

## **A Tale of Woe Becomes a Tale of Kindness and Refuge**

**By Lee West**

*Lee is a board member of Dharma Friendship Foundation in Seattle and an avid outdoorsman. He wrote the following email, with the subject line "A Tale of Woe" to Ven. Chodron after an accident while rock climbing.*

Last Thursday I had a fall while rock climbing and broke both bones in my lower left leg. As this happened in the afternoon and we were about seven hours walk from the nearest dirt road, I spent the night with three friends on a ledge while two others went for help. They reached a location where a call for help could be sent at about 12 midnight. By this point they had been on their feet in mountainous back country since 6 in the morning, tough as nails, true heroes.

Fortunately, I had some understanding of how my mind works, and the night went as easily as could be expected. People were very surprised by my calm, in control manner. Although I was largely consumed with dealing with the survival of myself and my immediate friends, I was able to meditate a reasonable amount on the suffering of others and dedicate to their well-being. I spent some time with my immediate sleeping partner discussing the merits of vegetarianism. My friends showed immense skill and patience keeping me safe. It would have been a terrifying, cold, long night if I knew nothing of the Buddha's teachings, so I thank you for taking the time to teach us.

Next morning a little after dawn a helicopter flew past several times but was unable to land. Late in the morning two rangers were dropped off on a long line. The pilot showed immense skill and seriously risked his life and the crew's lives to get to me in such an awkward spot halfway up a cliff. Before long I had been transported by a litter to an ambulance at the nearest road. The ambulance crew and the rangers were all extremely kind, I owe them my life.

Soon I was at the hospital. I spent six days in the emergency department at Harborview Hospital as there was no room for me in a ward. It was not pleasant. I am scared of becoming addicted to pain medications and refused IV opiates after the second day. These drugs seemed to do little for the pain, but make my head swim and then I feel sick when I stop taking them. For me they are confusion-inducing medications with the side-effect of light pain relief. I find if I just wait, the pain passes; it is not permanent (I had recently been teaching this idea at DFF). Anything you can suggest for helping me to sleep when I am enduring pain would be much appreciated as I am still taking oral opiates at night to fall asleep and stay asleep.

So far I sound like I have been very stoic, but after three nights in the emergency department surrounded by all manner of terrible sounds I really lost all my mental and physical strength. The fourth night I had terrifying nightmares that the emergency department was a hell realm and I couldn't escape. I felt like I didn't have the strength to continue. I realize now that we need the strength to be able to endure suffering for very long periods. We need endurance to last lifetimes, not just a forty minute meditation session or a few days of discomfort.

When I woke up the next morning, I still felt like I was in a hell realm. Mentally I was not good. I asked if I could spend some time sitting in a wheelchair near a window. This was apparently against the rules. However, a very kind nurse agreed to take me with him while he attended a meeting. It turned out his meeting was cancelled, but we got to spend fifteen minutes

outside the emergency department looking out a window. This fifteen minutes helped me regain a lot of my mental strength.

When we returned to the emergency department, the first person I saw was a heavily-armed, obese policeman, and it seemed like he was some kind of “hell guardian.” Shortly after this, Jordan from DFF came to visit, and I was pretty much crying tears of joy. Jordan is such a very kind person, who works so hard for others. We had a good chat about lots of things; he recently had an accident and knew some of my struggles. That night my wife brought me a picture of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to hang in my little, curtained-off space. This was a big lesson, and I felt immense relief just knowing with absolute certainty that someone was thinking about the suffering of others. Now I know from personal experience how much it means just to know someone is aware of your suffering when you are trapped.

That night I had a dream where there were some Indian boys restrained in suits of armor in a hell realm. The most terrifying thing for them was they were completely immobile and totally aware. I tried to let them know I was thinking of them and wanted their suffering to end, and I could see this brought some relief to them.

I am home now and will return to have a second operation in a little while, but for now I am as helpless as a baby. My wife has to feed me, medicate me, take me to the bathroom, clean me. I am completely dependent on her, and it is so much work.

There are so many Dharma lessons in my little story, perhaps some can be used to illustrate your teachings in the future. As I said earlier, I am very grateful that you took the time to teach us. Any advice you have as to the best practices to perform in this time are much appreciated. If the residents at Sravasti Abbey could pray for my wife, that would be much appreciated.

With the greatest respect,

Lee West

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*Ven. Chodron's response:*

Dear Lee,

Oh my goodness! You've had quite an experience. In reading about it, though, I wouldn't call it “A Tale of Woe.” I'd call it “A Tale of Kindness and Refuge” or “A Tale of Discovering Inner Strength” or “An Unexpected Retreat” because you've really been practicing well and using the Dharma to help your mind. Throughout the whole ordeal--the cliff, the rescue, the hospital, home, etc. – you were aware of the kindness of others and appreciated it. That inspired a wish to repay it and opened your heart towards others. Even when you had the nightmares, you looked at them from a Dharma perspective, seeing the scary places the deluded mind can take us and applying the medicine of compassion. You took refuge in compassion and received HH the Dalai Lama's compassion. And then in the dream the following night you gave compassion to others.

Regarding sleeping when you're in pain, here are a few things to try. You can do them while lying in bed:

- Imagine the Buddha is on your pillow and put your head in his lap. Gentle light flows from the Buddha into you, filling your entire body and calming the pain.
- Recite mantra continuously. Choose the mantra you most resonate with. (Lee tried this and said, “I had not been reciting mantra constantly when I had trouble sleeping because for some reason I thought it would keep me awake! However, I took your advice and it seems quite the opposite. Last night I really thought I wasn't going to sleep at all, but the discomfort passed and I was fine.”)
- Do the taking and giving meditation.
- Think of people, especially children, who are in pain or in dangerous situations when they're sleeping or trying to sleep. Send them love and compassion and dedicate so they may be free from pain, danger, and fear. Imagine them relaxing and feeling safe and cared for.

Regarding practices to do:

- Think, “I’m so fortunate to have this happen to me. It’s a result of my negative karma from previous lives, and if it hadn’t had ripened in this accident, it could have ripened in eons in a hell realm. So my comparison, I’m getting off easy. I can endure this suffering without much difficulty, and in the meantime eons of negative karma are getting purified.”
- Do Tonglen, Taking and Giving.
- Do Medicine Buddha practice, letting Medicine Buddha’s healing light fill your body-mind and those of all others. After Medicine Buddha dissolves into you, radiate out this same healing light to all other beings.
- Read the “King of Prayers” and let your mind get totally caught up in the imagery. See all the Buddhas surrounded by bodhisattvas in all the specks of dust and imagine what that you be like. Imagine making skies Full of offerings to the Three Jewels, etc.

Thanks so much for writing and sharing your experience. Sravasti Abbey monastics will make prayers for you and Phuong-Cac.

With lots of metta and all good wishes,

Ven. Chodron