

Sailing the Worldly Winds

A Buddhist Way through
the Ups and Downs of Life

Vajragupta

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To my father

About the author

Vajragupta was born as Richard Staunton in 1968 and grew up in London. He studied social science at university and first came into contact with Buddhism at the Birmingham Buddhist Centre (a centre of the Triratna Buddhist Community) in the early 1990s. He was ordained in 1994 and given the name Vajragupta which means 'secret, or hidden, diamond-like truth'. He was director of the Birmingham Buddhist Centre from 1997 to 2005, and is now director of the Triratna Development Team – working for a collective of 50 Triratna centres and projects across Europe. He currently lives in Worcester, England, where he teaches Buddhism and meditation, enjoys walking and wildlife, reading, poetry, and travelling over to nearby Stratford to watch productions of Shakespeare plays. His previous books, *Buddhism: Tools for Living Your Life* and *The Triratna Story*, were also published by Windhorse Publications.

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Introduction

At last I'd arrived. Now I could settle in, and get on with writing my book on the worldly winds. I'd managed to carve two weeks free in my busy diary, and a friend had allowed me to stay in his family's caravan in the countryside. I'd been looking forward to this writing project and it was such a relief to finally get down to it, and a pleasure to do so in a quiet place, in beautiful landscape.

Two days later my mum phoned, distressed, and said that my 89-year-old father had fallen over at home. He'd been taken into hospital for a few days. My dad had been poorly for some time, but suddenly he seemed much weaker.

I decided, with a heavy heart, to leave the caravan, to pack up my books and computer, and to go and spend a few days with my mum and dad. I travelled down to where they live and managed to speak to their doctor. My dad had stomach cancer, it had spread to other parts of his body, and there was nothing they could do. I asked how long he might have to live. The doctor said it was hard to say and was reluctant to give an answer. 'Will it be weeks or months?' I asked. It was a matter of weeks.

I spent as much of those next few weeks as I could with my parents. Since their flat is small, I booked into a local bed and breakfast. I spent the mornings in my little room with its clicking radiator and a sink with a plug-hole that gurgled every half hour.

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I sat with my laptop computer perched on my knees and wrote this book. Around lunchtime I went round to my mum, ran some errands for her, and then we walked down the road to the hospital to see my dad.

At first the hospital was a strange, unknown place, but that little journey became very familiar. There was a tree where a robin often sang, even though it was mid-winter. There were the sliding doors of the hospital, and the beige walls of the long corridor. We'd walk past the TV room, the X-ray department, and the room from which an elderly woman always shouted 'Help, help, help, I need help', no matter how many times the staff went in to see her.

As William Blake wrote, joy and woe are woven fine. They were strange, sad, painful weeks. My dad became weaker and thinner, till he was too frail to stand, and his legs, arms and hands were like the legs and claws of a little bird. There was nothing we could do; we just watched him fading away.

They were also strangely inspiring and beautiful weeks. My dad seemed to accept what was happening with a quiet humility. He was uncomplaining and unfussy. He kept a sense of humour. I was with him once in hospital when a nurse came in with a needle and syringe to take a blood sample. She approached, all gentleness and apology, but he pulled up his jumper and said, 'Go on! Stick it in quick, so it's done before I even notice.' Near the end, when he could only speak with difficulty, I gave him some water to drink. 'Ah, some lovely water – thank you,' he said. There was something so dignified in the quiet, yet emphatic way he thanked me.

I had some lovely times with him – watching football on TV, sneaking him a little drink of port when the nurses weren't watching, and reading him stories (a poignant reminder of how, once upon a time, he read bedtime stories to me).

So I wrote this book during a significant time in my life, and that of my parents. I typed away in that little room, while the

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worldly winds swirled around us. Would that place in the nursing home become available for my dad? Would things go OK when the relatives visited? Would he suffer a lot of pain? Would we be able to get a message through to my brother – travelling in Africa – in time?



Life is full of ups and downs, circumstances – large or small – that can trigger craving or aversion, hope or despair, longing or fear, or that can elicit from us a more creative and noble response: generosity, kindness or understanding. The Buddha often talked about these situations in terms of the eight ‘worldly winds’: gain and loss, fame and infamy, praise and blame, pleasure and pain.¹ In the Buddhist texts the word used is *lokadhammas*. Literally, this translates as ‘worldly conditions’ – the ever-changing conditions of the world, the varying circumstances of life that we will all encounter at some time or other. Some days we get what we want, other days we do not. There are times we feel loved and popular, and times when we are far from the centre of attention. On some occasions people seem to approve and praise what we do, on other occasions they criticize or censure. Sometimes life is full of pleasure or delight, but at other times pain or discomfort.

Whilst ‘worldly conditions’ is the literal translation, ‘worldly winds’ is a more poetic rendering. The metaphor of the wind is appropriate. The wind blows hither and thither, changing direction unexpectedly. We can’t *see* the wind, but we feel its effects, whether it is a pleasant warm breeze or an icy, biting blast. One day storm clouds crowd the sky, the next day the wind scatters them, revealing pure, sunny blue. And it would be useless to try to stop or redirect the wind.

Likewise, the worldly winds blow back and forth. Whatever our circumstances in life, even if we are young and healthy, talented

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and popular, wealthy and comfortable, we'll still experience gain *and* loss, pleasure *and* pain at some time or other. The worldly winds are those circumstances in life which we cannot completely control; our only choice is in how we respond to them. Sometimes we are caught off-guard, and they blow us about, we sway and swing, our minds get into a spin. Like the wind fanning the flames of a fire, we allow the worldly winds to set the fires of craving and aversion blazing in our hearts.

They are the 'worldly' winds because they are everywhere in the world. There is no escape from them. Though they may blow in varying ways, and to different degrees, in different places, they still blow through everything: at home, at work, on holiday, at school.

These winds are 'worldly' too because to be carried along by them is to be swept along by the ways of the world. On the whole we expect the world to accord perfectly with our desires. We ignore, or try to ignore, the facts of life, the plain simple truth that life consists of complex, ever-changing conditions that we can never entirely control. On one level we know that the winds of change are blowing constantly; it sounds obvious, self-evident. And yet on some other level, deep down, we expect life to be fair, to come right. Our little irritations and disappointments, our sense of hurt and injustice when we don't get what we want, reveal this underlying delusion. Learning to sail the worldly winds involves learning when we need to give up on our desires, adjusting them to the reality of the situation. Whilst matching our desires to the world will be difficult, expecting the world to match our desires is utterly futile.



The pages that follow contain more detailed descriptions of gain and loss, fame and infamy, praise and blame, pleasure and pain,

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and the myriad ways they can manifest in our lives. You'll see that some of the examples I've mentioned are very everyday; they might even seem a bit trivial. You may think: 'It's all very well talking about practising equanimity when you've stubbed your toe on the table-leg or beaten your old badminton rival seven games to nil, but what about when you're under threat of redundancy, or a family member is seriously ill?'

The reason that many of the examples given are more commonplace is precisely because they are the conditions we encounter day by day: the daily gusts and squalls, rather than a raging tornado that sweeps through our life, tossing everything up in the air. That tornado is bound to come at some point in our life; but it's the small, even trivial ups and downs of life that most of us are working with, most of the time.

Although they may be small, they are not trivial in terms of the effect they have on us. Buddhism says that actions have consequences. Everything we do or say, and the ethical intention, the mental and emotional state that motivated it, has an effect. It conditions us; it determines the kind of people we become. Looking at how we respond to the worldly winds in daily life shows us this 'karma of everyday things' – what in Buddhist tradition is called 'habitual karma'. As Buddhist teacher Sangharakshita explains:

A very great part of one's life is probably made up of habitual karmas, things we do over and over again, often without realizing the effect they are having on us. The action may not amount to very much – it may not take up much time – but if we do it every day, perhaps several times a day, it has its effect, like drops of water wearing away a stone. All the time we are creating karma, either forging a sort of chain which binds us, or planting seeds of future growth.²

In terms of the worldly winds, if we notice that even small gusts and squalls can produce irritation or anxiety or complacency in us,

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then working on them will improve the quality of our underlying state of mind, and therefore the quality of our life. Sometimes it is these small trials of life that bring out the worst in us. It is about these that we get tetchy, anxious or small-minded. Maybe this happens because, being relatively minor, they catch us unawares. The bigger trials of life, on the other hand, can sometimes bring forth the best in us, drawing out resources of patience, kindness or perceptiveness that we hardly knew we had. Perhaps when faced with the bigger challenges of life, we are more likely to realize that circumstances are beyond our control, and that what we need to do is respond to them as creatively as we can. In those more crucial situations we can be more in touch with reality, whereas in everyday situations the illusion of control can persist. In other words, underneath those petty irritations, stubborn little attachments, persistent anxieties and all the rest, is ignorance of the nature of life. They are how our existential angst – our fear of impermanence and our desire to hold on and be in control – manifests in the everyday. There is a lot to be learned from looking at them more closely.



This book focuses on the Buddha's teaching of the worldly winds, how we can learn to navigate them more effectively, so that we can sail safely through life rather than being blown off course, however stormy the weather. It is about cultivating a more even-minded attitude to life, yet one that is still engaged, interested, concerned, and not passive or indifferent to what is happening around us. As we become more flexible and adaptable, we find a bigger perspective which helps us stay calm, even amidst the storm.

In my experience, many people find this teaching helpful, engaging and inspiring. But why? I think there are three reasons.

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Firstly, it is so practical and immediate. We can each recognize the worldly winds wafting about our life. It is a simple teaching that shows the relevance of Buddhism to contemporary life and everyday events. The first chapter of the book will describe the worldly winds in more detail, and the chapter following it discusses ways to ‘sail the worldly winds’ – responding to them more skilfully and ethically.

Secondly, they show us the connection between ethics and wisdom. When we are swept up by the worldly winds, we are caught up unaware of the ways things are. We are trying to deny the winds of change, and are setting ourselves up for pain and disappointment. This seemingly simple teaching gets to the root of things, showing how underneath the small events that niggle at us or irritate us or mesmerize us is our desire to control and avoid. When instead we respond more skilfully and ethically, we are acting in a way that is more real and objective. Implicit or explicit in a skilful response is the recognition that we can’t always control the circumstances around us.

Being aware of the worldly winds and noticing how we respond to them can help teach us ‘how things are’ – what Buddhists call wisdom. The third chapter explores meditation and the inner work of cultivating an even-mindedness in which such wisdom can arise. The fourth chapter of the book focuses more fully on seeing things as they really are.

A third reason I find the teaching of the worldly winds so inspiring is that it connects practice for self and for others. Buddhist practice is not just about *us* learning how to be less blown about. It is also about helping *others* find shelter in a storm. If we are blown hither and thither, we create a flurry around us, and increase the chances that others will be tossed about too. But if we can hold our course in all the winds that blow, we create calm and clarity, and that, too, may influence others, giving them the confidence and clarity not to be so thrown around. The more

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positive spiritual qualities we have, the more we can be a force for good in the world.

If we pay attention to the world around us, we'll see, or feel, that the worldly winds are always blowing, sometimes with a terrible force. We may know people who have lost their jobs in an economic downturn, or see pictures on TV of the devastation caused by an earthquake. The worldly winds will always blow; they are an unavoidable part of life. And their force and direction varies according to the prevailing cultural conditions. Judging by the number of times the Buddha mentioned the worldly winds, they certainly blew people around in his day, but our experience of them is probably rather different today. Chapter 5 is an attempt to explore how they bluster through our twenty-first century world, in the age of the internet, consumerism, celebrity culture and material comfort. In particular, we're going to be looking at scientism and consumerism – two myths or ideologies that are prevalent in our culture. I'll argue they contain a subtle, and often hidden, message which can nevertheless affect and condition us. They promise a world in which the worldly winds *can* be controlled, but it is a false promise. We'll be looking at how modern Buddhism needs to critique these views and offer an alternative.



How to use this book

Throughout the book you'll find reflections, exercises and suggestions for practice that are designed to help you make more of the material in the book. The temptation (I know it well!) is to devour a book and get onto the next one as quickly as possible. But we need time to digest. We can tend to do six hours' reading, and maybe just an hour's reflection, but it would be better to do

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six hours' reflection for every hour we spend reading. We need to think about whether we agree with what is said, and how it might apply to our own life. It is that considering, thinking and wondering that reveals the gold – if you are willing to give time to it. We need to dig down into the material, sifting through it, looking for the gleam of gold. It might not come to light straight away. We have to learn to '*live* the questions' as the famous quote from Rilke puts it. 'Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.'³ We sift through ever-deeper layers, finding new seams of gold.

So I'd encourage you to make use of the reflections in the book,⁴ and relate the ideas and teachings you read about to the issues and challenges of your own life. The final chapter looks at some ways to create supportive conditions in our life to sustain our practice, keep it alive and engaged, so that we can respond more creatively to the worldly winds. It is designed to help you apply the material of the earlier chapters in your daily life, and to be a practical guide to sailing the worldly winds.