

Buoyancy Floats

Resilience under pressure

By Caitlin Collins

I was just six years old and my older sister was eight years old. It was winter time. We were crossing the Himalayas to escape into India. We had been separated from the rest of our Tibetan group as the Chinese police had arrested most of the others. My sister and I, and a monk who was in his sixties, were the only ones who escaped. So we attempted to cross the mountains alone.'

The narrator of this story, Gyalwang, was captured after the monk died on the journey and the two children became separated. Sent back to Tibet, he escaped again, and after another long and terrible journey he eventually made it to safe exile in India. His story was written in the 1990s; since then up to a thousand Tibetan children each year have made the dangerous journey out of Tibet across the highest mountains in the world in search of freedom.

How do people do it? What is the resilience that sustains them – boys and girls, men and women – under extreme adversity?

Accounts of others' heroism move me to tears. I feel both humbled and inspired by their examples. My own worries diminish by comparison: things that were looming in my life as major problems resume their proper proportions as mere inconveniences.

Pressure, pain and opportunity

Pressure takes many forms including all kinds of physical and emotional stress. How we experience it and respond to it varies. We can experience it as suffering, whether large and small, throughout the range of *dukkha* identified by the Buddha (memorably defined by a contemporary teacher as 'the entire range of experience all the way from searing physical or emotional agony to the minute frisson of dissatisfaction one feels when one's butler has failed to iron one's newspaper adequately'). Or we can experience it as an opportunity for learning, growth, atonement, or discovering and developing heroic qualities within ourselves. We can fight it; or collapse under it; or accept it as just the way things are, and

do our best anyway; or some of us can even flourish under it as we rise to the challenge of adversity.

Many people thrive under pressure, whether it's relatively huge: the child crossing the bitter snow mountains to exile, or relatively small: the social-worker solving the koan of too heavy a caseload to cover in the hours available. The world is full of ordinary heroes. In a way, we are all heroes in our own lives: as the NLP presuppositions point out, we each experience our world in our own way and respond to the demands made on us as best we can in accordance with the resources we have available. But it's also true to say that some people seem more resilient than others. How can we, too, learn to float more buoyantly on the waves?

Stress and the stress-response

Most people have seen popular psychology lists of 'stressful situations' such as divorce, bereavement, serious illness, getting married and moving house. These are not necessarily all

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unpleasant experiences, but they do all involve change and uncertainty. Interestingly, while many people feel pressured by change and uncertainty, others (or sometimes even the same people) find too little change to be extremely stressful – the boredom of the same old routine, day in, day out, drives them up the wall.

For most of us, whether there's too much change in our lives or too little, the most stressful thing is the sense of not having any control over what's happening. And a double-bind situation, being faced with equally unsatisfactory options, is extremely stressful, the resulting sense of pressure being neatly expressed by the saying 'trapped between a rock and a hard place'.

But it isn't really the pressure that's the problem, is it? It's our response to it. When we talk about being stressed out, we're really talking about our stress-response. Physiologically speaking, we respond to a threatening situation by releasing stress hormones from the adrenal glands, giving us a surge of energy for 'flight or fight'. In the days when humans were hunters competing with sabre-tooth tigers, it was a life-saver (and it may still come in handy down a dark alleyway in a tough part of town) but in our normal day-to-day lives, this physical response is not so useful. Stress hormones remain in our bodies for some time after being triggered, and the resulting energy surge demands release in physical activity – not easy if we're stuck behind the wheel of a car, hence such inappropriate behaviour as road rage. And sometimes the coping strategies we use to alleviate the pressure – such as drinking, over-eating, smoking etc – lead to further problems and make matters worse.

Stress-related symptoms can span a wide range, including rapid heart beat, breathlessness, headaches, stomach aches, back pain, skin rashes, insomnia, depression, emotional irritability, tearfulness, dizzy spells, fearfulness, anxiety and panic attacks. Many physical disorders, such as stomach ulcers, colitis, migraines and indigestion, are triggered or worsened by our response to pressure.

Thriving under pressure

How to find the buoyancy necessary to cope with pressure – or, even better, thrive? Some of these strategies come from NLP; all can stand the test of personal experiment!

- Start by taking a step towards reclaiming control. Identify obvious pressure points. Consider what the implications might be if it were not the situation itself that's the problem, that your response to it may be the more important factor. For example, one person may see an event as a challenge, and enjoy it; while

another may see it as an ordeal, and hate it. Your perception of it and response to it is what matters. By taking responsibility for your own response, you take control, and your floatability will rise accordingly.

- Be alert to the signs of stress building up. Don't wait until it overwhelms you and you either erupt in fury or collapse in tears over some tiny incident. It's easier to take responsibility and assert control sooner rather than later in any process, whether that process is an ongoing part of your life, such as a relationship, or an immediate emotional event

such as the arising of anger.

- Learn to express your emotions clearly and kindly before they get out of hand; don't let things fester. It's no good expecting other people to read your mind: tell them how you feel. Ask for help when you need it. And appreciate depression, a leaden feeling as far removed from buoyancy as can be, as an emergency brake trying to stop you going further down a wrong turning. Imagine yourself at a crossroads, the different paths representing your imaginary options, and notice how your feelings change as you try each

one; then think about how you can act on your discoveries to make changes in your life.

- Be aware of the possibly harmful side-effects of your usual coping strategies. For example, the coffee that gets you up in the morning can itself induce symptoms similar to a stress-response, including heart palpitations, anxiety, irritability, and insomnia. And while one drink in the evening may help you to relax, it can easily lead to several more – and a subsequent drink problem to add to the original pressure. Find healthier ways to relax – maybe yoga or meditation, or some kind of creative ►



expression such as music or art. Any physical exercise is great, as it enables you to release the pent up energy that is such a big part of the stress-response: try walking or running, or squash, or swimming; whatever works for you. This will not only help you to relax, it will also increase your fitness and stamina, which in turn will increase your resilience.

- Learn to identify your own needs, such as quiet time for yourself, or opportunities to socialise or to pursue a particular interest. It's not only legitimate to acknowledge and take steps towards fulfilling your needs, it's necessary for your own sake and the sake of others. If you need to convince yourself of this, consider how, if you carry on stretching yourself as thin as too little butter over too much bread, you're likely to crack up, which would cause more problems for everyone. It's absolutely vital to learn how to prioritise, set boundaries, and assert yourself kindly and firmly: if necessary, practise saying 'No' in front of a mirror!

Heroes and role-models

Heroes often surprise themselves. Courage, which may have been deeply hidden, emerges in a crisis. Another NLP presupposition is that we each have all the resources we need. Could that really be true? If so, how to find them? To use a simple model found in many traditions: how to find the peaceful inner space that is normally eclipsed by the drama of the ego-zone?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) commonly follows intensely horrific experiences; Dan Goleman, in his book Emotional Intelligence, terms it a kind of emotional wounding that leaves its imprint on the brain. Symptoms include repeated vivid flashback memories, terror, guilt, anxiety, depression, and a host of knock-on effects that impair the sufferer's ability to get on with his or her life. But is it inevitable? Few experiences could be more traumatic than that of Tenzin Choedak. The Dalai Lama's doctor in Tibet, he stayed behind when the Dalai Lama fled to India in 1959. Incarcerated in a Chinese prison for 30 years, he experienced torture and deprivation on a horrific scale, as well as witnessing the torments of others daily. On his eventual release, he made his way to Dharamsala and resumed his old job as the Dalai Lama's doctor. A gentle, cheerful old man with a crooked face, one eye permanently knocked out of kilter in the course of many savage beatings, he ministered to anyone who called at his little room – including me. He didn't talk much about his ordeal, but was heard to say that the only time during those

30 years of torment that he felt really afraid was just once, momentarily, when, at a low ebb, he feared he might be weakening in his compassion for his tormentors.

Among our most outstanding role-models, like Tenzin Choedak, Mandela, or Gandhi-ji,

Courage emerges in a crisis

if there's one thing they seem to have in common, it's that rather than seeing what's happening in terms of the limited ego-zone of 'me', they have a larger perspective, both in terms of their own sense of purpose and in terms of relativity. Eckhart Tolle, in A New Earth, retells the traditional Sufi story of the king and the ring with its inscription, This, too, will pass, and comments on it. 'These words are to make you aware of the fleetingness of every situation, the transience of all forms – good or bad... The recognition that This, too, will pass brings detachment and with detachment another dimension comes into your life – inner space... Who you are becomes freed from its imprisonment in form. This freedom is the arising of inner space. It comes as a stillness, a subtle peace deep within you, even in the face

of something seemingly bad. This, too, will pass. Suddenly there is space around the event. There is also space around the emotional highs and lows, even around pain.'

In that space we find the willingness to be present, to open up to whatever is, with love, compassion, joy, peace, and the irrepressible lightness of being. Then pressure is not experienced as stressful, and buoyancy is as natural as breathing.

Let's return to the story of Gyalwang. His sister was never found. Following his second attempt to escape, the young boy arrived in India as a destitute refugee; he has since completed a degree in political science and now lives in Delhi helping his fellow Tibetans with political work and translation. ●

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 Originally published by Art Refuge in the collection Art of Exile, Gyalwang's story, accompanied by his own illustrations, appeared in the programme booklet of this year's visit by the Dalai Lama to Nottingham.

PRESSURE-RELEASE VALVES:

pattern interruptions for dispersing rising stress-energy

Breathe. Notice what happens when stress levels are soaring – your breathing changes. So take 3 deep breaths, and then count 10 more while breathing all the way down into the abdomen. This will help you to relax and release the building tension.

Laugh. See the funny side of a situation, make a joke, and take time out to watch a comedy show, even get someone to tickle you. Laughter is a great way to dissolve tension.

Move. If you can, go out for a walk or a run; if not, jumping on the spot can really help – even if you have to hide in the loo to do it!

Change perspective. A problem can dominate your vision. See things in a different way by imagining what it would be like if you could somehow float up above your body, as high as you need to go. Imagine going out into space so the Earth appears as a little blue green ball; or even further, so the Sun appears as just one of countless stars. Where is that little problem you used to have, now?

