

Situation Yellow, Situation Red: Developing a Well-Being Toolbox

Mat Wooller

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Welcome. I am Mat Wooller, also known as Ho Shim. I'm a dharma teacher here in Fairbanks, Alaska, where I live with my wife, Diane, and my two kids, Owen (fifteen years old) and Phoebe (twelve). I work as a professor here at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, teaching chemistry and studying mammoths, among other things. I feel tremendously grateful for our good situation.

I would like to start my talk by acknowledging the land on which I am sitting here today in interior Alaska. I want to express my sincere thanks to the Dené and Lower Tanana people and their ancestors, who have taken such good care of this land and everything on it for longer than ten thousand years. Generations of care by indigenous people have undoubtedly influenced our good situation here in Alaska today. Although I moved to this place from the UK, both of my delightful kids were born in the local hospital situated on this land in Alaska. My situation here in Fairbanks also benefits from the presence of the Cold Mountain Zen Center, led by my good friend Cary de Wit. This Zen center accommodates the practice of my lovely sangha (near and far, in person and online), for whom I am most grateful. Our Cold Mountain Zen Center in turn benefits from a rich connection with the Empty Gate Zen Center in California and our guiding teacher, Zen Master Bon Soeng. My own situation has benefited tremendously from Zen Master Bon Soeng's guidance, wisdom, teachings, and dear friendship—I feel very lucky and thankful. I also feel that the connections between these two Zen centers have only strengthened and been enriched during the pandemic—connections I can best describe as a feeling of love.

A favorite Zen saying of mine, which is also a favorite with my family too, is “A good situation is a bad situation, and a bad situation is a good situation.” This saying allows me to tell my second-favorite Zen story.

A long time ago in China there was once a farmer who owned a fine horse. But one day the horse escaped. His neighbors came over right away and said “Your horse has escaped and gotten lost; how unlucky you are.” To this the farmer just said “Maybe.” Then one day the horse returned, but this time followed by a bunch of wild horses. The neighbors came over again and this time said “Oh, now you have your horse back along with ten more horses—you are so lucky.” The farmer just said “Maybe.” The farmer's son then set about trying to tame the wild horses but one day got thrown from one of them and broke his leg. The neighbors came over again and said “Oh no, your son broke his leg and can't help you—how unlucky you are.” The farmer re-

plied, “Maybe.” Then one day the army came by the town and conscripted all the young men to go off and fight in a war—but they did not take the farmer's son because he had a broken leg.

In my mind, there actually is no end to this story, with the life of the farmer likely oscillating between perceived “good” and “bad” situations. Our own lives and situations can be like this—time passes, and what was bad can turn into good and good can turn into bad. What was perceived to be bad can on reflection appear good. Good outcomes can also sometimes arise from bad events.

On reflection, this has been true in my own life, and in some ways was my entry point into practicing Zen. About fifteen years ago, I experienced some game-changing and challenging events that resulted in me butting heads with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—a “bad” situation. I am certain I am not the only one here today who has had some experience with PTSD. Part of my recovery was to stumble into the Cold Mountain Zen Center here in Alaska and to try healing through meditation and our range of Zen practices, which serve what I like to think of as a well-being toolbox. This has been a game-changing “good” situation that I may never have stumbled into if it had not been for the accompanying and prior “bad” situation.

On reflection, having been practicing Zen for well over a decade now since experiencing PTSD, I can see the “untangling” or “settling” that has occurred in my own mind. When my kids were younger, we used to use a clear plastic bottle filled with glitter to help them learn to calm their minds. When they were angry or upset we would sit with them and shake up the glitter in the bottle, and the glitter would swirl around. We would set the bottle down in front of us, watching the glitter settle as we would shift our attention to slowing our breathing. Often we would both calm down. This can be what I sometimes experience each time when I practice meditation. But over time it feels like there has been some long-term settling, healing, and calming that has occurred since first experiencing PTSD. Although sitting, walking, and chanting meditation have become the cornerstone of my own well-being practice, I recognize that my recovery from PTSD and ongoing well-being has benefited from the diverse toolbox available to me, including paying attention to diet and physical activity, implementing kindness and gratitude—helped by reciting my precepts each day—and practicing good sleep hygiene. For many, myself included, some form of trauma-informed counseling is also an important part of this well-being toolbox.

Meditation, along with this well-being toolbox, have even become part of a for-credit class I developed and now teach at the university here on the science and practice of happiness and well-being. This class has benefited from the guidance and support of a wide range of others from many different disciplines, and from other institutions where similar classes have been developed and are now being taught.

Recently, my practice has involved a three-month retreat—not a retreat away from my family responsibilities and situation, but a retreat nonetheless. The retreat tightened my formal practice and wove practice more strongly into the regular demands of life.

Part of this retreat involved my reading through the Diamond Sutra. The Diamond Sutra starts with a beautiful, calm description of the Buddha returning from begging for food to then settle down on a cushion and to then be approached by a group of his followers. Once settled, a senior follower asked what it takes to become a bodhisattva. And so the sutra begins, which is largely considered to be an education in no-self—which to be honest, I have found dense.

But there are a lot of little treasures along the way, including some commentary on what is a bodhisattva's situation. The commentary on the Diamond Sutra in the version I own talks of the bodhisattva as "Anyone who ceaselessly seeks unexcelled, perfect enlightenment as well as the happiness and welfare of all beings." I liked this definition when I came across it because I feel we can all aim to be this bodhisattva. We don't need to have anything—we just need to be seeking, trying to benefit the well-being of others. Best of all, I now see the bodhisattva path as a positive feedback loop, where care for others feeds back to promote one's own healthy well-being.

In the lengthy commentary on the sutra, it is made clear that the Buddha was not only teaching monks and nuns, but lay practitioners too—folks like me and many of you—weaving practice into and making it part of our everyday lives. I found this view and words to be like an encouraging crowd cheering me on during my retreat.

In his book *The Diamond That Cuts through Illusion*, Thich Nhat Hanh also provided commentary on the sutra that I found encouraging.

If we are washing dishes and thinking of others who are enjoying themselves doing nothing, we cannot enjoy washing the dishes. We may have a few clean dishes afterwards, but our happiness is smaller than one teaspoon. If however, we wash the dishes with a serene mind, our happiness will be boundless. This is already liberation.

How we see our own situation is important.

The sutra is also considered to be a message and reminder that the path involves moving beyond arbitrary distinctions. So perhaps that favorite saying of mine—"A good situation is a bad situation, and a bad situation is a good situation"—is useful, but it might also be a little misleading. Perhaps there

are no good or bad situations, but rather a seamless continuum of inseparable moments. Perhaps rather than attempting to label situations, it might be more helpful to see the phrase as guiding us toward more openness and inquisitiveness of each moment and each new situation.

In our own Zen school, I have heard Zen Master Soeng Hyang encourage the use of the wonderful and simple question "What is this?" as we approach each moment and situation. I have found this to be such a useful and great tool in the toolbox—a way to approach almost any situation. I use it to question and tease apart my emotions and feelings, and have been surprised sometimes by what appears. Fear and anger are some of my favorites to use this tool on—what seems obvious on first approaching these situations often is much different when I have used this tool.

In a wonderful interview I had with Barry Briggs JDPSN years ago, the whole interview and teaching centered on encouraging me to pose the question "How may I help?" I can still hear Barry's infectious laughter as I stumbled and laughed through kong-an after kong-an. His teaching in this encounter was purely devoted to encouraging my knee-jerk response of "How may I help?" This was another wonderful tool for me to use as I approach situations, such as fear and anger. When anger arises in response to another person's words or actions, a momentary pause to silently ask "How may I help you?" quickly softens the mind and results in a more compassionate approach to the situation, and sometimes even a swifter resolution. The real challenge is to *remember* to do this when it is so easy to get caught up in the sparkly bottle that becomes the angry mind. This is where our *practice* is great—making the process much more instinctive—like developing a muscle memory in the mind.

And then there is the wonderful teaching about approaching situations by Zen Master Seung Sahn: "When yellow comes only yellow, when red comes only red." So we have many tools to approach and appreciate our constantly changing situations.

Thank you for listening to me this evening—I really appreciate your attention. How is your situation right now? ♦

Mat(theu) Wooller (he/him/his) is originally from the UK and has lived in Fairbanks, Alaska, for about twenty years with his family. Mat has taken sixteen precepts, but is still awaiting an in-person ceremony to become a senior dharma teacher with the Cold Mountain Zen Center in Fairbanks. Dr. Wooller is also a professor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, where he has developed an interest in helping lead the promotion of happiness and well-being on campus. At the university, he leads an in-person and online practice space called "the Well" (<https://sites.google.com/alaska.edu/thewell/home>), which is devoted to promoting happiness and well-being. He also developed and teaches a for-credit class (both online and in-person) on the science and practice of happiness and well-being to students, staff, and faculty. This secular class includes meditation as part of a broad well-being toolbox.