

Ayya Yeshe

How to be a Light for Yourself and Others in Challenging Times

Week Four: “The Psychology of Interconnectedness,
Social Engagement, and Transformation”

September 25, 2017



This is the fourth part of the talk called “The Psychology of Interconnectedness, Social Engagement, and Transformation.”

We're coming to the latter part of the text [*The Seven Points of Mind Training* by Geshe Chekawa], where it says, "Guidelines of Mind Training." All activities should be done with one intention, and that is to benefit others and liberate them from suffering, as well as to reduce self-cherishing. Correct all wrongs with one intention—bodhicitta. Whatever you do, have a good motivation. By this practice, may beings become liberated. And then, in the end, we dedicate or share the merit with all beings—these positive actions are good karma.

“Observe the two—refuge and bodhicitta vows—even at the risk of your life.” Whichever of the two occurs, be patient. Whether it's suffering or joy, have an equanimous heart. “Train in the three difficulties [attachment, aversion, and ignorance].” We see neuroses and we try to follow a different path, maybe we're playing the “poor me” record, so we take it off and we change the record. There I am, self-obsessing again. There I am, going into the "poor me" mantra. Try to stop and reboot.

Then, “Take on the three principal causes,” which are the teacher, the teaching, and a human life. Pay heed that the three never wane and have gratitude for the teacher, the teachings, and your ethical vows. Keep your actions, your speech, and your thought inseparable from the attitude of mind training in bodhicitta or compassion. “Train without bias in all areas. It's crucial to always do this pervasively and wholeheartedly.”

“Always meditate on whatever provokes resentment.” This is very challenging. The conditions in the outer world are always there affecting us, but when something really presses your button, it usually shows you that you have some unresolved issue there, that you have some unresolved

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pain, trauma, opinion, or prejudice. Meeting that edge of difficulty and just sitting and holding space for something different, for something a little bit uncomfortable, is a way to help you extend the borders of your heart and a way for you to grow.

Compassion is all about uncovering the genuine heart of tenderness, our soft spot, our vulnerability. That doesn't mean we should allow others to abuse us or seek unnecessary suffering, but the places that are at our edge are the places where we grow. It's so hard sometimes when you sit and listen to people talk about racism or sexism when you know that you're in the privileged group, but by actually just sitting there and holding space for those uncomfortable feelings, you can examine how your privilege has created suffering for others and how you could become an ally, how you could change a system of injustice. Take off the many layers that we use to shut down, to not be present to life as it's unfolding in the present moment. Sometimes that means to be present to painful things in ourselves or in others.

Sometimes in the West we see death as a real defeat. We hide it away. We even have elaborate boxes to cover dead bodies and we do insane things to make dead bodies be preserved, filled with chemicals. Whereas in India, in the slum, you just see people having a cup of tea around the person who's deceased saying nice things about them. The body is not hidden. The body is then carried on a bamboo stretcher through the town to the burning ghat. If it's an old person, they might even have a broth band that celebrates the fact that the person's life was complete and to just not see death as a defeat. Instead, they see it as just like a season—spring will come again.

Thich Nhat Hanh has another way of describing death and impermanence. A child said, "I really love my pet, and I really miss him, and where is he? Where did he go?" And Thich Nhat Hanh said, "Your pet is now part of you. When you feel a cool breeze on a hot day; when you see the flowers blowing in the wind; you can remember how your pet made you so happy. You can

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remember the love you had with the one you've lost. And then your pet is carried on in you." That's another way of looking at loss, but I don't think it's a defeat. It's just a natural part of life. Being born, we must die, and therefore, take good care of every moment that is left for you in this life.

The text goes on: "Don't always be swayed by external circumstances." Of course, we want to be a nice person, but then someone cuts across us in traffic and we suddenly become a demon. A lot of people in prison are just people who lost control in one moment, and that worst moment of their life becomes the reality that they have to live with for the rest of their life. This time, practice the main points. Be there, be open, and exchange the self for others by practicing *tonglen* [the guided meditation in sending happiness to others and taking on their suffering]. Don't misinterpret, don't vacillate. Train wholeheartedly in the body's upper path in exchanging self for others. Liberate yourself by seeing the dreamlike illusory nature of things. Don't wallow in self-pity. Don't be jealous. Don't be frivolous. And don't expect applause.

This is where the text comes to an end. It says, "When the five dark ages occur, this is the way to transform them into a way of awakening. This is the essence of the nectar of oral instructions, which were handed down in the tradition of a sage of Sunarnadipi, which is where Atisha came from in Bengal, India.

We talked about how everything arises due to causes and conditions, which means that happiness is not just a personal matter; it's a communal matter. Our well-being lies with the well-being of the whole world. If one person in a family is unhappy, it affects everyone in the family. If people are homeless, not able to get a job, not able to make a living, and not able to afford healthcare, it creates instability in the society. It leads to crime; it leads to revolution; it leads to violence. We have to understand that we are sharing this one small planet and that what we do to the earth

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affects us. There is no future for our children when they can't drink the water. There is no future for our children when there is no more clean air to breathe, when there are no more trees, no more oxygen, no more safe ozone layer. What we do to each other will always come back to us.

Mother Theresa said, “If you suffer, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.” Understanding interconnectedness is understanding inter-being, and understanding the part we play in the destiny of the world, how we all need to do something to make the world a better place. If you open your heart, if you understand and transform your own suffering, you see that you are one and other beings are many, and their suffering is very vast. If you are someone who strives to be a spiritual person, when you have a spiritual experience, it naturally widens your heart and you see the kind of divine interconnectedness linking us all together in a web of interdependence.

As part of any spiritual path, there has to be some social responsibility. There is a problem in Buddhism in the West. We have taken it as a self-therapy. I just want to feel good and it's all about me and my teacher—but that's very shortsighted. If you see other spiritual traditions, they have social welfare programs, they build community, and they have a long-term vision for the preservation of their tradition. In Buddhism, our community is not united; we are divided along sectarian lines. Our failure to be there for each other is a failure to understand that the dharma is a complete spiritual path with social elements. We need to work together to save the planet and to work for social justice, because there are just too many things going on to not get involved in some way, shape, or form. If you think that everybody has been your mother, and a path of awakening depends very much on others as an objective virtue, we definitely have to get involved, and we can't just sit on our cushion while the world is burning. There are so many issues to get involved with—you have to make your own decision.

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For myself, it was going to India and seeing the situation of 22 percent of Indian girls marrying below the age of 18. It was seeing that 40,000 children die everyday because they don't have enough to eat, while we throw away tons of food. It was seeing a massive rate of domestic violence, thousands of women dying every year, and understanding that empowering girls with education breaks the cycle of poverty. It was also seeing that what was a very small amount of money in my country could actually save a life in India. I understood my own privilege, and therefore realized my own responsibility to pay it forward and to become a global citizen. People say, "You live in an Indian slum. It must be so hard! Are you some kind of masochist?" For me, a meaningful life is a path of happiness, and if you live your life with compassion, you will never regret it.

There is a wonderful Australian saint called Mary McKenna who said, "I've always felt the quiet presence of love. When storms rage, when persecutions threaten, I quietly creep into its deeper bliss, and securely sheltered there, my soul is at peace. Though my body may be wracked on the waves of a cold and uncaring world, if you have charity in your heart, you need never fear." Understanding interconnectedness means that we understand we need to be socially engaged. We need to work for the welfare of others. If we only work in the external world and we don't work on ourselves, we'll burn out. That's where self-care and the need for spiritual practice come in. We need both, and that is how our spiritual path becomes a path of action and a path of complete liberation, a path of complete transformation, not just for ourselves, but for the whole world.

Thank you.