

Anne C. Klein

Week 3, *Embodied Love: Core Tibetan Trainings for an Unbounded Heart*

August 18th, 2014

“Compassion”

We are continuing our series exploring the four boundless states, our reactions to them, and the possibility of dissolving those reactions so that those states can actually reveal themselves. Today we are focusing on compassion.

We can review for a moment how we got here. We are following the order recommended for beginners—and actually a very common order—by beginning with equanimity, because equanimity, as we see, is the place where we really focus on releasing ourselves from the reactivity of liking, not liking, or dullness. We become freer, not so encumbered by whatever circumstances happen to pass our way—they don’t govern our inner life anymore. We have a kind of ground that we can rest on and so, as I mentioned, the cultivation of equanimity has a certain connection with the cultivation of the qualities of stability associated with the earth element. We also saw that equanimity is a way of addressing pride, which itself contributes to the reactivity of judging, liking, and disliking. And equanimity also, very interestingly, gives us earth and gives us space, because in the gesture of sameness that is really the realization that comes out of cultivating equanimity, there is a profound sameness that pervades everything, at all times. There is the dawning of a sense of a wide embrace of inclusivity. There is a space, we can say, like the sky itself, in which everything is included—the liked and the disliked—they’re all there. There’s no excluding and this gives a sense of spaciousness and, thus, associated with the space element. As we are on a path of learning, we may very well find that we touch into some equanimity, but there’s still some kind of reactivity going on, there’s still some kind of lack of fulsomeness to that equanimity, and we find ourselves in a state of indifference. So part of the training in equanimity is to distinguish equanimity from indifference. And we found that the cultivation of love also addresses this indifference.

Whereas equanimity in particular overcomes pride and obscuration, love particularly overcomes hatred. It is, however, easily mixed up with passion, craving, wanting, addiction. These are distorted expressions of love and lovingkindness, being totally merged with someone or letting it merge into you, that kind of thing. These are the downsides of love—not the downsides of actual love, these are distortions of love. So in our practice, we want to learn from our own experience, from our sensibility, what our body tells us, what our emotional sense tells us when we relax, when we’re flowing, when we’re stuck, when we’re like water, just offering and receiving as circumstances warrant. When we’re not like that, we are possibly in some kind of distorted type of love, such as attachment.

Attachment is the thing to which love might decay or degenerate or be confused with and so we have the cultivation of the boundless state of compassion. Compassion is above all the willingness and capacity to be with pain, our own and others. It is to be distinguished from overwhelmingly drowning in the pain of another or being overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness. (I want to fix it

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and I can't.) Or feelings of wanting to control everything so that pain will never occur. You can't do that. You can't. But it is a gift to anyone and to ourselves to be able to be with pain, not pretending it's not there. Of course, if we can alleviate it, we do that. I don't mean that we fail to address it in ways that are suitable and appropriate, but the particular quality of compassion is an ability to be with it without being overly agitated, which actually will allow you to address it even more skillfully.

You may remember, as I do, some moment, maybe in childhood, when you got a bloody knee or maybe you had a broken bone and, of course, we're crying and we're frightened and we're hurting and we run to someone who hopefully receives us and holds us and does what is necessary, but doesn't say, “Oh, that's nothing.” They don't say that, nor do they call up all the neighbors to say what a disastrous thing has befallen the family. They're just there with you—not denying it, not getting overly excited about it, not getting depressed about it—just being present. This is a very clear kind of perception of the precise experience one is having at that time. It will finally yield to wisdom of just clear discrimination, and you see everything, but you're not reacting to it, either with selflessness, either with a sense of wanting to control, a sense of, “This can't happen, I can't allow it to happen,” that sort of thing. Cultivation of compassion certainly teaches us that we're not the center of the world and that's pretty tough. That's a pretty tough one.

We can already see that the cultivation of these boundless states comes up against some very fundamental senses that we have about our own identity. “What do you mean I can't make judgments about people?” Well actually you can cultivate an identification of those who are helpful to you and those who are not. That itself is not to lack equanimity. What lacks equanimity is when you feel, “And I really hate this person and am not ever going to be interested in him or her having the happiness that he or she, like everyone else, wants.” Or, “I'm just so enamored of and glommed on to this person, that all I can think of is serving them and offering them happiness.” That kind of emotional reactivity, that's what robs us of equanimity, not the simple identification of so and so is a person who is potentially dangerous to others and to me. Equanimity is not stupidity, it's not indifference, but it does teach us about our way of holding our judgments as central to our identity, and to think about that. Whether that's true for you or not, that's actually not what we are. The judge is not what we are. Or sometimes we base a sense of identity in who we are identified with. We're great! In the schoolyard, “My daddy's taller than your daddy.” It starts there and we never lose it. “I went to a better school than you did.” “I read more books than you did.” “I can throw a ball faster and further than you can, or my brother can.” This kind of identification, living through identity of another idealization, all those kinds of things, which feel like a kind of love to us, are really just attachment. But they may feel like what we are. “I am who I am because I'm identified with so and so.” “I'm identified with such and such a group, this is my...” But that's never who we ultimately are. Space is not part of anything. The unbound and wholeness that is our nature is actually not so limited. But we don't know that easily, so as we cultivate these four boundless states, we do come up against some very, very deeply held self-impressions that go back to childhood.

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If you feel your body erupting in some kind of response or reaction to what you’re cultivating, it may be a sign that this is actually a very deep (from childhood) kind of pattern. It’s not going to go away overnight, so we’re patient. That’s why we have these different steps. That’s why we take a month—really, at least two months, ideally, if you can—on each of these four immeasurables. I’m using immeasurable and boundless to translate the same term because they have a little different feel in English. Any time we have a sense of reactivity, we are stuck in some kind of boundedness of self. See if that’s true for you. When we’re really open and spacious, we’re not stuck in that way. The clouds just flow through, whether the wispy, misty clouds of equanimity, the big, billowing clouds of love, or the dark black clouds of the suffering that compassion is going to take us to the heart of—none of that is our actual identity.

In other practices, we focus very specifically on wrong ideas that we have about what we are. In the four immeasurables, they come up in this very central but kind of under the radar way because that’s what we bump up against. “I don’t like this. I don’t want to consider suffering. It scares me. I feel helpless. I feel anguished.” All of these things will arise and the cultivation of compassion will serve to rescue us from whatever addictive, overly passionately craving, attached type of love that we might fall into as we cultivate a love and kindness of the second state. So we’re cultivating compassion now.

Let’s review our steps. Again, we set up our body, always. We take ten, fifteen, twenty minutes, if we can, to cultivate our attention. We enjoy the sense of support that we get from our cushion or chair. We enjoy the sense of a kind of upright flow that we get from sensing into the alignment from the center of the earth, rising through our body, to the apex of space. We come into the present as we invite our attention to rest on our breath. As we start to feel settled, we let the next inhalation carry our attention down to the very center of our bellies and to gravity, and we continue to breathe, present there, deep in our body. And as we come toward the end of our setting up mindfulness, setting up our capacity for attention, bring your attention, rising up your central corridor, from your *do*, center of your belly, rising up to your solar plexus, which has a particular connection with love to your heart, has a particular connection with wisdom. As before, we sound the sound “Om,” feeling that light, clarity sound expanding from your heart. It’s actually going into and becoming present in every cell of your body. And in this way, we begin to wake up our body. “Om” is the sound of enlightened embodiment. We begin to wake up our bodies and we acknowledge that our body is a source of profound information for us, and that in our practice, in our cultivation of these found boundless states, we are always going to be noticing what cues come to us from our body. So we can do this “Om.” You could do it three times if you like. We’ll do it once now, feeling that every cell is filling with “Om”-ness and awareness. <Hums “om” sound.>

Recalling that the purpose of this session is to cultivate compassion, take a moment to recall and feel into what you know about the feel of compassion: when somebody was able to sit with you

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when you were in pain, without denying it, without being overly dramatic, just with you, and what a gift this is to give yourself. Now bring to mind someone who’s close to you—not a child—somebody you have good feelings about, maybe not the very closest person to you because that might be quite challenging, but someone dear, a human being. Imagine that they have suddenly found themselves abandoned in some kind of hot, burning plane. They have no friends to help them, no one around to give them advice. It’s a kind of hell situation. The sun is burning, the land is burning, they feel excruciating pain, like being seared in a hot iron pan. Just notice your reaction. If you’re familiar with descriptions of hells in any tradition, Buddhist hot and cold hells, take the time to imagine this, not going into whether you believe in such hells or not, but just as a way to see into your capacity for and resistance to really sitting with the suffering of this person who you know and care for.

Now the scene changes and they’re seated on some icy cliff with the wind blowing so hard that it tears at their skin. Their teeth are chattering, their skin cracks, blood emerges, they’re shaking, they’re crying, they have no way of release. And here you are, observing this. What is your tendency? Do you want to jump up and go somewhere else? Understandable. But in the second phase of this practice, we’re seeing we have a commitment to sit here and see into our reaction. We’re experiencing pain at their pain. Can we observe that?

Once we’ve identified this particular mode of either wanting to run away or completely eradicate their pain in the next moment, we’re in the third phase of our own practice, and we just keep our attention on this anguished state that we have and our reaction to their own pain, to the pain that we’re seeing in this person. Now we stay with that, and we stay with that, now we stay with it.

Then, at some point, we don’t know when, there’s some kind of shift, and we’re just there and present to that suffering before us. We’re not in denial of it. We don’t feel we have sole responsibility for healing. We’re just there and we care, and it is our aspiration that this person and all others be free of suffering. And we may find ourselves in a state of simply precise seeing. We see the suffering, we know exactly its torment, and we can neither run away nor run toward. Our recognition of what is occurring is very, very precise because we have completely, through our awareness, seen through to the dissolution of our wanting to escape. The energy of that wanting to rush away or wanting to control has dissipated and now we are in a state of highly passionate compassion, which is a state of a very precise discrimination. Then we look, “What is this compassion really?” We sit in that and we do that for some minutes and whatever is coming up for us, we see it. We don’t judge it, we don’t attach to it, we don’t run away from it, we’re just present. We rest and digest the practice by simply resting here. Then we close with an “ah,” extending this compassion to the entire universe of our experience. And then bringing it back with an “ah,”

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bringing it back into our heart, to carry into our lives on a daily and hourly basis with an “Om.”
[ph?]

That’s how we’ll close the session. Ah... And then it’s as if the whole universe of compassion, which we have lit up with our “ah,” sharing it with all beings, now dissolves into our heart, and the sound “Om” is a stabilizing sound of presence, just here with us, a gathering sound. “Om...” And we rest in that a little bit.

During this next week, please cultivate compassion and review the other [retreat installments] as you might wish. If you’re interested in some reading, Ken McLeod’s *Wake Up To Your Life* is really wonderful. I’m also drawing from Longchenpa’s discussion of the four immeasurables in *Now that I Come to Die*.

See you next time.