

Lama Rod Owens  
Week One, *Compassion, Love, and Healing in Times of War*  
July 4, 2016  
“Exploring a Vulnerable Compassion”



Hello, my name is Lama Rod Owens. I am a dharma teacher and lama within the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, and I'm here to share this series of teachings with you.

I would like to talk about practicing in the world right now, and the challenges that we face as people, as community members, and as dharma practitioners. It's easy to sit, watch the news, and be in the world, and to see that things are falling apart. There's so much violence, so much happening in our environment and the climate. Politically the world seems to be a mess—which is probably an understatement. But, when we view everything, it's difficult to have a sense of how we should be practicing in the world. It's easy to say that we can practice compassion or lovingkindness, or as we say in my tradition, *tonglen*, or exchanging one's soul for others. It's easy to say that we should just do this, but there are significant obstacles and challenges to doing it.

In this series of dharma talks for *Tricycle*, we will be examining some strong, poignant strategies from my tradition—the Tibetan or tantric tradition of Buddhism. This week, I want to talk about the idea of vulnerable compassion, which I see as critically necessary if we are to be bodhisattvas in this world, as this world is right now. But before that, I think it's important for us to generate a sense of refuge, which I rely on as a primary strategy for my work currently in the world. According to the dharma, we understand that there are three sources of refuge, or three precious jewels.

The first of these jewels is the buddha—the buddha in this sense not only represents the historical Buddha, the teacher, the archetypal teacher that emerges for us in our lives. This could be the actual personification of our teacher, our guru, our dharma friend, as we practice and study with them. It could also be the manifestation of anyone occupying the space of wise one, or guru, or elder, someone that we rely on for guidance and wisdom. The first jewel of refuge brings our attention to the realization that there are people around us always teaching us and guiding us. Not just our dharma teachers and our gurus, but people around us who may not have those titles but whom are always guiding us and keeping us on the path towards realization.



The second jewel is the dharma, which I often translate as the study of how things are or how things really are. Dharma in my practice is the direct manifestation of wisdom itself. Dharma is not just the teachings, texts, scripture, or ritual—not just what, in my tradition, we call *sadhana* practice. Dharma is the living tradition of clarity, honesty, and goodness as it manifests in this very moment—in our bodies, in this time and place. Through that manifestation of goodness, we are able to be in the world in a very clear, direct way. Through the deeper internalization of dharma and its wisdom, we are able to liberate ourselves from suffering, from fixating on the preconceived sense of autonomous self. Dharma supports our cultivation of spaciousness, and in that spaciousness, we are able to let go, eventually attaining realization and ultimately enlightenment.

The last jewel of refuge is the sangha itself. Sangha is community. We rely on the community of practitioners in order to attain realization and enlightenment. I understand the community to be those individuals aligning themselves with the teacher—the buddha, the guru, the first jewel—and practicing the dharma and taking it seriously. The community is a support network. It's a workshop, if you will, that allows us to deepen our practice of dharma; often that deepening is through being influenced by the example of others within the community. But deepening our practice is also influenced by conflict. When we enter into sangha, the primary goal and purpose of sangha is not to maintain a comfortable, perfect, harmonious environment. Ultimately, when sangha is a training ground—a workshop where we can bump against each other, bump heads in a way that can be compassionate and loving—we can use conflict in order to deepen our practice.

We have other environments where we are always in conflict, which may include our families, our workplaces, our schools, and so forth. But the sangha is a sacred environment. In the sangha, we may have similar conflicts, but what we're actually challenging ourselves to do is to bring awareness to those conflicts and through the awareness of those conflicts, we're able to bring our practice into conflicts. By entering conflicts with awareness—using relative practices of



compassion, love and kindness, and so forth—we're able to deepen our compassion and love for both ourselves and for those around us with whom we're in conflict.

That is essentially the sacred nature of the sangha, and that overall is the sacred nature of the three rare and precious jewels of refuge. We say *rare* because it's very difficult to be born into conditions where these three jewels are present. We're very fortunate to have teachers, guides, gurus, and elders. We're very fortunate to have exposure to the wisdom and teaching of true, pure, authentic dharma, and we're very fortunate to be in communities of likeminded practitioners and individuals approaching the same goals that we are, in order to be happier, freer, more spacious, and ultimately to be enlightened.

When we consider the path of Vajrayana, of tantric Buddhism, which is my tradition, we have three secondary routes of refuge. On these routes are the guru, the *yidam*, and the dharma protector.

The guru, in this sense, is the source of blessing and grace. The guru helps create the causes and conditions for us to have a profound effect of practice. It's through the example of the guru that we're able to travel the path of the dharma.

The yidam are meditational deities, and they act as the source of accomplishment. Through the practice of a yidam—an esoteric lineage of teachings—we're able to accomplish tremendous direct realizations of mind itself. We're able to accomplish the realization of what, in the Kagyu school, we call Mahamudra, the great seal on the great gesture. The great gesture refers to the nature of mind itself: that everything that arises as a phenomenal reality is really pointing back to essential nature, which is the nature of the integration of emptiness and luminosity. But luminosity is not referring to light—it's not phenomenal brightness. Luminosity refers to the energy of potential: emptiness. Because of that potential, that energy of manifestation, we give rise to phenomenal reality, and we also give rises to the various levels of our confusion and ignorance. The yidam help us to connect to that and to move through that.



Finally, we have the root of the dharma protector, which is very prominent in Tibetan practice. The dharma protector is the blessing of activity, activity aligned with blessing and helping us to experience the causes and conditions for an effective dharma practice. This includes the literal support that we need in order to practice: food, clothing, shelter, medicine, access to teachings and so forth. So taking refuge in the dharma protector, relying on the dharma protector, enables us to bring about those conditions of support.

Together we have the three precious jewels—the buddha, the dharma, and the sangha—along with the secondary roots of blessing in the tantric tradition: the guru, the yidam, and the dharma protector. We bring these all together into this profound, direct contemplation that helps us enter into a stable practice, and we bring our awareness to the three jewels. We take refuge in these sources of support and protection at the beginning of each practice. In this series of dharma talks, at the beginning of each practice we will take refuge in these routes of refuge.

Let’s now move forward into the heart of this first session: vulnerability and compassion. Compassion is perhaps one of the strongest practices that we have in the dharma. Compassion is a liberatory force that moves us into the suffering of the world in a creative, dynamic way. The heart of compassion is empathy. Empathy is connecting to our sense of suffering, because ultimately compassion is defined as the wish to alleviate suffering in ourselves, in each other, and in the world.

To begin compassionate practice, we use our practice of mindfulness to locate and connect to our sense of suffering within our own experience. Suffering is a complex, difficult word to work with. I often say that suffering is really about a feeling of not being okay, of being uneasy, or being off. I encourage you in your practice to name how suffering manifests in your life. Suffering can be a huge, complicated concept. But how do you feel in life? Think about the anxiety and discomfort that you feel in certain situations. Think about moving into the world and placing yourself within situations that are very difficult. Place yourself as a mediator in an act of



violence. Place yourself in certain other conflicts. Place yourself in your identities, and come to terms with how these identities may create suffering for others around us.

I’m talking about racial identity, class identity, gender identity, and the kinds of violence and power differentials that arise out of these identities. Bring mindfulness to that discomfort. When we identify with our discomfort, we say, “I’m experiencing this. I wonder if other people experience the same things. I wonder if people like me—who I perceive as being very similar to me—if they’re going through what I’m going through.” From that reflection, we move from inside and begin to relate to the world outside our internal environment. That’s when we begin to develop compassion—when we say, “Other people experience discomfort in the world, and since I don’t want to experience discomfort, I’m sure others don’t want to experience discomfort. I want to wish that all beings, including myself, are free from their suffering.”

This is the beginning of compassion—when compassion takes root in our experience and we begin to consider the experiences of other people. Vulnerability is important here, because we have to have a sense of openness. In my practice, vulnerability is defined as the willingness to hold space for the experiences that come up for me. Not only am I holding space for my experiences—but I am acknowledging those experiences. That is vulnerability. The initial practice of vulnerability is very personal. It’s very internalized, but it is critical, when we’re developing compassion, that we begin by considering our own experiences. Vulnerability is the development of empathy for ourselves.

One thing that I work with in my practice is my sexuality. I identify as a queer man, and the development of my understanding of my own sexuality was important to me when I was coming out to myself. That was a practice of vulnerability. That was the beginning of the roots of compassion. Although I could not name that as a young man, now I can look back and realize that admitting to myself that I was attracted to other men was the beginning of holding space for my experience of sexuality. From that, I was able to hold the experiences of the shame, the fear, the regret, the sadness, and also the joy, freedom, and openness. All that began to arise, and the



space in which I held it began to deepen and widen more and more. I began to connect more and more to everything that was coming up, and then eventually, I was able to say, “This is my experience of being a gay man or a queer man,” so that I could understand that other people like me may be experiencing the same range of things arising.

That is the compassion and vulnerability of my practice. But we also need honesty when we’re practicing vulnerability. We cannot give rise to compassion if we’re not honest about the reality of our own suffering, and we will not connect to the suffering of others if we’re not connecting honestly with our own suffering and discomfort.

Vulnerability and compassion come together to create this powerful, authentic force in our practice and in the world. Many of us tend to believe that vulnerability will open us up to being attacked. I think that this is probably not the best, nor the most accurate, understanding of vulnerability. I understand vulnerability to be courage. I understand vulnerability to be the practice of authenticity, meaning that I am able to be open in the world about who and what I am, my desires and my aspirations. As long as I am able to have some space around that, and some confidence in my own experience, it’s very difficult for others to come and to hurt me by judging, criticizing, or disparaging me.

Having confidence in my experience is the way in which I’m able to be vulnerable in the world. One of the ways that that has really been powerful for me has been around racialization. I am racialized as a black person. A historical and social narrative has accompanied black racialization in the United States, particularly within my African American community. There was certainly a time when derogatory names were used against us. I remember how damaging and traumatic those experiences were. I remember those experiences, and I reflect on them often. But there was also certainly a point when I began my dharma practice, where first I began to connect to how difficult and traumatic the experience of racism was for me, and the racial trauma that results from racism.

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But through the practices of Mahamudra, I was able to connect to experiences of my own mind and begin to have direct experiences with who and what I was. I began to have a different experience of this self, this ego that I was identifying with. Through that experience, I developed a confidence of who and what I was, such that when I began to move, act, and be in the world in different ways, I was identifying with my *own* experience of who I was, rather than tuning in only to the projections of who I was formed by others around me.

This is not so much a transcendence of suffering but a going-through of suffering—owning my suffering, owning the ways in which I buy in to the violence around me in the speech and thoughts of others around me. Through this awareness, I was able to integrate vulnerability and compassion very powerfully. It’s a practice that I continue to use as I move in the world as an activist and organizer. It’s how I’m able to develop compassion for those that I label as aggressors or oppressors. This particular practice is how I’m able to develop relationships with people who may not like me or are very prejudiced towards me for some characteristic, for some aspect of my identity. I don’t necessarily like these individuals, but I challenge myself to love them. Love is defined very similarly to compassion, but love is centered on the idea of happiness. The wish for someone to be happy is the heart of the definition of love. These are the aspirations that we can move into through our practice.

When we have a strong, authentic practice of vulnerability and compassion, we’re able to get up every day, be in our formal practice, and say, “I aspire to be an agent of compassion in the world. I aspire to be an agent of love in the world. I wish that all beings would experience the deepest wellbeing, happiness, and joy. I wish that all beings would have the experience of being loved, and also the experience of expressing true love, true happiness. I wish that all beings could have the exposure and access to all the beautiful, profound, poignant strategies of transformation that I have, and I wish that I can continue to be a representative of these strategies in the world so that I can become a light for people, that I can actually become a shining example of what it means to be in the world, to live really fiercely in the world, to live very directly in the world, and not to

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live from a sense of fear and a sense of hiding, but to live open and fierce and bright and loving and compassionate.”

Please join us again next week, where we will continue our discussion of compassion and examine the fierce and fabulous practice of Tara, the mother liberator.