

Ven. Robina Courtin
Week One, *Unraveling Our Emotions*
August 1, 2016
“Understanding the Buddha’s Model of the Mind”



Hello, everybody. I'm Robina Courtin, and I'm going to talk about our emotions: how to unravel, unpack, and deconstruct our emotions. I want to sing a prayer to start—it's a way of stating our goal. Our goal is to listen to these words of the Buddha and identify some tools that we can use to develop our marvelous potential. The Buddha says that we have so much potential, potential for our own sakes, but also so that we can be of benefit to others. The Buddha says that a bird needs two wings: wisdom and compassion.

[sings]

Why would we want to unravel our emotions? According to the Buddha, the mind is his expertise. The mind is absolutely central to life. The Buddha would say—and it's not meant to be a cliché—that everything comes from the mind: all our happiness and our suffering start with the mind. Buddha's deal is the mind. So what is the mind? We use the word *mind* in the West, but the Buddha has a radically different view of the mind, so it is very important for us to clarify his view of what the mind is and what it is not.

But before we talk about the mind, it's important to know how to listen. The Buddha is not a creator, and he does not assert a creator. In fact, the Buddha comes out of an astonishing Indian tradition from more than 3000 years ago. I remember the Dalai Lama saying recently, “It was these Indians more than 3000 years ago who began this incredible investigation into the nature of self.” The Buddha came out of that marvelous tradition and came up with his own experiential findings.

What we're going to be talking about is not revelation. It's not merely to be believed. It's coming from the Buddha's own direct experience, from the depths of his own mind. He tells us that this mind of ours has remarkable potential. That's one of the crucial points. It's very different. He would say we could all become a buddha.

The word in Tibetan, *sang gyay*, is very interesting. The etymology is very tasty—it points out

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what “buddha” means. The first syllable, *sang*, implies the utter eradication from our own mind the very atom of so-called negativity, misery, ego, fear, drama, all that we think in our culture is utterly normal. The Buddha would say it's adventitious. It doesn't belong; therefore, we can get rid of it.

The second syllable, *gyay*, implies the development to perfection of all the goodness. Speaking very simply, the Buddha would say, "This is the core of our being." This is the starting point to recognizing our extraordinary potential. That's the Buddha's first point in his view about the mind, which is radically different from our conventional views. If I go to you as my therapist and ask for methods to get rid of all ego, fear, depression, or anxiety, and then develop infinite love and compassion for all beings all the time, you will probably think I'm mentally ill. But this is exactly what the Buddha's saying.

The second point about the mind that, again, is radically different from our assumptions in the modern materialist world, is that the mind is not physical. There's not one atom of our mind that is physical. What the Buddha's referring to is all our thoughts, feelings, emotions, instinct, intuition—this entire spectrum of our inner being. Not one atom of this is physical. He's not saying we don't have a brain. In the last 30 years, we have learned marvelous things from discussion between the Dalai Lama and the best Tibetan scholars and meditators and the best brains in the West. There's a wonderful coming together in these different models. The Buddha's view is fundamentally clear. The mind is not your brain. The mind is not physical.

So the non-physical mind has this deep potential, which implies the next point: that it has subtler levels of cognition. Essentially the job of the mind is to cognize. Cognition includes intellect, feelings, and emotions. The Buddha, and the other Indians of his tradition, developed the psychological skill that we know as the single-pointed concentration—broadly known today as mindfulness—which enables a person to achieve access to far subtler levels of the mind that do not depend upon the brain. These are levels beyond the conceptual and the sensory. Of course, in our materialistic view there's no such concept of this, so we tend to think of it as mystical. This is

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absolutely clear and fundamental for the Buddha.

The mind has an astonishing potential to be free of rubbish and full of goodness. The final, crucial point—which again flies in the face of all the views we have in the modern world, whether we're religious or materialist—is that our consciousness, our mind, thoughts, feelings, emotions, and unconscious are not the handiwork of someone else. This is the weirdest idea from the Buddha: that we're neither a product of a creator nor the product of our parents. Yes, they gave us a body; there's no argument with that. But the Buddha would say, "Our consciousness, our mind, is our own."

From Buddhist psychology, we gain the term *mental continuum*. If we had perfect memory, we know very well we'd end up back in the first second of conception in our mother's womb. The second before that egg is in the mother's body and the sperm is the father's body, where is my consciousness? It has its source in the previous moment, in this river of mental moments—this mental continuum.

Clearly, we can't prove this immediately, so what do we do as Buddhists? You take it as your working hypothesis. That's the approach that the Buddha takes, neither blindly believing nor blindly rejecting. That's not the view. Taking this as our hypothesis, let's explore this process of unraveling this mind of ours, so that we can do this extraordinary job of ridding ourselves of all the rubbish, which for the Buddha causes suffering, causes us to harm others. Instead, to speak very simply, let's develop our goodness.

As my teacher Lama Yeshe says, being a Buddhist means being your own therapist. That sounds like good marketing, and it is, but it's also absolutely true. It takes a while to wrap our heads around this idea. We understand the idea of therapy. But what we mean here is the idea of therapy as a sounding-board to address the causes of our stress, fears, and depression. It's marvelous that we have these tools. The Buddhist way of being your own therapy means using these practical skills. As I mentioned, the Buddha adapted them from the Hindus.

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The first step is learning to focus your mind. This, in its nature, is not even religious. It's utilizing a state of mind that the Buddhist model calls mindfulness. The bare bones meaning of mindfulness is simply the capacity to remember what we're actually doing from moment to moment. When we look into our crazy mind and its big soup of emotion, it's difficult to keep track of what's going on. It's all over the place. One of the key skills, then, is to focus the mind.

Even if you do this for three minutes every morning, you sit there and make a determined effort to not let your mind wander off. You make a determined effort to pay attention to something. Let's use the breath, a typical object that the Buddha would suggest as a starting point. You're making the effort for even three minutes. "I will not let my mind wander." Naturally your mind will wander but you bring it back to the breath.

Because we're stepping out of our head for three minutes, the immediate benefit is that we can't help but hear what's going on. That's the skill we need to learn to develop—to begin to listen to these infinite thoughts, feelings, and emotions all milling around that we don't pay much attention to until they're really loud, or until they hit our body. That's what we mean by emotion. We fuss over and give great importance to emotions. If we begin to develop the skill of stepping out of our heads for a couple minutes and paying attention to something, the skill will develop of focusing will begin to develop as we start hearing our thoughts. We begin to hear the conceptual stories that inform emotion and inform the feeling in the body.

Normally, paying attention is not a skill that we learn in our culture. As a child, one of my most natural, spontaneous emotions was anger. The millisecond that I didn't get what I wanted, I would explode in anger. I didn't notice I was angry until, of course, the words came flying out of my mouth. Perhaps some other people don't notice that they're repressed until they can't get out of the bed one morning, completely inert. Lama Yeshe says, “We make the body the boss.” We give such power to our senses and our bodies. The Buddha deals with the mind, which is what ultimately informs our senses.

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What we have to learn to do, then, is go beyond the sensory, beyond the grosser level of conceptuality, in order to listen to what truly informs our emotions and sensory responses to the world. This is the great skill. Anyone can do this, but it needs rigor and discipline.

The key thing, of course, here is that if I start looking into my anger and you ask me, "Tell me about your anger, Robina," I will give you a very detailed description, a very detailed conceptual story about the person that I feel has caused my anger. What I can't see is that I'm not describing my anger; I'm describing the *object* of my anger. As far as I'm concerned—this is the instinct of ego—I'm a victim of that person's actions. So my anger is real but it's not my fault. I'm angry because you did this, because she said that, because they did this. This is very deep in our bones.

Once we start to understand our mind, we can start to listen to the conceptual story that anger tells us. What I just shared is a conceptual story. If you see a person shouting and yelling we go, "Oh, they're angry." If you record them and then transcribe their words, you're left with a piece of paper with a series of words on it. Anyone with half a brain can tell the person's angry, but what are you seeing? Clear concepts. All these unhappy emotions that we have—attachment, jealousy, depression—let's go into these more in-depth.

In the bones of their being, beneath the emotional component, are these conceptual stories. That's what we have to learn to listen to. The crucial one, more than listen to them, is to learn to unpack them and maybe stop believing in the stories they tell us.

If we take the Buddha's view of karma, which is a massive part of his worldview, these habitual tendencies and stories that we tell are incidental side points of who we are, which can be empowering. Personally I find it empowering that I came into this life, at the first second of my conception, programmed with my own tendencies—my kindness, love, compassion, musicality, anger, whatever. For me, even without analyzing that too much, this makes me realize that they are the qualities of my mind, and that I need to become very familiar with my mind. Why?

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Because I can *change* my mind.

There’s a lovely saying in Buddhism: “If you can change something, please change it, but if you can't, then what?” I find this very powerful, because for many years I've been working with people in prison. Many of my friends in prison are devoted Buddhists, and they don’t have the luxury of changing their external circumstances. We do, in fact, have the time and ability to change our minds, but we feel as if we are in prison sometimes. We feel so paralyzed by our relationships, jobs, and external environment. When you're up against the wall and you know that you can't change anything out there, you either go mad or you begin to change your mind. My friends in prison use these tools—it’s empowering, inspiring, and encouraging.

The key, then, is to become our own therapist. That means listening to these conceptual stories of our emotions. Maybe we have more enthusiasm to do it if we get a clearer picture of the Buddha's view of the mind. The Buddhist model of the mind is very distinct. The words we've just used—love, compassion, depression, jealousy—they're utterly familiar to us. They're completely second-nature. When we think of psychology, we tend not to think those things. They almost sound too simple.

But the Buddhist view of the mind has not changed in 2500 years. The model is most fascinating. To understand the Buddha’s perspective, we need to understand his model of the mind. Again, initially this model came from the Hindus, these remarkable persons of more than 3000 years ago who developed the psychological skill of entering the mind at subtler levels. They basically mapped out the mind. This is something perhaps even as modern-day Buddhists we don't think about very much.

We're so used to thinking about mapping the *brain*. That's nothing wrong. But if we want to learn to use the Buddha’s skills wisely, we need to learn at least initially his model and theory of the mind. Then we use that as our basis to begin to go more deeply into developing the skills of concentration, listening more precisely and more clearly to the goings-on in our minds at ever-

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subtler levels, and to begin, as I said, to unpack and unravel the emotions. Eventually we argue, using wisdom, with the misconceptions caused by ego. The crucial point made by the Buddha in his model of the mind is very simple—deceptively simple, initially.

The Buddhist view of consciousness says that there are three categories of a state of mind. We have the so-called negative states of the mind: the neurotic ones, the useless ones, or the ones that the Buddha says are adventitious, that aren't at the core of our being, and which we can therefore remove. We know them well: anger, depression, jealousy, low self-esteem, arrogance, self-hate. There's a hierarchy of them, but the root one—the root delusion, as they call it—is so primordial, so instinctive that we practically don't give a name to it. We don't even recognize such a concept in our culture, in our views of the mind. In fact, you could argue the view of this deeply instinctive misconception of self—which is how the Buddha would label it—is actually the very self that we reinforce in our ordinary daily life, and it's reinforced in our views of psychology in the modern world.

The root delusion is what the Buddha calls simply ignorance, *marigpa*, unawareness. It's a primordial unawareness. It's known as ego grasping, so that indicates its character. It's this primordial, absolute ignorance of how actually the “I” and everything else in the universe exist. All of the Buddha's teaching leads us to an understanding of the ultimate absence of this fantasy “I,” and leads us to the understanding of emptiness which, initially, sounds so abstract to us. In this hierarchy of negative states, there's this ego grasping that then gives rise to the ego's main voice, which is called attachment, which then gives rise to anger when attachment doesn't get what it wants, and then all the other drama from there. This is what we really have to understand.

Then, we have the second category of states of mind: the marvelous ones. These are at the core of our being: love, compassion, empathy. These are the states of mind that give rise to courage, wisdom, joy, happiness, and our ability to help others.

The third category are the mechanics of mind that are crucial to develop, and which the single-

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pointedness of purpose allows us to develop: concentration, alertness, mindfulness, all the marvelous that we must hone in order to be our own therapist.

Let’s finish here for now. We can continue this conversation later.

We started by motivating ourselves to listen to these teachings and adapt some tools from them. If there have been some tools, fantastic—because we’re the boss here, not the Buddha. This process is up to us. Now let’s consider how marvelous these tools that we’ve learned can be. Think about how many seeds we’ve planted in the last 15-20 minutes. Buddha would say, "None of it goes astray," so we delight in this and we think, "Fantastic." May we nourish these seeds from this moment with our effort to develop ourselves so that we can be of benefit to others, no matter how long it takes. We express this in these little prayers.

[*sings*]