

Ven. Robina Courtin  
Week Two, *Unraveling Our Emotions*  
August 8, 2016  
“Unpacking Delusions and Disturbing Emotions”



Let's continue our discussion about the Buddha's model of the mind and go into further detail.

First I'd like to sing a little prayer that expresses our goal, our purpose. Let's make it something altruistic. We're going to listen to these ideas—the Buddha's ideas, his findings about the mind and our marvelous potential—to see if they possess any tools that we can use to help us develop this potential so that, in turn, we can be of benefit to others.

[sings]

The Buddha's model of the mind is fascinating. The words are very easy—they make the model deceptively simple. But the model comes initially from the Hindus, and the Buddha took it and moved on with it. It comes from the experiences of the great yogis, not from the use of a microscope to view the brain. It comes from looking into the mind at a subtler level, and observing with crystal clarity the various conceptual states at this gross level of mind that we function at. From that perspective, it's utterly interesting.

Typically we don't have such clear, precise descriptions of the internal experience of the mind. The precision and clarity that is used for mapping the brain is exactly the precision and clarity used by the Buddha and the great yogis, and we need to use them if we want to use the Buddha's tools to unpack and unravel our minds, and then reconstruct them into this marvelous potential of a perfect mind, a mind free of rubbish and full of goodness.

But before we begin—why would we want to do this? The Buddha's point is very clear. It's not a question of believing; it's a question of looking into. We look into the three categories of states of mind: the negative states, the positive states, and the circle of neutral.

The negative are the unhappy ego-based states of mind. We all know them: attachment, craving, depression, jealousy, dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, arrogance. All of them are rooted in fear. Very often in the West we ask, "Where is fear in the Buddha's understanding of the mind?" All

Ven. Robina Courtin  
Week Two, *Unraveling Our Emotions*  
August 8, 2016  
“Unpacking Delusions and Disturbing Emotions”



of these neuroses are in the nature of fear.

Then we have the second category, the positive states of mind: love, compassion, empathy, kindness, generosity, wisdom. We know these words backwards and forwards.

Then, we have the third category. This is not the way that we tend to think about the mind. We know that we have the capacity to concentrate, to remember what we're doing, to be very clear. These states of mind are called neutral—not because they're unimportant, they're absolutely crucial—but because they have neither the characteristics of being virtuous nor non-virtuous.

As one of my other teachers, Lama Zopa, says, "Thieves need mindfulness." Thieves need to not forget what they're doing moment-by-moment; otherwise they'll be in trouble. There's many of these states of mind. Using the techniques of concentration developed by the Hindus, it is through these states of mind that we learn to hone the skills to the most marvelous degree so that we can unpack and unravel emotions, identify the neuroses, distinguish them from positive states, and gradually do the job, as Lama Zopa says, of “molding this mind of ours into the shape we want.”

The crucial point that Buddha makes—which is not how we think in our culture—is that there's this clear distinction between the so-called negative and so-called positive. These are not moralistic terms, but technical terms. Don't put any heavy meaning onto them—which is what we tend to do.

The negative states have two main characteristics. The first is obvious, and it is indicated by a term in Buddhist psychology that acts as one of many synonyms for negative states of mind: *disturbing emotions*. We sometimes see terms like afflictive emotions or emotional afflictions in Buddhist literature. Consider the last time you were jealous. Consider the last time you were depressed. You don't say, "Wow, I was jealous yesterday, it was just great." No. We know it was beyond painful and disturbing. This is obvious to all of us.

Ven. Robina Courtin  
Week Two, *Unraveling Our Emotions*  
August 8, 2016  
“Unpacking Delusions and Disturbing Emotions”



The second characteristic is indicated by another synonym for unhappy states of mind: *delusion*. This is the bull's eye. Once we understand its meaning, we are on track exactly with understanding Buddha's approach, his explanation of why we suffer, and, therefore, how we can rid the mind of delusion. The term delusion is very interesting. If someone accused you of being delusional, we'd be very offended, and we know perfectly well why: because they're saying that we're not in touch with reality. That's the point. That's the bull's eye. That's what the Buddha is saying. This is unique to the Buddha, if we analyze it carefully.

Initially, of course, it's hard to see. Why? Let's go deeper into the Buddha's definition of the emotional components of strong anger, attachment, jealousy, and depression. When emotions hit our body, we feel them very powerfully. For the Buddha, this is the tip of the iceberg. When we start to go beyond emotion—when we get single point of concentration, or even some semblance of concentration—we can begin to heal these elaborate conceptual stories that these emotional states of mind speak to us. The emotions are like scripts in our head.

What's anger saying? “You are evil. How could you do that to me? I do not deserve it. You are the cause of my suffering.” This is where it gets tricky. Let's say that my partner has cheated on me. We feel that our anger is an accurate depiction of the action of cheating. But what the Buddha is saying, and as our mothers would tell us, is that these delusions make mountains out of molehills. This is even trickier, because then immediately we're saying, “Stop exaggerating. Big deal, so he cheated on you.” It's not saying that. It's far more nuanced than that. We can get the facts in there. My partner did cheat on me.

Let's look at the state of mind called attachment, which is a word used very differently in our culture. For the Buddha this is the bottom line. This is the one that drives us from the second we wake up until the second we go to sleep. It's this bottomless pit of neediness, a dissatisfaction that gives rise to craving for something that we feel very strongly is missing. Just like anger, attachment takes an object—let's say, chocolate cake—and makes a mountain out a molehill.

Ven. Robina Courtin  
Week Two, *Unraveling Our Emotions*  
August 8, 2016  
“Unpacking Delusions and Disturbing Emotions”



Attachment exaggerates the deliciousness of the chocolate cake. Anger exaggerates the ugliness of the cheating partner.

Now, all of this happens so instinctively, because as the Buddha says, we come programmed with this stuff, from countless practice. We do not inherit these habits from our parents. Our parents had these habits, but they have them because they did them as well. In Buddhism, these are our states of mind because they are so instinctive and intuitive. We practically don't even notice. Initially we don't notice there's a conceptual story that forms an emotion.

To begin to unpack and listen to these conceptual stories takes courage. Why? Because, "I believe that story. I believe 100% that that cake is delicious in its bones" —as if you put a spoonful of deliciousness into the cake along with the chocolate in the batter— "and I believe 100% that ugly partner is ugly, that they are the cause of my suffering."

The Buddha would suggest that it is bad enough that we have this inflated, instinctive powerful emotional response to something that we don't even notice is informed by an elaborate conceptual story. It is bad enough that we don't even notice that. But the elaborate conceptual story is so powerful that it even makes the object look delicious. Anger makes the object ugly. And of course, what do we do? We believe it's a true story.

First, we don't even know it's a story. In Buddhist psychology it is said that things appear to us from "out there"—the partner appears ugly to us, the chocolate cake appears delicious—but it is in fact an aspect of the mind. We can prove this. We know this every day. We know when attachment is rampant. When your stomach is empty, the cake looks divine. No question. We know when your partner cheats on you, you just have to think their name and it's heartbreaking. We know they look awful. We believe the truth of these stories and pictures. That's the killer.

One level of practice here—if we begin to understand how the mind works—is to, as Lama Zopa would say, "stop believing in our appearances." Stop believing necessarily that these

Ven. Robina Courtin  
Week Two, *Unraveling Our Emotions*  
August 8, 2016  
“Unpacking Delusions and Disturbing Emotions”



appearances might be the truth. It is true: the cake tastes delicious when you eat it. It is true: your partner cheated on you. These statements are true—relatively. But the rest is embellishment.

That’s the key factor of these *delusions*, these *disturbing emotions*. This is fundamental to the Buddha’s understanding of the mind, and it’s fundamental to our understanding of his view that we can rid the mind of such delusions and disturbances. They’re exaggerations, distortions. This is very hard for us to see, because we believe in the appearance. We believe in the picture these emotions tell us. This is not possible unless we first understand what the Buddha is saying. This is not the way we tend to think in the world.

To understand these unhappy states of mind, have the courage to own them—to own that you know them. That’s the first step. It’s true that my partner cheated on me. What I must learn to do, if I have the courage, is to know that I can ask them to stop cheating. There’s no harm. If they do stop cheating, aren’t you fortunate! But if they don’t, you’ve got some choices. This is where the Buddha steps in. This is where he begins the work. He says, "Let’s look at the mind, then."

I always like to use extreme examples. I remember reading about a woman in prison. I didn’t know her, but I was running an organization, Liberation Prison Project, working with prisoners in the United States and Australia: people on death row, people with 30-year sentences. I gained such inspiration from them, to see them use these tools very well.

About 30 years ago, in Florida, this woman and her husband were accused of murdering two policemen. She, in fact, was innocent. She got out after 17 years. Her husband was executed. You can imagine the nightmare of that. She said that eventually she got to a point where she realized, "I couldn’t change anything, but they couldn’t take my mind from me, so I decided I’m not a prisoner, I’m a monk. I’m not in a cell, I’m in a cave."

We love to read things like this. It’s so moving. If we think about it, even for a moment, we realize it’s such inconceivable courage. There she is in this nightmare. We know ourselves that

Ven. Robina Courtin  
Week Two, *Unraveling Our Emotions*  
August 8, 2016  
“Unpacking Delusions and Disturbing Emotions”



to be accused even slightly of something that we didn't do is pure torment, pure suffering, and provokes such determination to get the accuser to see the truth. That's the point where we nearly go crazy. This woman is so powerful. But I don't think she was a Buddhist. She used yoga and some meditation, but her story is still something we can listen to, loud and clear. This is what the Buddha is saying.

The Buddha is not being moralistic—he is not saying that you should put up with an ugly partner. No, leave them, please. We could easily misunderstand the Buddha here and become very passive. The Buddha is saying that we can become very powerful by owning our emotions, owning our own emotions, and recognizing that yes, the world is full of people who harm. There's no question here. But with the courage to own our own thoughts, feelings, and emotions, then we can make the tough choices, instead of running back like a moth to the flame to continue being abused and cheated on. This is the thing. The Buddha didn't make all this up. He just has observed it. This is the central approach of the Buddha. But it's hard to hear this, because it takes courage.

The Buddha says, "This is the source of happiness." Look at that woman. She came out of prison wiser and more compassionate after 17 years of hell. It's astonishing because we tend to have this deep conviction that, "It's not my fault, therefore, I'm allowed to be angry, I'm allowed to be depressed, I'm allowed to be jealous." It's not a question of that. The Buddha says that, actually, if we could see these states of mind and really own them, we will see how totally heartbreaking they are. We should have compassion for ourselves. It's not meant to be punitive, not saying "Oh, you can get rid of anger. You shouldn't be angry." Not that. We should have such compassion for ourselves so that we would have the courage to know that we can change, that our mind is not set in stone.

Let's finish here with a prayer of dedication again. For these few minutes, think of the Buddha's views of the mind and of our potential, of how to work on our minds and develop that potential.

Ven. Robina Courtin  
Week Two, *Unraveling Our Emotions*  
August 8, 2016  
“Unpacking Delusions and Disturbing Emotions”



Consider these thoughts that we've had and how they've sown seeds—as many seeds have been planted as thoughts that we've have. Rejoice and nourish the seeds from this moment, so that we can develop our potential and be of benefit to sentient beings that are all in the same boat. We're all suffering together.

[sings]