

Ven. Robina Courtin
Week Three, *Unraveling Our Emotions*
August 15, 2016
“Letting Go of Attachment to Reputation”



Hello again. Let's sing our little prayer to put ourselves in the right direction, state our purpose, or as the Tibetans would put it, set our motivation. We're going to talk about the Buddha's view of the mind to find some tools from it that we can use to help develop our amazing potential so we can be a benefit to others on this crazy planet of ours. Our little prayer expresses that thought.

[sings]

Let's talk about the word “attachment.” It's massive for the Buddha. It's so important to understand clearly what the Buddha means by attachment, because we use this word virtually synonymously with devotion and love. The Buddha has a specific definition of attachment, which is very easy to misunderstand. Of course, when we hear that the Buddha says, "Sorry, you can't have attachment if you want to be happy," we say, "Oh, you mean I have to give up my heart? I have to give up my happiness?" Not at all. It's much more nuanced than we think. We have to listen more carefully and not just give some superficial reading, which is what we tend to do.

I've mentioned already the Buddhist model of the mind, which includes a deceptively simple categorization of three varieties of states of mind. There are thousands of these states of mind, within the three distinct categories. There are those that are mechanics of the mind: concentration, alertness, mindfulness. These are what we need to cultivate and what enable us to do our job well—whether you're a meditator or a murderer, you need these.

Then we have the other categories, which you simply name as negative and positive states of mind. These are not punitive or moralistic titles—they are technical terms. The key reason we need to distinguish between these—first theoretically and then experientially—is because the Buddha teaches that these so-called negative states of mind are not at the core of our being. Because they are not at the core of our being, they can be removed. This view, this finding, this ultimate point, is the basis of the Buddha's methodology. The virtues of the positive states of mind are at the core of our being. We can develop them limitlessly.

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As I have mentioned, there's a hierarchy of the negative states of mind. The root delusion, the primordial negative state, is colloquially known as ego grasping. It's so instinctive that we don't even have a name for it in our world. It's primordially instinctive within us, clinging frantically at a neurotic, wrong, separate, lonely, bereft sense of self, because of which we then naturally feel dissatisfied. We are all born with this. On the basis of this dissatisfaction, this sense of always something missing, there's never have enough—no matter what I do, no matter what I achieve, it's never enough. We always go to this default of *it's never enough*.

Naturally what this gives rise to is craving, hankering, neediness. These are all words for attachment. Attachment is looking for something “out there,” such that when we get it, we think, “This will fill up the gaping hole.” Attachment is the motor that runs throughout the day, driving all of our decisions. In the Buddha's teaching on the Four Noble Truths, he talks about suffering in the second truth. Suffering is what drives us, but it's difficult to see because we consider it normal.

Attachment is multifaceted. First of all, its energy derives from dissatisfaction. No one teaches us this; we're born with it. Some of us have it much more severely than others. It is a constant sense of never being enough and never having enough, which naturally gives rise to hankering after something. Attachment then causes the object—a cake, a handbag, a person, an event, a thought in the mind, one's own self—to appear far more delicious, far lovelier than it really is. This attachment then invests that object with the power to make us happy. Attachment then causes us to manipulate, control, expect, and possess. All of this is the function of attachment.

If you want to take the Buddha's teachings seriously, we must understand this seriously. That means knowing the teachings first theoretically and then identifying them in our minds using the marvelous techniques of focusing, meditating, and learning to be our own therapists. Why do we want to identify this? The Buddha says it is the core of all of our suffering and our pain.

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Our minds are driven by the neediness of attachment at very subtly nuanced levels, almost like milliseconds. The millisecond can be thwarted, and doesn't get what it wants. But the millisecond can also get what it wants, or get what it doesn't want. That's called aversion. The bare bone state of the mind is aversion. There are many variations of aversion: irritation, unhappiness, frustration, annoyance. We hardly ever pay attention to them, but they're moments of thwarted attachment. They build up inside us. We all recognize strong aspects of aversion: anger, depression. A thousand times a day, we're driven by neediness.

Attachment is brutal. This is the tragedy—it's like this junkie inside of us, frantic to get what this supposed "I" wants every millisecond. Another way to put it: attachment can only bear the nice things. The more strongly we cling to and grasp at a need and feel the lack of that thing, that person, that event, the more freaked out we become when it doesn't come. Again, this happens a thousand times a day at milder levels that we don't pay attention to. We only pay attention when it becomes unbearable. But as the Buddha says, this is why we have to pay attention to our minds at a subtler level: to learn to see its process. We pivot between attachment and aversion a thousand times a day, and until it's extreme we won't even notice. This is our problem.

Attachment is the main voice of the ego grasping. Anger is the response when it doesn't get what it wants in this hierarchy. All the other dramas follow from there: jealousy, arrogance. These states of mind all have their own. We all recognize them, but they're all very clearly distinct in all these crazy conceptual stories, all running about like a big soup of emotion that we don't notice until they hit the body, until they become emotional. This is the problem. This is why, practically speaking, we need to develop this skill to get out of our head, to focus the mind, not because there's anything miraculous about the breath and certainly not because we're trying to be calm. Calm comes eventually, but be patient.

In the classic Buddhist texts, where this concentration technique is described in terms of nine stages of development, one of the signs of success at the first of these nine stages is to think that our conceptual thoughts are increasing. We think that we're getting worse here, but no, we're

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not. We're beginning to see our mind, to pay attention to what's there, and to own what's there. Then we hear the stories, so that we can begin to *change* what's inside our mind. This is the point.

Attachment is tricky. We also have the virtues, and they're basically our saving grace. We can see—let's say, in a relationship—that my attachment wants to go onto a person as opposed to an object. Attachment is limitless in its capacity to find something that causes us to believe, “Once I get that, I'll be happy.” Let's say that I feel the lack of a person in my life, so naturally I'm going to search for a person. When I find that person, all these delusions and virtues are going to do their role. The stronger the attachment, then the less likely the relationship will be successful—but the more we can access the virtues in there also. They're our saving grace. They are the characteristics of a human mind.

The Buddha would say that animals have the same states of mind as we have, but tragically, they can't access too much of their wisdom and their virtue, because their ego grasping is so primordial. Their craving, rage, aggression, and fears are so much more primordial. But in character, their minds are the same as ours. The Buddha's model of the mind refers to all sentient beings, not just humans.

The saving grace of us humans, if we're fortunate—just look at the suffering human world—is that we can access our virtues to the extent that our lives can be more reasonable. Let's say I'm very attached to my boyfriend. The hungrier I am for that boyfriend—the more fantasy that I have written in my mind, this novel about who he is, what my expectations are of him in terms of making me happy—the more the hunger of that fantasy runs the show. The more easily I'll freak out when he does the smallest thing that doesn't meet with the expectations of my attachment. But if I can access my love, patience, forgiveness, then I will work on it. That's our saving grace. This is what we have to learn to do. We must distinguish between the delusion and attachment of negative states of mind and the virtues of the positive states, because the latter are radically, completely different. But we can't tell the difference right now.

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When we say *love* and *attachment*, we mean virtually the same thing. When I'm in love with my boyfriend, I will say, "I love that person." Now, what is love? That's under the virtuous heading. Love is an altruistic state of mind, in sync with reality and its sense of interdependence, to some degree. Love is the state of mind that causes me happiness and causes me to help others, but it's polluted by attachment. Because love and attachment become so mixed together, we can't tell the difference. If I say, "I love you," when I'm in love with somebody, I mostly mean attachment.

As long as that person fulfills the needs of my attachment's needs every millisecond, I'm prepared to love him. Real love is the delight in someone else's happiness. "May you be happy." That's love. It's necessarily other-based. Attachment is frantic, neurotic, fearful, and ego-based. But we can't see it so easily, of course, if our love is strong, which is marvelous. This will, of course, be a danger zone. Let's say we have love and compassion. What is compassion? When you see someone suffering, compassion is the wish that they didn't have it. "May you not suffer." That's compassion, empathy.

Let's say we have bucket loads of love and compassion, but we also have attachment. Let's say I have an alcoholic brother. I love my brother. I have compassion for my brother, but if my attachment's there, I can't see it, because mainly I can see the expression of my compassion and my wish he would stop suffering. The trouble is, my own attachment makes a mess of my compassion. It makes me worry about him. It makes me neurotic. It makes me keep thinking of him in terms of "my alcoholic brother." I keep trying to find ways to help him. I expect him to take my advice. I get upset if he doesn't take my advice. Then I get stressed out and blame him for causing my stress. We don't even notice that this is attachment.

This is the attachment of the mother. We know this one. "Oh, it's for your sake," she'll say, yet it's her own neurotic attachment. But it's hard to see it when it's under the guise of being kind, generous, and loving. Even this points to a deeper primordial level of attachment. This is very difficult for all of us to see. This is the closest to ego grasping—it's an attachment to how we're

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seen by others, and the desperate neediness to be seen in a good light by others. But we're not so often seen in that good light.

Let's say we're very patient—not volatile or angry. It's easy to see attachment working there, but if you're a kind, generous, patient person—one of the good girls—you won't notice that your attachment pollutes your generosity and kindness. You won't make the tough choices because you'll say, “Oh, I don't want to upset them.” But actually, it's because your attachment needs you to be seen as a good person. We've all refrained from doing tough things—like navigating a minefield. But there's no way in the world we're going to see this naturally on the surface in the way we express it daily. We have to go deeply into our minds.

As my teacher Lama Yeshe said, "I can tell you about attachment for one whole year, but you'll never begin to understand it until you start looking in deeply into the mind and really building something up there." That is the Buddha's approach. It's one of being your own therapist. Sounds like a cute idea, but actually it's quite profound and distinctly different from the approach we typically take to having a therapist. The crucial piece here again points to the broader understanding in the Buddhist worldview of how come into being, which is the Buddha's understanding of the continuity of consciousness and the notion of karma, that we are each of us the fruit of the cause and effect of our past actions. We are not made by a creator. We are not the product of our parents. But we are not just some random product either. We are the fruit of our past.

This attachment that craves to be seen as a good person is what Buddhism calls “attachment to reputation.” If we look carefully, we can see it, but I think it's deeper than all the others. We seem mostly to be attached to the sense objects, and that's what drives us: getting what we want every millisecond. It's a big one. Things go wrong. The red light comes. The noise is too loud. The cooking isn't going well. You're late for work. Attempting to get what we want all the time is a very intense way that attachment gets thwarted.

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If we look carefully, this attachment to reputation underpins most of what we do at a very subtle level of ego. This is what is described in the bodhisattva path, according to the Mahayana view. There's often the story of the amazing yogi who renounces all things, sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, now living with his vows, meditating, and attaining realizations to amazing degrees, going away up into the mountains and seriously, seriously, practicing. Yet they say, "Still, he wonders what the people in the village are thinking about him."

We notice this attachment in our minds every second. Every since we were children, we've been internalizing this. What our mother thinks. What our father thinks. What the Catholic Church thinks. What the police think. What the judge thinks. What the world thinks

At this deepest level of attachment, we're so needy to be reinforced, to be seen as a good person. We learn from others and their views how we should. Mommy says this, Daddy says this—then we internalize our parents and their thoughts, and when we do something naughty, like dropping something, we get upset, we get angry. Why? Because this attachment didn't get what it wanted. Why? Because you're not supposed to drop things—Mommy said not to, way back when you were two.

We've internalized all of this, and it's so instinctive that it holds us back from seeing what we truly think ourselves. Most of our choices are informed by this need to not rock the boat, this need to be seen as a good person. The moment that we can see this—the moment someone doesn't look at us nicely, the moment someone insults us, the moment someone doesn't understand us properly, the moment someone offends us—it's like a mortal injury. This is the attachment. We think this is natural, but the Buddha says, "Excuse me. There's an analysis of this."

In the view of the Buddha, we can go beyond these delusions. Countless great beings, since the Buddha's time, have done just that, using his methodology to root the mind of this rubbish, literally becoming egoless, fearless, vast, compassionate, wise, courageous bodhisattvas. This is

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our marvelous potential, the Buddha says. Once we understand this, we can see that attachment isn't normal. It's actually a mental illness. This is not a joke. I think the Buddha would have liked that term. But because for us these attachments are so normal, we don't think of them as a problem.

We even think our attachment to reputation is a virtue. “Oh, I don't want to say that. I might upset them. I can't do that because they won't like it.” Or before we even speak it, we'll hold back from thinking it. We'll hold back from even suggesting to do something because we don't want to upset things. It's because of this neediness to be seen in the right light. It's almost as if the attachment is so primordial—the voice of this fractured, bereft sense of “I”—that we don't have any certainty that what we think, do, and say is valid unless we're reinforced by somebody else. It's quite intense. We can all see this. It's the deepest and most difficult level of ego to face.

What will be the consequences of this? Initially, it can sound like you've become a selfish person, doing exactly what you want. On the contrary, you're a courageous person because you've given up attachment. You become a wise, content person, and you've given yourself space for the ability to develop the other wing of the birds. As the Buddha says, a bird needs two wings: wisdom and compassion. So far we've just talked about the wing of wisdom, which is the work we do on ourselves, dealing with our neuroses, taking responsibility for them, seeing how they cause us pain, hold us back, and harm others.

Now we can start to be courageous: lessening our neediness, attachment, aversion, depression, and the other dramas that break our hearts. Now we can afford to expand ourselves even more and start to see that we're all in the same place, that we're all living in the same insane asylum. We begin to slowly develop the courage of the bodhisattvas. If I don't help myself and others, who will? But as the Dalai Lama says, compassion is not enough. You just can't leap to compassion. You must develop the wisdom wing.

What we've talked about so far is this wisdom wing. This is the nuts and bolts of beginning to

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develop our marvelous potential for our own sake. Now it informs our capacity to see others and have the courage to be wise in our ability to help them.

Again, let's dedicate these few minutes of thoughts and ideas coming from the Buddha, to take some tools from it that can help us develop our marvelous potential so we can help others. We express them in prayers.

[sings]