

Ven. Robina Courtin
Week Four, *Unraveling Our Emotions*
August 22, 2016
“The Courage of True Compassion”



Now, let's talk about how to develop the wing of compassion. A bird needs two wings: wisdom and compassion. So far, we've talked about the wisdom wing, which is the work we do to begin to develop our amazing potential. Now, we've expanded ourselves enough to see that we're all in the same boat, and to develop the courage to be a benefit to others as well.

We start off by stating our purpose in this little prayer. Then, we will listen to see if we can locate some tools to develop our own marvelous potential for buddhahood, free of delusions and full of goodness.

[sings]

So: the wing of compassion. The Tibetans have an interesting packaging of Buddhist teachings. It's like all part the essential parts of the Buddhist teachings have been taken have been taken and structured in a nice, orderly way. if you learn anything, you learn it according to your own capacity. This is very much the basis of this structuring. The “junior school” level of Buddhism is basically this: control your body, control your speech, and don't harm others. Why wouldn't you harm others? Because the Buddhism says that hurting others will hurt yourself.

The basis of morality in Buddhism is not because “the Buddha says so.” When I was Catholic, I wouldn't do something wrong because “God says so.” The Buddha is like a messenger. He has found that if I lie, kill, steal, jump on the wrong partners, eat too much cake, whatever, that I'm going to harm myself in the process. They're actions that will harm others, but I will also harm myself. This is the very first level of Buddhist morality—play safe. Harness the energy of your body and speech.

The consequence of this is that you become a more content person. We move from junior school to the high school of Buddhism, getting to know our own mind using this amazing model of the mind, and we begin to unpack and unravel the contents of our mind. Then we have what is called renunciation, which of course sounds quite forbidding to us, as if you've been depressed. Quite

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the contrary — when you renounce, that means you’re learning to understanding suffering. You’re sick of suffering, and now you understand its cause, which is your own ridiculous rubbish. You develop this courage to lessen the delusions, and therefore, naturally, grow your own contentment, grow your own courage, grow your own sense of joy.

Now, with lessened delusions, we can see others. We’re less neurotic. Normally we can’t see past our own nose. Now, we have sanity, contentment, fulfillment, and confidence so that we can also see that we’re all in the same boat. Everyone is suffering, due to karma and delusions, as the Buddha would say. Recognizing this is the basis of compassion.

Often when we think about spiritual paths, we immediately run to the idea of compassion. But compassion, as His Holiness the Dalai Lama says, is not enough. You must have wisdom—that is the university level of Buddhism. Junior school is the control of your body and speech, not harming others. High school is being your own therapist. University focuses on compassion because it’s the basis of the work that you’ve done for yourself so far. Of course, you don’t perfect these first two levels before you touch the third level. We practice these according to our capacity, but the degree to which we can have compassion is shocking when we think of it at this “university” level.

It’s not the way we tend to think of compassion. Right now, we do have compassion, but according to the Buddha view, our current compassion is profoundly limited because it’s based on attachment. I have compassion for my boyfriend, but only to the extent that he does what my attachment wants. I absolutely do not have attachment for my boyfriend when he gives me up for a younger woman. I have no compassion for him now, because he becomes an enemy. I couldn’t care less about 99% of people in the world with this compassion, because they are strangers to my attachment.

One of these starting points for developing more authentic compassion—using techniques that have come from the lineages of Shantideva and Tibetan lamas, back to the Hindu tradition—is

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that equanimity. Like all these words, equanimity a simple word, but if we want to understand Buddhism, we must know their very distinct definitions.

Equanimity is when the heart feels no differently when it recognizes a friend, an enemy, a stranger, or any other being in the universe. From the heart's point of view, they are identical to each other. The heart wishes for them all to be happy and not suffer. What is the logic of this emotional feeling? We must come to it by using our heads, by doing analysis, arguing with the misconceptions entrenched by ego.

I want my friends to be happy. That's love, but the logic of ego asks, "Why?" we want our friends to be happy because they do what my attachment wants. It sounds brutal, but look at the world. When my boyfriend leaves me for a younger woman, it's fairly natural, we would say, that he is now in the category of enemy, and in fact, I will find it extremely hard to not want him to be unhappy. We know this. It's so-called natural. But what about the stranger? What about strangers? How do I feel about them? We know that we couldn't care less about them. This is natural. Human do this. Monkeys do it. Dogs do it. Ants do it. Rats do it.

We have to make this paradigm shift in our mind, because the Buddha says that eventually we can reach the point where we develop love and compassion for literally *all* sentient beings. But we have to change our basis. As long as I have the basis that I want those who make *me* happy to be happy—and *only* those—then our love is profoundly limited. It's unstable because it is based on attachment. We have to make this shift in order to recognize this is not a logical basis for love. The categories of friend, enemy, and stranger are constructs of ego. This is where we use logic to prove this to ourselves.

You think of yourself now. You know in your life at this moment, you can think of one person who adores you. Look at them looking at you. They love you. They love to look at you. You're gorgeous to them. Then, we have another person who can't stand us. Just look at their eyes. You can see they're looking daggers at you. Then, we have a third person who doesn't even know

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you. They're so bored that they can't even look at you. That's a stranger.

You know that if each of these three people wrote down their description of you, you would not recognize those three descriptions because they're completely different descriptions based on what's in their mind. One has attachment for you that exaggerates your attractiveness. One has aversion for you, which exaggerates your ugliness. One has indifference, which exaggerates your nothingness. We know this. This is how the universe exists.

Of course, we don't question this. We have our friends, our enemies, and the rest we don't mind. Recently, I remember reading the New York Times on my iPad. In the right hand corner, I noticed the heading that said, “350 People Die in Ferry Accident in Tasmania.” Tasmania is a state of Australia, where I'm from. They're my people. I went, “Oh, no!” and looked—then I saw that it said, “Tanzania,” and I went, “Oh, okay.” Who are Tanzanians? They're strangers to me. I don't even think, “Oh, where's Tanzania?” It's spontaneous. Of course, I caught myself, and read the story, and tried to have compassion, but it's so natural. Friends, enemies, and strangers—we don't question it.

Nobody thinks that you're cruel, nasty, or not spiritual if you don't love your enemy, but this is what the Buddha is saying. This is why this view is so outrageous. It's so shocking, but this is the Buddha's point. Right back at the beginning, his experiential finding from his own hard work, that the neuroses in the mind—ego grasping, attachment, anger, ignorance, jealousy, pride—these delusions are adventitious. This is a shocking concept.

We can read it in Buddhist literature and not even blink, because we think, “Oh, yeah. That's Buddhism.” We don't hear the implication. We're talking about the mind. No view in any materialist model would remotely suggest something like this—that anger, attachment, and ignorance are adventitious—so to hear this stated seriously is quite shocking.

These methods begin with simple techniques to move us in the direction of developing what is

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called *bodhicitta*. *Bodhicitta* is this astonishing aspiration—once it’s accomplished, of course. It has two parts. The first is to be of benefit to whoever is in front of you. The second is the long-term goal, of never giving up after life—perfecting your mind, achieving buddhahood—because then you will be qualified to be of benefit to others. Of course, don’t hold your breath. It’s long-term!

This is the attitude that we’re heading to, and it is informed by astonishing levels of development on the basis of love, compassion, and equanimity, into *bodhicitta*, which may ultimately be called great compassion. Great compassion is a technical term referring to the attitude of compassion. Love says, “May you be happy.” Compassion says, “May you not suffer.” But great compassion is the courageous attitude, the extraordinarily level of compassion that says, “What can I do to take the suffering away?” This is the courage of *bodhicitta*. It’s like the attitude of a mother to her child. A mother sees her child suffering, and in her infinite compassion for her child, she’s there in that very second, even if she will drown in the water to rescue her child, because she knows this is her job. Great compassion takes courage.

It’s easy to have compassion, but more difficult to say, “What can I do to take it away?” this attitude must be cultivated. In the beginning of its cultivation, as with all these of states of mind, we must practice, practice, practice, because practice makes perfect. Understanding these terms and these techniques is important. We take one step at a time. The crucial thing is to not leap in where we’re not yet qualified.

These teachings on compassion reach certain levels where they’re very difficult. For example, the attitude ultimately takes responsibility for transforming problems into happiness, and learning to take blame rather than give blame. In this paradigm shift, trainees in the teachings come to welcome the problems. One lama says, “You must be a suitable vessel to practice these,” so don’t just leap in with naïveté, thinking, “Oh, I’m going to be so compassionate.” No way.

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If you're in a relationship, and you're not a suitable vessel yet—which means you haven't done much wisdom work—you don't know your own mind, you're full of victimhood, you're miserable, you keep going back like a moth to a flame to that lousy relationship. You're not ready to take the blame. You're not ready to see bad things as good. We have to know where we're at. That's why I think the structuring of all these practices—junior school, high school, university—is quite true. Compassion sounds lovely and easy, but it requires courage. In the Buddhist view, it includes compassion for literally all beings—including pedophiles, psychopaths, and the beings that you just assume you couldn't possibly have compassion for.

This takes us to the big picture in Buddhism, which is the view of karma. This is a fundamental part of Buddha's worldview: that our consciousness doesn't come our parents or from a creator. It doesn't come from nothing, either. It comes from the previous moments of itself, in a river of consciousness.

I find this view to be a very powerful tool, because its implication is that I can own what's "there." The Buddha would say that because we all had countless lives, bumping into each other, harming and being harmed, we're all in the same boat. Having that more expansive view, we can afford to have compassion for those who do the harm, not just innocent victims. Being compassionate only for victims is the current level of our compassion.

This is quite shocking. We can't leap into that level of compassion. We must understand its logic—not just the gooey, sentimental feeling. This is the approach here. Not all of us particularly want to adopt this view, but I know certainly from my experience that I very much like the big picture here. I like the idea of karma, of the continuity of consciousness and how it informs who we are. This is my working hypothesis. I don't ever say that I *believe* in it. That's a bit intellectually lazy.

This very expansive view that we've all bumped into each other countless times—that we're all suffering in the same boat, that we've all done negative and positive things—allows us to

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observe those harming others and how they actually harm themselves by doing so. It's like the compassion of a mother for her junkie kid. Everybody else can't stand him, but her heart breaks because she can see that he's harming himself. This is the basis of having genuine compassion. True compassion is very intense, and that's why you must have wisdom first. As the Dalai Lama said, "Compassion is not enough." You must have the wisdom that informs our capacity to have this courageous compassion for others and that means the vow to never give up working on myself in order to benefit others. We're all in the same boat.

As Buddha would say, "Every sentient being has this natural potential." It's at the core of our being. We all possess buddhanature. We all possess this innate potential. Our mind is innately pure. Our minds have such potential. May we never give up on ourselves, and therefore, may we never give up on others. One step at a time. One step at a time in the development of our marvelous potential for wisdom, clarity, courage, confidence, and compassion, so that we can continue to develop our potential to become a buddha for our sake and for the sake of others.

[sings]

Thank you, everybody. Thank you.