

Marcela Clavijo
Facing Fear
Week Three: “Developing Compassion”
August 21, 2017



Welcome to the third of four talks that we've been having about the four immeasurables and how to use them to overcome negative emotions such as fear. We've talked about how the four immeasurables are practiced in different orders by different people and what the definition of the four immeasurables are as well as how they reveal to us the boundless capacity in our own heart, in our own mind, for developing any positive quality. [We've also discussed] how the objects upon which we practice, all sentient beings, are also countless. This makes this practice one that can help us recognize and discover how unique we are and how much we have within our own being right now. It shows us how much we can develop, how much we can grow, and how much we can mature.

We've seen how equanimity helps us to overcome likes and dislikes and the sense of longing for friends. [It helps us overcome] our fears of people that we don't like or that we think are going to hurt us. It also helps us to be comfortable and free in any situation because we come from a place of impartiality. This makes us more effective in life.

With lovingkindness, we talked about how we wish all sentient beings to be happy and have the causes of happiness and how important it is for us to begin that practice with ourselves, how we must not exclude ourselves. We must even make it a point to wish happiness upon ourselves, so that we are not subtly punishing or being hard on ourselves and then subtly punishing and being hard on other people. This can happen with the ones we love and care about the most. Instead, we can move from that, and wish them happiness and the causes of happiness, which is virtue. Such positive deeds are free of what are called the three negative emotions of attachment, anger, and ignorance. We saw how with lovingkindness we move into an experience of being connected and warm-hearted toward other beings.

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We break down our conditioning and we break down barriers that block us from relating to other people. Once that's possible, then we can move onto the next immeasurable practice, which is called compassion. Compassion is the wish for all sentient beings to be free of suffering.

We could also think of it as wishing for all beings to not have any problems. We wish for them to be free of problems and to be free of what causes problems. In Buddhism, we say that the cause of suffering—although some suffering comes from attachment and some suffering comes from aversion, hatred, or anger—the root cause of suffering is not-knowing. It's called ignorance. [Suffering comes from] being ignorant of not-knowing, for example, the law of cause and effect.

Suffering comes from being ignorant, not understanding how karma works. Suffering comes from being ignorant of the causes of our happiness and the causes of our suffering. Sometimes it might not be enough to wish happiness for ourselves or for others, or to wish for freedom from our suffering for ourselves and for others. But we need to add on [to what we have looked at already].

This is suffering that comes from naivety, or lack of awareness, or ignorance—whatever you feel most comfortable calling it. Then compassion in that sense means that we're able to be with others in any circumstance.

Moving on from there, compassion means that we're able to be with others when they're having a bad time, when they're suffering, when they're facing problems, when they are depressed. And there is, in that, great potential for us to be afraid of getting involved. It is this fear of getting involved that I think makes us afraid of being around people when they're not so happy and cheerful and in a good space. We're afraid to get our hands dirty. We're afraid to feel uncomfortable.

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So, the practice of compassion is important because if we want people around us to be only happy, we're putting a great demand on them. It's an unfair demand [to want others to] always be in a good mood, to always be positive, to always be having a good day [so that we may be] happy to be with them.

That is a very limited way of relating to other people. If we practice compassion, we're able to be with them when they're not in such a good mood, or when they're not in such a good place, or even be happy that they came to us with their problems.

The practice of compassion involves what we've done before: formal practice, sitting down, calming our body, calming our breath, and calming our mind. The practice of meditation can be a conceptual practice or it can be a non-conceptual practice. The practice of meditation with the four immeasurables is what's called conceptual meditation. In conceptual meditation, we're using words to meditate. We're using words to develop certain concepts, we're using words to help us develop certain states of mind, and we do this over and over again. It's in this repetition that we become familiar with the states. This familiarity is what's traditionally called meditation.

In fact, in Tibetan, “gom” is the word that's used for meditation. And “gompa,” as you might know, is the meditation hall or temple. The definition of “gom” is “to become familiar,” to get used to something, to get into the habit of something. We all already have habits. So, when we practice meditation, we're not doing something that we've never done before. In fact, we're doing something that we've been doing our whole life.

When we formally practice any of these four immeasurables, we use these words to over and over again become familiar with a particular way of thinking, or a particular way of feeling. They are a formula for developing positive states of mind.

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To develop compassion, take a comfortable seat and make sure that your room isn't too bright or too dark, too hot or too cold. Make sure that it's quiet and turn off your phones. Turn off anything else that's around you that might make a sound during the next few minutes. Make sure your seat is not super comfy, which might induce you to relax a little bit *too* much and make you too relaxed and sleepy, but not that it's so uncomfortable that it will be a source of distraction the whole time.

If you've practiced meditation and you're used to sitting cross-legged, feel free to do that. If you're still developing a practice, try a different position. Try a different place, try a different chair so that you work for yourself to develop the best environment and the best circumstances for your practice. Practice can be very brief, the way we do it here. It could be five to seven minutes.

Then you go on with the rest of your life, pretty much. But those five or seven minutes have to be very carefully planned. It's like the segments of this Dharma Talk. Each session is 20-25 minutes, but everything has to be set up just right. The sound, the lighting, the doors, the seats, the camera person, and me.

The same thing applies to your five or ten minute meditation. It needs to be right, so that this recording will come to you clearly and you can see and hear me. That's why [you give your practice attention], so that your meditation has a good impact on your mind. The conditions need to be right.

You've taken a few breaths to ease your body and your mind. Then we move into the main part of the meditation, which is how to develop compassion by using some words in your mind. You can use a phrase like: “May I be free of suffering and the causes of suffering. May I not have problems. May I not suffer bad health. May I not be living or surrounded by danger, or threats.”

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Then you move onto wishing that for others. “May others be free of suffering, and the cause of suffering. May others not have problems or causes for problems. May they be free of depression, may they be free of anxiety. May they be free from fear. May they be free from illness or danger.”

As you hear things about people undergoing suffering, challenges, or problems, you might have had somebody pop into your mind that is going through some of these. Use that person as your object. If you care for them, it'll be easier to develop compassion.

[In practicing with the] immeasurables, we begin with objects that make it easy for us to develop, in this case, compassion. Once we've done that, it'll be easier to develop compassion for people that we might not like very much, or people that are giving us a hard time. We'll see that the reason they're giving us a hard time is because they're suffering. It's because they're moved by desire, or insecurity, or paranoia. They're undergoing suffering, and it's because of that suffering that they're giving us a hard time.

So, if for no other reason, we might learn to wish compassion on others for this selfish reason. Then from there, we're able to move on to wish for freedom from suffering for all sentient beings: people we see on TV, people we hear about in the news, people we read about in the newspaper, politicians, corporate leaders. We know that there are plenty of people who create so much suffering and so many problems for ourselves and others in the world. It's very important that we begin to see them as being under the influence of these negative emotions.

It's because of suffering [that they act as they do], it's not because they're mean or evil. They're just trying their best, and unfortunately they're gripped by greed, by paranoia, and by fear. They make them do these things. We don't have to know them personally. We see the effect of their actions in our lives and others. We wish them to be free of it so that they'll stop feeling these negative emotions and they'll stop acting out of them.

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Practice like this for a few minutes. You can stop your device if you're at home. Set a timer for five minutes. Think those thoughts: “May I be free of suffering and may—you can fill in a name—be free of suffering.” Somebody you know, somebody you don't know. Or somebody you've heard about or you've seen, but you have never met.

Do this until you feel a little shift in your posture or breath, your mind or emotions. Give yourself three, four, five minutes to do this. Then you can turn the device back on and we'll conclude the session.

When we wish other beings to be free of suffering, it allows us to be with them when they're suffering. When we know our own reactions to other people's suffering, we'll be able to tolerate a lot of things much more effectively. We probably won't need to placate them so much, or to tell them everything will be okay. We probably won't need to come up with our own story, when we're listening to them about our suffering or the suffering of someone we know that's similar to theirs. We won't need to blame them, ourselves, or others for their experience. We won't need to distract them from their suffering or distract ourselves from the suffering of others. We'll be able to be present with others in their suffering, in their fear, in their problems.

In sum, this means that we won't be so reactive to people's problems and suffering. The truth is, I think, that this is one reason why we can be around each other. Not just in the good times, but to support and encourage one another when we're having a bad time. I would say the epitome of developing compassion would be to tell ourselves that if anybody ever needs a friend, may I be that friend. May I be a good friend to them.

In this way we become fearless. When we're not so afraid to get involved with others, we'll feel freedom to be generous with our time, our resources, our kindness. With our generosity towards others and as dharma practitioners, we might know of some things to say or points of view to encourage them and uplift them. People don't need us to solve their problems.

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One of my teachers said that we can respect people enough to let them have their problems and be a good friend to them. We don't try to solve their problems or run away from them. I encourage you to practice this.

What happens when we practice like this? When we begin to see the suffering of others, we can't help but be moved to do something about it. When this happens, we might realize that there's not a lot that we can do. But that doesn't mean that these prayers and these practices have no purpose. In doing them, what we're developing is our own capacity to develop these qualities. We are practicing to become the type of being that can help people correctly, skillfully, and maybe, once and for all, we'll be able to guide them out of their ignorance, darkness, and confusion.

Just because you can't help somebody when you're practicing compassion, doesn't mean these practices are meaningless. We might not see the result of our patience and compassion immediately, but [maybe they will have an effect] down the line, in a time or place that we cannot see. Everything we think, everything we do, and everything we say has an impact on ourselves and others.

This is why these practices work. We will be able to see that our suffering and the suffering of others is based on something deep in the root of our mind called not-knowing, or ignorance. These practices help us to overcome that ignorance and in turn will help others to overcome theirs. This is what is called true compassion, we say.

It's not just to feel pity for somebody, or to help them temporarily, but to have the aspiration to help them forever. Come what may with equanimity and with love and kindness.

I encourage you to practice, I encourage you to never give up. Even if you have a bad day, put it behind you. Wake up the next day, start fresh, and don't be discouraged. Don't be afraid. Have

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conviction and faith, and believe in yourself. And as you practice, you will develop it a little bit at a time. It's funny, we need to practice in order to have faith to practice.

So, even if we don't have a lot of confidence, do it anyway. It's got to be better than what we've been doing so far. This sort of meditation is positive meditation and it's got to be better, and it's got to be more fulfilling, and more beneficial and more productive than what we've been doing so far. Please, give it a try for a month, for a year. Be realistic and don't think that you're going to change overnight. That's foolish and childish.

Give yourself some time that you yourself will see down the line—a year, maybe two years—and perhaps by then you will have started to make a change. Then you'll be happy to sit down everyday and practice because you have that conviction that it means something and that your life means something to you and to others.

Thank you so much.