

Ayya Yeshe

*How to Be a Light for Yourself and Others in Challenging Times*

Week Three: “Building Resilience, Kindness, and Intention”

September 18, 2017



This is part three—training the mind in resilience, kindness, and dharma. The text [we have been working with, *The Seven Points of Mind Training* by Geshe Chekawa] goes on with, “All dharma agrees at one point. When the world is filled with evil take everything as the path.” We have all the things we need to awaken. All the things that challenge and scare us show us where our limits are, where we're tied up, and where we still need to grow. So rather than running away from those things we can try to have mindful attentiveness when they arise, relax into them, and learn from them. We can learn to slowly untangle the knots that stop us from tasting freedom.

Usually it's not the easy things in life that teach us what we need to know. When we look at people we really admire like Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, or Nelson Mandela, these are not people who had easy lives. Mother Theresa wouldn't win a beauty competition, but she had so much beauty radiating from her compassion. Just knowing that somebody is there in the slum caring for others makes you feel warm inside. Nelson Mandela was in jail for 27 years. He had to fight for the independence of his country and to end apartheid, but in the end compassion won out and he became the first prime minister of a free South Africa. It's often the things that are the most challenging that shape our character, just like water over rocks over a very long time, smoothing the rough edges. This is how we grow. We have to face these things and understand where we're stuck and how we deceive ourselves, how our self-grasping is creating unhappiness for us. We may also notice dysfunction or structural violence, and we shouldn't internalize or perpetuate that. That's also part of spiritual growth.

The text mentions three basic principles. The first is to abide by the vows you've taken. If you're not an ethical person—if you're out killing or womanizing or stealing—you can't have a good meditation practice, you won't have a peaceful mind, and you won't be a trustworthy person. Refrain from disturbing or unethical conduct and cultivate patience. These are all essential practices in the spiritual path. It says, “Drive all the blames into one,” which is to say: don't always point the finger outwards. First look inside and ask, “How am I playing a part in this?”

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Be grateful to everyone because everyone is giving us a chance, showing us where we're stuck. That doesn't mean that you don't call out people when they're behaving in a violent and harmful way, but you do so without maliciousness. You do it out of kindness to stop them from harming themselves and others.

Try to see confusion as illusory. When you realize that each moment shall pass, that the problem that is getting you down today won't matter in a year's time, then it's easier to see beyond it. It's easier to see, “Okay, this is how it came about, this is how it will pass.” And eventually these things do pass. What doesn't kill only makes you stronger.

Next, “Whatever you meet unexpectedly, join with dharma.” So this means accumulate merit and purify negative karma that you've accumulated. [The text] also talks about feeding ghosts and making offerings to protectors. In Tibet these ghosts would be described as demons, but what the text really means is when we suffer we tend to hold on to ourselves very strongly, and it is actually the holding on—the resistance of shutting down—that makes the experience more painful. When you go through pain it's actually wise to relax your body as much as you can and just flow with whatever that experience is. That way, it flows through you more quickly. Whereas if you have a difficult experience and you're shutting down and you're locked up, it makes the experience last longer and more painful.

The demons are the prisons of the heart, the places that scare you. Sometimes we find it really hard to see a homeless person in the street and we don't want to see them, so we just walk past very quickly feeling ashamed because we don't know what to do. We may even be afraid that we could end up homeless. Some people are just a few checks away from being homeless, so that scares us. It's not really the homeless person's problem, it's our own fears, our own sense of shame that makes it hard for us to hold space for others. Sometimes we can't listen to other people suffering about a particular issue because we haven't resolved those issues in ourself. But

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the more you can be present to and hold space for your own suffering and transform it, the more you can have compassion and hold space for other's suffering without an agenda—just to listen. The best counselor doesn't interrupt too much and doesn't offer unwanted advice, but rather helps the other person come to their own wisdom and is a mirror for that person's own wisdom.

Tibetan Buddhists make offerings to dharma protectors and Buddhas and deities, but what it really means is a direction to merge daily with your own awakened state as much as you can in meditation. To allow the prisons of the heart, the places that scare you or the things you haven't resolved, to arise, abide, and transform, because the spiritual path is not just about bliss and peace. That is one side of meditation, but meditation should also bring up stuff—it should also challenge you. It's really a process of breaking down experiences, trauma, and delusion into a wonderful juicy compost that will help you grow some insight. It's not just about dealing with pleasant things, it's about transforming the painful scary things and then being able to hold space for others as well because you realize, “Just as I suffer, others suffer too.”

It's often people who have suffered a lot who have the most kindness and compassion. It's often people who have suffered poverty who are the most generous. Sometimes the suffering of others only becomes real for us when we've suffered ourself. Through suffering ourself we developed empathy and we can say, “The door of my heart is always open to you, to ourself, and to others.”

The slogans go on: “Abandon poisonous food, don't turn gods into demons.” This means don't use the dharma to get a lot of money and don't use the spiritual teachings to boost up your own egotism. For example, don't think: *I'm so good, I'm so spiritual*. That's a kind of spiritual pride. Don't turn gods into demons. Don't turn something which is for awakening into a way to justify your dysfunction. This sometimes happens with gender inequality—someone has an inspiring timeless experience of the truth and then they put it down in words and it becomes a religion. And then the state realizes, “Ha ha, we can maintain the status quo and suppress the people by

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joining forces with this religion and use it to keep our privilege, our male privilege, our white privilege, our colonizing privilege.” So we have to decolonize religion. We have to take our patriarchy and white supremacy and understand that everybody should have access to the dharma. Everybody should be able to attain awakening equally.

Women are the largest supporters of Buddhism, but if you look around, how many women are sitting on thrones? How many western monastics and laypeople that are abbots and abbesses are fully trained? How are we going to bring the dharma forward in the West with gender equality? If you look at the lineage tree [you’ll see that] it’s very male heavy and it doesn’t empower us as female practitioners to only support men—and only Asian men—because it can damage our own sense of well-being. We also have to start holding the lineage and have to start empowering other Western women and nuns to carry the dharma.

There is a great deal of energy and wisdom tied up in the challenges we face. We can sift through the pain we have and find some wonderful gems. If you think of a diamond—a diamond is just a rock under a tremendous amount of pressure. That’s how our buddhanature comes about through facing these challenges. By going through these rough places we start to develop the diamond of buddhanature.

We need to work with our emotions and unlock the energy that is tied up in unresolved anger, lust, or from being emotionally bullied, but to do that we need to purify. We need to take out the violence and the delusion that’s tied up in all of those energies. And we do that through various means, but one of them is meditation and another is mind training. So try to make friends with yourself and your own shadow. Then it won’t be so hard to hold space for others.

There are many things in life that we can’t control. You can’t cover the whole surface of the earth in leather in order to avoid stepping on thorns, but simply cover your own foot and it’s as good as

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if the whole world is thorn-free. In Buddhism we try to protect our own mind and cultivate a virtuous mind. That way, all of the challenges that we face become a lot easier because we're not holding on, we're not blowing things out of proportion, and we're open to learn. So that's how we're going with this.

The next slogan is, “Practice the five strengths, the condensed heart instructions. The Mahayana instruction for the ejection of consciousness at the time of death is the five strengths. How you conduct yourself is important.” I won't talk too much about the ejection of consciousness at death—that's called *phowa*—it's something you really need an initiation for. But the five strengths are strong determination, which is to practice with a commitment to bring yourself to awakening and to not shut down emotionally. Often when we face something we are either attached to it, we're pushing it away, or we're indifferent to it. We're not really fully embracing the moment or tasting life. We're not seeing through the curious eyes of a child. We're not seeing the cloud in our tea. We're not fully tasting our lunch because we're somewhere else, wanting to be with someone else. We're missing our whole life. Strong determination to practice is to be open, to be present, to not shut out life, and to learn.

The second one is familiarization with the bodhisattva mind training as part of daily life. When you have a good experience you can say, “May all beings enjoy this good experience.” And when you see beings suffering you say, “May they be free of suffering.” And when you see someone who is successful who is enjoying something, think “May they have more and more happiness and may they progress on the path of awakening.” This is very different from how we usually operate. When we see someone who's successful we feel resentment, but actually when we allow those negative states of mind to control us, they don't lead us to happiness.

Next is familiarization with the seed of virtue, which is to relax into the awakened mind. It's already there, you just have to sweep away the dust. Like milk added into water, you can merge

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with your own awakened clarity of mind, and that becomes more and more apparent through meditation and through the guidance of a qualified teacher. If the mind was black like coal there would really be no point in practicing, but because the mind is pure like a conch, as Tibetans say, there is a point in polishing down our rough edges and developing boundless compassion and goodwill toward others. Even if you're the most selfish person in the world, compassion makes sense for you—it creates well-being, friendship, meaningful relationships, and it creates a better world. But remember to also take care of yourself in a healthy way. Manage your health, what you eat, and take time to sleep all in the service of others. Do the things that make you happy but in a balanced way. You have two hands, one to help yourself and one to serve others.

The fourth of the five strengths is reproach, which is just having a babysitter there to watch the mind and see that you haven't been carried away by negative emotions. It's to say, “Where is my mind? Where is my mind strength? Where is my mind state?” So much of the mind is like a record player. We have the “poor me” record. We have the “I hate them” record. We even have the “I'm obsessed with you/I love you” record. So many things we play again and again. In meditation we just take off the spindle—the thoughts and the feelings are still spinning around but there's no noise. We're not completely identified with them. We're just observing.

That's a bit different from spiritual bypassing or being emotionally shut down because we're embodied and we're observing them and we're feeling them, but we're not carried away by them. That gives us a bit of freedom and space, and when that spaciousness is there the clarity of mind starts to dawn and slowly the thought process slows down and we can choose to cultivate virtuous thoughts—thoughts that lead to well-being like bodhisattvas rather than just any trashy thought that comes along. We're a little bit more discerning—a little bit less slutty with our thoughts.

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The final of the five strengths is aspiration, which is to dedicate merit and to inspire and make prayers for the awakening of others. People say, "Do prayers really work?" Prayers alone are not enough; it's more like an intention. First we have the intention to do something good, and then the action follows.

The text then goes on with, “Always abide by the three basic principles. Change your attitude but remain natural. Don't talk about injured limbs.” This means don't hold on to whatever has happened to you. Don't try to take revenge. Don't ponder others. It's very much a case of the log in my own eye versus the splinter in yours. It's so easy to point out the fault of others and not look at our own faults.

“Work with the greatest negative emotions first. Abandon any hope of fruition. Abandon poisonous food. Don't be so predictable. Don't malign others. Don't wait in ambush.” That's like waiting for someone to make a mistake and making fun of them for it. “Don't bring things to a painful point. Don't transfer the ox's load to the cow.” Oxen are strong and can carry a heavy load, so that means what is our problem, our delusion, our issue—don't put it onto or project it onto others. Take responsibility for your own happiness.

We all look for love, our soul mate, but so many of these relationships fall apart because of our massive expectations. Everybody is struggling to find happiness and fighting a secret battle. If they can barely manage their own mind and their own happiness, how can they take on the burden of your happiness and expectations as well? A healthy relationship is not two halves making a whole, rather it is two complete human beings who take responsibility for their own happiness and well-being who share joy and mutual respect. They uplift each other like an infinity circle, an endless knot of eight. They are two whole people sharing their lives and uplifting each other.