



In this segment we're going to cover how to let go of the past and the future as a caregiver. What does that mean? Again, all of these points at first glance seem very basic, yet when we look at how we relate to the present moment, we often find ourselves reliving past experiences or letting past experiences dictate the current moment.

This is the story that we bring. Each one of us has a rich, amazing, powerful story. Each one of us also has a story with shadows, traumas, hardship, pain, loss, and inequality. The ways we've been hurt often [influence whether] we're able to be present in a given moment. In this way, our stories present ways of falling out of relationship with the person we're caring for, or with the particular experience within which we're caring for somebody.

Tilopa urged us to hang everything up on a hook, so we must also let go of the future. But how can we hang up our expectations? An easy example of letting go of expectations is the process of becoming a dharma teacher. I trained and trained and then asked myself if I was a dharma teacher—I was not. Later I went to my teacher and asked, “Am I a dharma teacher now?” “No.” I practiced more and went back to my teacher. “Now am I a dharma teacher?” “No.” Eventually the question naturally revolves itself. By then we're occupying the space that we desired to occupy. Weirdly enough it's an experience that you can't really approach with ambition.

As a caregiver, having ideas about the future outcome can be problematic. I don't mean to say you shouldn't have hope or pray for positive outcomes; we all want positive outcomes to happen. Just don't get hung up on the outcome.

I've seen caregivers talk a lot about themselves and their own needs, but disguise these needs as the needs of the people they're caring for. This isn't anything to beat anyone up about. It's very natural. We all do this. We all go to this place of “I” from time to time, even when we're trying to be a positive source of hope and healing for somebody else.



Tilopa stresses not recalling and not imagining. Not recalling means letting go of the past. Not imagining means not entertaining the future. In a meditation session, that means resting the mind. It means allowing yourself to experience what's happening [in the moment] without being consumed by what got you there.

When I was caring for Ani Zangmo in Sikkim, I hadn't had many experiences caring for people who were ill. [For that reason, avoiding recalling] wasn't hard for me. I just didn't have a lot of experience. But not fixating on hopes and expectations for her recovery was very hard.

I had a very close relationship with Ani Zangmo. She was a spiritual mother to me. Thinking about what life would be like without her was terrifying. I would often find myself expecting to have all these years together once she healed. I imagined studying with her for years and years, but over the course of the next six or seven months she passed away.

I felt destroyed. I couldn't begin to conceive of where I would go, or how I would survive with her gone. Some of that had to do with the depth of our relationship, but some of it also had to do with [the way I'd been] clinging to a future outcome. I'd imagined us starting a dharma center together.

Sometimes we project wildly to escape how hard the moment is. [We do this] when everything looks bleak and feels hard. When caregiving involves physically cleaning a loved one, which we're not used to doing, it's easy to disassociate by entertaining these wonderful thoughts of the future.

Again, there's nothing inherently wrong with this. It's a useful defense mechanism, but it pulls us out of the moment. It reduces our ability to accept what's going on because it's a habit rooted in the impulse to experience something other than what's happening.



I recently had an incredibly challenging experience in my own family. It was very easy for me to see all of the ways that I had been hurt by others, and they all arose as crazy demons. I was struck by how alive my story is for me. I was successful in not allowing it to affect what I had to do in that moment as a caregiver, but I was very humbled by the power of my emotions. It felt like some very alive emotions which had been dormant right under the surface had just becoming activated.

Within Buddhist practice we try to avoid forming self-oriented habits that cause us to fall out of relationship with the world around us. Remaining aware of how these things come up is important, but sometimes they come up so fast that we don't even notice them. [In these moments] we find ourselves triggered, but over time these experiences settle down and we can actually identify them.

Identification [of our emotions] is crucial. Identification is an experience of awareness. When you don't know what's happening [you can only act on] reactionary habit. But when you feel your emotions coming up and can identify them, you gain the ability to break from them if you need to.

Similarly, getting wrapped up in potential outcomes is a kind of addiction to the future. Another addiction is impatience. I usually can't wait for six o'clock when the home health aid comes and I get my break. Impatience is a way of not having to be present.

During a meditation session we can be resting our mind and still be caught up with our boredom. We wonder when the experience is going to change, or what it is really all about. Maybe we get caught up worrying about our day. Just as this happens in meditation, it happens while caregiving. It can happen in any engaged situation.



When we're able to actually have presence of awareness in caregiving situations it's much more powerful because most people are not trying to cultivate awareness during those experiences. They're not trying to go as deep as they might during a meditation session. When we're able to provide that depth for other people it's incredibly supportive.

Imagine being cared for by somebody who seems obsessed with a future positive situation. Think of the pressure this puts on the person who is sick. Imagine the guilt arising within the person who is at the end of their life—I've seen this in hospice many times. There's nothing they [the patient] can do to improve the situation. Whatever is happening in their body is happening. Still, the people around them want to see a different thing happen. That's tremendously hard.

Similarly, try to imagine being sick or at the end of life while the person who's caring for you is wrapped up in their own story. Imagine them saying, “This is so hard for me. This is so sad for me. This is hurting me so much.” We get it. Loss hurts. Impermanence is really challenging. But the preoccupation of the caregiver isn't going to change the outcome. In fact, by worrying about the outcome the caregiver misses the point of connecting with the person who's receiving care.

All of this involves looking at fear and anxiety, which is very challenging. I am not suggesting finding somebody who's very sick and experimenting. This is about gradually developing the ability to be present.

What does radical presence mean when we care for people? What does it mean to let go of the past? How does it feel to not entertain the future—to just hold somebody's hand and listen to them breathe, no matter how labored their breathing might be? What does it mean to acknowledge how these moments make us feel? In moments like these, the sheer ordinariness of sitting with somebody who needs care is so rich and so powerful, but it's something that we forget how to do when we're zipping around.