Repa Dorje Odzer (Justin von Bujdoss)
Everyday Buddhahood: Caregiving as Dharma Practice
Week Three: “Letting Go of Control”
February 19, 2018

In this teaching we're going to cover what it means to be a caregiver who has no control over the situation and who isn’t trying to do anything in particular. We’ll do this by looking at two of Tilopa’s instructions: not controlling and just resting.

As with all of the other points we’ve covered, this seems easy. But I can tell you as a chaplain, this is one of the hardest things for a lot of caregivers to do. We have very elaborate ways of explaining what's happening. Just as medical professionals will explain the physiological reasons that X, Y, or Z is happening to our loved ones, we develop our own way of trying to explain situations by spiritualizing everything.

We tend to think our karma is causing the situation to arise, which on some level is true, but the chaplain in me says that it’s terrible bedside manners to fixate on this. Similarly, the Buddhist teacher in me says that when we explain away what's happening, we fall out of relationship. We create and entertain an intellectual narrative that has nothing to do with the experience.

We do this frequently, not just during caregiving or in chaplaincy. We try to figure out why an earthquake happened, or what the real cause of human suffering is. I’m not discouraging curiosity. I'm also not saying you shouldn’t have intellectual interest in why things are happening; I’m just [suggesting] letting the analytical mind go. We don't need it right now.

During a meditation session, when we want to experience the radical presence found in Mahamudra, we disincentivize trying to figure out what we’re doing. As the mind and body settle and awareness expands, a particular experience arises. The moment we get wrapped up with what it means, we're no longer really having that experience.

During this process of letting go, the ego gets activated. We experience a very subtle wisdom and it makes us feel good about ourselves. We like having the answers to these situations, which is another reason why it's best to just hang our mind up on that hook.

Again, imagine yourself in a hospital bed and two caretakers walking into your room. While one is trying to control the situation, the other is trying to intellectualize everything. Imagine what it would feel like to have somebody basically “mansplain” your illness.

The tricky thing in chaplaincy is the mansplainy the nature of the job. I think it's pretty safe to say that most people do not know the details of the bardo experience or what happens after death. We know what the traditions say, but definitive wisdom of what the experience will be like is very rare. It's potentially harmful to explain away what your end of life experience may be, or what the experience of your sickness may be.

Similarly, when we try to control the outcome as a caregiver it’s because we are uncomfortable with the ordinary. This body that we have is temporary. In many Buddhist traditions we spend time contemplating this. And while [awareness of our body’s temporary nature] usually happens slowly over the course of our lives, sometimes it happens very suddenly after an accident.

It’s painful to have somebody explain what's happening to you, when all you need is somebody to hold your hand, or to hear your crying, or to acknowledge the sadness, or to witness you as a fighter. Some people are fighters. Just be with these people as they have this experience rather than explaining how it’s going to be.

I'm very curious about [modern teacher of secular Buddhism] Stephen Batchelor because I believe removing the preoccupation with the outcome of death might be healthier than worrying about it. Just try to *be*. Try to rest and have radical presence. Try to have radical acceptance

about what's going on. As a caregiver, have radical acceptance for the way the loved one in front of you is.

I've been in situations where people are actively dying and their loved ones, who are completely unable to be present in the moment, tell me, “Oh well they're going to get better.” Meanwhile the dying person has labored breathing and it's very clear that they're going to die in the next couple of hours. Still the person who's caring for them tries to control the situation.

This behavior comes from a deep need for reality to be anything other than the way it is. This need to control experience relates to the meditation cushion. It’s similar to our longing for spiritual meditation experiences as opposed to experiences of just sitting with light, color, and sound, which we sometimes react to positively, sometimes negatively, and sometimes indifferently. We don't want our spiritual practice to be ordinary.

I've seen family members stack up images of saints at one’s bedside. In a couple cases I’ve seen this with Buddhists—Buddha images are placed everywhere and mantra sounds played constantly. It's a positive way of dealing with the situation, but it's also distracting. There’s sensory overload when you try to maximize the amount of merit created in these last several days or weeks.

I've spent a lot of time with hospice patients who are sick of seeing their priest or rabbi. But their loved ones keep calling the priests or rabbis back, saying, “Please bless them. Please do whatever you can do to make their experience positive.” The Buddhist families that do this are forgetting the whole idea of Buddha nature, which is that we already are blessed. We don't need to add anything. We don't need to control anything. We don't need to explain why we have Buddha nature when we have Buddha nature. We don't need to tax a loved one with rules and regulations around how to be at the end of life.

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The sun rises and sets, the clouds move through the sky, we grow, eventually become old, and die. There's no handbook for that. It just happens naturally. Tilopa is urges us to put away the academic mind. Where you are right now is okay. There's nothing to add; there's nothing to take away.