

Lama Kathy Wesley

*Buddhism's Alchemy of Emotion*

Week One: "Noticing Your Habitual Reactions"

January 7, 2019

Hi, my name is Kathy Wesley and I will be leading a Tricycle Dharma Talk on the topic of Buddhism's alchemy of emotion. These teachings come to us from the 12th century and are valuable to us not just as emotional regulation, but also to help improve our lives. I received these teachings back in the 1980s from my teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, who was sent to the United States in 1976 by His Holiness the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa, the head of the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. These teachings have been part of Tibetan Buddhism for centuries and have come to the United States now as a way of bringing the lineage and lessons of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition to the modern world. Today's installment is going to be about how difficult it is to be a human being and how to use the practice of meditation, particularly the teachings of *lojong*, or mind training, in order to help us with our emotional health.

We begin with the story of the Buddha, who lived 2,600 years ago in India. As prince Siddhartha Gautama, he wondered about the reasons why suffering was part of life. He decided to leave his kingdom to become a wandering yogi. Through his practice of meditation he began to examine his mind to discover the causes of suffering, and through a deep meditation he encountered a spiritual illumination from within that we now call enlightenment or Buddhahood.

In the Buddha's state of awakening, he saw very clearly the causes of happiness and suffering and his teaching of the four noble truths summarized this. He said, "The first of the noble truths is that suffering is part of life." We might try to avoid it, we might try to run away from it, but suffering is indeed part of our life. When we fight against it, when we rebel against the suffering we experience or, worse yet, try to deny it or run away from it, we increase our suffering.

As the second noble truth, the Buddha talked about the causes of suffering. The cause of the suffering that we experience in this world is not the boss, it's not the neighbor, it's not your family member. "The cause of suffering," the Buddha said, "comes from within us, from clinging and fixation." We cling to and fixate on just about everything. We cling to people,

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situations, and ideas, and because we cling to these things we suffer. In fact, if we look at the thing we cling to the most, it's our self-concept. By clinging to our self-concept all suffering arises. For example, if we think we're a good person, but somebody says we're not, then we become upset and angry. And as a result of these feelings, we then say hurtful things and to this person and cause the suffering to increase. Then it becomes even worse.

The Buddha said, "In order to combat suffering and its causes we needed to find the solution to suffering, which is letting go." If clinging is the problem, then letting go is the solution. So, that leads us to the third noble truth, the fact that suffering, because it has a cause, also has a solution.

The fourth noble truth is the path. We can't just say to ourselves or to someone else when they are suffering, "Oh, just let it go." We have to give them a method, a means for letting go.

This became part of the Buddha's teaching on the eightfold noble path, which can be very easily summarized in the four statements made by the Buddha in the sutras: "Do no harm whatsoever, practice virtue as much as possible, and tame the mind; this is the teaching of the Buddha." The last one of these statements is just a summary. So, that leaves us with the first three.

"Do no harm whatsoever" means to not harm ourselves or others; "to do as much virtue as possible" means to take care of ourselves and to benefit others; and "tame the mind" means to meditate, to learn and understand about our minds and see how our minds create our own happiness and suffering. Therefore, the first of the Buddha's teachings was to look within our mind. He said, "We are what we think; all that we are arises with our thoughts. And with our thoughts we make the world." So, if we want to change our experience of ourselves and we want to change our experience of the world, we need to change our minds.

Therefore the topic that we're discussing, Buddhism's alchemy of emotion, really begins with training the mind, because if we don't understand our minds, how can we train the mind to use

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the skillful means of Buddhism's alchemy of emotion? How can we? What we need to do first is to practice quiet sitting meditation.

Many people have learned this already, but I'll just summarize the steps. To learn how to sit quietly and just be with oneself is not easy. We're so used to stimulation coming to us from every which way. It's part of what makes it difficult to be a human being. These days we have so many of ways to distract our minds, so many media that combat us and bombard us all the time with various things, various ideas and so forth, entertainment, you name it. We're always distracted and always bombarded. Is it any wonder that we have emotions that sometimes roil around like boiling water going out of control? The practice of quiet sitting meditation walks us back from all of that stimulation into the quiet that can exist within our minds.

The basic technique of meditation is summarized by the two statements: "body at ease" and "mind at ease." First, we place the body in a relatively comfortable position. By allowing ourselves to sit quietly in a chair or on the floor with our back erect and our eyes cast downwards, we can actually begin to feel our mind begin to quiet this way. So, place the body at ease with the back straight and the hands palm downward on the legs. By sitting in this way, we immediately begin to calm down the mind, looking downward, and so on. Placing the mind at ease becomes easier.

The basic teaching of meditation is to follow the breath with your attention. In order to do that and to place your mind at ease, you begin by sitting quietly for just a moment, allowing your body to feel your seat and then to form a motivation within your mind. The very best motivation is, "May I through the next few minutes of breath awareness meditation begin to work with my mind for the benefit of myself and others." Then you begin by taking one deep breath, breathing deeply, and then allowing the breath to become natural and following the course of the breath with your attention. You follow the breath in and you follow the breath out with your attention.

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What you'll find when you do this is that you will have a short period of attention to the breath that will be followed by a period of mental wandering. The key to this practice is to notice the wandering, whether you're wandering into the past or wandering into the future. When you notice the wandering, you take hold of that wandering thought; you could even label it, "Thinking." Let go of it and then return your attention to the breath for a fresh start. This allows you to train your mind gradually to stay with the breath and then to gently, gently—*gently*, that's the word—gently return your attention to the breath when it wanders.

Many people misunderstand meditation and think that it is a perfect performance of some type of thoughtless state. It's not. According to the teachings of the Buddha, what we are doing in meditation is noticing how our mind is wandering and gently returning it.

That gentleness is actually important to our topic of Buddhism's alchemy of emotion. Because often our emotions are wound so tightly that when something goes wrong we panic and we don't know what to do. By sitting on your meditation seat and gently returning your attention again and again and again for a fresh start you train your attention gradually in a way that's almost painless and organic. I tell people when they first start meditating to start with just a short period of time at first and then to gradually lengthen it. In this way, they can establish a habit of meditation that they can actually work with.

Now you may ask, "What does quiet sitting meditation have to do with the alchemy of emotion?" Well, in the next installment we will be talking about that a bit more by describing the continuum of emotion, how emotion arises, how it releases, and then how we can begin to work with that process of experiencing emotion to experience our emotions in a way that doesn't cause us harm.

Between now and the next installment I recommend that you try the practice of meditation and notice and let go. Notice when your attention wanders and bringing your attention back. Do this

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again, and again, and again. You'll notice there will be a little side effect. That little side effect is that you'll begin to notice your thoughts, both while you are meditating and when you are not meditating. And this is interesting, because for many of us our emotions, the things that cause us so much trouble and sometimes rage out of control, these emotions begin as little thoughts that arise from within our mind and then grow into strong habitual tendencies that allow these little thoughts to blossom into a habit of reaction. All the students of meditation who I've worked with have found that when we do meditation, we notice our reactivity and begin to work with it. We'll discuss that in the next session. Thank you very much for your attention this morning, and I hope to talk with you again soon.