

Lama Kathy Wesley

*Buddhism's Alchemy of Emotion*

Week Two: "The Continuum of Emotion"

January 14, 2019

Hello, I'm Kathy Wesley and this is the second installment of the program about Buddhism's alchemy of emotion. I'm working from a 12th-century text written by a mind training master named Chekawa Yeshe Dorje. This text is used as a basis for something called *lojong* or mind training in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

I'll be giving teachings today on the topic of how habitual patterns can become a path. When people tell me about the problems they have with their emotions and habits they frequently talk about their feeling of the inability of overcoming them. They say, "Well, this is just the way I am," or "I can't seem to get on top of this habitual pattern," or "I always fall down into the same hole over and over again." Well, this is understandable because our mind is repetitive. For example, look at how human beings learn anything: through repetition. We learn how to ride a bicycle, or tie our shoes, or sing a song, by repeating it over and over again. Sometimes when we feel pain and emotion, we tense up, and in tensing up we key into a part of ourselves that reacts without thinking. This reactive pattern of emotion, this reactive pattern of habit, can sometimes make us feel trapped. But in practice of Buddhism and meditation, we try to first loosen the grip of these habitual patterns and then eventually learn how to transform them.

In the previous installment, we talked about the practice of quiet sitting meditation, sometimes called *samatha* in Sanskrit or *shyine*, calm abiding, in Tibetan. This practice of breath awareness allows us to slow down our reactions to the thoughts, feelings, and emotions that can arise for us when we're sitting in formal meditation. One of the side effects of this is that we can begin to notice our thoughts, feelings, and emotions when we are not meditating. At first this may be a little frustrating. People say to me, "I never knew I was thinking so much until I started meditating!" The fact of the matter is that it isn't that the person is thinking more, it's that they are noticing it more, and by noticing it more they become a little more uncomfortable with it.

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This is not an entirely bad thing! Once we begin to notice our habits, we may be discouraged at first, but if we remember the technique we learned on the meditation cushion (remember that from the last installment?), when we notice that our attention is drawn away from the breath, we note it, we can even label it "thinking," we let go of it and bring our attention back to the technique of watching the breath. By gently bringing it back again and again for a fresh start, we gain the capability of noticing, not reacting, letting go, and returning to a place that is centered and quiet. This little technique, this touching and letting go and returning, is really the beginning of the change of our habits of reaction and our habits of thinking.

So if we look at emotion, we see that emotions arise in us all the time; it's like we're programmed for them. They sometimes lead us into thinking, then to ruminating, and to resentments, because we create stories in our mind about what we think is going on—in a relationship or in an exchange that we've had with someone—and that can actually bring emotion out of the realm of thought and into the realm of speech and action. So our work in working with emotions is to work with the mind, to work with the emotions as they are arising in our mind to begin to work with them at that moment.

But before we get into the techniques of working with thoughts with emotions, I think it's interesting to talk about an example that I created. I checked this out with my teacher, so it's okay! It's called "The Continuum of Emotion." When we feel something, for example if someone says a harsh word to us or if we feel disappointed in ourselves about something, we may not be able to sit with that uncomfortable feeling. We might be tempted to run away from that uncomfortable feeling, and we will run away to one of two extremes in general. One extreme is the extreme of blind *expression* of emotion, and the other is the extreme or blind *suppression* of emotion. If we run away to the extreme of blind expression of emotion, we might fountain with negative words or negative attitudes; we might even cause harm to ourselves, denigrate ourselves

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and take an invisible stick and hit ourselves over the head thinking that we somehow have done wrong.

The story that's being created is an old story, whether it's "that person has always disliked me," if that's our story, or if our story is "I am always going to make mistakes." Whatever these stories are, we have to find a way to interrupt the story in the middle in order to gain relief from the feelings of the emotions that make us run away. For example, the other extreme of emotional reaction is blind suppression of an emotion. Blind suppression is where we pretend that we don't have the emotion. We say, "That person said a bad thing to me but I am not going to feel it. Nothing happened." We tamp the emotion down as though it were nonexistent. But as everybody knows, when you put something under pressure long enough it eventually explodes.

So we have to find a way of working with our thoughts and our emotions in a way in which we can see them for what they are and feel them completely, but not run away. This is where the practices of mind training or *lojong* come into play. *Lojong* is a Tibetan word; *lo* refers to the mind and *jong* means training, so *lojong* is training of the mind. We need *lojong* because the quieting of the mind that happens in sitting meditation is not enough to uproot our habitual patterns. Let's see it this way: when we get good at letting go of thoughts in meditation, we might feel as though we have overcome emotion. But then when we get up from our meditation seat and go walk around in our everyday lives, someone may come to us and say negative things to us and we'll instantly fall back into our habitual pattern.

The reason for this is that letting go of thoughts in meditation is a way of tranquilizing them or calming them, but underneath that calming and that tranquilization are our habits of self-fixation. The habits of self-fixation have not let go, they've not been dealt with. And because they haven't been let go and haven't been dealt with when the situation is right they will come to fruition again as negative emotions and feelings and suffering.

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So, how do we begin to work with this? We begin by finding a new way to work with pain, a new way to work with our emotions, and a new way to feel about our emotions. Let me give you an example. Someone says something to you and you get angry. Afterwards, you feel terrible about having lost your temper. You think about it over and over again and you feel bad about yourself. How would it be if you could stop feeling bad about yourself for just a minute, if you could let go of that for just a minute and relax your mind? That would be a really good thing. But first, we have to learn how to do that. We have to learn a way to not feel bad about feeling bad.

The technique of *tonglen*, or sending and receiving meditation, is the main practice of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of lojong or mind training. *Tong* means to send and *len* means to take. It's a way of training our mind in an attitude. Now if you remember from the first installment, we talked about the Buddha's four noble truths, and that the first of these is that suffering is part of life and the second is that the cause of suffering is clinging and fixation, particularly clinging to self. If we can find a way to let go of that clinging to self through the methods of practice then we will experience relief from suffering.

So in the next installment, I'm going to give up step by step instruction in how to learn how to let go of self-fixation through the practice of tonglen, or sending and receiving. I think that I can quite literally say these teachings on lojong and tonglen saved my life. And that's not an exaggeration. Before I started learning these teachings from my teacher from Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, I felt like my emotions were out of control and that there was no way I was ever going to find a way to work with them. But once I learned how to do tonglen and kept doing it over and over—diligence is part of practice—doing it again, and again, and again, learning the practice of tonglen allowed me to relax my mind, to relax the stories that I was telling myself about myself and find a way to engender love and compassion for myself as well as for others.

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In the next installment we're going to talk about how these habits that we talked about today can actually be the prop for us to practice compassion in the moment. I'll give you a quick example. When I was visiting a doctor one time I needed to have a blood test, and I don't like them very much. The nurse who was giving me the blood test said, "Hey, wait a minute. You're a meditator, aren't you?" And I said, "Yes." And she said, "I have a meditation for you to do. The minute that you feel the pinch of the needle, relax every muscle in your body." And I said, "I think I can do that." And I did and everything went well. So this is an example of how, instead of tensing up when we feel emotion, if we can find a way to relax and feel love it is better. This is a way to work with our emotions in a different way.

We'll be talking about that in the next installment and I hope you'll join us for that then. Thank you very much.