

Lama Kathy Wesley

*Buddhism's Alchemy of Emotion*

Week Four: “Three Objects, Three Poisons, Three Seeds of Virtue”

January 28, 2019

Hi, I'm Kathy Wesley and this is the final installment of the series *Buddhism's Alchemy of Emotion*. We've been talking about the Seven-Point Mind Training, a teaching that comes to us from Tibet and from Tibetan Buddhism. It goes all the way to a 12th-century text written by Chekawa Yeshe Dorje called *The Seven-Point Mind Training* which was commented on in the 19th century by Jamgon Kongtrul the Great in a book that's been translated into English as *The Great Path of Awakening*. This path shows us how through the practice of love and compassion and meditating on love and compassion how we can let go of all of the causes of suffering, particularly self-fixation.

When we're fixated on ourselves the world sort of revolves around us and we're always looking for friends and enemies. We're looking out for our friends, because we want them to help us and we're afraid that our enemies will interfere and, so, we're trying to push them away. And this continual dance of what one teacher called hope and fear-- this continual dance of hope and fear keep us upset and subject to suffering through emotional upheaval.

If you remember in the second episode, we talked about the continuum of emotion, how a lot of our problems are from reactivity and from not wanting to feel what we feel. But how would it be if we could feel what we feel and not run away, not run away to one of the two extremes: the extreme of blindly expressing an emotion or blindly suppressing an emotion? How would it be if we could just feel the emotion in the moment and see it the way a loving parent would see an ailing child? This is the gift that is given to us through Buddhism's alchemy of emotion. And this comes to us through the practice called *tonglen*, or sending and receiving.

If you remember, in the last episode we talked about the practice itself and I gave a very simple method for practicing it based on Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche's book *Dharma Paths*. In the practice of *tonglen*, we sit and train our attitude in being loving and compassionate. We have to train our attitude in love and compassion because we love some people, but not others. We have to train in the idea of loving all. On the out breath, we imagine that we give happiness to all sentient beings, who we imagine to be in front of us. When we breathe in, we think that we remove the suffering from all of those beings, that it enters us, dissolves into nothing, and

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disappears. When we do this over and over again we are training our mind in the opposite of ego fixation. Instead of being fixated on self and what we want, the fingers of our fists of ego fixation are being pried open so that we can begin to entertain the notion of loving and being compassionate towards others and benefiting them.

If you’ve done any reading about the Seven-Point Mind Training, you’ll know that the main thing it’s training us in is something called *bodhicitta*. *Bodhi* means awakening, meaning an awakened way of being. And *citta* means mind. So, *bodhicitta*, or the mind of awakening, is what we’re training in when we do lojong, which is called mind training, and tonglen, sending and receiving. We’re teaching an awakened way of being. We’re training in an awakened way of looking at the world. And we’re also training in an awakened way of working with ourselves. For example, if we’re feeling depleted, sad, or depressed, we could actually do the practice of tonglen for ourselves. We could imagine that we are sitting in front of us. We could project a mental image of ourselves sitting in front of us. And as we breathe out, we could give ourselves healing and goodness. And as we breathe in, we could imagine that we remove our own pain and suffering. If we do the practice in this way we can fill ourselves back up again when we’re feeling depleted. And then after we’ve filled ourselves back up, we could then imagine all sentient beings to be in front of us again and breathe out goodness to them and breathe in and remove their suffering. At the conclusion of any session of tonglen it’s good to just relax your mind for a moment. Just relax your mind for just a moment, in place, a quiet place, where there’s no you, no sentient beings, no action of saving, but merely the quiet of basic mind. So, that’s a little bit about how to do the practice of tonglen, sending and receiving on one’s meditation seat.

But we don’t live our lives on our meditation seat. At some point, we have to get up, interact with the world, and experience it as it is. And this is why there is a post-meditation practice given in the Seven-Point Mind Training. In the Seven-Point Mind Training there is a post-meditation practice summarized by the slogan, “Three objects, three poisons, three seeds of virtue.” I know that may not make sense. The numbers help you remember the slogan. There are three objects that we relate to in our everyday lives. And there are three mental poisons—negative reactions that we can have to them. And then, finally, there are three seeds of virtue if we can use this alchemy of emotion on our experience. I’ll explain the meaning.

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The three objects are things that we cling to. They’re things we like that we want to get close to us, things that we don’t like that we want to get away from, and there are things that we’re indifferent towards and these correspond to the three mental poisons described by the Buddha in his teachings. Things we like bring up our attachment, things we dislike bring up our aversion, and things that we’re indifferent to bring up bewilderment.

And, so, you can see that what’s happening to us in our everyday life when we are untrained, when our minds are not trained, is that we go through our everyday life dividing the entire world into friends and enemies, things we like, things we don’t like and then we react with our self-fixation to strengthen those ideas. But what’s happening in tonglen and in lojong in general is that we’re trying to loosen our reactivity. We’re trying to loosen our self-fixation and be more open to the idea of having love and compassion for ourselves and for others.

So, here’s how it works. In the 19th century Jamgon Kongtrul the Great in his book that’s been translated into English as *The Great Path of Awakening* he says when you feel something, whether it’s attachment or aversion or bewilderment, you can actually can put it into a formula of thinking. Usually, when we feel something we spin off into a story, “Why did this person say this? Why can’t I get the better of this situation?” Well, what happens is that we spin off into these stories and become more self-fixated. But Jamgon Kongtrul in his formula gives us a way of working with our emotion in the moment and gives us a different story to tell ourselves. He tells us when we feel an emotion, rather than running away to blindly expressing it or running away to blindly suppressing it, instead we should take hold of it, acknowledge how we are feeling, label it, “I am feeling angry, I am feeling sad, I am feeling upset,” and then plug it into a formula that turns that emotion into an aspiration for goodness.

And here’s the formula. I’m going to paraphrase it from the book. And when we feel anger—let’s just use anger as an example, not that it’s my favorite emotion, but it does happen from time to time. So, when we feel angry, we should think, “May my anger contain the anger of all sentient beings.” In other words, we can think, “I’m not the only angry person on the planet right now. There are other people who feel like this also.” So, we think, “May my anger contain

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the anger of all beings." In other words, "May my anger stand in for all of their anger." "May my anger contain the anger of all sentient beings and by my working with my emotion in this way may I and all beings be free of it." That's a powerful thing: By my working with this moment of difficult emotion, may I and all beings be free of it. And then we can go even farther. We can say, "And furthermore, may we all become Buddhas." The complete freedom from negative mental affliction.

So, you can see this three-part technique, this three-part formula can help us respond to our feelings in the moment. We don't run away from our feelings. We feel them. And, in fact, we identify them. But instead of spinning off into a story about this thing or that thing, we take the emotion and plug its energy, the energy of that emotion, we plug it into an aspiration, and we make the aspiration, "May my negative mental affliction contain the negative mental affliction of all sentient beings and by my working through this moment of negative mental affliction, may I and all beings be free of it. And furthermore, may we all become Buddhas, awakened beings," which is really the complete freedom from mental affliction. And you can do this at any time. You can do this with physical suffering. You can say, "May my headache contain the pain of all sentient beings and by my working through this moment may I and all beings being free of this pain. And furthermore, may we become Buddhas, the complete freedom from pain and suffering. And when we're happy, we can think, "May my happiness be shared with all sentient beings. And by my sharing this happiness with all sentient beings may we all have goodness and happiness and come to Buddhahood, which is the complete freedom from clinging to happiness.

So, the idea is by mentally giving away our happiness we actually get to keep it, because even happiness can be seen as suffering. And it says so in the famous saying of the Four Seals of the Buddha, the Four Seals of Buddhadharma, that all emotions are painful. That is very hard for some people to understand. Well, how can happiness be suffering? Happiness can become suffering if we cling to that happiness and demand that it remain. And what happens in this practice, this alchemy of emotion, is that we take the emotion-- let's say, it's happiness and we imagine that that emotion is shared with all beings. And what's happening in that moment is the fist of our self-fixation opens and we see a new possibility. And it's the same with our suffering. If we're feeling very angry or very upset and we say, "May my anger contain the anger of all

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sentient beings and by my working through this moment of anger,” which by the way doing this technique is working with it, “by my working through this moment of anger, may I and all beings be free of it. And may we all become Buddhas,” which is the complete freedom from anger. By using this as our new method, as our new way of responding to mental affliction, instead of closing down, we open up and we take the energy of that emotion and turn it into an aspiration that we can feel good about. In that way, if we make that our new habit, if you take that formula and recite it to yourself every single day, “May my emotion contain the emotion of all beings. By my working through it, may we all-- may I and all beings be free of it and may we all become Buddhas.”

If we can use that formula and recite it to ourselves every day, then slowly and gradually we'll be able to use it when the time comes. And when we are able to use it when the time comes, we'll feel relief and that relief is based on being able to let go. And, in this way, we will continuously train in love and compassion even when we're feeling at our worst. And this is why in the title of the book, *The Great Path of Awakening* is translated into French, it's translated as *The Alchemy of Suffering*. So just as the alchemists of long ago tried to turn base metals into gold, we can take what we feel is the worst about ourselves, our negative mental afflictions, and use them as fuel and as a path. We don't have to be afraid of our emotions anymore, if we can use them within this context and within this formula.

It's my hope that you will take from this final installment of our time together, that you will take from this the aspiration and the wish to practice this. Watch the series again, get the techniques down, practice them at home, and my hope is that this helps you to transform the way you work with your emotions. Thank you very much for listening, and may all beings benefit.