

Barry Kerzin

*Nagarjuna's Wisdom: The Middle Way*

Week One: "The Union of Wisdom and Compassion"

May 6, 2019



Hello, I'm Barry Kerzin, and I'm here to introduce a series that Tricycle Magazine is producing on Nagarjuna's Wisdom. First, let me tell you a little bit about myself. I'm a fully ordained Buddhist monk, a *gelong*, in the Tibetan tradition. I'm also a medical doctor, and I merge these two worlds. For many years I did meditation retreats in silence, mostly by myself, and for the last 12 years I've been teaching at the request of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Let me introduce the topic, which is Nagarjuna's Wisdom. At the end of this year or the beginning of next year, I will release my fourth book called *Nagarjuna's Wisdom: A Practitioner's Guide to the Middle Way*, so I plan to discuss this book briefly.

First, I'd like to set the stage for the importance of Buddhist wisdom. Compassion is where the rubber hits the road. Compassion is what is most essential for our practice, our experience, and our life. The full form of compassion, which in English is called universal compassion or unbiased compassion, is *bodhicitta*. The Sanskrit word *citta* means mind, and *bodhi* means awakened. What does it mean to awaken? This is what wisdom is all about. You begin to see that universal compassion, *bodhicitta*, and the Buddhist understanding of wisdom are not separate, in fact, they're intimate. In some ways, in terms of meaning, you can say they're one and the same.

How does this work? What is compassion? *Bodhicitta*, the mind of awakening, has two parts. There's conventional *bodhicitta* and there's ultimate *bodhicitta*. Ultimate *bodhicitta* is the Buddhist wisdom of emptiness, that is, the lack of any intrinsic or inherent existence.

Conventional *bodhicitta* is the wish, and then the engagement and action, in relieving and eventually eliminating suffering from everyone without exception, including yourself.

What is suffering? The Buddha there are several different layers or levels of suffering. On the superficial level, we have physical, psychological, emotional, or spiritual pain; we all know that and we can relate to it.

Barry Kerzin

*Nagarjuna's Wisdom: The Middle Way*

Week One: "The Union of Wisdom and Compassion"

May 6, 2019



The second level, which is a little more subtle, is the suffering of change. Things do not stay static—they're always in flux. Why is this suffering? As an example, I like chocolate cake. (I don't like it as much as I used to, but I still like chocolate cake!) Let's say you go to a place and they've got great chocolate cake. You order a piece of chocolate cake and eat it, you love it, and you want more. You go back and order another piece of chocolate cake. Then you eat it and you love it so much, but now you're totally full. Your friend says, "That cake was so good. Let's have another." But you say, "I'm full. I can't have any more." Then the friend pleads, "Come on, just one more." So you take one more piece of chocolate cake. You enjoy it thoroughly, then you go home, and go to bed. But you wake up at two or three in the morning with indigestion. That is an example of how pleasure turns into its opposite: pain. That's the suffering of change.

The other type of change is when something just exhausts. For example, I buy a new car, I love it, and I drive it a lot. After a few months or years it starts to wear out. It's gone because of change. This is another suffering of change where pleasurable things don't last.

Underlying the other two types of suffering—the normal suffering of physical and emotional pain and the suffering of change—is the third and deepest level of suffering. This is what we call conditioned suffering, sometimes called all-pervasive suffering. This suffering is a distorted understanding of reality. We sometimes call this distortion ignorance, and it is the deepest level of suffering, discontent, or dissatisfaction.

What is the antidote? That is, how do we get rid of this distorted kind of ignorance, this distortion of reality, of who we are and what the world is? The antidote is Buddhist wisdom and the understanding of emptiness. Not getting attached to the idea of intrinsic or objective existence or the idea that things have some permanent existence. When we lack Buddhist wisdom and grasp at thinking that things have an objective existence, this is distorted ignorance. This is the third level of suffering.

Barry Kerzin

*Nagarjuna's Wisdom: The Middle Way*

Week One: "The Union of Wisdom and Compassion"

May 6, 2019



Compassion is the wish to eliminate suffering and taking action to actually eliminate suffering. At the deepest level, suffering is the distortion of reality. We can overturn and get rid of it through the wisdom of emptiness. Now you can see how intimately related compassion and emptiness, or wisdom, are.

I wanted to set the stage this way because my whole *raison d'être* for writing this text, for our studying and trying to actualize the meaning of this text in our lives, is compassion. To help others get out of this distorted misunderstanding of reality and find the correct understanding of reality, which brings deeper peace and happiness, and eventually, full enlightenment.

The name of my book is *Nagarjuna's Wisdom: A Practitioner's Guide to the Middle Way*. This book has an interesting genesis and I'm going to mention that in session two, which will follow this first session. Please join us.