

Vanessa Zusei Goddard

*The Four Immeasurables: A Science of Compassion*

Week Two: "Offering Unconditional Compassion"

May 9, 2020



Hello, I'm Zusei Goddard. Welcome back to this Tricycle Dharma Talk series on "The Four Immeasurables: A Science of Compassion." This second week, I wanted to focus specifically on compassion, *karuna*, and to look at it and the broader four immeasurables as an ethic of reciprocity, and also as the practice of heartfulness.

We all know about the practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness is everywhere nowadays! Mindfulness, *sati*, is the ability to bring to mind, more traditionally described as the ability to *recall*. It's also the ability to see what is coming up in our mind. If concentration is the practice of maintaining our focus on a point, mindfulness is the ability to see what we are focusing on. There is no question that you need both concentration and mindfulness for the practice of the four immeasurables. You need to be able to focus as you are repeating the phrases, and you need to be able to see the people or persons you are offering them to in your mind's eye. At the same time, you want to be able to cultivate the actual feelings of lovingkindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. So I feel that it is very much a heart practice.

I think it's important to emphasize heartfulness; so often in Buddhism, the emphasis in meditation practice is on concentration and the cultivation of insight and wisdom, which of course are necessary for realization, but you don't want insight or wisdom to remain abstract or distant, cold in some way. So I think it is important to actively cultivate a practice of heartfulness.

Of course, the term "heartfulness" is not new. I thought of applying it to this practice of the four immeasurables recently when I was doing a retreat and the teacher spoke of an old contemplative practice of the Eastern Orthodox fathers. It is to *put the mind in the heart*. When I heard this, I thought, "That's perfect for Buddhism." Because we don't actually make a distinction between "mind" and "heart." We call them heart-mind, *shin*. In fact, we often see them as one reality. At

Vanessa Zusei Goddard

*The Four Immeasurables: A Science of Compassion*

Week Two: “Offering Unconditional Compassion”

May 9, 2020



the same time, as I said, with a stress on concentration or insight, it is good to bring compassion to mind; we should take on another our own being, as our own heart-mind.

Buddhaghosa said that the four immeasurables can be used as an object of meditation, that they can, in fact, lead to the four *jhanas*. These are the four increasingly deep states of meditation that the Buddha moved through, on his journey to enlightenment, to seeing things as they are. And the four immeasurables can in themselves be an object of meditation. But if you remember as Khandro Rinpoche said, there also that suchness itself, they are that very nature of things as they are. Both of these are true. It's another very important dynamic of the four immeasurables.

In this way, the practice of heartfulness brings all of our qualities and humanity to bear on the actual practice. And in one sense it doesn't actually matter whether in a moment we're not feeling loving, or kind, or compassionate; that is part of the practice. This part of the practice is placing ourselves within these qualities and letting them arise out of our being. So with this second of the four immeasurables, compassion, we extend it equally in all directions, just like the sun shines. The sun doesn't strategize who it will shine on or when—it does not pick and choose. Likewise as we cultivate compassion, we are working towards offering it unconditionally regardless of whether we think the person deserves it, is able to receive it, whether we think we're able to offer it, etc. We offer it just because. The compassion chant is phrased as the wish for another's freedom from suffering and the root of that suffering.

If you know that well known phrase, “Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional,” I feel that the practice of the immeasurables lives within that gap. So, pain is inevitable for us human beings because we are physiologically wired to feel pain. We're sentient beings and pain is the body's protective mechanism. So we will never avoid pain and we wouldn't want to. Suffering, however, as the Buddha saw, is how we respond to pain, and that we very much can choose. We can train ourselves to respond more appropriately, more skillfully, and more lovingly.

Vanessa Zusei Goddard

*The Four Immeasurables: A Science of Compassion*

Week Two: “Offering Unconditional Compassion”

May 9, 2020



From the perspective of the self, when I do something for you that takes something from me; my time, my energy, my skill perhaps. That's why the near enemy of compassion is greed, but here, it's greed for things, for possessions. The far enemy of compassion is cruelty, that is ill-will magnified. The antidote for this is once again to step close, to see that what I do to you, I do to me.

So let me first take a step back and look at it from the perspective that so many religious traditions have. And that is the golden rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Or there's also what you could call the more negative perspective. There's a story in which Rabbi Hillel the Elder was asked by a man who said he would convert to Judaism on the condition that the rabbi recite the whole of the Torah while standing on one leg. The rabbi very humbly did as the man asked, he stood on one leg and he said, “What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor. That is the Torah. Everything else is commentary. So go and study it.” And so, so many of the world's traditions have understood this ethic of reciprocity.

I think from a Buddhist perspective, this is what compassion is first based on: the understanding that what I do affects you, and what you do affects me. But in reality, from the perspective of compassion, pain is pain it needs to be alleviated. It doesn't actually matter whether the pain is mine or yours, that is a distinction that we make conventionally. What so many of the world's religious traditions have seen is that we have exhausted conventionality. There is a point at which common sense meets its limit. We are used to living in a box called “me” and what is inside the box is mine, and what is outside the box is yours. The practice of the immeasurables, and specifically the practice of extending compassion, asks that we begin to truly understand that we have created those boundaries, and that we don't have to. The eighth-century Indian monk and scholar Shantideva said, “This suffering has no possessor. Therefore, no distinctions can be made in it. Since pain is pain, it is to be dispelled. What use is there in drawing boundaries?” To me, that's the key of compassion. What use is there in drawing boundaries where there are none?

Vanessa Zusei Goddard

*The Four Immeasurables: A Science of Compassion*

Week Two: “Offering Unconditional Compassion”

May 9, 2020



He also said, “Why not take another's body as my body?” which is really a revolutionary teaching. Why not take another's body and call it “I,” call it “me?” So here we begin to see that the four immeasurables are our stepping forth from the realm of logic, the realm of what we normally would consider as possibility, and encourages us to stretch in a way that enlarges us and that encourages us to inhabit and embody that immeasurability. At the same time, it's important to acknowledge that this isn't just wishful thinking and it's not looking at the world through rose colored glasses. The four immeasurables acknowledge that there is so much work that needs to be done in the world, and that we are the ones to do that work. At the same time, they are arising from an understanding of our wholeness, of that suchness that Khandro Rinpoche described as that inherent ground on which our impulse is really towards what is in harmony. It is towards the understanding that I cannot truly be happy until you are happy and free as well.

That is why the four immeasurables really seed a revolution of the mind, heart, and spirit. They ask that we extend the boundaries of this body, so to encompass that body, and slowly to extend it outward, until truly nothing is left untouched, and nothing is left unaffected.

So to summarize, we looked at compassion as an ethic of reciprocity, as the Buddhist expression of the golden rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” And we also looked at it as a practice of heartfulness, as a practice that incorporates mindfulness, certainly of concentration, but also that very much imbues it with heart.

Next week I would like to take up the practice of sympathetic joy, *mudita*, which is the cultivation of joy at another's happiness, and to go beyond that ethic of reciprocity into an ethic of unity, which can be summarized in the words of Buddhaghosa as the “breaking down of the barriers.” So I look forward to working with you and I hope you can join me.

Vanessa Zusei Goddard

*The Four Immeasurables: A Science of Compassion*

Week Two: “Offering Unconditional Compassion”

May 9, 2020

