

Bhante Buddharakkhita

*Overcoming Difficult Emotions in a Chaotic World*

Week 4: “Understanding the Causes and Conditions”

August 22, 2020



*Namo Buddhaya, Namō Dharmaya, Namō Sanghaya.* I pay homage to the Buddha, dharma, and sangha.

In this talk, I'm going to talk about two more methods of dealing with difficult emotions in a chaotic world. The first one is retracing. This really continues my last talk; this is the continuation of the discourse the Buddha gave on how to deal with obsessive thoughts. So in this method, the retracing method, we tried to find out the springboard of emotion. What's the root of this emotion?

Of course, I'll also talk about the last method which is called resolution, when we make a strong determination to deal with the emotion. In other words, you use every effort to cope with the difficult emotion.

But let's start with the retracing method. What is it? For me, this has been a very practical method where I look back and ask: why am I in this [mental] space? It requires a good look at the past. Why am I the person who's always getting angry? Why do I have fear all the time?

I remember when I was young, I used to walk and I would knock myself on something, but I didn't remove whatever had knocked my foot. The next time I would walk the same way my foot would be knocked again because I didn't remove whatever had knocked me. I learned this lesson the hard way! Of course it was very painful. So I thought, the next time I hit my foot I would look back, identify the object that knocked my foot, and then move it. So that next time it doesn't knock me. So this is an example where I used the retracing method when I was young. I was retracing and finding out what was nourishing the springboard.

Retracing requires you to have some psychological understanding of emotions. A little bit of theoretical understanding of emotions can take you a long way. If you know a particular emotion you can replace it. But even if you don't know you can really find out for yourself and look backwards. We have already discussed the reflection method in the first talk, reflections forward looking. What am I getting into when a difficult emotion arises? Now I'm in the situation, what was behind it? So it's quite the opposite.

Let's look at fear. So if you're really inundated with fear you can apply mindfulness of fear and investigate. But with the replacement method, you want to start having a good look at fear. Where does this fear come from? There's a book called *The Dhammapada*, it's one of the scriptures we have.



Let's look at fear. So if you're really inundated with fear you can apply mindfulness of fear and investigate. But with the replacement method, you want to start having a good look at fear. Where does this fear come from? There's a book called *The Dhammapada*, it's one of the scriptures we have. In it the Buddha really taught that from craving, from endearment, from passion, attachment, arises fear. Where there is no craving, there is no fear. So the psychological root of fear is attachment, craving, in one form of passion.

Let's say if you fear death. It's very strange, most people are afraid of dying, but they want to go to heaven. So most people fear death. But have you asked why you are afraid of death? When you look at it clearly, you see you are afraid of death because you are attached to your body, you're attached to your life, you're attached to the life of others. In one way or the other, there must be some kind of attachment or craving. So we can see this method working when fear arises you start asking your questions. You go backwards. Where is fear coming from? Then fear is coming aversion. Then you ask yourself, where does this aversion come from? It comes from attachment.

Attachment is a two way thing, it has both sides: attachment, reaching out for what we want, and also pushing away what we don't want. That pushing it can cause fear. You can even go a little bit farther than that and ask: where's this attachment coming from? So you retrace, you keep on going backwards. You find out this attachment is coming from ignorance. Ignorance, you are ignoring things. In other words, you're not paying wise attention. You can go further and you go to wise attention and unwise attention.

So, every time you go a notch below and find out where this difficult emotion comes from, it reveals something. It reveals something that you may not know. And once you find out, let's say I'm having fear, maybe to walk in the dark or go to an interview. Once you find the springboard, it is very easy. You think, why do I have to be afraid of these people? Sometimes you may have fear, but it's not justified. When you retrace don't make it a mental exercise where it becomes some kind of intellectual entertainment, just retracing this and this. No, you must have some kind of psychological basis to find out where this stuff is coming from. And if you don't have enough knowledge about Buddhism, you really can take a good look at your life. Why are you doing the things you do now? You can really find out for yourself.

You don't have to have a PhD in Buddhism to retrace what's happening in your life. When you look at your mind you find out what was the pre-existing condition for where you are now. Then, once you find out, you have some kind of workable space or area to deal with that emotion.



One time when I was meditating in Thailand I was afraid of seeing ghosts. Growing up in Africa everybody talks about ghosts. I ask them, "Have you seen a ghost?" "No, no," they would tell me. I was so frustrated that I had not met anyone who had a first-hand experience of seeing a ghost. So when I went to Thailand, they told me, "Yes, you can see ghosts if you go to a cemetery and meditate there." So I went to the cemetery. When I sat there meditating in the dark I heard branches breaking and I thought "Wow, a ghost is coming." And at some stage I thought, "I think a tiger is coming," because I had read stories about his monks in Thailand who were eaten by tigers—I mean, who were visited by a tiger, but the tiger didn't eat the monks. Because I had a shaved head, mosquitoes were biting me. I was coming from Uganda and I thought maybe I had malaria from these mosquitoes. Then I thought I was going to get dengue fever. So I moved from fear of ghosts to fear of tigers to fear of fever—of two fevers, malaria and dengue.

But at some stage I resolved as a Buddhist monk, I should really figure this out. I teach about emotions; how can fear overtake me like this? I sat down and said, "Where does fear come from?" I retraced it and I found out I'm really afraid of these things because I think that I have a lot of things to do in Uganda with the temple. Leading the temple, taking care of my mother who is a nun, taking care of the Buddhist community here. I don't want to leave now because I need to complete my projects. Once I said to myself, "Bhante Buddhatakkhita, you have done enough. You have introduced Buddhism in Uganda, you have ordained your mother as a nun, you have helped so many people. It's okay, it's okay." It was amazing to see what the fuel was behind all this fear, and when I saw that, I was ready for a tiger, I was ready for a ghost. Unfortunately, I never saw the ghost anyway! But anyway, I've used this method; I've used everything I've talked about in this series of talks, and they work.

The last method is called resolution, making a strong resolve. This is a very important method in Pali called *adhitthana*, determination. Even the Buddha made a strong determination when he sat down under the bodhi tree, when he was visited by Mara, he touched the earth to bear witness, right, and made the resolve that he was not going to budge.

He resolved not to move from his seat until he achieved what is to be achieved. The Buddha talks about this in many suttas. There is another sutta, in the *Majjhima Nikaya*, about fear and greed. It is the buddha-to-be, the bodhisattva. Fear arose when he was sitting in meditation, and he resolved "I'm not going to stand until fear goes down." If fear arose when he was walking, he said, "I'm not going to stop walking until this fear has subsided." So this determination works.



This is a resolution. I contend to make them every day; every day I make a strong resolution not to be overcome by strong emotions as soon as I wake up.

I've heard this from the Dalai Lama, actually, in 2020. He talks about reflections as soon as you wake up. And I modify them. As soon as I wake up I make a strong resolution: I'm grateful to be alive. I'm awake, I'm healthy, and I'm not going to waste my life. I'm going to use all my life for attaining enlightenment. I'm not going to be caught up in the media, in television. I'm not going to waste my life. In thinking about greed, hatred, and delusion, I'm going to use my life to cultivate lovingkindness, compassion, generosity, courage, and enlightenment, for the benefit of all beings, including myself. Whatever I've done, knowingly or unknowingly, through body or speech. I forgive others, whether they say sorry or not. I'm going to benefit all beings as much as I can. So this is my determination I do every morning.

But the question is, when you do this, make determinations, are you actually not going to get angry or hijacked by emotion, simply because you made this determination? Of course not. Sometimes you're going to be visited by difficult emotions, and that is strong, but, you're going to remember that you have made a resolution. And that's a good reminder.

So these are my resolutions. But of course, when you're making resolutions, make them in a way that you relate to them well. Find your own resolutions. And make small chunks of resolutions. Don't say, "In the next 20 years, I resolve to not get angry at all." No, no, no. Just start, "I'm healthy, I'm alive, I'm not going to get angry." Make that determination.

But what's very interesting for me, at least in my life, I found out that so many triggers for the difficult emotions arise in this chaotic world. When emotion comes, it's amazing how I remember that "Ah, I made this determination." Actually this remembrance is very, very important. Making a strong resolution reminds you of what you aspire to as a human being for the rest of your life. There's a common saying in the meditation circles that mindfulness is not difficult, but what's difficult is to remember to be mindful. So actually, these emotions, if you remember your determination, are easy to deal with, but if you forget, then they take over. So the Buddha gave this teaching model, making a strong resolution. He said that "Crush your mind with the mind." This seems to counter Buddha's teaching, but really, we shouldn't take this too literally, because this method really means trying to apply every ounce of your efforts to overcome difficult emotions.

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So we have seen two methods in this talk, which ends the whole series of talks about ten ways of overcoming difficult emotions. One is to be mindful. Make sure that you are mindful of the springboard behind your emotions. And lastly, I've talked about strong resolution, make a strong resolve not to be carried away by this emotion. Don't let difficult emotions be your master. You have to be the master of your mind, not the other way around.

Friends, we have covered a lot in these talks. I have discussed ten tools in this series of talks. I hope you'll be able to deal with difficult emotions in this chaotic world. May you be blessed by the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. *Namo Buddhaya, Namō Dharmaya, Namō Sanghaya*. I pay homage to the Buddha, dharma, and sangha.