

Kimberly Brown

*In It Together: Kindness through Crisis*

Part 4: “When You Can't Take it Anymore”

May 22, 2021



Welcome back to the fourth and final week of our Dharma Series, "In It Together: Kindness through Crisis." Today we're talking about what to do when you're fed up with the world. This year, I've noticed that so many people—friends, family, and students—have become more and more overwhelmed, angry, and frustrated with all the difficulties facing our country and the world. We have deep economic uncertainty and joblessness; the unfairness of our society where a few people have far more than they need and so many struggle; corrupt and selfish politicians in both parties; and of course such a worry and stress about the effects of global warming and the exploitation of our natural resources harming our environment.

These are big problems, and they are hard to face. Some people deal with this by getting totally overwhelmed, discouraged, and pessimistic, and just decide there's nothing they can do. They think it's too big and they can't solve it, so they're not going to do anything. These people often become cynical and nihilist—they feel nothing matters and nothing can be done.

Others of us feel enraged and are determined to do something, demanding that change happen and insisting that everyone do what we want so we can fix these problems. These people are often angry and exhausted, totally burned out—they feel there's so much to do and it's up to them to do it.

Both ways of reacting—cynical and nihilist, or outraged and insisting—are extremes and are unskillful views. They cause us deep suffering and pain. So a solution for this, an antidote, is to learn to orient our actions in wisdom and compassion for ourselves and others, without losing heart or burning out.

Because from the Buddhist point of view, action means our thoughts, our speech and communication, and our behaviors. And it's a fact—it's science—that everyone of our actions has outcomes. Each thought affects me and my mind; each word that I communicate affects everyone who hears them and however they're affected they might affect others. And of course each behavior has effects both indirectly and directly. Even a neutral action, like when I open the door to the grocery store, that movement moves molecules and affects living creatures near the door. It has an effect. So if we can remember that everything we do and say and think matters, there are outcomes, then we can pay attention and orient our intentions and actions in wisdom and compassion. We understand that cause and effect are real. It's not that nothing matters—it's that everything matters.

The great Indian teacher Shantideva, who was a student at Nalanda Buddhist university over two thousand years ago, wrote a book called *The Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*. He gives us advice and instructions on how to behave wisely for the benefit of ourselves and all beings. He tells us that there are three types of wise action. The first, action that does not harm; the second, action that benefits; and the third, actions that develop our own wholesome qualities.

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The first type of wise action, non-harming actions, often require restraint, renunciation, saying no. A simple example of non-harming is choosing not to say something. When your teenage daughter just bought the ugliest pair of shoes, *not* saying that, because you understand these critical words would hurt her. Not harming is simply choosing not to react. Not commenting on that social media post. And this includes not harming yourself. So for me, non-harming could be not eating another piece of chocolate cake. In a larger way, refraining from over consumption is a way of non-harming the earth and our resources.

Many of us forget or overlook the power of restraint and not doing, of this first wise action, because it’s not so obvious and it’s not something in general that we get praised for or really brag about. But to me it’s even more important than beneficial action. Because the less harm we cause ourselves and others, then the less help we all need later. We won’t have to clean up the harm that was caused.

The second type of wise action are thoughts, words, and behaviors that bring benefit. We’re most familiar with this type of wise action, and many of us have learned that is the only and best way to solve problems or create an equitable and kind world. But it’s just one of the three—non-harming and being beneficial and developing our own wholesome qualities, which we’ll get to in a minute. This second type of wisdom really requires us to have a clear and cultivated intention before we speak or act. We’ve all experienced well-intended actions that didn’t turn out well. People trying to be helpful but really meddling or controlling; right? Being of benefit we also take a long view—we might not fix or solve a problem right now. I have a friend who works in public policy on homelessness—she would like it to disappear, but knows it is created by many causes and conditions. So she works very hard and others too, using their beneficial actions and over time all these actions big and small contribute to a time when there is no homelessness. It might take one hundred years or five hundred years, but the beneficial outcome of all these actions are never lost or wasted.

*The outcome of your actions will survive you*—then it becomes imperative that you orient your actions in non harming and being of benefit—and that you develop your wholesome qualities. Why? Because these qualities inform our actions. So when we cultivate love, compassion, balance, and kindness, then our words, thoughts and deeds are more likely to not harm and be of benefit to all beings including us. This is why meditation is important and not just “navel gazing,” because by developing our hearts in this way we’re also grounding our actions in wisdom—in skillful means, *upaya*, to alleviate suffering and to prevent causing more.

So let’s do a meditation together with an intention to cultivate your wholesome qualities—our clarity and caring and kindness and so forth. Take a minute to find a comfortable seat. You can sit in a chair or lie on the floor or a bed or a couch. What’s most important is to not look at your phone and to get still, to stop moving or looking around. Settle into a seat, and take a few conscious breaths at your own pace. Don’t force it. You can close your eyes, or if you’re sleepy

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keep them open with a soft unfocused gaze. Bringing your attention to your body—your feet, seat, belly.

Think of someone who has loved you easily, who has encouraged you, who just thinks you’re great. Perhaps an old friend, aunt, uncle, teacher, therapist, or even a dear pet. Let your wholesome qualities for them naturally arise, and offer silently, “May you be filled with lovingkindness. May you be healthy and safe. May your joy never cease.”

Next, imagine that this person, this loved one, is offering you their lovingkindness. Allow yourself to *receive* their wholesome qualities. You can imagine or picture that they look at you with concern and love as they say, “May you be filled with lovingkindness. May you be healthy and safe. May your joy never cease.”

Now—still connected to yourself and loved one, opening your heart to more beings—including all in your kindness and love. Bringing attention to your heart and imagining all the countless living creatures in front of you, behind you, to the right, to the left, above, and below. You’re radiating your beautiful qualities from your heart like a sun, shining on all indiscriminately easily without effort. Human beings—young, old, tall, short, poor, rich, people of all different skin colors, ethnicities, languages, all over the globe—“May we be filled with lovingkindness. May we be healthy and safe. May our joy never cease.” Now including all of the animals—in the air, the ocean, in the ground, on the ground—now we’re including all Earthlings—“May we be filled with lovingkindness. May we be healthy and safe. May our joy never cease.” Taking a moment to give this blessing to all living beings on our beautiful planet.

Through our actions, may all beings everywhere through time and space be safe, happy, healthy, and live with ease. *Sabbe satta sukhi hontu*. May it be so.

As we conclude this meditation, take a moment to appreciate your time and your good heart, say “thank you” to yourself. Now, instead of getting fed up with the world, do this practice, which will help you to keep your words and deeds oriented in benefit and not harming.

It has been a delight to participate in this wonderful Dharma Talk series here at Tricycle. Thank you for practicing with me. I rejoice in your good hearts and wisdom.