

Malcolm Martin

*You Can't Be Yourself By Yourself*

Week Four: "Dependent Origination, Identity, and Inequality"

June 25, 2022



I began this series of talks by asking a question: What can we say about the relationship of the suffering that brings me to practice, my own suffering, my own pain to that of all beings, which is what the practice asks us to address? Shantideva, in this classic Mahayana statement of the suffering of all beings, asks, "Why am I so concerned with the suffering of this being when the suffering of all beings has exactly the same status, that we're all equal in suffering?" The classic statement of this Buddhist concept of emptiness and the relationship of emptiness to suffering is the *Heart Sutra*. The figure who is giving the *Heart Sutra*, so to speak, is the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara.

We normally translate the Sanskrit term *karuna* as compassion. There is actually a much better translation available, which is just care or caring. Compassion is problematic because it sounds like a feeling. It's something I feel about other beings who are separate. It's passive. Caring is something we do. Caring is active. Caring has so many different possibilities, so many different modes of action. I care emotionally. I can care physically for somebody else. It is endless. And it's this sense of activity and diversity and spread. I think caring is actually a much better translation.

It's easy to imagine Avalokiteshvara as some wonderful cosmic force completely outside ourselves, some amazing, mysterious, completely realized cosmic being. I think there's a much more interesting way of imaging Avalokiteshvara, which has to do with us. One of Avalokiteshvara's many different forms is represented as having 1,000 hands and 1,000 eyes, the better to care for all living beings. I love this image because that's how I see it in the context of the world. Actually, I think in this world, currently, Avalokiteshvara has about 16 billion eyes and about 16 billion hands because that's each of us. Avalokiteshvara is the caring that each of us carry out, that each of us embody in this world.

Malcolm Martin

*You Can't Be Yourself By Yourself*

Week Four: "Dependent Origination, Identity, and Inequality"

June 25, 2022



So the myth of Avalokiteshvara is that he or she—interestingly, Avalokiteshvara is the only Buddhist figure to migrate gender as it moves from India to China—hears the cries of the world. That's one translation of the name Avalokiteshvara: to see the suffering of the world. So intensely does Avalokiteshvara experience this that she or he explodes, literally physically explodes in the frustration and the agony of not being able to help all beings, not being able to address their needs. But then Avalokiteshvara mysteriously reforms in this form with 1,000 eyes and 1,000 hands, the better to assist and aid all beings.

As I say, if we're all the hands and eyes of Avalokiteshvara, we all address suffering through the care that we offer to ourselves and others, to the extent that we become aware of ourselves as part of this infinite web of caring, which sustains each of us in each moment, which we were totally dependent upon as infants and as children, but which still supports us. We care for other beings. Avalokiteshvara practices and carries out this caring intuitively. There's this wonderful image in one of the Zen koans that asks, what's the activity of Avalokiteshvara like? It's like reaching behind you for a pillow in the night in the dark. You don't have to think about it. There's not even any conscious involvement. It's instinctive. It's become natural.

I think that decades—maybe many decades—of the kind of practice I was talking about in the last lecture will probably, to some extent, allow us to become this kind of person with this kind of instinctive reaction, which is great. But that actually says nothing about how we address things collectively. Let's think about this. What would an image of our actual society be in the way that it functions? It would have to be Avalokiteshvara with arms pulling in different directions, some trying to strangle the bodhisattva, some picking up things, some knocking the same things out of their hand. We're all over the place. We're not intuitively going in the same direction. How on earth could that actually come to be? Can we begin to understand how we might make that shift?

Malcolm Martin

*You Can't Be Yourself By Yourself*

Week Four: "Dependent Origination, Identity, and Inequality"

June 25, 2022



That would be to place caring at the center of our democracy and how we see the world. We'd have to develop means of participation whereby it became entirely natural and spontaneous to take part, where we valued carrying activities, where that was the mainstay, the foreground, of how we think of ourselves rather than individual competition. And to do that, we'd have to begin to acknowledge our own vulnerability and that we share that vulnerability with all other beings. Perhaps in that sense, we could bring about what the philosopher Joan Tronto has called a caring democracy, a society founded on the principle of care rather than of the endless competition of all against all.

We are whirlpools. We want to see ourselves as billiard balls. So where is the problem? Where's the real problem? I keep coming back to this idea of misperception, that we see ourselves one way, whereas the reality of the world is another; that we see ourselves as separate identifiable elements in competition with each other, whereas the world is simply not like that, this infinitely interdependent web. But if we act as billiard balls, the consequences are really dire. But why would we do that? The argument I'm making is that that's the way the structures of our society are organized. If we think of even the foundation of our laws, the idea of a social contract that we're all party to from the moment of our birth, even though nobody asks us, that guarantees us one kind of equality. But that in practice turns out to be nothing but inequality. It guarantees us one kind of freedom that in practice turns out to be a completely different kind of freedom.

One of the key ideas that is supposed to stem from that is equality of opportunity. That's the ideal towards which we aspire. And yet we know that that can never actually come to be. There are so many reasons why not. The material circumstances, the state of which I'm part, is a big determinant that will guarantee that my equality will never be the same as your equality. My social background, the family into which I was born, the socioeconomic conditions, the financial conditions, the opportunities for education, and so on. And that's before you take into account what difference should it make whether I'm smart or whether I'm not so smart, whether I have a

Malcolm Martin

*You Can't Be Yourself By Yourself*

Week Four: "Dependent Origination, Identity, and Inequality"

June 25, 2022



disability, whether I am cognitively different from the average? Why should any of this stuff actually make any difference? Nominal equality actually generates real, catastrophic inequality. We misperceive. In trying to do something one way, we bring about the opposite result.

There's a very useful Buddhist notion here: dependent origination. If everything is dependent on everything else, and if there is no completely separate, substantial, permanent billiard ball self organizing things and pulling the strings, why do I think that I deserve special attention? Why do I think that I deserve more than you if it's all causes and conditions? As we say, the principal determination of the possibilities of my life are determined by the state, the nation into which I was born, the citizenship I hold, and the value of that passport. It is completely determined by causes and conditions. But on another level, it's completely random. Why do I think that I deserve to be more because I live in England or because I'm of a certain class or of a certain race? It just doesn't add up.

Finally, there are no grounds because it's all conventional, because all our distinctions, because all aspects of our identities are ultimately arbitrary, conventional. There's no reason why the CEO of a corporation based in Manhattan should be worth more than an office cleaner in London or a child that scrapes a living picking trash in Mumbai. There's no actual grounding reason for this other than contingency, what you can get where you are when you are. But we endlessly erect justifications. In the world of the billiard ball, it's competition. It's winning. It's losing. It's being deserving, and if you have, you're deserving, and if you don't have, you are undeserving. And if you're undeserving, you're morally culpable. We need the myth that if we work hard, if we use our talents, we will succeed.

I always like to take the example of the President of the United States as the kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of this. The President of the United States is the most powerful man in the world. Of course, he's constrained. His possibilities for action are really surprisingly tight, the parameters

Malcolm Martin

*You Can't Be Yourself By Yourself*

Week Four: "Dependent Origination, Identity, and Inequality"

June 25, 2022



he can work with in. And while anybody born in the United States can become President of the United States, we know that your actual life chances are at best about 10 million to one, unless, of course, you're born into a certain stratum, a certain class, a certain family. We know, for instance, that if you are Black, if you're a woman, if you're differently able, if you're cognitively different, you're out of the picture entirely in a lot of points of view a lot of the time. It's not a game, and yet we believe in the game. And we like to ignore the fact that the odds are always stacked.

We like to believe in the idea of a level playing field while knowing that that is unachievable in principle and in practice. And yet, we still keep playing the game. We still want to believe. We still misperceive because it's what we've been told, and it's the fundamental of our conditioning, our socialization. We'll even defend these ideas with our lives on occasion because they're so central to our identity about who we are and what we are.

I spent 10 years working as a Buddhist prison chaplain. There I have met the people who are labeled morally culpable, moral failures. They were either not willing or not able to succeed in playing the game in the terms that we're supposed to. We lock them up. We literally put them behind walls. We deprive them of the vote. We place conditions upon them when they leave to the extent that they're not really able to lead anything like the lives that they might be able to lead were they given support.

The point is that we're trying to pin the failings of our society on them as individuals: "These are the not deserving people. These are the culpable people. These are the blameworthy people." But actually, on the whole, these are the people who are simply unable to compete, unwilling to compete, who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. And yet our determination to place everything at the level of the individual, of the personal, means that they alibi our own sense of goodness and fundamental identities: "I'm a law-abiding person. I know I'm a law-abiding

Malcolm Martin

*You Can't Be Yourself By Yourself*

Week Four: "Dependent Origination, Identity, and Inequality"

June 25, 2022



person because over there behind that wall are the criminals. As long as they are there and as long as I know that they're being punished, I can feel good about myself knowing that I'm one of the good guys. I'm on the right side of the wall." Again, it's a line. It's a line we draw in law. It's a line we draw with bricks and concrete and barbed wire in the real world. And it's a line that affects everybody's lives, how we think of ourselves. And the real twist is that we demand that those in prison agree to this, assent to this, and come to think of themselves as the bad people, dreadful people, failed people.

It eats away. I can think of so many people that I've met. A really sweet young lad had grown up in care, was physically and sexually abused while he was there, and learned anger and violence this is only possible response to that. He had to escape that situation, and he could stay safe only by being irrationally violent at the merest hint of a threat to him. Has any significant help really been offered to him ever? Not so much. He's spent 15–20 years in prison now. I called him a young lad, but I think he's probably about 40. He still seems like he's in his late teens or 20s. He's in and out of jail—he gets released, responds inappropriately, gets a bit violent, gets locked up again, falls foul of this, falls foul of that. He's so scared. He's so terrified. He can't even go to the hospital on release. He can't even attend a doctor's appointment because that is just too provoking of his anxiety. And so he'll find himself again in some kind of scrape. There'll be some kind of scuffle; he'll throw a punch; he'll find himself back inside.

And yet I found this same man in tears, shaking. What was the problem? On the previous day, he'd seen somebody seriously self-harming, and nobody helped that guy. He tried to, but he was unable to. He's not a monster. He's not insensitive in any sense of the word. And yet he found himself in that situation. He spent a whole life. I can't see him ever getting out of that cycle. How could he be helped? Surely, a caring society could offer him something.

Malcolm Martin

*You Can't Be Yourself By Yourself*

Week Four: "Dependent Origination, Identity, and Inequality"

June 25, 2022



We vow to save all beings, free all beings, whatever that means. How can we do this? We need energy. We need to not become discouraged. We need to persevere. And in fact, the Buddhist qualities we call the *paramitas*, or the perfections, give us an idea of this. All this may sound like we have to become some kind of superhero. But that's not it at all. The real point is to understand our own suffering as both our real connection, our real relationship with others, and seeing through the billiard ball world as the source of our othering of others, our source of separation, our source of rejection of others. Paradoxically, what we need is not superhuman strength but really to understand our own vulnerability in order to heal the world.