

**Mindfulness, Wisdom,
and Compassion:
Exploring the Nature of
Experience**

**Week 3: Cultivating
Compassion**

With John Dunne

This week we're going to explore compassion. So let's begin again with a very simple practice of just settling the mind, finding that posture in which there's a sense of alertness and relaxation, just dropping down into the body, perhaps settling the mind on the breath, simply being present.

Now, all Buddhist traditions think very highly of the cultivation of loving-kindness and compassion. There are some traditions in which the cultivation of compassion in particular is especially important, and we'll explore that momentarily. But let's begin by doing a short practice of *metta bhavana*, as it's called, that is to say the cultivation of loving-kindness. And I first learned this practice from Sharon Salzberg, a great meditation teacher. It's very well-known. It actually comes from the Theravada tradition. So just settle again, be present, and attend to the breath.

We're going to recite a series of phrases. We're going to begin with ourselves actually directing these phrases to ourselves. But instead of saying "I" or "me," I invite you to just say "this being."

Loving-Kindness Practice

So, again, settling in...and now we'll begin the phrases:

May this being be happy,

may this being be free from mental anguish and

may this being be free from physical suffering.

May this being live with joyful ease.

These are the four phrases which, again, directed to this being, ourselves. Allow the phrases to write on the breath.

May this being be happy. . . You just breathe the phrase. . .May this being be happy.

May this being be free from mental anguish. . . May this being be free from mental anguish.

May this being be free from suffering. . . May this being be free from suffering. Just breathe the phrases.

May this being live with joyful ease. . . May this being live with joyful ease.

Now, reaching out, bringing to mind those in your vicinity, your household, the other people nearby, moving from a focus on yourself to them.

May these beings be happy. . . May these beings be happy.

May these beings be free from mental anguish. . . May these beings be free from mental anguish. Just breathe the phrase.

May these beings be free from suffering. . . May these beings be free from suffering

May these beings live with joyful ease. . . May these beings live with joyful ease.

And now, extending the mind even further to encompass the earth.

May these beings be happy, and breathing the phrases, may these beings be happy.

May these beings be free from mental anguish. . . May these beings be free from mental anguish

May these beings be free from suffering. . . May these beings be free from suffering.

May these beings live with joyful ease. . . May these beings live with joyful ease.

Now extending the mind everywhere, above and below, front and back, left and right, in all directions, everywhere, encompassing all beings.

May all beings be happy. Just breathing the phrases. May all beings be happy.

May all beings be free from mental anguish. . . May all beings be free from mental anguish.

May all beings be free from suffering. . . May all beings be free from suffering,

May all beings live with joyful ease. . . May all beings live with joyful ease.

Now, to end this practice, let us seal it with our intention and turn to the question, "What is loving-kindness? How is it different than compassion?"

The Buddhist traditions talk about loving-kindness as basically the motivation that all beings be happy. That's universal form. But loving-kindness can also be directed at oneself, just one's loved ones. It's simply the wish that any being be happy. This is different than *karuna*, or compassion, when we recite the loving-kindness phrases. The phrases I recited are similar to some very traditional phrases, but not exactly the same. And I invite you to explore, especially Sharon Salzberg's work on loving-kindness. And there are many resources out there, also on Tricycle. So you can, in a sense, modify those phrases for yourself in ways that might make

sense for you, whereas always in some way or another, they're eliciting that sense of wishing for beings to be happy.

Compassion, in contrast, is the motivation, the wish, for beings to be free from suffering. It's slightly different in its orientation and in its feeling. And part of the idea with compassion is that compassion has a kind of motivating feature to it—that there's something that needs to be done to alleviate the suffering of others.

In some Buddhist traditions, this becomes very important, that sense of a motivation to actually relieve the suffering of others, to do something, even to take that responsibility on oneself. And when we think about this in relation to wisdom, it turns out to be really important. So for these traditions, and here I'm thinking especially of the traditions of what we call Mahayana, or the Great Vehicle forms of Buddhism, and especially the ones that I'm most connected to in Tibetan Buddhism—really all of the Tibetan traditions, but my home base is a tradition that combines two nondual styles called Mahamudra and Dzogchen, through the lineage of a great master named Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, and especially his sons, including my teachers, Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, Mingyur Rinpoche, and Tsokny Rinpoche, all of his sons from whom I've learned a great deal. So in these kinds of traditions, actually, compassion becomes a kind of essential companion of wisdom. Because part of what compassion does is compassion actually, in a sense, opens the heart in a way that is motivating. There's not just a kind of wish, but a motivation, and that's a key element of compassion. It enables us to, in a sense, get outside of ourselves, to not be so stuck in our own orientation. And there are some really important elements to this. One element that's key to this, actually, interestingly, is to develop a kind of compassion that is focused on all sentient beings—what we call great compassion.

In order to attain that, what we need also to cultivate is the capacity, which can be very challenging, capacity to have compassion, not just for those that we care for or maybe people that we're sort of neutral towards, but even people for whom we have some dislike. And this involves, therefore, the cultivation of what we call equanimity.

The practices in the Tibetan tradition that are used to cultivate equanimity are many, but some of them involve a kind of visualization, and they actually begin, in many cases, by focusing on someone that you really care for and who cares for you. So let's do that.

Equanimity Practice

Let's begin first by cultivating an image, a mental image, a memory of someone that has been kind to us, someone that cares for us. In everyone's life, there's somebody like this—a parent, a sibling, a friend, a mentor. There's no need for this person to be perfect. Just recall some moments of kindness, bring them to mind and then also bring to mind our own sense of wanting to be happy, of not wishing to suffer.

We don't want to suffer. We all wish to be happy. Just notice that authentic sense—that spontaneously, we wish happiness. Spontaneously, we seek to avoid suffering.

Bringing that same sense now to that memory of this kind person, they too, do not wish to suffer. They wish to be happy, just like us. See if you can connect with them, just with that together: we don't wish to suffer. We wish to be happy. See that almost like a light connecting your heart to their heart, a shared wish for happiness, freedom from suffering.

And now, next to that person, see if you can also visualize someone that is quite neutral to you. Maybe you scarcely know them. You've seen them working at the grocery store, or you encounter them on the street quite often. Whatever it might be. You know them. You've met them personally, but maybe you don't even know their name.

And bring to mind, how they, too, wish to be happy. They don't want to suffer.

Know that, acknowledge it. They wish to be happy. They don't want to suffer and see again like a strand of light connecting you to them as well.

And now bring up the image of a challenging person, someone who is difficult, someone who maybe even has caused you trouble.

Recognize they, too, want to be happy. Perhaps, in their confusion, they harm others, thinking it will help them. But they wish to be happy. They don't want to suffer, just like the kind person, just like the neutral person, just like yourself. You all wish to be happy. You don't wish to suffer. Perhaps we're confused about how to do this. Perhaps the difficult person does things that doesn't bring happiness to anyone, but they still have that wish. See, now, that same strand of light connecting you with them as well, just through this wish. They wish to be happy. They don't wish to suffer. All of us together. We wish to be happy. We don't wish to suffer.

This is what we call equanimity. There are many versions of equanimity and this one is key as a basis for compassion. So with equanimity in place, it's possible for us to develop a kind of compassion that is not partial, that's not biased, the kind of compassion that is actually the companion of wisdom that facilitates our wisdom and that actually embodies our wisdom of seeing things the way they really are.

So how do we cultivate compassion? There are many different kinds of practices, but we'll do a brief version of one that's a kind of combined practice from the Tibetan tradition.

Compassion Practice

So let's begin first by again, bringing to mind and visualizing a person who is kind to us, a benefactor, a parent, a sibling, a mentor, someone who we know, who has been kind. There's no need to be perfect. Just remember their kindness.

See them now in a form that is radiant, where their kind aspect is amplified so clear to you.

Like a beautiful stream of light coming from their heart, their kindness comes to you and enters your heart gently, and you feel your whole body filled with the kindness of this person, the memories of the little things, the big things that they have done for you, perhaps as a child, as an adult, whatever it might be. You feel completely filled with their kindness, and a sense of gratitude arises with the kindness that they have given you.

And now see this person in difficulty. Perhaps you imagine them as old and frail, as somehow not able to care for themselves, needing your help. They might even be crying out with distress, and feel how immediately in your heart is the spontaneous urge to help, to do something to relieve their suffering. This is compassion.

Now bring to mind that neutral person again. Surely they have been kind to someone somewhere, maybe just as kind as the one you have been thinking of, and recognize that they, too, from their own side, wish to be happy, to be free from suffering. They too might cry out in pain. What if you were the one to whom they were kind? What if you were the one who would receive their kindness? Can you see yourself as the one receiving their kindness? See if you can put them in your shoes and you in theirs, needing help. Again, that spontaneous sense *I must do something* arises, and this is compassion.

Now turn to the challenging person. Surely they, too, sometimes, somewhere, have been kind to some being, maybe just their pet, whatever it might be. They too wish to be free from suffering and to be happy and. They too might cry out in pain and need help. Can you imagine being the one who received their kindness, just for a moment? Can you push yourself in their shoes, needing help, not finding any. Do you feel that spontaneous sense? *I must do something*. This is compassion/

Now, returning to the kind person and that strong sense of kindness from them, and the kindness you give to them when they need your help, see if you can allow that sense of compassion to radiate from your heart outward to those nearby, to those in the country, on the earth, beyond the earth, the whole universe, pervading everything with compassion, ready to help, ready to free others, all others, from suffering,

With that sense of compassion now filling you, filling the universe, drop all of the visualizations, and then just let your mind settle.

I invite you to explore these practices until we meet next time. Thank you.

This transcript has been edited for clarity.