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Loving-Kindness and Compassion



ALL DHARMA AGREES AT ONE POINT. All the teachings and all the practices are about just one thing: if the way that we protect ourselves is strong, then suffering is really strong too. If the ego or the cocoon starts getting lighter, then suffering is lighter as well. Ego is like a really fat person trying to get through a very narrow door. If there's lots of ego, then we're always getting squeezed and poked and irritated by everything that comes along. When something comes along that doesn't squeeze and poke and irritate us, we grasp it for dear life and want it to last forever. Then we suffer more as a result of holding on to ourselves.

One might think that we're talking about ego as enemy, about ego as original sin. But this is a very different approach, a much softer approach. Rather than original *sin*, there's original *soft spot*. The messy stuff that we see in ourselves and that we perceive in the world as violence and cruelty and fear is not the result of some basic badness but of the fact that we have such a tender, vulnerable, warm heart of bodhichitta, which we instinctively protect so that nothing will touch it.

This is a life-affirming view; it starts from the point of basic goodness or basic good heart. The problem is that we continually grab the wrong end of the stick. All practice agrees that there's some fundamental pattern that we have in which we're always trying

to avoid the unpleasantness and grasp the pleasantness. There seems to be a need to change the fundamental pattern of always protecting against anything touching our soft spot. Tonglen practice is about changing the basic pattern.

Earlier, I referred to ego as being a room where you just tried to get everything on your own terms. To get out of that room, you don't drive up in a big machine and smash the whole thing to pieces. Rather, at your own speed, starting where you are, you begin to open the door and the windows. It's a very gentle approach, one that acknowledges that you *can* gradually begin to open that door. You can also shut it as often as you need to—not with the desire to stay comfortable but with the intention ultimately to gather more courage, more sense of humor, more basic curiosity about how to open that door, until you just leave it open and invite all sentient beings as your guests, until you feel at home with no agenda and with groundlessness.

The main thing about this practice and about all practice—all dharmas agree at one point—is that you're the only one who knows what is opening and what is closing down; you're the only one who knows. The next slogan, "Of the two witnesses, hold the principal one," is saying that one witness is everybody else giving you their feedback and opinions (which is worth listening to; there's some truth in what people say), but the principal witness is yourself. You're the only one who knows when you're opening and when you're closing. You're the only one who knows when you're using things to protect yourself and keep your ego together and when you're opening and letting things fall apart, letting the world come as it is—working with it rather than struggling against it. You're the only one who knows.

There's a later slogan that says, "Don't make gods into demons." What it means is that you can take something good—tonglen practice and the lojong teachings, for example (that's the idea of "gods")—and turn it into a demon. You can just use anything to close your windows and doors.

You could do tonglen as one of my students once described to

me. He said, "I do it, but I am very careful about the control button; I breathe in just enough so that it doesn't really hurt or penetrate, and I breathe out just enough to convince myself, you know, that I'm doing the practice. But basically, nothing ever changes." He was using tonglen just to smooth everything out and feel good. You can also use tonglen to feel like a hero: you're just breathing in and out all over the place but your motivation isn't to befriend and begin to penetrate those areas of yourself that you fear or reject. In fact, you hope the practice will just bolster your sense of confidence, bolster your sense of being in the right place at the right time, having chosen the right religion, and "I'm on the side of the good and all's right with the world." That doesn't help much. Maybe you've noticed that sometimes you feel like you're in a battle with reality and reality is always winning.

All of the teachings, and particularly the lojong teachings, are encouraging us, if we find ourselves struggling, to let that be a moment where we pause and wonder and begin to breathe in, trying to feel what's underneath the struggle. If we find ourselves complaining, it isn't that we have to say, "Oh, I'm bad because I'm struggling." It's not that it's a sin to complain. We're simply saying that the way to change the pattern is to begin to breathe in and connect with the heart, the soft spot that's under all that protecting.

Karma is a difficult subject, but one of the reasons you are encouraged to work with what happens to you rather than blame it on others is that what happens is somehow a karmic result of things that you have done before. This kind of teaching on karma can easily be misunderstood. People get into a heavy-duty sin and guilt trip, feeling that if things are going wrong, that means they did something bad and they're being punished. That's not the idea at all. The idea of karma is that you continually get the teachings that you need in order to open your heart. To the degree that you didn't understand in the past how to stop protecting your soft spot, how to stop armoring your heart, you're given this gift of teachings in the form of your life, to give you everything you need to learn how to open further.

I saw a cartoon that describes this. A head of iceberg lettuce is sitting in a garden saying, "Oh, no, how did I get in this vegetable garden again? I wanted to be a wildflower!" The caption reads, "Oscar is born again as a head of iceberg lettuce in order to overcome his fear of being eaten." One can think from a bigger perspective than this whole notion of reward and punishment. You could see your life as an adult education course. Some of the curriculum you like and some you don't like; some of what comes up you find workable, some you don't. That's the curriculum for attaining enlightenment. The question is, how do you work with it?

When you begin to touch your heart or let your heart be touched, you begin to discover that it's bottomless, that it doesn't have any resolution, that this heart is huge, vast, and limitless. You begin to discover how much warmth and gentleness is there, as well as how much space. Your world seems less solid, more roomy and spacious. The burden lightens. In the beginning it might feel like sadness or a shaky feeling, accompanied by a lot of fear, but your willingness to feel the fear, to make fear your companion, is growing. You're willing to get to know yourself at this deep level. After awhile this same feeling begins to turn into a longing to raze all the walls, a longing to be fully human and to live in your world without always having to shut down and close off when certain things come along. It begins to turn into a longing to be there for your friends when they're in trouble, to be of real help to this poor, aching planet. Curiously enough, along with this longing and this sadness and this tenderness, there's an immense sense of well-being, unconditional well-being, which doesn't have anything to do with pleasant or unpleasant, good or bad, hope or fear, disgrace or fame. It's something that simply comes to you when you feel that you can keep your heart open.