Bodhicitta: Compassion and Emptiness

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:06:27

From one perspective, we can say that a far-reaching aspect of our practice comes down to the awareness and purification of our motivation. In Western culture, we often measure the success of our actions only by their results. But the Dalai Lama suggested a different standard, saying that the true value of an action is measured not only by its success or failure, but also by the motivation behind it. Because it's the motivation behind our actions that most completely conditions our own hearts and minds. So what seeds are we planting within ourselves with each action that we take? It's clear that we can't always control the outcome of our actions, but we do have the power to train our own hearts.

Within the Buddha's teachings, there is one motivation that is so skillful and so ennobling of our lives that it can become the reference point for our entire life's journey. And this motivation is called bodhicitta, translated as the heart-mind of wisdom. What it means is the deep aspiration to awaken from the habits of ignorance in order to benefit all beings. Although our practice will inevitably help everyone else, including this aspiration in our very motivation to practice can really bring a very rich and heartfelt energy to everything we do.

I'd just like to read a couple of things expressing this aspiration of bodhicitta. This is from the Dalai Lama: "Speaking of my own experience, I sometimes wonder why a lot of people like me. When I think about it, I cannot find in myself any specially good quality except for one small thing. That is the kind heart, which I try to explain to others and which I do my best to develop myself. Of course, there are moments when I do get angry, but in the depth of my heart, I do not hold a grudge against anyone. I cannot pretend that I am able to practice bodhicitta, but it does give me tremendous inspiration. Deep inside me, I realize how valuable and beneficial it is."

So we may have a different assessment of the Dalai Lama's capacity to practice it, but he is expressing just the supreme value of cultivating this quality of the kind heart, or the wish to awaken for the benefit of all.

And from the Pali Canon, the Buddha's teaching—this was his exhortation to the first sixty monks who had become fully enlightened, who had become Arhants. This was his directive. He said, "Go forth, O Bhikkhus, for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, benefit and happiness of people and devas. Let not two go by one way. Teach the Dhamma, excellent in the beginning, excellent in the middle, excellent in the end. Proclaim the noble life altogether perfect and pure. Work for the good of others, you who have done your duty."

So tonight, I'd like to speak about bodhicitta. In classical teachings, we can understand the meaning and practice of bodhicitta on two levels. On the relative level, bodhicitta means compassion. And on the more

ultimate level, bodhicitta refers to emptiness or emptiness of self. It is said that when these two are present—the relative and the more ultimate level, compassion and emptiness—when these two are present, enlightenment is unavoidable.

Given this guarantee of enlightenment, it seems worthwhile to explore both of these aspects of bodhicitta: the relative aspect of compassion, the more ultimate level of emptiness, how we can actually apply them and practice them in our lives, and how the two levels relate to one another.

Relative bodhicitta, or compassion, manifests in the world of beings, of separate individuals. Compassion is that feeling and wish to alleviate the suffering of beings in whatever way we can. Compassion opens our hearts to the suffering that is there and overcomes the tendency we may have of indifference or apathy or inaction. It's the feeling of compassion that actually moves us to act. But as the Dalai Lama said, compassion and love are precious things in life. They are not complicated.

They are simple, but difficult to practice.

I found that quite interesting—why such beautiful and ennobling qualities are so difficult to practice. That's one of the things I'd like to address today.

Compassion arises out of our willingness to come close to suffering, both in ourselves and in others. The problem is that even though we may want to be compassionate, and perhaps very often are, it's not always easy to open to the suffering that is present. Just as there are many times in our own lives when we don't want to acknowledge or open to the suffering in ourselves, to our own pain, we don't always want to open to the pain of others. There are strong tendencies within us, strong tendencies in the mind, that in the face of suffering, in the face of pain, can keep us defended or withdrawn or indifferent or apathetic. And this indifference is the often unacknowledged barrier to a compassionate response.

As an experiment, watch your mind and your reactions the next time you approach a situation of suffering. It might be some pain in the body, some painful emotion—feelings of discontent, fear, unworthiness, jealousy, loneliness. It might be an interaction with a difficult person, or it might be a situation of suffering in the world: natural disasters, political or religious violence, racial injustice and oppression. What happens when we face these situations, either in person or through the vivid image of the media? It would be helpful to watch our own reactions as we come in close contact with all of these different situations of suffering that confront us. What happens when we face them? Do we feel uneasy? Do we withdraw? Do we turn away? Do we let them in?

I'd like to share a story that was told by a friend of mine quite a few years ago. He was telling the story of his grandfather and his father driving in a car on December 7th, 1941—Pearl Harbor Day. They're driving in the car, listening to the radio, and the news of the attack on Pearl Harbor comes on. The first thing his grandfather says to his father is, "Don't tell your mother."

World War II would be a hard situation to keep out. And yet I like that story because it reflects some deep

tendency we may have to avoid suffering, not to come close to it, not to be willing to open to it.

I could see all of these different tendencies at play in the commitment that we undertook, starting many years ago, to train ourselves in undoing racism as it manifests in our society, as it was manifesting in our institutions, in the centers, in our own personal lives. For me, one of the most striking aspects of engaging this work was seeing how easy it was, as a white person in this society, to have the awareness of racial injustice—among many other kinds of injustices—and to see how easy it was for that awareness to slip onto the back burner of our consciousness. If something doesn't touch us personally and with immediacy, it can be so easy to ignore.

It's not enough to admire the qualities of love and compassion from afar, or as simply being a meditative exercise somehow removed from our daily lives. As Thich Nhat Hanh said, compassion is a verb—meaning it implies that we take action in the face of awareness of suffering.

The question for all of us is how to keep our hearts open, given the magnitude of suffering that exists in the world. Is it even possible to keep our hearts open, given the immensity and extent of the suffering that is there?

This challenge is not a theoretical one. Our practice is about the transformation of our consciousness that increasingly makes compassionate responsiveness the default setting of our lives. That's really the challenge for us as we undertake this practice.

Compassion requires openness. It requires interest. It requires equanimity. It's learning to let things in, letting in the experiences of suffering without drowning in the difficulties, without being overcome by sorrow. It's really learning how to be with the truth of things just as they are.

This is the great gift of mindfulness to compassion. It's what we're doing every time in our practice when we can open to our own pain and difficulties—pain in the body, difficult emotions, some interpersonal difficulty. Can we be mindful? And mindfulness in this context means letting it in, letting it in without reactivity, without defensiveness. As we practice opening and coming close to the suffering in ourselves, we then have greater strength and courage to be with the suffering of others.

I'd like to read something from a Zen teacher named Lou Richmond. Quite a few years ago, he suffered from a very serious disease, viral encephalitis, which is a devastating and often fatal illness. He was in a coma for two weeks with brain damage and other disabilities, and it took three or four years to heal. After he recovered, this is what he wrote about his understanding of some fundamental aspects of the Buddhist teachings:

"Sometimes when I'm asked to describe the Buddhist teaching, I say this: everything is connected, nothing lasts, you are not alone."

This is really just a restatement of the traditional three marks of existence: non-self, impermanence, and

suffering.

I don't think I would have expressed the truth of suffering as "you are not alone" before my illness. But now I find that talking about it that way gets at something important. The fact that we all suffer means we are all in the same boat, and that's what allows us to feel compassion.

I found that very inspiring because it reminds us that we can relate our own experience of suffering and feel compassion for that same suffering as it manifests in others.

The beginning of compassion is empathy. This happens when we take a moment to stop and feel what is going on with another person, another being, or with ourselves, before rushing on with our lives. This stopping is its own practice, because many times we may be cognizant of another's pain but don't really take the time, even for a few moments, to truly open to it, to understand it in ourselves. Empathy is the heart-mind of inclusion. It takes others in.

This was expressed beautifully by the Zen master poet Hermit Ryokan, who lived at the end of the eighteenth century. For those of you who may know about Ryokan, he was this amazing and beautiful monk who lived in the mountains of Japan, very poor, with almost no possessions at all. He would just wander around, often playing with the village children. There's a book of his poetry that beautifully expresses his humanity.

This was one of his short little poems, and it really expresses this feeling of empathy, this feeling of inclusion. He wrote: "Oh, that my monk's robes were wide enough to gather up all the people in this floating world." I love that image. Oh, that my monk's robes were wide enough to gather up all the people in this floating world—as an expression of that care and compassion for all beings.

With a touch of humor, he also described the same feeling of compassion for inanimate objects. He wrote: "I've forgotten my begging bowl, but no one would steal it. How sad for my begging bowl." You can just imagine—he had this old beat-up begging bowl, forgot it, but no one would steal it. How sad for my begging bowl. It's such a warm, heartful expression of care for all beings, all things.

We can practice developing empathy in all different kinds of situations. It might be opening to the difficulties and suffering of someone very close to us, or it might be opening to the difficulties and suffering of different situations in the world. In these very polarized times, when we're with people we find difficult, it might be helpful to ask the question: Why do others feel the way they do? Rather than hold on just to our own reactivity.

There was a sixteenth-century Zen master called Bankei who wrote a wonderful book called *The Unborn*. There's one line in the book that really jumped out at me, which I've tried to remember in my interactions, particularly in situations of conflict. What he wrote was: "Don't side with yourself."

That's a good reminder, because mostly we go through our lives very much siding with ourselves. We're

not always open to really hear, to really listen to other points of view, to feel empathy for people we might find difficult, who hold very different views.

Sometimes there are situations where people really are behaving badly and causing a great deal of harm, either to ourselves or to others. Then it becomes interesting to watch what our own reaction or response is to that. Do we get angry as we're seeing people do really harmful things? Do we judge how they are, perhaps feeling almost a kind of self-righteousness in our anger? But is it possible to stop and feel what is going on in a larger context of understanding, even in very extreme circumstances?

I want to talk a little about Dr. Tenzin Choedrak, who was the personal physician to the Dalai Lama. He was imprisoned and tortured by the Chinese government for seventeen years. When he was finally released and came to live in India with His Holiness, describing what he went through, he shared what made it possible for him to survive—not only physically in that extreme situation, but also with a heart that remained open and compassionate, not closing down in fear and hatred. It's a pretty extraordinary accomplishment.

These are a few of the things he said. He said he saw his tormentors, his enemies, as human beings like himself—that his guards were people who were also in adverse situations, conditions, creating the unwholesome karma for themselves that would result in their own future intense suffering. He never forgot the commonality of our human condition, understanding that all of our actions have consequences, have karmic consequences, bringing their own karmic results.

What's so interesting is that Dr. Choedrak held this understanding not as a vehicle of revenge—"Oh, with karma, they'll get theirs"—but rather as a vehicle of compassion. It is possible to reframe or enlarge the context of our understanding of what's going on. This is how we begin to open to the possibility of keeping our heart open—hopefully not in such intense situations as he described, but even in the more ordinary challenging circumstances of our lives.

It's important to understand also that when it's possible, we do need to take appropriate actions when people are doing harmful things. It is possible for us to set appropriate boundaries, to redress injustices.

Compassion doesn't mean that we don't respond in an effective way to the causes of suffering in our lives. But again, what's happening in our own hearts as we do that? Can we keep that sense of openness?

I'm sure most of you know of Ram Dass and his guru Neem Karoli Baba, often called Maharaji. Much of his teaching was about love—the book of his teachings was called *The Miracle of Love*. And he had a very pointed instruction in how to blend effective action with maintaining that feeling of open-hearted compassion. He said, "Do what needs to be done, but don't throw anyone out of your heart."

It's such a pithy expression of what we can strive for. Even as we're engaged in responding to the suffering in the world, can we practice—and it is practice; we're not going to be perfect in this—can we practice doing what needs to be done without throwing anyone out of our hearts? The great lesson here is that how

we respond is up to us. Nobody is making us respond in a particular way. This is where we have agency in our lives.

Empathy brings us close to suffering—that willingness to come close. Compassion takes us a step further. It's not only feeling what others are going through; it's also being motivated to act on those feelings. As compassion grows within us, as we develop that capacity, we begin to actively engage with the suffering in the world, responding to the various needs of beings in whatever way is appropriate, in whatever way is possible. Sometimes it may be in very small, unregarded ways—maybe just a small gesture of friendliness, or forgiveness, or generosity. Really simple things.

Again from the Dalai Lama: "I try to treat whoever I meet as an old friend. This gives me a genuine feeling of happiness. It is the practice of compassion." Imagine for a moment if we really undertook this as a practice—trying to treat everyone we meet as an old friend. What a beautiful way to go through life.

We shouldn't overlook these opportunities or underestimate their effect. There is an understanding in science called chaos theory. I'm not a scientist, so this will be a very simple explanation. A technical description of chaos theory says "sensitive dependence on initial conditions." What that means is that a very small change in input in a system can often result in very large differences over time. Many of you are probably familiar with the famous example known as the butterfly effect: how a hurricane formation can be contingent on a butterfly flapping its wings three weeks before. It's a very striking image—a butterfly flapping its wings sets in motion a series of cause and effect that several weeks later could result in a hurricane.

There's a powerful lesson in this for us. Some years ago I saw a film documentary called *A Small Act* which beautifully illustrates this principle. In the mid-1970s, a Swedish schoolteacher named Hilda Back was making a small monthly donation to help children from poor families in Kenya continue with their education. One of the recipients of her small monthly gift was a young boy named Chris Mburu. Because of that financial help, he was able to continue his education. He eventually went on to the University of Nairobi, then received a Fulbright scholarship to Harvard University, where he graduated in 1973 with a master's degree in international human rights. He went back to Kenya and eight years later set up his own foundation, helping very bright young students who were unable to continue their education due to poverty.

This is an amazing story. The butterfly flapping its wings—a small monthly donation from a schoolteacher in Sweden set in motion a series of cause and effect which resulted in the transformation of hundreds, maybe thousands of people's lives, opening up entirely new possibilities in their unfolding life experience.

We don't want to overlook or minimize the importance of these small acts of kindness, these small acts of compassion, because they often bring results that we have no idea of—how they will manifest, what magnitude can come from a butterfly flapping its wings. For me, this has become a strong motivation: remembering not to miss or pass on acting on these opportunities, these possibilities.

Sometimes compassion manifests as acts of great courage. There are so many examples of people motivated by far-ranging visions of justice, of peace, of freedom. Harriet Tubman during the Civil War, helping slaves escape through the Underground Railroad. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks, Gandhi—these are people who acted based on their compassionate concern for the suffering of others.

And we see it today with many young people really answering this urge to help. Many of you may know of the Pakistani young woman, Malala, who has become an advocate for women's rights and women's education in Pakistan. Or Greta Thunberg, who has done such remarkable work in trying to awaken us to the devastating consequences of climate change. These are young people who are acting out Thich Nhat Hanh's understanding that compassion is a verb. We have this feeling, this motivation to help, and then we actually do something.

Sometimes compassion, as I said, manifests in small, unregarded ways—a small monthly act of generosity. Sometimes it manifests in very courageous ways. And sometimes it just shows itself quite spontaneously in a single moment.

There are two stories that exemplify this. Many years ago, there was a man named Wesley Autrey, who became known as the subway hero. He was standing on a subway platform in New York when someone fell onto the tracks and a train was coming. In that moment, without hesitation, he jumped onto the tracks and laid down over her as the train passed over both of them. Extraordinary.

Afterward, there was a lot of press about this. This is what he said about that spontaneous act of compassion: "I don't feel like I did something spectacular. I just saw someone who needed help. I did what I felt was right. I do construction work in confined spaces a lot, so I looked and my judgment was pretty right. The train did have enough room for me." All of this unfolded in a split second, motivated by that spontaneous urge of compassion, the wish to help.

There's another example that has also really inspired me, and this is about Dr. Paul Farmer. He was a public health worker who did tremendous work with AIDS and TB and many other public health crises around the world. There's a wonderful book about his life called *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. In it, there's a little anecdote about his having set up a clinic in Haiti. Lots of people would come to the clinic for help. At one point, he took off to walk for two days to help two families in a very remote village. Many of his colleagues questioned that decision. He spent all this time going off to help just these two families when so many people were coming to the clinic. They were overwhelmed by how many people needed care. Was that the right thing to do?

This was his response, and it really touches my heart: "If you say that a seven-hour walk is too long to walk for two families of patients, you're saying that their lives matter less than some others. And the idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that's wrong in the world."

That is such a beautiful and poignant assessment of all that's wrong in the world—thinking that some people's lives matter less than others. In this practice of compassion, we begin to expand our capacity. The Brahma Viharas, as you probably know, are called the boundless states. Can we at least be working towards, practicing with the aspiration, that our compassion become as boundless as possible? Cultivating responsiveness to suffering, however it might manifest in our world.

The lesson from all of these examples is that we don't have to be saints or special beings to act with compassion. A small monthly donation ended up helping transform the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. There's no particular prescription for what we should do. There's no hierarchy of compassionate action, because the field of compassion is limitless.

It's the field of suffering beings. And we each find our own way. Depending on our interests, depending on our capabilities and capacities, there is no hierarchy where one kind of compassion is better than another. As I said, we each find the way that's appropriate for ourselves to develop and cultivate this quality.

It could take the form of active engagement with the suffering in the world. Or it could take the form of sitting in a mountain cave with the aspiration to awaken for the benefit of all. If you think of the Bodhisattva—the Buddha in his previous lives before awakening—there were countless past lives when he was living as a solitary monk, probably sitting in the forest or in a cave by himself, before the energy of his enlightened compassion could flower in the world.

I can just imagine his family during all those previous lives when he would go off and simply be by himself cultivating that quality. I can imagine them saying, "You're just wasting your time, you're just thinking about yourself." And yet 2,600 years later, we are still benefiting from the work that he did—his amazing awakened heart, awakened mind. So we don't want to take too narrow a slice of time to measure the value of our actions. And again, going back to what I said in the beginning, the value should really be measured by the quality of our motivation.

The Bodhisattva's aspiration and the Buddha's manifestation was not just to alleviate the suffering of a particular situation, but to understand the very root causes of suffering—the forces of greed, of hatred, of delusion in the mind, in our minds—and how to free ourselves from them. And as I said, thousands of years later, we are still benefiting from the power of his wisdom, from the power of his compassion. I find that so extraordinary.

So we need to walk on this path with a great deal of humility. Again, from His Holiness the Dalai Lama: "Changes in attitudes never come easily. The development of love and compassion is a wide, round curve that can be negotiated only slowly."

We need to be careful not to have unrealistic expectations when we begin our practice and get inspired by these possibilities, and then judge ourselves if we are not perfect in the manifestation of them—which we certainly will not be. We need the understanding that these changes of attitude never come easily, that the

development of these qualities is a wide round curve that can be negotiated only slowly.

Another expression of realistic and appropriate humility comes from the Japanese poet Issa, who himself had endured so much suffering in his life. His haikus are wonderful—so full of humanity and warmth and compassion. This particular one I really love and find very appropriate:

New Year's Day.
Everything's in blossom.
I feel about average.

Yes, I feel about average. Can we acknowledge that and live in the space where we actually are, while still walking this path, inspired by the possibility of what we can cultivate and develop?

I've talked a lot about relative bodhichitta, which is compassion and compassionate action in the world. I want to say just a few words about the more ultimate bodhichitta, which goes beyond the notions of self and other, beyond any sense of separation. Because ultimate bodhichitta is the free, open nature of the mind itself. It's the experience of emptiness—emptiness of self.

There's a wonderful Tibetan teacher named Dzigar Kongtrul who said, "The experience of emptiness is not found outside the world of ordinary appearance, as many people mistakenly assume." Emptiness—a word we hear commonly in Buddhist teachings—is not some mystical far-off state. It's not found outside the world of ordinary appearance. In truth, we experience emptiness when the mind is free of grasping at anything. The mind free of clinging. That's within ourselves. That's within our own capacity to practice. And that's what our practice, in fact, is about.

One of the great turning points in my own practice was hearing these teachings of relative and ultimate bodhichitta—of compassion and emptiness—and realizing that compassion and emptiness of self are not two different things. They're not two separate things. In the union of these two, relative and ultimate bodhichitta, which is the nature of our own heart-mind, compassion is the activity of emptiness.

When I heard that and realized it, it was almost like a revelation. It was understanding that yes, the freer we are from attachment to the view of self, the more that freedom manifests as compassionate responsiveness. That is the activity of this understanding.

So this is compassion not as a stance of the ego. It's not a question of being a particular meditation practice that we do. Rather, it's the heart and mind that is free of self-reference. And of course, that's what our Vipassana practice is about.

The more we practice the selfless compassion of bodhicitta, the more easily we recognize the mind's empty nature. And this is how the two relate to one another. The more we practice compassion, the more we realize and experience selflessness as we engage in that responsiveness. And the more we recognize the empty, selfless nature of this whole mind-body process, the more compassionate and responsive we

become.

Understanding the union of these two practices—emptiness of self and compassion—and seeing that their union is one, I found this tremendously energizing for my practice of both.

I'd like to close with a teaching that very succinctly expresses this understanding. It was a teaching by one of the great Tibetan masters of the last century, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He said, "When you recognize the empty, selfless nature of phenomena, when you recognize the empty, selfless nature of this mind-body process, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless."

Compassion is the activity of emptiness. When we recognize that selfless nature of this mind-body process, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless.

This is the great work that we are all engaged in.

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