

Outline for Class 8 Compassion Meditation

By Darrell Peters

Introduction

Normally, when we experience afflictive emotions, we tend to see them as solid, real, and part of our identity. But the teachings of the Buddha tell us that our confusion and suffering is only temporary and illusory. The teachings say that if we look within, we will discover our innate compassion and wisdom, which we can manifest in order to benefit ourselves and all beings.

The method we use to look within is meditation practice. In the introductory meditation class taught here at 10 a.m. on Sundays, we receive instruction in tranquility meditation, which is called *shinay* in Tibetan and *shamata* in Sanskrit. In tranquility meditation, we mentally follow the breath as it moves in and out of the body, and when our mind wanders, we gently bring it back to the breath. As we practice over time, we find that our mind becomes more calm, clear, open, and precise. We're able to perceive things more accurately and deal with situations more effectively.

However, simply because we've achieved some calm and stability through our practice of *shinay* meditation doesn't mean we've achieved complete enlightenment, which is our goal as practitioners on the Buddhist path. In spite of our partial progress, we still have neurotic thoughts and afflictive emotions, which are temporarily calmed, but not permanently uprooted by *shinay* meditation. We are still preoccupied by self-clinging, and we forget about the needs of others. Even when we remember to think of others and want to benefit them, our ability to do so is severely limited.

For this reason, once our mind has become calm and stable through the practice of *shinay* meditation, we continue our development by working with practices that help us develop loving-kindness and compassion. Loving-kindness is said to be the wish for the happiness of others, and compassion is defined as the desire to relieve the suffering of others. Together, these qualities are considered the foundation of enlightened mind, because they remove ego-clinging and the barriers that separate us from others.

One example of a practice we use to develop loving-kindness and compassion is the meditation on Chenrezig, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, which is practiced here on Tuesdays at 7 p.m. and on some Sundays at 11:30 a.m.

Another example of a practice we use to develop loving-kindness and compassion is the subject of this morning's discussion. This is a compassion meditation called *tonglen* in Tibetan, which means "sending and receiving." *Tonglen* reverses the normal logic of the ego. Normally, we divide the world into ourselves versus everyone else, and by definition, our needs are more important than everyone else's. If we disagree with someone, we think we're right and they're wrong. In a world of good things and bad things, we want the good things for ourselves, and the bad things for someone else. In general, we're

wrapped up in self-grasping, which the Buddha identified as the root of all our confusion and suffering. But with tonglen meditation, we methodically turn this situation around.

Instructions in the Practice

As with shinay meditation, the practice of tonglen involves mentally following the breath as it moves in and out of the body.

To do this practice, first we sit in meditation posture and take a few moments to center the mind and follow the breath. Then we bring to mind someone who is very dear to us, someone for whom it is very easy to generate feelings of love and compassion, who is suffering and needs help. This could be a spouse, a parent, a grandparent, a sibling, a dear friend, a pet, or ourselves. We imagine this person in front of us.

As we inhale, we imagine all the suffering and bad karma of the person as thick, heavy, black smoke, which we take away from them and draw into our own body through the medium of our breath, and we do this with the conviction that we are taking all of this suffering and bad karma for ourselves. This is called training the mind in compassion.

When we exhale, we visualize all of our happiness, well-being, and good karma as rays of white light, which go out to the person we are visualizing. As these light rays touch our loved one, this person is relieved of all present suffering, and is given relative happiness and the causes of ultimate happiness, or buddhahood. This is called training the mind in love.

Once we've generated a strong sense of love and compassion for someone who is dear to us, we expand our visualization to include people we are less attached to, and finally, we include people we dislike, and those toward whom we feel active malice. The idea is that we expand our visualization so that we imagine taking on the suffering and bad karma of all beings, everywhere, and giving them all of our happiness and good karma.

We can see why this practice is called "sending and receiving." We imagine that we're sending happiness and well-being to others, and that we're receiving all of their suffering. But we're not actually sending or receiving anything. This practice is not a practice of energy transfer or exchange, such as in Reiki healing. It's an exercise of the imagination, in which we use the imagination to train the mind in loving-kindness and compassion.

Guided Practice Session

Let's take five minutes to do some guided compassion meditation together.

First, sit in meditation posture, and take a moment to place the mind on the breath.

Now, bring to mind a loved one who is suffering and needs help, and visualize this person in front of you. Exhale, and imagine all of your happiness, well-being, and good karma as rays of white light, which go out to your loved one. As these light rays touch this person, he or she is relieved of all suffering. Inhale, and imagine all the suffering and bad karma of your loved one as thick, heavy, black smoke, which you breathe into your body. Do this with the conviction that you are taking all of the suffering and bad karma of this person for yourself.

Next, expand your visualization to include all sentient beings throughout space. Exhale and imagine all of your happiness going out to all beings. Inhale and imagine you are drawing in all of their suffering.

Questions?

Practice off of the Cushion

The practice we just described is a formal meditation practice that we do on the cushion, but tonglen can also be done off the cushion, in our daily life. We tend to have very busy, demanding lives, and as a result, many people may feel they don't have the time and energy to do formal meditation practice. But we can do the practice of tonglen in any place and at any time, no matter what we're doing. We don't necessarily have to be seated, use a visualization, or follow our breath when we do the practice during our regular daily activities. For example, if someone insults us, and we find ourselves becoming angry, we can simply make the aspiration that the anger we're feeling contains all of the anger of suffering beings everywhere, and we form the conviction that we are taking on their anger and suffering and giving them all of our happiness. We can also visualize breathing in our own anger and that of all sentient beings, and breathing out happiness and well-being. So the practice gives us a practical way of taking any circumstance in our daily life, no matter what it is, and bringing it onto the path of dharma, turning it into a practice situation.

Results of Compassion Meditation

Some people who are new to compassion meditation worry that this practice might make them lose their happiness and suffer more. However, we don't need to worry about this, because the good and bad things that happen to us are actually the result of our good and bad karma. If we think about it, because we are increasing our positive thoughts and aspirations during compassion meditation, the practice will actually increase our merit or positive karma, which will produce good results.

Some people practice compassion meditation with high expectations, thinking that their practice will, for example, heal a loved one who is sick. When this doesn't happen, the result can be disillusionment with the practice. But this reaction is based on a misunderstanding, because the point of the meditation is not to create more hope and fear within ourselves, which is simply adding to our self-clinging. Instead, we want to loosen and let go of our self-clinging and generate more concern for others.

For most of us, whenever we do anything new, the experience can feel false and unnatural, and we may feel this way when we begin practicing compassion meditation. But if we practice compassion meditation with sincerity, our aspiration to benefit others will gradually become more genuine. Over time, we will manifest the positive qualities that are part of our enlightened potential, our own Buddha Nature. We will present a more open, friendly, and responsible face to the world, and our ability to handle painful situations and to help others in appropriate ways will increase. Ultimately, compassion meditation provides us with a practical way of generating, developing, and manifesting *bodhicitta*, which is a Sanskrit word that means “the mind of awakening.”

Recommended Reading

The Great Path of Awakening, translated by Ken McLeod
Start Where You Are, by Pema Chodron

Handout

“A Method for Practicing Tong Len,” by Lama Kathy Wesley