

Opening The Injured Heart - Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche

*The way to live with joy in a painful world
is not by shutting down or closing off
—just the opposite.*

I'd like to talk to you about a profound quality that we all have: the innate tenderness of our own heart, or tsewa in Tibetan. When it is warm with tenderness and affection toward others, our own heart can give us the most pure and profound happiness that exists and enable us to radiate that happiness to others. That happiness is right here within us. It is not something on the outside for which we need to search and strive. We don't need to get several university degrees, work hard, and save up a lot of money to buy it. We don't need special opportunities or amazing luck. We only need this heart, which is right here within us, accessible at all times.

This may sound too simple—even simplistic. If happiness is so accessible, then why are so many of us unhappy? And if we do experience periods of happiness, why is our happiness so unreliable and difficult to maintain? The reason is that although this joyous, warm heart is part of our nature, most of the time its glow is hidden from us.

One of the most common impediments to tsewa is holding a grudge. If someone has caused you pain, it's challenging to keep your heart open to that person. Even worse, a grudge against one person or a few people can turn into a much bigger form of resentment, such as prejudice toward an entire group of people or animosity toward the entire human race. It's not uncommon for a few experiences of being hurt to block all flow of tenderness from a person's inherently warm heart.

If you shut down your heart because of past injuries, life becomes a painful ordeal. Even if you

hold a grudge against just one person, anytime you think of them or recall the time you were hurt, you will suffer. Since you have no control over when these thoughts will arise in your mind, you will always be susceptible to sudden pain. And if you resent many people, whole groups of people, or humanity at large, you will be that much more susceptible. There is no peace in such an existence, no matter how good your life may look from the outside.

To let go of our grudges, we must understand that we are not stuck with them. We have two choices. The habitual option is to keep holding on—to keep depriving ourselves of the oxygen of tsewa. The other way is to make whatever effort it takes to let go and thereby restore the naturally exuberant flow of love to our heart. We may believe we're protecting our heart by shutting it down, but that is a confused way of thinking. Trying to protect ourselves in this way ends up being what harms us the most. There is a classic analogy: If an arrow wounds you, you can blame the one who shot the arrow for your injury. But if you then take that arrow and grind it deeper and deeper into your wound, that is your own doing.

The past is important, but not as important as the present and the future. The past has already been lived. It doesn't have to be relived. To sacrifice the present and the future by reliving past injuries is not the way of the sages. When we find ourselves caught in a grudge, we should notice how we are perpetuating the past. Something has happened, and we have put together a whole story around it that we repeat to ourselves over and over like a broken record. And we tend to be so stubborn about these stories: "This is what happened, and there's no other way of looking at it." In this way, we continue to grind the arrow into the wound. Our mind and heart are frozen around this issue. How can we breathe our oxygen of tsewa in such a state?

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Closing our heart because of a grudge doesn't harm only ourselves. Our negativity affects the people around us, such as our family and friends and those who depend on us. It makes it harder for them to be close to us, to feel relaxed in our presence. Though we may not act out with physical and mental abuse, our internal unhappy state distresses others, especially our children, who can perceive us in a less conceptual, more energetic way. On the other hand, overcoming our resentments and fully reclaiming our innate tsewa—our birthright to feel love and tenderness toward all—brings tremendous benefit to others. In the present, those around us feel our warmth, which in turn induces their own tsewa to flow. And in the long term, our tender heart is the seed of realizing our full potential to benefit others by attaining enlightenment.

Some grudges are easy to overcome, but with others, it may seem almost impossible to let go. Perhaps someone has let us down again and again. Perhaps someone we were kind to has hurt us badly. Perhaps someone has been cruel to us and shown no remorse. But whoever these individuals are and whatever they did, we have to keep in mind the bigger picture of what's at stake: our wish-fulfilling jewel of tsewa. Sometimes it takes a lot of work to overcome resentment, but we are capable of doing that work as long as we are motivated. And we will be motivated as long as we understand there's no good alternative.

Keeping your heart closed toward others who have hurt you is the natural result of perpetuating your negative story lines. It can seem like a satisfying way of repaying the injury. Perhaps unconsciously, you are thinking, "This person did this to me, so I'm going to get him back by maintaining a cold grudge in my heart." Maybe your negative thoughts will make your enemy suffer. Maybe he will even come to you and beg for forgiveness on his knees! But even if your "best-case scenario" miraculously occurs, will it restore the mental and emotional balance you've lost while depriving yourself of tsewa? Will it bring you the peace and joy you long for every

moment of your existence? Or will you have just caused yourself a lot of extra suffering that continues to disturb you like a hangover? And if the improbable desired outcome of your story never happens, how long are you willing to keep grinding the arrow into your wound?

These are questions you must ask yourself in your darkest hour, sincerely and objectively. Being objective will require you to step aside from your emotions and prejudices and look at the bigger picture. If you have observed the glories of the tender heart in your own experience, how does the possibility of fulfilling your story line compare? How does it compare to watering the seed of tsewa and watching it grow and grow until you realize your potential to become a buddha? Would you really prefer to collapse into your small, contracted self and its relatively minor concerns? Would you like that to be the dominant habit of your mind and heart?

If we ask ourselves these questions, we will inevitably conclude that keeping our heart closed is an unproductive way of working with our stories. A more intelligent way is to put the story in a bigger context. What is the one fact about every sentient being that never changes? It is our constant wish to be happy and free from suffering. The infinite differences in how we appear and how we behave are all temporary because they come from temporary conditions. Almost all of these conditions are beyond our control. They are based on other temporary conditions, which are based on more conditions, and so on. But underneath this limitless display of interdependence, we are all the same. No one is permanently one way or another—good or bad, right or wrong, for us or against us. When we hold a grudge, however, we see everything through the lens of that resentment. We see other beings, who are equal to us at the core, as intrinsically selfish, inconsiderate, or just plain bad. They can even appear to us as permanent enemies.

Right now we may be having a lot of turmoil around one particular person. If so, we should ask ourselves, "Has it always been this way with them? If not, then what has changed? Have they

really changed at the core? Or is it that temporary conditions have changed? Will it always be this way in the future, or does that also depend on temporary conditions?”

We will quickly realize that people and our relationships with them are always changing. There is no malevolent, unchanging person who has always been and will always be against us. So if the conditions are responsible for what has gone wrong, does it make sense to hold on to blame? The object of our grudge is, in fact, quite innocent, like a child. He or she only wants to be happy and free from suffering but unfortunately sabotages these desires out of ignorance. If we were under the same conditions, we would be acting in the same confused way. In fact, we ourselves, though we may be well educated in the dharma, also can't help harming others from time to time because of our own conditions. No sentient being is exempt from wrongdoing. But no one is intrinsically bad either. This is how we can understand things when we're not blinded by our resentment.

If our aim is enlightenment—or at least some form of spiritual growth—then any time we are hurt, we can view it as an opportunity. Now we have a chance to look at things in a different way, which is based on wisdom. We can choose not to see the story with ourselves in the role of intrinsic victim and the other person in the role of intrinsic culprit. Both of us have the wish-fulfilling jewel of the tender heart, which gives us the potential to attain the ultimate state of happiness. But both of us, perhaps to different degrees, have let our jewel go to waste because of our ignorance. Either we haven't recognized our tsewa, we haven't appreciated it, or we've failed to take advantage of it because we continually get swept away by our habits. So far, our impediments have gotten the best of us. That is why we keep hurting one another. But now that we've encountered the Buddha's wisdom and skillful means, we can finally learn to open our heart to all, including those who have hurt us in this life. As we gain confidence in the power of our tsewa, we can even hold a special place in our heart for the former objects of our grudges. We can be grateful that they have helped to open our eyes to the cyclic nature of suffering and motivated us to expand our mind and try a different approach.

And if they are continuing to hurt others out of the suffering of a closed heart, we can feel compassion for them. In this way, the pain we have gone through can be transformed from an impediment into a warm rain that nourishes our precious seed of tsewa.

To be continued next week. Part Two.