

Uplifted Heart of Practice | Four

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.

-Antoine de Saint Exupéry (1900-1944)

Excellence of the Heart

- Pema Chodren

When I was about six years old I received the essential bodhichitta teaching from an old woman sitting in the sun. I was walking by her house one day feeling lonely, unloved and mad, kicking anything I could find. Laughing, she said to me, "Little girl, don't you go letting life harden your heart."

Right there, I received this pith instruction: we can let the circumstances of our lives harden us so that we become increasingly resentful and afraid, or we can let them soften us and make us kinder and more open to what scares us. We always have this choice.

If we were to ask the Buddha, "What is bodhichitta?" he might tell us that this word is easier to understand than to translate. He might encourage us to seek out ways to find its meaning in our own lives. He might tantalize us by adding that it is only bodhichitta that heals, that bodhichitta is capable of transforming the hardest of hearts and the most prejudiced and fearful minds.

Chitta means "mind" and also "heart" or "attitude." Bodhi means "awake," "enlightened," or "completely open." Sometimes the completely open heart and mind of bodhichitta is called the soft spot, a place as vulnerable and tender as an open wound. It is equated, in part, with our ability to love.

Practice of Loving-Kindness (Metta)

- Commentary by Nanamoli Thera

Metta (loving-kindness) is defined as follows: "Loving-kindness has the mode of friendliness for its characteristic. Its natural function is to promote friendliness. It is manifested as the disappearance of ill-will. Its footing is seeing with kindness. When it succeeds it eliminates ill-will. When it fails it degenerates into selfish affectionate desire."

The word "love" — one of the most compelling in the English language — is commonly used for purposes so widely separated, so gross and so rarefied, as to render it sometimes nearly meaningless. Yet rightly understood, love is the indispensable and essential foundation no less for the growth and purification of the individual as for the construction of a peaceful, progressive and healthy society.

Now love can be considered in two principal moods: that of lovers for each other, and that of a mother for her child. In its spiritualised form, love can draw its inspiration from either the one or the other. Spiritual love idealizing the love of lovers is often conceived as a consuming flame, and then it sometimes aspires to purification through torture and the violence of martyrdom. But spiritual love that looks for guidance to the love of a mother for her child uplifts itself to the ideal of the pure fount of all safety, welfare and spiritual health (and a mother best serves her child if she guards her own health). It is this latter kind which the Buddha takes as the basis for his teaching of universal love.

Where Greek distinguishes between sensual eros and spiritual agape English makes do with only the one word "love." But the Pali language, like the Sanskrit, has many words covering many shades of meaning. The word chosen by the Buddha for this teaching is metta from mitta, a friend (or better "the true friend in need").

Metta in the Buddha's teaching finds its place as the first of four kinds of contemplation designed to develop a sound pacific relationship to other living beings. The four are: metta, which will be rendered henceforward by "loving-kindness," karuna, which is "compassion" or "pity," mudita which is "gladness at others' success," and upekkha, which is "onlooking equanimity." These four are called Divine Abidings (brahma-vihara), perhaps because whoever can maintain any one of them in being for even a moment has lived for that moment as do the Highest Gods (the Brahma Deva).

In the Buddha's teaching these four Divine Abidings, the "greatest of all worldly merit," if practiced alone, without insight into the true nature of existence, can

lead to rebirth in the highest heavens. But all heavenly existence is without exception impermanent, and at the end of the heavenly life-span — no matter how long it may last — the being dies and is reborn according to his past actions. This is because some craving for existence (for being or even for non-being) and some sort of view of existence that is not in conformity with truth still remain latent in him, to burst out again when the result of the good actions is spent. And where he will be reborn after that is unpredictable though it is certain that he will be reborn.

The Buddha's teaching of Insight is — in as few words as possible — the training in knowledge and seeing of how it is that anything, whatever it may be whether objective or subjective, comes to be; how it acquires existence only through dependence on conditions, and is impermanent because none of the conditions for its existence is permanent; and how existence, always complex and impermanent, is never safe from pain, and is in need of a self — the will-o'-the-wisp idea, the rainbow mirage, which lures it on, and which it can never find; for the comforting illusion has constantly to be renewed. And that teaching also shows how there is a true way out from fear of pain. In its concise form this is expressed as the Four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering, the truth of suffering's origin (craving or need), the truth of suffering's cessation (through abandonment of craving), and the truth of the way leading to suffering's cessation. These four truths are called the teaching peculiar to Buddhas (Buddhanam samukkamsika-desana) since the discovery of them is what distinguishes Buddhas.

The way (the fourth Truth) is also called the Middle Way because it avoids the two extremes of sensual indulgence and of self-mortification. It's eight members are: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. The practice of loving-kindness alone will give effect in some measure to all the members except the first: but it is only with right view (without self-deception) that Nibbana can be reached. Right View gives insight into the real nature of existence of being and non-being, with all its mirages and deceptions, and it is only with its help that the practice of loving-kindness is perfected, lifted out of the impermanence of even the highest heavens, and directed to the true cessation of suffering. That true cessation comes with the elimination of deception by wrong views and with the exhaustion of the stream of craving in its two forms of lust and hate. This extinction of lust, hate and delusion, is called Nibbana or Nirvana.*

* Literally "blowing out" or "quenching".

In the Buddhist tradition, Nirvana has commonly been interpreted

as the extinction of the "three fires", or "three poisons", obsession, aversion, ignorance. When these fires are extinguished, release from the cycle of rebirth is attained.

Nirvana has also been deemed in Buddhism to be identical with anatta (non-self) and sunyata (emptiness) states. Over time, with the development of Buddhist doctrine, other interpretations were given, such as the absence of the weaving of activity of the mind.

Dharmapada

- Buddha

Seeing creatures flopping around,
Like fish in water too shallow,
So hostile to one another!
— Seeing this, I became afraid.

This world completely lacks essence;
It trembles in all directions.
I longed to find myself a place
Unscathed — but I could not see it.

Seeing people locked in conflict,
I became completely distraught.
But then I discerned here a thorn
— Hard to see — lodged deep in the heart.

It's only when pierced by this thorn
That one runs in all directions.
So if that thorn is taken out —
one does not run, and settles down.

Who here has crossed over desires,
the world's bond, so hard to get past,
he does not grieve, she does not mourn.
His stream is cut, she's all unbound.

What went before — let go of that!
All that's to come — have none of it!
Don't hold on to what's in between,
And you'll wander fully at peace.

For whom there is no "I-making"
All throughout the body and mind,
And who grieves not for what is not
Is undefeated in the world.