

Turning the Stream of Compassion Within

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When I first heard Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett speak, the words that resonated with me most were, "Buddhist training begins with compassion for the self." At the time, I really had no understanding what these words meant. Being critical of myself was a central aspect of my personality. I saw this trait as a virtue being very aware of my faults would keep me grounded and real, and that it would be impossible to make spiritual progress unless I recognized what I needed to change. What I didn't realize was that being aware of how I need to improve my behavior did not mean I should be critical and upset with myself. My problem was I had no understanding of what it meant to be nonjudgmental.

Cultivating a nonjudgmental way of looking at things is the key to opening our hearts to real compassion. But how does one go about this? What should I do when I see that something is wrong? How should I approach it? What exactly is the compassionate mind rather than the hard judgmental mind?

In the years since I first heard Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett speak those words, I have since learned that the mind of meditation is to see problems and failures without judgment. Not judging others but also not judging myself. If I make a mess of something, or if I am lazy or angry or proud, I am breaking the **Buddhist Precepts**. However, being aware of this does not mean I have to judge and criticize myself. There is not something fundamentally wrong with me; there is only a problem with my behavior. And here lies a subtle but important point: There is a vital difference between being aware of the harmful nature of certain patterns of thought and behavior, and having harsh judgment of oneself.

It is an inescapable aspect of reality that everyone is imperfect everyone is making mistakes and having difficulty in one way or another. I can always look at myself and see ways that I can do better. Yet if I begin criticizing myself, being angry with myself, or

despairing with myself, it's very important to recognize that in doing so I am taking refuge in my deluded view of who I am instead of taking refuge in the Buddha. "Do not criticize but accept everything," is Great Master Dogen's teaching in the Kyojukaimon. In her commentary on that teaching, Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett wrote:

Each expresses the Truth in his own way as do all things; they do that which they do in their way and express the Lord within it. Do not criticize the way of another, do not call it into question; look within it and see the Lord. Look with the mind of a Buddha and you will see the heart of a Buddha.¹

It is essential that we apply this teaching not just to our views of others, but to ourselves as well. I need to look at my imperfect self with the mind of a Buddha so that I can realize that this seemingly flawed heart of mine is the heart of a Buddha. If I am waiting for the day when I will see myself without flaws, I will never see my Buddha Heart. Looking back at my years of Buddhist training, I can only smile when I realize it took me many years to recognize that when I criticize myself, I am breaking the Precepts in the same way as when I criticize someone else.

Compassion is really just the opening our hearts to suffering without allowing our judgments to get in the way. If someone is suffering and we judge them, this closes our hearts and fills our mind with harsh opinions. Compassion does not mean we do not see the mistakes others make; it means we have sympathy and understanding for their difficulties, knowing we are not really different from them. We are all born and live in this human realm in which ignorance and delusion strongly influences our lives.

When I see myself making a mistake, I need to take refuge in the Dharma and do whatever action will result in good rather than more suffering. It is easy to get stuck dwelling on our unenlightened actions of the past. The absurdity of this is that we can easily stay stuck, dwelling on wrong actions while losing awareness of what the right action should be in the present situation. Faith in Buddhism is having faith in the fact that although the stream of karma that has

brought us to this present moment has both good and bad within it, all we need to do is what is good in the deepest sense in the present situation. Just doing this is enough, moment by moment, day by day, year by year, life by life, to bring ourselves and all sentient beings to Buddhahood.

Key to attaining this perspective is to see all our wrong actions everyone's wrong actions as just normal karma that needs help. When someone is making a mess of their life or someone else's life, I can choose to get upset and judgmental or realize that their actions are the result of normal and understandable human karma, and then do whatever I can to help. And Buddhist training is just giving the most help we can within the limits of our situation. I always find that it is much easier to be upset with and judgmental about someone else's mistakes when I only focus on their seemingly wrong behavior. Yet if I gain a deeper understanding of the person, I find that the quick condemnation often dissolves, and sympathy and compassion arises.

When I look back on my years of Buddhist training, I can see how mistaken it was to be so upset with my own weaknesses. Once I gained a deeper understanding of my own karma, I saw how very difficult it was to let go of some of my desires and fears. Years of meditation has opened my heart and mind to recognizing how difficult it is for all of us to go through this human life, how hard it is to undergo this Buddhist training, and how difficult it is to take responsibility for our karma. Normal human karma makes it easy to indulge in blaming something, someone, or ourselves for our suffering, to live in a fog of ignorance. Instead, what we need to focus on is helping the karma that is causing the suffering. Offering that help to ourselves and others is the very ground of Buddhist training.

For example, if my house is a mess, I can be filled with judgments about myself or others who may be the source of the mess. That is how our judgmental mind approaches situations that it does not like. Training is about noticing that our mind is filling with judgments, but then letting go of them, and focusing on what we need to do in the moment. When I face a dirty room, I need to not judge why this

room is dirty. Instead, I just need to clean the room. This is the work of a Buddha.

In the same way, it does not matter why my heart is not pure; it is the work of a Buddha to do whatever will help to cleanse my heart. Instead of being upset or angry my impure heart, I need to understand that this is what spiritual life is all about doing the hard work of purifying my heart. I need to offer help to all the lost karma that is looking the wrong way for happiness. Rather than be upset with whom I seem to be, I need to awaken the desire to help my heart to turn to the Buddha.

The judgmental mind comes from a fear of whom we seem to be and fear of what this suffering world seems to be. The mind of meditation is the mind that is open and nonjudgmental. We trust ourselves because we trust that nothing in our karma stands against the truth that our real heart is the Buddha Heart. We trust that nothing can hurt our real heart no matter how the karma of our life unfolds. And we trust that the real life of the world and everything within, despite appearances, is the life of Buddha. When we see mistakes and the resulting suffering, we do not judge, but instead keep our hearts open and have compassion. All beings are just trying to be happy. Everyone confronts the same basic darkness, which is the darkness that emanates from feeling as though our deepest desires are not going to be fulfilled.

Turning the stream of compassion within is letting go of our opinions and desires so that the same compassion that fills the universe can also be experienced filling our hearts and our lives. Although it seems utterly impossible to believe, we are dreaming we are suffering, dreaming harsh judgments of ourselves and others, and dreaming we are lonely and separate beings. The life of Buddha is the all-embracing life of compassion. That compassion flows through everything, washing away all impurity, and allowing everything to find its true place in the great Mandala of the Buddhas.

¹Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett, *Serene Reflection Meditation*, (Mt, Shasta CA; Shasta Abbey Press, 1996), p. 83.