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recognizing experience (even attachment and aversion) as it occurs, compassion for self, about taking Bodhisattva Vow including using 4 Immeasurables as preparation

Student 1 [00:00:41] I just got back from spending time with a very dear friend and about halfway through our time together, it became very uncomfortable for both of us due to a reaction on my part to a request for space that I didn't want to recognize. And I've been reviewing sort of the time we spent together. And I acted very selfishly without even recognizing it. And I'd like to know what I can do with selfish behavior when I do not recognize the behavior to be selfish?

LMC [00:01:54] Could you state your question again? And if possible, um, slightly change it?

Student 1 [00:02:09] I recognized selfish behavior in myself *after* the actions. And that really scares me. Because it's pretty difficult to deal with selfish behavior when it's not even seen as selfish behavior. And... I guess I'm wondering if there's any way to work with that other than just kind of practicing recognition. And, it's really difficult for me to recognize my behavior as self-serving in the moment because I'm a very emotional person. And when all that kicks in, I tend to... act without... self-reflection. And I'd like to find a way to work with that, uh, *in* that moment, even without the recognition.

LMC [00:03:59] Well, first of all, I think your question is clear. And just generally speaking, one of the most difficult things to do... is to recognize our motivation as it transpires. Like, that's really... very difficult. And when we recognize it, and see that it's not something that we wanted to do... that also is very difficult to recognize. And difficult to do something about. So in one way, we could say, that the most profound thing that you *can* do... in relationship to any mental state as it comes and goes, is to just recognize it. The recognition itself... can be the antidote.

[00:05:20] Often when the recognition comes... and you may or may not have experienced this, but it sounds like you might have... that you see the motivation or the action. And then you have kind of an aversion reaction to it. You don't want it. You don't want to do it. ... So what makes it difficult is... not entirely that we... have experiences, like emotional experiences, that we don't... appreciate in ourselves. So what makes it difficult is the attachment and the aversion. That's the big piece.

[00:06:09] So recognizing the action itself as it occurs is very helpful. But then, when we pass judgment on ourselves, not so helpful. And the farther we go in that direction... of the various ways in which we can chastise ourselves, the more difficult it is to unwind it. At some point, it becomes almost impossible to unwind it. And at that point, I think the best thing that we can do is... that's the point in which we recognize the attachment and the aversion. And when we recognize the attachment and the aversion, then... if our awareness is stable, we can just put the awareness on the attachment or the aversion. And just leave it at that.

[00:07:10] So in recognizing the attachment and the aversion, we actually are right on the edge of some kind of insight, which maybe is even fairly regular. To recognize those things as they occur is very difficult. They normally go by. We kind of see them in the proverbial rearview mirror. And, *or* we don't recognize them at all. It's helpful to recognize them. In one way, we often say that... the great majority of the path is about recognition. And in a really *big* way, we often say that the high realization is fundamentally recognizing the nature of mind itself.

[00:08:10] So it doesn't say recognizing and then do this or then do that. It's just the recognition itself is what's key. Any experience that you have, whether you might judge it as a positive or negative... in the moment of having the experience... to be able to just relax a little bit and place the awareness on that experience is very helpful. It sets an example for ourselves and it also can set an example for others. We can't entirely avoid... what we would like to avoid. Which is... the occasional things that we do that harm ourselves and others, hopefully in small ways. But we can avoid... some of the spin off, some of the things that come with those experiences. By developing the ability and the habit, if you will, using that word carefully, that we develop the habit of placing our awareness on our experiences as they occur. Relaxing and just letting the experience go by. But we've *seen* it. So if we can just then let it go and not elaborate it and make it into something else... that's pretty good. ... What do you think?

Student 1 [00:10:03] What would you say to someone who is very habituated to self-chastisement, to the spinning afterwards, who can spend days, weeks even on that?

LMC [00:10:17] Yeah. Not so good. We have a certain cultural... appreciation of exactly what you're talking about. And even in some circles, that appreciation goes to the level of... there's something wrong with you, if you don't feel really bad about it. ... But the antidote to the issue that we're talking about is not embedded in the *actual* experience of this... judging ourselves for something we've done, whatever it is. It's really embedded in the *lack* of recognition. We don't recognize it. Having not recognized it, it's kind of like a puddle of water that you step in. You know, if you look carefully, for just a moment, probably tomorrow you won't step in that puddle of water. But if you don't see what it is, you're almost sure tomorrow to be condemned to step in the puddle of water again. So this is, in a certain way, the same thing.

[00:11:47] A little story maybe is helpful. Reminded of it partly because of Bill talking about how we were going to look at the Mahamudra Program. When Bokar Rinpoche originally set up that program... and he announced the practices that people would do in order to continue and benefit from that program... he asked everyone to do a certain number of repetitions of certain practices. Which were, in a sense, not particularly difficult to do. But the *number* of them that was expected was difficult. And so each year then, as part of that program, you were meant to do certain number of these practices. And in the first summer following the India trip... and Bokar Rinpoche's instructions about which, you know, everyone was excited to get instructions from him and all, and so everybody marches out with the full intention of doing these practices.

[00:13:29] And then in the summer, not very many of those people came to the summer classes. And when we asked why... they'd come and they'd say, I almost didn't come. And in some cases, we ask them, like, so how many of these recitations did you do? They were supposed to do something like 10,000. And some of the people who said, I almost didn't come, and I feel like I'm not worthy of being here for this. And then you find out that actually they did like 9,000 of the 10,000 or even more than that. And yet they fundamentally condemned themselves to not participating in the program because they hadn't made the *full* commitment. When Bokar Rinpoche heard of this, he wept. And immediately decided we needed to change something so that would not be the outcome. Since that wasn't the intended outcome. Not only was it not the intended outcome, it was not helpful for people to feel like they were not worthy of being in the program. And so there were all of these cascading cultural interfaces, really. And little by little, things changed and so that it was possible to accommodate certain things individually and collectively.

[00:15:15] The issue that you raise is so common. It's so regular. ... No one gets through this life feeling like... I conducted my life in a way which was utterly without harm... in the principle of ahimsa. It's like, it doesn't happen. It's a really rare person who would say, I had a life which was utterly absent of harm to others. Most of us would say, if you *think* you did that, you probably didn't look very close. [laughter] We find ways to condemn ourselves. We actually don't need a judge. We are the judge. We're the actor. And we are the jailer, the whole thing. So recognizing that mechanism is actually just incredibly helpful.

[00:16:25] When the Tibetans didn't accomplish the total number that they had committed to, a kind of a wonderful lesson came about. So if they committed to ten thousand, let's say, and they did only 5,000, the Westerner felt like they utterly failed. Not in every case, but generally speaking, they felt like they had utterly failed. The Tibetans felt like they had completely succeeded. And when asked, how come you feel so good about having only gone half way? The answer was, if I hadn't made the commitment, I never would have done that many! So it's actually funny. But in another way, it's not funny. It is something to laugh at, but only because... the difference here was not intention, ability or anything other than... our own expectation placed upon ourselves. And then *failing* to meet the demands that we set for ourselves. Even though it was at the suggestion of the great lama, still, because we beat ourselves up, he wept. And altered the program to some degree. But I still think it actually probably needs even more altering. Because we're still having that problem to some degree.

[00:18:05] And what you're raising is really just kind of in that genre, you know. You wish that you could benefit others more than we can. We wish that we would never witness, in any way at all, that we would hurt another person in any way. But that's not the way things work, generally speaking. So the first person to forgive is ourselves. The first person to generate an act of kindness for is ourselves. And we could say if we can't generate kindness and forgiveness for ourselves, just exactly how big of a chance do we think we have of doing it for someone else? So it's critical to be able to generate kindness and forgiveness for yourself and *continue*. Not to give up.

Student 1 [00:18:58] Thank you. Thank you.

Student 2 [00:22:26] So, on the same lines, I'm aware that in my work, I work from a part of myself that is compassionate toward other people. And I find that to be pretty easy. But I'm also aware, increasingly, that there's this other part of me that has absolutely no compassion for me. And that it's a barrier in my work. It's a barrier in my practice. And so I'm wondering is noticing that... an antidote for that? Is noticing it, the antidote? And relatedly, when we think about taking the Bodhisattva Vow, how can I not take a Bodhisattva Vow with a sense of martyrdom? Like, I'm going to sacrifice myself in some way because I don't really matter, you know, for the sake of all. Which is just old, you know, it's Christian stuff and it's old stuff. But I'm aware that... that's a possibility for me. That I'd go into a Bodhisattva Vow and say, I'll throw myself away for the sake of others. No problem! And I don't think that that's correct, you know. So it's the same topic, you know, that you've been talking about. But I'm wondering, *is* noticing that... is that the antidote for it? Noticing that really hard kind of lack of compassion for myself.

LMC [00:24:20] What's your experience? ... I mean, is it helpful to notice?

Student 2 [00:24:32] I think it can be in the moment helpful, but then it fades away. And I'll just kind of habitually continue on, you know, in that same manner towards myself.

LMC [00:24:46] When it fades, can you reinvigorate it?

Student 2 [00:24:51] Can I reinvigorate the... problem? [laughter] Yeah! Oh, yes.

LMC [00:25:08] So I think that there's at least one clear thing to understand. And that is that when we recognize something... that's not the problem. Let's start there. ... Are you saying okay, or... ?

Student 2 [00:25:28] I'm thinking about that.

LMC [00:25:30] Thinking about it? That's probably the problem. [laughter]

Student 2 [00:25:38] So the recognizing is not the problem. I get that.

LMC [00:25:41] Recognizing that it is not the problem. Recognizing it is, at the very worst case, recognizing it is the beginning of understanding it. And the deeper the understanding goes, the more that we could say that... the problem is not there. The understanding is there. But the understanding... often, we kind of *demand* that it have a significant conceptual component. I want to understand it at the level that I understand other things, and that's pretty rare that *that* works. So when we say, recognize... the experience is what we're really recognizing, right?

[00:26:32] Whether the experience is a sense of success or failures, in a certain way irrelevant. First the question is, can I recognize it? Can I just see it? And seeing it, can I just put my awareness on it? Like, recall the face of somebody that you that you really care about, or the face of your spiritual mentor, or your mother or father, whatever it is. Can you just see the face and put your awareness on it without any judgment one way or the other? And just be present with it? And if the face is of someone, for example, who generally, when you see them, it inspires a certain kind of strong emotional thing, whether it's positive or negative, I think is not relevant. And then you just put your awareness on that until it vanishes. And little by little see... like what's happening there?

[00:27:34] So I have the recognition. I see it's my mother's face. It's my friend's face. It's my spiritual mentor's face, whatever it is. And I have some kind of internal experience when I see the face. And the question really isn't whether I see the face clearly... or whether the face feels like it's dangerous, or I just have a bad feeling, or a good feeling... it's really about what do I *do* with that experience now that it's in front of me? Can I just *have* the experience? It's like when we're talking about compassion for ourselves, can I just have that experience? Can I look at myself, in my own mind's eye, and just... at a time when I feel like... what I need is some kindness. And so I generate it for myself. And then I look and I see the kindness. Can I just *have* it and not do something with it to make it less or more or anything, just to have it?

Your kindness is as good as anybody's. [00:28:56] So there's no need to judge it as less or more or anything. It's just what it is. But I think generally speaking, we could say... there is no one, no sentient being, who does not deserve kindness and compassion. No such thing, no matter what they've done, they deserve to be out of that trap. And we deserve it also. Because if they're not out of it, we're not out of it. Which is part of how we get the Bodhisattva Vow, to focus in as many ways as possible on the benefit of others. Because when they're not out of it, we also are not out of it. We continually victimize ourselves. ... Does it make sense?

Student 2 [00:29:54] It also work the other way. If we're not out of it, they're not out of it.

LMC [00:29:59] Yeah, to some degree at least, you know, it's a way of speaking. It's not a mathematical truism of some kind, but it's a way of speaking. People, in the broader sense, I think most of us could agree that... when I see someone who routinely hurts others, even with the *intention* to hurt them and that they're *happy* about hurting them, the more that those things are true, the more I see their pain. That is not a cause of happiness. So generally speaking, what do we do? We judge them. We hold them in judgment. Maybe, even worst case, we wish worst things on them than they visited on others. So we just basically fall into that trap even further and further. So the whole point of the Bodhisattva Vow is to give rise to a sense of universality. Like, my pain is everybody's pain and vice versa. I deserve to be free of it, not just because *I* deserve to be free of it, but they deserve to be free of it. And furthermore, the degree to which I and they are *not* free of it, we all suffer from it. This is just the extension of the classic statement that all things, without exception, are interdependent.

[00:31:32] All experiences arise interdependently, continuously all the time. So obviously... kindness and compassion and misery and happiness are not going to be the exception. They're the classic rule. ... We can test it. So I think that's also worthy. In the Dharma, great teachers always say... you need to test this. Try it. See what happens there. And if it doesn't work, then investigate to see whether or not we're doing it correctly. Is there something could be modified a little bit? And if it just *never* works, then it's time to throw it out. ... If you test that a little bit, and then later, if you want, we could pursue it some more.

Student 3 [00:33:12] I'm wondering if you have any advice on kind of gauging readiness to take the Bodhisattva Vow, or any contemplations to prepare for that if we were to want to pursue it?

LMC [00:33:39] There's a lot of things that one can do to prepare for it. There are also like fairly extensive rituals that one can use to prepare to take the vow. And yet it's clear that virtually no ritual is actually *required*. Notwithstanding that some teachers who would give the vow would require it. And it's probably helpful for some people. There is a teaching... so if we were to prepare, we might do something like... if you're a runner and you need to enter a long run, maybe a marathon or something, what you might do is, you might go into the mountains and run in the mountains. Right? And so that when you got used to running in the mountains, you come down to sea level where the marathon is and you will be more prepared. So this analogy will not work for the Bodhisattva Vow, since it is not a race. But it has some parallels here.

[00:35:18] So the preparation for the vow could be... in putting some time into what we call the Four Immeasurables. So the Four Immeasurables provide us with an opportunity to kind of... practice an heroic concern for others. And the Four Immeasurables then present themselves as... immeasurable... because of immeasurable sentient beings. So we always say, it's utterly impossible to count sentient beings. So when we engage in the Four Immeasurables, which are loving kindness and compassion for them and a sense that we would like to free them of the causes of suffering and liberate them through giving them the means to free themselves from some of the causes of suffering. And the big thing is, is that we make these wishes for *all* sentient beings, not just for some. Not just for our friends, but for all sentient beings.

[00:36:51] And the *base* of that teaching and practice is the practice of equanimity. Just in case we don't get it... equanimity is really the essence of working with all beings. And wishing, mentally working with all of them, and wishing for all of them, without exception, that they might be free of the causes of suffering and experience the causes of happiness. And by so doing, become skillful at benefiting others in the same way. So sometimes we mistake this with the

immeasurable compassion. Meaning that the *compassion* is immeasurable. But it doesn't really refer to that, though there's nothing wrong with that. But it refers to immeasurable sentient beings. Who suffer, fundamentally, at their own hands.

[00:37:50] So engaging in those four Immeasurables, of which there are many, many texts that explain them, there is a wonderful one by Alan Wallace, but I don't remember the title. What is it? 'Boundless Heart' is a good one. Yeah. So you can look in those texts and see about the Four Immeasurables and work with them. Try, experiment with them. Like, what would it feel like if I *actually* felt unbounded compassion for even just one being? What if there was one person? And you could start with someone that you really cared a lot about. And then just because, you know where this whole thing's going, you might then think of someone that you really *don't* care about. Someone that you really have a bad attitude about. Someone who you maybe inadvertently, or intentionally, wished that they would be harmed. And so then you go to that person, call them up. Think of them in front of you and engage in the practice of loving kindness and compassion. So that would be a method for preparing for the Bodhisattva Vow. One of many different ones. We will not do an extremely elaborate Bodhisattva Vow. So I think anyone who wants to come to it is welcome to come.

Student 3 [00:43:03] Part of my question was kind of directed at the conversation we've been having earlier today. Does the aspiration itself, whether you meet that aspiration... to the fullest fidelity possible, or not, does the benefit of the vow itself... you know, is it worth taking, even if you even only meet a fraction of that scope, you know? And I guess, knowing only a little bit about what some vows carry, a commitment that it's kind of a big deal to break, you know... so where it falls on the scale of that? And I guess you kind of answered my question already, but that was where my mind was at.

LMC [00:43:50] Were you scared?

Student 3 [00:43:55] Was I scared? Or am I scared? No, I guess I would be a little bit. Where I'm at now with it is a little bit hesitant. And feeling like I need a little more preparation. So I feel like that's kind of where I'm still at, even after this conversation.

Student 4 [00:44:34] Michael, what would you say to somebody, in this case myself, uh, but probably others too, if just days before going to the Bodhisattva Vow, that you were feeling really angry and it was going on. And it wasn't going away. And no matter what practice you did, it wasn't going away. It occupied your total being. Would you tell that person to go to the Bodhisattva Vow or not?

LMC [00:45:10] Riddles. Pondering the various responses that I've heard from... everyone from Kalu Rinpoche... people had gone to him when he was going to give Bodhisattva Vow asked the same kind of question. ... The responses have been really varied. And I think that it's really not easy to say, in the absence of an actual person saying that I'm concerned about this and that and all, I can easily imagine suggesting... yeah, maybe you shouldn't take the vow. Oh yeah, sure. ... I can easily imagine a situation where you would suggest that somebody wasn't, you know, really ready to take a vow. And it could be, for example, that they had harmed people. And they enjoyed harming people and intended to harm more people and so on. You could easily paint a picture of somebody who probably exists, because I always think if you can imagine somebody, they're out there somewhere. And so, certain circumstances could lead you to say, I don't think that's a good idea to take it.

[00:47:06] Especially with the attitude of... it doesn't matter. Since you're about to take this vow, which many great teachers have said, is really of extraordinary significance in one's path. And so you want to actually feel a sense of appreciation for getting the vow. And think of its preciousness and work with it from that perspective. And so if somebody came and said, I don't know that I can *keep* all the vows. But I but I really want to take it because I look at you and you seem to have it. And so it makes me happy to see it. I think it'll make me happy to have it. I would find that difficult to say, don't take the vow.

[00:47:57] And there's always this thing that we have, that is really in a certain way *peculiar* to our culture, which is that we set standards for ourselves that are often impossible to reach. And then we flagellate ourselves for not having reached it. Not even looking to realize that, hey, you're the one who set it up! You know, no one made that for you. You didn't find it in a book, you just made it.

[00:48:30] In other words, the criteria, the standard of being a good bodhisattva is... I mean, you can find texts that also describe all of that in precise terms. Personally, I think that those things, in their great precision, are *more* often... I wouldn't say always, but more often not helpful... in that form. Just because, especially if the individual who's taking the vow has a proclivity to set a high standard. They're setting a high standard for something they haven't done before and they don't realize just exactly how difficult it is to maintain that vow. In fact, I think that I've even heard... some great teachers say, it's impossible. You can *not* succeed 100 percent. So that should be a kind of, not a warning against doing it, but a warning against thinking that if you don't succeed, there is something wrong with you.

Student 4 [00:49:48] For me, I know that the anger in my life is just one of those things that comes up. I work with it and it dissolves. But that does not mean that I get it in the instant. You know, sometimes I have to work a couple of days, or a couple of weeks, on the anger. Religiously, every single day, focusing on that anger. Trying not to blame myself. Trying to blame the other person. Trying to accept the blame, *all* of it. And that was one of my habitual tendencies, you know, not a good one, particularly. So maybe I'm just... maybe I should just take it.

LMC [00:50:38] You've already taken the vow. It's too late for you. [laughter]

Student 4 [00:50:48] Well I was going to renew the vow.

LMC [00:50:52] Yeah. Well see, there's the great antidote that's built into the vow. Which is... what's called, renewing the vow.

Student 4 [00:51:04] That's what I was going to do.

LMC [00:51:06] Well, do it! You renew the vow. You do your best. You recognize the shortcomings when they occur. You need to also recognize the *good* things. It's another little thing we kind of have in our culture. Like if I don't get it perfect, I'm bad. There's something not right. Yeah.

sangha [00:52:30] *dedicating the merit*