

MINDFULNESS FOR MENTAL HEALTH: OVERCOMING DISTORTED THOUGHTS

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The Four Immeasurables and Cultivating a Global Perspective in the Modern World: Challenges and Opportunities

Tibetan Buddhism offers a comprehensive vision of human development. From this optimistic perspective, each of us has the potentiality to fully develop and manifest positive human qualities, such as wisdom, compassion and love etc. Moreover, not only can each of us develop these capacities, and these qualities themselves are “immeasurable” and “boundless.”

According to Mahayana Buddhism, the ideal in terms of human development is the “Bodhisattva,” an individual who devotes her or his life to being of benefit to others, and who has fully developed the human capacity of Wisdom, thus experiencing reality directly and accurately.

An important part of the Bodhisattva Path is the development of the Four Boundless States.

These are:

- ◆ **Lovingkindness** (maitri) is a heartfelt yearning that others experience happiness and the causes of happiness.
- ◆ **Compassion** (karuna) is the foundation of the Bodhisattva Path. Compassion is the heartfelt yearning that others experience freedom from suffering and the causes of suffering.
- ◆ **Sympathetic/Empathetic Joy** (mudita) is the heartfelt rejoicing in the happiness, good fortune and virtue of others.
- ◆ **Equanimity/Impartiality** (Upeksha) is an attitude of evenness, both toward our own experiences, and toward others. There is absence of neither attachment toward those whom are “near” nor aversion towards those who are “distant/far.”

Each of these “four immeasurable” is an innate quality that each possesses. They are part of our birthright as humans, or more generally, as “sentient beings.” In fact, not only do we have them, but we also have the capacity to develop them boundlessly. On one level, this refers to the depth of these qualities. They can be developed beyond our wildest imaginations. Even more importantly, boundlessness refers to their scope. For the Bodhisattva, these qualities are developed toward everyone. All psychological and attitudinal barriers are broken down, and everyone (both human and non-human.” is perceived affectionately and equally deserving of unconditional love:

“May all beings have happiness and its causes.

May all beings always be free of pain and its causes.

May all beings always be pain free and live happily.

May all beings ever cling to those near nor spurn those far.”

Thus, these for “boundless states” are both innate and also qualities that can be trained and cultivated. For their full expression, training is most likely required. Luckily, our minds are trainable. In a sense, psychological processes are a result of habituation. We become habituated to experiencing the world in particular ways.... And these habits are difficult to shift. But, as the current term “neuroplasticity” emphasizes, our experiences are malleable and changeable. We all have experience with developing new habits, both “positive” and “negative.”

Many of the habits that we have developed are in terms of relationships to others. Others are continually categorized and labeled, and these labels determine our responses to others. For instance, if a loved one is suffering we may experience compassion. But, if an enemy or outcast is suffering, we may experience enjoyment or disgust. If a loved one experiences success or good fortune, we may rejoice, but to another, the response may be envy or resentment. In a nutshell, our responses to others are biased.

Through the cultivation of the four immeasurable, ingrained biases are gradually undone. But, how is done and is this applicable to those of us in the modern world? We explore these questions and these qualities more fully in this presentation, examining the cultivation process and its relevance and application to modern life.

Tibetan Sequential Compassion Cultivation

Step One: Equanimity / Impartiality

Step Two: Recognizing Friends

Step Three: Reflecting on the Kindness of Others

Step Four: Returning Kindness

Step Five: Love

Step Six: Compassion

Common Strategies

- ◆ “Softening the Edges”
- ◆ Expect resistance / backlash
- ◆ Always bring the practice back to individuals
- ◆ Assess your own compassion /
- ◆ lovingkindness (or lack thereof)
- ◆ Assess concrete relationships
- ◆ Multiple Short Sessions
- ◆ Informal practice
- ◆ Self-Compassion

Mindfulness and Emotional Balance

Mindfulness has become quite popular. In its most condensed form, it can be described as a state of awareness that is focused and non-judgmental. Many secular based mindfulness programs have been developed and there is an emerging research base of various benefits of mindfulness practices. Many positive outcomes have been associated with mindfulness, including sports performance, health and psychological benefits, decreased stress and academic success. Yet, in traditional Buddhist contexts, mindfulness was one component in an overall spiritual orientation and outlook.

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, for instance, mindfulness is a tool in an overall spiritual project that involves renunciation, transformation and the perfection of human qualities such as Wisdom and Compassion. Mindfulness is understood only in reference to this greater ethical and spiritual dimension.

“The mindful way to emotional balance involves contacting and living our emotions fully, and at the same time patiently cultivating the habits of heart and mind that will foster peace and joy in us and those around us.”
(Cullen & Brito).

Contemplative practices should help us, both personally and socially. One area that is troublesome for many in the current era is coping with “negative,” distressing and extreme emotions. In fact, His Holiness The Dalai Lama has called frequently for more education in understanding and coping with emotions. He is also been actively involved in discussions of emotions with leading scientists and researchers of emotion.

“Emotion is a process, a particular kind of automatic appraisal influenced by our evolutionary and personal past, in which we sense that something important to our welfare is occurring, and a set of physiological changes and emotional behaviors begin to deal with the situation.” Paul Eckman, 2003

One recent contemplative program designed to address issues of emotion is Mindfulness Based Emotional Balance (MBEB). Building on programs such as Compassion Cultivation Training and Mindful Self-Compassion Training, MBEB has extended secular-based contemplative programs in a more holistic direction.

Emotional Balance

- ◆ Mindfulness of Thoughts
- ◆ Mindfulness of Feeling Tones
- ◆ Mindfulness of Emotions
- ◆ Working with Specific Emotions
- ◆ Mindfulness of Intention
- ◆ Developing Compassion and Lovingkindness etc.
- ◆ Self-Compassion
- ◆ Using emotions as a bridge to compassion for
- ◆ others.

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