

The Push and Pull of Emotional Life

An Interview with Ven. Thubten Chodron and Travis Newbill

[0:00:08.5] Travis Newbill: Hello, welcome back to the Science of Meditation online summit, presented by Shambhala Mountain Centre. Day three here, working with emotions, meditation for resilience and stress, my name is Travis Newbill and I am quite honoured to be joined here by venerable Thubten Chodron, who was ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist nun in 1977, she is an author, teacher and the founder and abbess of Sravasti Abbey in Washington State here in the US. Venerable, thank you so much for taking the time to join us.

[0:00:48.1] Ven. Thubten Chodron: Thank you for asking me.

[0:00:50.4] Travis Newbill: So the topic of this day, the main topic is emotion. And so I wonder if we just may begin by looking at emotion and I'd like to ask you how might we understand emotion? What is emotion and how does emotion manifest in our bodies, minds, lives, you know, what are we dealing with here?

[0:01:18.8] Ven. Thubten Chodron: You know, I don't think I can give you a definition of emotion unless I get a dictionary, actually we talk about emotion so much that when it comes to defining it, it's really quite difficult to define, and in Tibetan they don't have a word for emotion that actually translates as the word emotion. They have the word klesha, which refers to things that obstruct you on the path which includes emotion, but they don't really have a word for emotion, so I can tell you what emotion does, but I'm not so sure I can tell you what it is. I mean it's definitely a mental state, and what's interesting is it's also a conceptual mental state, what I mean by conceptual is that it is a thought consciousness. Now, we usually think of thoughts and emotions as two separate things, but when you really go into it, behind every emotion there's a whole bunch of thoughts and the emotion is happening in our mental consciousness, it's not a direct perception by one of our senses, so automatically there it's conceptual, we're not seeing things entirely directly like we do with our five physical senses, yeah, and then there's all this thinking going on behind emotion that we often don't realise, we just say well, emotion is a feeling, I feel angry or I feel attached, you know. But what does that mean exactly? Because in Buddhism, the word feeling refers to happy, unhappy and neutral feelings, it doesn't refer to stuff like anger, jealousy and love and compassion, that's not considered under the category of feelings in Buddhism. I remember one of the Mind of Life conferences with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, one of the scientists was saying that when they talk about emotion it refers to what's happening in your body, it refers to the mental part and it also refers to the behaviour. In Buddhism, when we talk about emotion, what's happening in your body isn't considered emotion and nor is your behaviour or your speech, yeah, those are maybe manifestations or effects of emotion, but we see emotion as something that's basically happening within you.

[0:04:34.8] Travis Newbill: So maybe in that same thread, I think Buddhism has a particular view of emotion and I wonder if you may say a little bit about that, is it the case that some emotions are considered positive and others negative, or afflictive and if that's the case, can you say why?

[0:05:01.1] Ven. Thubten Chodron: Yeah, ok, well first of all, here's the difference between Buddhism and psychology, because Buddhism evaluates all these mental states based on what is helpful for attaining liberation. Psychology, that's not the way they evaluate mental states, they evaluate mental states based on what makes you feel good at that moment. Now what makes you feel good at that moment may not lead you to liberation, those two things are not equal, ok. So, I'm going to be talking from a Buddhist viewpoint, not from a psychological viewpoint. So yeah, from a Buddhist viewpoint we can

have positive emotions and disturbing emotions, and here again the criteria is are they conducive for liberation, or are they antithetical for liberation? Not whether they make you feel good or not at that very moment, okay, for example, when we contemplate the disadvantages of psychic existence, our mind feels quite sober, yeah, or when we contemplate our own mortality, our mind feels quite serious, it feels quite sober. You don't feel happy at that time but those mental states are conducive for liberation, because they make us reflect on what is meaningful in life and what is not meaningful in life. Okay, whereas, let's say when you fall in love, you're like there's this fantastic guy, I just adore him! And you're so happy from a psychological viewpoint maybe they say that's a positive emotion, from a Buddhist viewpoint we would say that kind of emotion is underlain by a lot of exaggeration and it's likely to take you further away from liberation. Now, that doesn't mean that if it feels good it's not good for liberation, not like that, because definitely when you cultivate love for sentient things and you really are opening your heart and appreciating them, then of course you feel good at that very moment, definitely. And so the idea in Buddhism is to build up the positive emotions and as we do that our mind will become happier and happier, okay, and it's a different kind of happiness, you know, when we talk in the world happiness is like <inaudible 0:08:15.9>, that's not what we call happiness in Buddhism, what we're talking about there is a sense of deep inner fulfilment, a sense of contentment, satisfaction, inner peace, it's not giddiness.

[0:08:43.5] Travis Newbill: So let me just repeat what you said, we were talking about the difference being, we're not just going for what feels good and if it doesn't feel good let's get rid of it, and if it does let's go for that, and yet, these qualities that you're describing of deeper, inner contentment, satisfaction, feel good. There's a sense that it's sort of a more full or stable ended experience.

[0:09:29.6] Ven. Thubten Chodron: Yes, yes what we're building for in the dharma is our internal experiences, being able to transform our mind by ourselves, whereas normally when we talk about happiness, we're talking about pleasure that we get from sense objects, and there's nothing wrong with pleasure from sense objects, nothing wrong with it, but it doesn't last long and it's not very stable. And so you get it and it feels good and then it's gone, and you're left with oh well, what now? And then you have to start running around searching for some other sense object to give you some pleasure, and so that puts us in our life in this constant, in our relationship with the world and everybody in it, it's very push-pull push-pull, this gives me pleasure, I want it, this gives me pain, get it away. And so we're always trying to control our environment, control the people in it, and when are we ever going to be able to do that? Yeah, you know when are we going to be able to control the world and make everybody do what we want them to do, so that we'll be happy? You know, it's like that's not going to happen. But if we can work on our own inner mind, and how we interpret things, how we view things, do some inner transformation, then it's possible to be peaceful and happy, no matter who we're with and where we are. And that kind of happiness is much more stable, it's not dependent on the outside.

[0:11:36.9] Travis Newbill: So I'm thinking this brings to mind this notion of desire, which is I think one of the emotions or qualities that is associated with Buddhism and in one sense we may in our lives think about our relationship to desire or passion as being essential for living like an exciting, fulfilling life, in order to bring about relationships and the achievement of projects and you know a life stripped of passion and desire maybe seems like well, I don't know and then a lot of people are making an association with Buddhism and a life of well, it's like getting rid of all that desire, and then you're happy. And what is the, what do we think about that? How would desire, what's the deal there?

[0:12:45.9] Ven. Thubten Chodron: Well, you know we come in of course with our usual meanings of words, our usual way of seeing things, and Buddhism is asking us to look at

things in a different way, if it worked, why go to it? If what we're looking for is just affirmation of what we're all doing, already doing, then there's no need to seek meditation or anything like that, we go to Buddhism to be challenged, ok, to get our ego challenged. So regarding this with desire, there's two kinds of desire ok, because desire is a tricky word in English, it's a very tricky word. So one kind of desire is this kind of I want this, you know I want this kind of desire, because this is going to make me happy. I desire chocolate cake, I desire a good sex life, I desire to achieve in my career, that kind of desire. Then there's another kind of desire, which is I desire to know the nature of reality, I desire to develop an impartial love and compassion for all sentient things, I desire to have a strong determination to be free of cyclic existence, those are two very different kinds of desire. The first kind of desire where we're seeking external pleasure or you know reputation or praise, things that depend on outside, there's a lot of exaggeration behind that desire, a lot of expectation behind it, a lot of clinging, a lot of self-centredness behind it, or if you can't resonate with what I'm saying, I'll just talk about myself. When I have that kind of desire, you know, I look at a piece of chocolate cake and it's like, wow that is going to make me happy, I want that chocolate cake. Now, to normal people, yeah, it's normal, what's wrong with that? It's not a question of right or wrong, it's a question of what brings you happiness in the long term? I run and I get to the front of the line so I can get the piece of chocolate cake off the buffet before anybody else does, ok, or maybe I can get two pieces of chocolate cake because I'm at the front of the line. Yeah, so fulfil my purpose, but I eat the chocolate cake, how long does that take, maybe two minutes at the most, then where's the happiness? I had that happiness for two or three minutes, then what? Then my stomach starts to hurt, because I ate two pieces of chocolate cake which I thought was going to make me happy, but the more I ate it, the more my stomach hurt. Yeah? I had a very interesting experience with junk food a couple of days ago, usually I don't eat any junk food. I was somewhere, I needed a snack, all there was some kind of junk food, I ate it, and then I knew why I don't eat junk food. Yeah, it was tasty at the beginning, afterwards I felt so bleh, and so is that really pleasure? Does that really bring satisfaction? I always say to people, you know when they're like so anxious, I want to get the promotion, I want to do this and do that and the other thing, and then I say well, you know you get the promotion, then you get the pleasure of working sixty or eighty hour weeks. Before the promotion you had time to spend with your family, after the promotion, none. So that kind of desire is sometimes very blind and it leads us into situations that can leave us feeling quite disillusioned, and that is why in Buddhism we stress, especially Mahayana Buddhism, we stress so much working for the benefit of others, because when we do something for the benefit of others, rather than just for my own personal happiness, now in the long term, we're going to have much more inner peace and satisfaction. That doesn't mean we become people pleasers, it doesn't mean we're sacrificing our own happiness for others, I'm not talking about a Jesus complex, ok, I'm just talking about when we cultivate a mind that looks beyond my happiness right now, yeah, looking beyond my happiness now to other's happiness, to happiness in the future, to happiness that comes through inner development, in the long term we wind up much happier. I remember His Holiness Dalai Lama at one of his public talks, somebody was asking him about this, you know, well, you know, you don't have a wife, if you don't have sex, if you can't eat everything you want and this and this and this, how do you have any happiness? And then the person said and also, don't you need suffering in order to know what happiness is? So we have to suffer and then we know what happiness is. And His Holiness said well, you know, my life might not be so up with ecstasy and down with despair, but it's more even, it's more balanced and actually I prefer that. Yeah, because the drama we create in our life, it's exhausting, isn't it? Totally exhausting. When we can switch our motivation and have a steady motivation, a calm motivation of wanting to be of service to others, it really works much better.

[0:20:30.6] Travis Newbill: As you're describing this and I'm reflecting on projects that I'm engaged in or things that I want to see happen, drive that I feel. And I'm wondering how we, not tease apart, but the relationship of like inspiration and this sort of desire and how like maybe both can kind of be happening right, this Science of Meditation Summit, we want to offer to a lot of people, we think people will benefit and we want to <inaudible 0:21:11.8> our Centre, Shambhala Mountain Centre and we want Shambhala Mountain Centre to further offer to others and we need sustenance, So I think that any project that I'm involved in, there's almost like a flickering sometimes of yeah, I want this to be successful. Is it a selfish thing or is it actually like an offer thing? Maybe it's sometimes a little bit of a mix of those?

[0:21:38.8] Ven. Thubten Chodron: It's very difficult to understand our motivations, we can have such a mix of motivation for one action, what I'm talking about, you know this thing of passion for a project, you know, is like yeah, that gives a lot of vibrancy to your life, and I think that kind of passion it produces creativity, it produces a lot of good things and I definitely have that kind of passion in my life. What I try to do is realise if that passion is mixed with the thought somewhere in my mind, oh, I'll be successful and I'll be famous. I'll be successful and then people will praise me, they'll know my project and praise my project, and then I'll think I'm really bright and intelligent and creative. Or I don't charge anything for anything I do, but let's say I did, then I can also be thinking oh well, if this is successful I will get money and then I can go out and buy things. Those kind of thoughts are a setup for disappointment yeah, so what I try when I have this kind of inspiration and passion for a project, I mean look at it, I started a monastery you know, the first started monastery for restoration in this country, so there's got to be some kind of drive and passion in my mind, but for me, what I constantly had to come back to is this is for the benefit of sentient beings, this is for the long term existence of the dharma. This is not for me, it's not for me, because actually, training disciples can be a big headache, ask any dharma teacher, it can be a big headache. So you've got to have this determination to do this kind of thing, because you see some kind of long term purpose for the benefit of others, for the benefit of the dharma. If you stay focused on that kind of purpose and your passion comes from that, then you aren't so linked into what is the result of what I'm doing. If you're looking for praise, reputation, money, whatever, then if things don't turn out the way you want them to, you know you crash and burn mentally. You feel like I'm a failure, what are people going to think about me, nobody likes me, blah blah blah, you know, but do you see what I'm talking about that the disadvantages of a self-centred motivation? They really set us up for disappointment, yeah, because when I first started the monastery, the first year, this was before we got the press of property, oh my goodness, big mess. Big mess, and then I had to explain to all these people, and I walked in with a big sop story, but I had to do that, and it would have been very tempting at that point just to say okay, finished, I'm not going on with this anymore. But I couldn't do that, because the project was not for me, yeah, it was for sentient beings, it was for the three jewels. So okay, there's a mess, I didn't look so good. Actually, it's not so bad you know, because if I don't look so good, it makes me more humble, it lessens my pride, that's good for dharma practice.

[0:26:11.8] Travis Newbill: Yeah, thank you for sharing all of that and on that point. I'd like to ask, you know maybe we can turn to the other topic for the day really, which is stress, which is also related to the whole endeavour of having projects and trying to achieve anything and just trying to achieve a daily life even. Stress seems to be one of the dominant qualities of our time and our culture. I wonder what, from your perspective, what do you have to say about stress, what is the cause perhaps? What do you recommend for us like dealing with it? And finally, as a Buddhist nun, do you ever get stressed?

[0:27:05.3] Ven. Thubten Chodron: Yeah, you know in my research about stress, that's research of inner research, and also observing the lives of people around me, I think

people nowadays are addicted to stress, if you're stressed, then you don't have enough time, which means you have a life. If you're not stressed and you have some free time, then you feel like what's wrong with me? I don't have a life, I'd better find something to fill my time with, because I've got to talk about all the things I do to other people and how stressed I am because I'm doing all these things, because then other people will think I live a very full life. I think that's a crazy way of thinking, to tell you the truth, isn't this crazy thinking? So to me, yes, sometimes I get stressed, yeah, when I get stressed, it's because my mind is saying this thing is so important if it doesn't get done, the world is going to end. That's the thought behind stress. Little bit exaggerated, huh? So I remember one time something happened, I was so stressed, I was so upset about it, <inaudible 0:28:46.9> happened here, then I went to His Holiness Dalai Lama's teachings in <inaudible 0:28:52.1>, after one of the teachings I was walking back, I was thinking about the situation, I was so stressed, and then I thought, there's seven billion human beings on this planet, and I'm the only one who's really stressed out about this. Maybe there's some exaggeration, maybe, yeah, there's a lot of exaggeration. So now when I get stressed, I try and realise, you know whatever I'm getting stressed about, the world is not going to end because of it, yeah, it's not going to end. Sometimes I get stressed about the upcoming election, but then I have to say you know let's calm down here, let's not have too many exaggerations. Okay, and you do what you can in the time that you have, with the best motivation that you can muster, and then you have to accept what happens.

[0:30:22.0] Travis Newbill: Yeah, it's a, what you're describing as you know... As you were describing the chocolate cake at the <inaudible 0:30:33.0> for instance, and the exaggerating situation in feeling that kind of burden and stress, these are things that for sure happen in my experience, and probably just saying oh, that's not a good idea, I won't do that anymore is not going to totally put an end to it. So along the way of starting to work with this stuff, you know, we talk about having compassion for others, what role does having compassion for ourselves and just this sort of comedy of our own minds that is happening. Self-compassion, like how does that play into the journey of beginning to work through some of this?

[0:31:22.2] Ven. Thubten Chodron: Okay, before I get to self-compassion, let me just talk about the beginning part of your question. It's, we are very much creatures of habit, as you said you know we can become aware of the mechanism, but then it's hard to, you know you can't just say oh yeah, I'm aware that if I eat so much chocolate cake I'm going to feel bad afterward, and you think that as you're shovelling it in, yeah, I mean we all do this, and so to say oh, why is this happening? You know, habit, so I have to change habit. One of the things that helps us to change habit, it's when we really contemplate for over time and repeatedly, the disadvantages of one kind of thing and the benefits of the other. And this is what meditation is all about, this word for meditation in Tibetan is the same verbal root as to familiarise and habituate, so it's means training our mind, familiarising our mind with useful and beneficial and realistic ways of looking at things. And so accepting ourselves in that way, accepting the present and improving the future. Okay, so acceptance doesn't mean I accept it and that's just the way I am so I'm not going to try and change, no, I accept that this is the way it is now, but I know that everything can change in the future and I want to be actively engaged, if everything's going to change anyway, how about I try and help it to change in a good direction. Everything's impermanent, isn't it? It's going to change, so as long as that's going to happen, how about if I help it go in a good direction? Another element that I think is very important in this whole thing is to have a sense of humour, we can't take ourselves so seriously, and we have to be able to laugh at ourselves. If every time we make a mistake we just get like <inaudible 0:33:49.9> that is not going to help us change, I talked to one man once and I think a lot of people feel this way, he said, if I'm not hard on myself, then I won't change. And I said but if you are hard on yourself, you're not going to change, because when we get hard on ourselves,

all we do is spend our time telling ourselves how bad we are. That does not produce constructive change, that just makes us depressed and dispirited, and it's just more and more self-centredness, I'm so bad, I'm so terrible, nobody loves me, I'm a failure, me me me me me me. So we have to get out of all of that self-degradation and I think humour is a very good way to do it, you know, to be able to laugh at how stupid we are sometimes, because we are stupid. I remember one time, this was when I was a young nun, I was doing retreat, and I was sitting there doing retreat, sitting up straight, trying to do the visualisation and the mantra and blah blah blah, and then the thought ran through my mind, my teacher has clairvoyance, I'm sure he sees how well I'm meditating now, what a good Dharma student I am, I hope my teachers are real proud of me. And that thought went through my mind, and when I thought it, it's like I just had to laugh because that thought is the complete... having that thought is the complete antithesis of being a good dharma student, and I just had to laugh, it's like, look how sneaky the self-centred mind is, it comes in anywhere, how hilarious that I'm even thinking like that.

[0:36:10.5] Travis Newbill: It's so helpful, it's a huge relief I think to just to hear that advice, that sort of teaching, that sort of encouragement, that lighten up we're going to be like foolish, whew, that's like a rough rough road and that little bit about like, I have somewhere I have that subtle thing like well if I'm not hard on myself then I'm not going to change, but considering that the opposite of that is, you know and whenever I turn that around I feel that oh, actually relaxing into that is going to allow me to you know embody some of this, so thank you for that. I wonder if we, before we close, if these <inaudible 0:37:14.3> of what we've been discussing, and what people, our audience, where we may be in our journeys of reflecting, contemplating, starting to work with, the experience of you know changing emotion and habit and stress and tightness, I wonder if there's anything that you may offer, I may request that you offer to our audience a maybe like a short practice or exercise that can be done or maybe a contemplation that may allow us to you know turn our mind in a good way. As you said, everything is changing, so how am I... what might we be able to apply to allow it to change in a good way?

[0:38:13.8] Ven. Thubten Chodron: So, one of the meditations that I find very very useful for myself, which is contemplating the kindness of others, yeah, usually if you're anything like me you contemplate the defects of others, so one of the meditations that I find really effective for dealing with many different aspects of my mind, with the complaining mind, with my fault-finding mind, of the world fan-fair, is the meditation on the kindness of other, because it makes me focus on my interdependence with other living beings and how much I depend on them just to stay alive, and that their kindness may be directed specifically towards me, but I mean that often their kindness, their motivation is not to help me in particular, but the bottom line is that I receive benefit from what they do and so in that respect I receive kindness, and when I contemplate the kindness of others, then I realise that I've been the recipient of a tremendous amount of kindness in my life, and I feel connected with others and then automatically I want to do something in return. So I can lead a short meditation just reflecting on the kindness of others. Okay, so let's start to just coming back to the breath for a moment, let the mind settle down. Then begin by considering the kindness of the people that you're close to, friends and family and all the different things that they've done that you've benefited from, how they encourage you, how they make you think or provoke you to grow, given you material things, helping with your education, providing food and clothing, shelter and medicine. Just think for a moment about the kindness of the people you know, and think very specifically about what they have done that you've benefited from and feel their kindness, let their kindness come in. Then think of the kindness of your teachers, beginning with your parents or whoever took care of you when you were young, who taught you to eat properly with good manners, who taught you to speak, all the people who educated you in formal education or in the arts and sports, now really reflect how all the things you're talented at come

because of the encouragement, the instructions of other people. Then think of the kindness of strangers, the people who build your computer or your phone or your house, people who work at the utility board so that you have water and electricity, the construction workers who fix the roads and make the roads that we drive on, people at the supermarket who stock the shelves. Just really think broadly of all the strangers who do so many different kinds of activities that we benefit from and yet we don't even know who they are and we hardly ever think to thank them, but without their effort we would really be lost. And then think also of the kindness of the people who have made you unhappy, the kindness of the people who harmed you. This sounds strange to say but when you think about it, after we have been harmed we have to look at things again and it challenges us to grow in a way that we never would have grown otherwise, and so after we've experienced some harm, we change, we grow, we find resources in our self that we didn't know we had, or we developed resources that were underdeveloped, and so without these challenging experiences we wouldn't be the person who we are now, with the richness and the wisdom that we have gained through difficulties. So see if you can even extend this feeling of receiving kindness from even the people who have harmed you or criticised you. Thinking of how much you have grown through that. And then stay focused for a moment on that feeling of having been the recipient of a tremendous amount of kindness through your life, just really feel that. Just the fact that we're alive today is due to the kindness of others, so let that in, and then let arise within you, a feeling of wanting to give back in return, to really connect with and benefit other living beings. Okay, now we can dedicate our <inaudible 0:51:33.3> and send out all the merit, lucrative energy that we've created, send it out to all living beings for their welfare, for their benefit. Okay.

[0:52:08.1] Travis Newbill: Thank you so much for that practice, <inaudible 0:52:11.5> our audience today to bring that practice up when it's hopeful. I know that I will.