Hey, everyone. Welcome back. We are continuing our discussion this month of Mahayana meditation. Over the past few months, we have talked a lot about emptiness. Of course, in the previous month when we were talking about the view of the Mahayana, we focused a lot on emptiness, on the principle of emptiness, and a little bit on the practice of emptiness. This month, we're also covering a little bit about emptiness and how we bridge that into our experience of meditation. We're also, now, entering the territory of compassion, and especially the full extension of compassion, which is bodhicitta. Today, I thought I would talk about the connection between these two.

At first glance, it seems completely different. When you think of emptiness, the practices we do where we are investigating and inquiring into the nature of experience and deconstructing the self, it can feel very intellectual. Even if we meditated and we do have an actual experience of it, it doesn't seem very connected to the heart. It doesn't, at least to me, feel very intuitively aligned with what we are doing in bodhicitta practice in generating compassion and kindness and care towards others. Similarly, when we practice compassion and those practices, that doesn't seem to be moving in the same direction as emptiness. At least in theory it doesn't. For many of us, at first glance, this can seem like two completely different worlds that are somehow part of the same tradition but don't seem all that connected.

One of the first things you see when you begin to study these teachings—perhaps even before you might have practiced them—when you hear a teaching like The Way of the Bodhisattva, or a philosophical teaching like Chandrakirti’s Entrance to the Middle Way, the Madhyamakavatara, what you see is these two are intimately connected with one another. In the most philosophical, in the most heady philosophy of the Mahayana tradition, which I think you find
most notably in the Madhyamika tradition, you find extensive descriptions of compassion. You hear it said again and again that one of the most effective ways to come to a realization of emptiness is through compassion, and one of the best ways to come to a full expression of compassion is through emptiness. So, even in this philosophical literature you see compassion as a very, very important central theme. Then if you go to the other side, you look at a more practice oriented text, like The Way of the Bodhisattva, for example, you find these rich, rich explanations of bodhicitta, the heart of awakening, and how we can connect in such a profound, meaningful way with others, even devote our own life, our own existence, to the service of others. In the midst of that you also find these incredible explanations and explorations of emptiness. In The Way of the Bodhisattva, the entire ninth chapter, in fact the single most famous section of The Way of the Bodhisattva is not about bodhicitta actually, but is about emptiness. Or, you could say it’s about ultimate bodhicitta, which is emptiness, but it’s not on the more heart centered compassion practices that one might expect. The point I’m making here is that it’s clear from the tradition that these two are incredibly bound up with one another. You can’t even separate them from one another. I think at first glance, it might not be apparent why that is actually the case. So, I wanted to talk this month, and this week in particular, about what that connection is from an experiential point of view.

When I think about these practices in my own life—how I encountered both the principles of emptiness and this practice of working with the view, and also these practices that have to do with opening the heart and connecting with others and compassion—both of those were relatively unfamiliar terrain for me. My starting point, and my main interest, when I first began practicing, was much more in simple meditation. As I talked about last week, I wasn’t really interested in buddhist philosophy. It may come as a surprise to some of you, but in fact I wasn’t particularly interested in studying philosophical texts. I was somewhat interested in these teachings on compassion and bodhicitta, but it wasn’t the driving force in my practice. I began working with both the view, studying the middle way
and madhyamika philosophy, and also practicing tonglen and bodhicitta, around the same time, which is when I was at Naropa. I mentioned this in the last weekly introduction.

Over the years, looking back on how I began practicing these teachings and how that’s unfolded over the last sixteen years it’s been now since I was at Naropa, I have deeply experienced how the opening of the heart has a way of undoing the knots of the mind. It has a way of creating more space in the mind, so that I can tune into the principle of emptiness. I can get more of a taste of the principle of emptiness. The way this has played out for me personally is that in these moments when I feel that I am not completely caught up in my own inner experience, or absorbed in my own thought patterns and what’s going on, then I begin to tune into what’s going on, particularly in relationship. Whether I’m in a formal practice and thinking about connecting with others, or actually out in the world and engaging other people in relationship, there’s an opening that happens in that. There’s a loosening that happens when you can do that connecting with others, when you can open up into that incredible vulnerability that we have in relationship with one another and enter into that with awareness, and with that awareness a sense of deep care and concern. In experience, the way that plays out for us is that there is on the one hand a sense of empathetic connection, a sense of really resonating with another individual. Along with that—this may be more subtle and hard to experience, because the empathetic connection may be more intense or come to the fore of experience—but what also is there is an openness.

It’s almost as if that narrowing of the self that happens when we’re in our most self absorbed moments, that narrowing of the self begins to release. That narrowing of the self begins to relax a bit. In that relaxing, the more we are able to get familiar with that sense of opening, that we’re able to drop into that more expansive state of being. That opens up the space for us to notice how that rigidity of the mind, in which we have such a strong, solid sense of self, we begin to get glimpses that it’s not quite so solid. One of the easiest ways to see through that illusion of the independent self, is to see how incredibly interconnected we are with other people, because we can feel that
sense of connection so tangibly in our experience. We can feel when we're totally open to what’s going on with another person. The emotional resonance, and even the resonance of what might be going on in the body or the mind. We can just feel that. So there’s an opening to experience that drops us into a place where we're much more receptive to the groundlessness of experience. The opening of the heart that happens when we practice tonglen, or we do an exchanging the self and other, or another bodhicitta contemplation, it very naturally opens us up into the space of emptiness.

On the other hand, when we come at it from the other direction, when we do contemplations that might not seem to have anything to do with openness and connecting with others, certainly not with compassion or bodhicitta, but we're just exploring the nature of experience, when we're taking these rigidities of the mind where we get stuck and we try to create a solid ground in experience and we begin to look into that, and notice that things are much more fluid, much more open than they might at first seem—that very opening that happens there, also, in the same way, naturally puts us much much more in touch, in a very intimate way, with others.

In my own experience, in my own practice, I’ve noticed that the times when I’ve felt the most connected to the groundlessness of experience, when I’m aware of the sense of openness within my own mind and body and I can feel that, when I’m with others there is a dramatically different way of relating to others. This narrow sense of self, and the strong boundary that often seems to be there between self and other, begins to loosen. It begins to dissolve a bit. In addition to that loosening of the boundary between self and other there’s also a much more natural, a much more spontaneous sense of care and concern that arises. It’s not the kind of care and concern, or compassion, that comes from doing a practice, like trying to intentionally arouse that, but a much more intuitive spontaneous engagement, where it feels, where that care, that sense of connection, feels very natural.

These two go hand in hand. I don’t think it’s any accident that the greatest masters, who seem to be the very embodiments of compassion, also have profound insight into emptiness, and the nature
of reality, and those who seem to be the great philosophers, the great scholars, who were writing these massive treatises on Buddhist philosophy, were also profoundly compassionate and deeply caring individuals. So, it's very, very clear that we need to be working on both of these levels. When we can work with emptiness, exploring it, especially experientially exploring it in our practice, that will naturally lead to an opening of the heart. The more we can open our heart, that too will naturally feed into our realization of emptiness.

Keep this in mind, as we go through this week, and this month. I'd be really curious to hear from you, and to hear your own experience, to see if that opening of the heart changes anything when you experience or explore the idea of emptiness and vice versa. So, please share your experience and how this has played out in the past, or what's coming up for you this month. We'd very much love to hear from you. Enjoy the teachings and the practices this month. Please stay in touch. Take care.