

How to Cultivate Emotional Resiliency
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By Melissa Moore

Dear Karuna Training Community,

This year Karuna Training is offering a series of free online talks and emails - with engaging insight into a variety of Karuna related topics. Here is a little in depth discussion from Karuna Founder and Senior Teacher Melissa Moore about our next topic, which will be explored in our next online interactive session: Karuna Live!...

How to Cultivate Emotional Resiliency

Emotional resilience is a term that is becoming increasingly common, but it's not always something that is particularly easy to understand at first glance. It refers to the human ability to adapt to difficult circumstances and ride through crises with relative equanimity, finding balance and restoration sooner than later.

One needs a fair amount of emotional resilience just to read the daily news feed. And of course, being human beings, we are all vulnerable to the experience of difficulties in life to both greater and lesser degree; especially depending on our socio-economic circumstances.

What is proving to be true however, is that the more resilient we are, the more able we are to "roll with the punches" so-to-speak and to adapt to adversity without lasting difficulties. The less resilient we are, the harder time we will have when the inevitable life crisis comes along, whether the crisis is major or minor. So one could argue emotional resilience is a necessary tool in our tool kit!

Developing Emotional Resilience

But how does one get this kind of emotional resilience? Well, how we think about gaining emotional resilience can depend on how we define it.

The [American Psychological Association](#) (APA) defines resilience as, "...the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors." The APA goes on to recount that resilience can be learned through identifying thoughts, behaviors and positive actions that strengthen one

through hardship along the way, but that resilience doesn't mean that our lives won't be hard or free from suffering.

Contemplative Psychology has a slightly different understanding of resilience. In fact, the baseline of contemplative psychology is that we all possess *intrinsic health* or *basic sanity*, as a baseline to being human.

According to Mahayana Buddhism, we are born with an intact wholesomeness, and we're hardwired for resilience. So from this view, we don't acquire emotional resilience - it is always present - we just have to discover it and cultivate it further.

This means that our *basic sanity* is an unconditional aspect of our being, that we can tap whenever necessary. *Intrinsic health* is not conditioned by anything external that can happen to us; family hardships, deaths, financial difficulties that put us in peril, even diagnosis that prove we are sick doesn't touch our intrinsic health. We may have a conditioned habit of feeling inadequate and worthless, even that habit doesn't touch or damage our intrinsic health.

Emotional Resilience in Living and Dying

I remember in the mid 1980's visiting men who were dying of AIDS in the heart of San Francisco's Castro district at Maitri Hospice on Hartford street on a regular basis with my dog Molly. My husband and I were friends with the Zen Abbot there, Issan Dorsey, who himself died of AIDS shortly into the onset of the AIDS crisis. It was there, long after obtaining my degree in contemplative psychology, that I began to really experience the difference in the way these young men met their inevitable deaths.

All were suffering horrific physical sickness in the process of dying with AIDS, and all of them simultaneously knew that they were going to die. It was like I could identify two categories of people; those who met their terrible fate with struggle, resentment and anger, fighting devils along the way; and those that met their deaths gracefully with ease, somehow accepting their fate, and going out with gentleness despite suffering greatly. It was then and there that I started to understand how holding an awareness of one's intrinsic health actually works.

The mere knowing and cultivating trust that we are unconditionally healthy, basically sane and whole in our core, allows us to meet difficulties more

easily. This appears to be true, even in the face of death, no matter how severe the crisis we are undergoing.

Awareness of our intrinsic health allows us to meet all crises with some semblance of acceptance and it allows us to tap our resilience along the way more easily. It is in trusting in our own intrinsic health that we believe in ourselves and are able to access our own natural resilience.

The Tibetan Buddhist Tradition and Resilience

Acceptance of our intrinsic health is key to resilience according to Tibetans who practice Tibetan Buddhism in general. In her book, [*Spacious Mind: Trauma and Resilience in Tibetan Buddhism*](#); Dr. Sara Lewis investigates trauma and resilience in the Tibetan culture. She notes how the 'trauma narrative in Tibet was never a culturally sanctioned form of expression'. A 'trauma narrative' is one where we have an embedded story around how we've experienced trauma either in childhood, or from something significant and difficult that occurred in our life. It is part of who we are and we identify with that story to varying degrees.

Dr. Lewis outlines how Tibetans having undergone such hardship since the invasion of Tibet by China, and yet they do not view themselves as being traumatized due to the Buddhist understanding and acceptance of the truth of suffering. From the outside this can easily look like repression or what has been called 'spiritual bypassing'. According to Lewis' research, this has much more to do with the Tibetan's culturally embedded assumptions about life. "Diminishing and downplaying adversity in life is not seen as repression, but rather as skilled and realistic. Remembering that others around you are also suffering seems to help Tibetan exile members cope even with severe events such as torture and imprisonment."

Spiritual bypassing is a phrase named by the late John Wellwood, as a phrase that defines using spiritual beliefs to suppress trauma and hardship. This interpretation is rising out of a Western psychological paradigm; one that holds the belief that trauma must be psychologically dealt with whenever traumatic hardship has occurred, otherwise one is repressing one's pain. Dr. Lewis' anthropological research refutes this idea.

The book also recounts the 'wide and spacious' mindset of Tibetans who practice Buddhism, which cultivates a view that thinks more systemically,

not only about 'my suffering', but automatically about the suffering of others, the country and whole planet.

Dr. Lewis recounts how Tibetan's perseverance and refusal to give up on themselves or humans all together' lends them a unique access to resilience in the face of losing their country and the on-going torture that still occurs there. She recounts how monks who were imprisoned for years only lamented how their one task was to not lose compassion for their captors.

Accessing Resilience as Westerners

So why are Tibetan's so much more emotionally resilient? Dr. Lewis points to the formal Mahayana Buddhist practices of Lojong (meaning mind/heart training) which is actually a training that strengthens love and compassion. These practices are now evidence based on how they prove to cultivate a selfless potency of heart and serve to rouse an indestructible attitude toward the preciousness of human life. She argues that Lojong training and the cultural fortitude of the Tibetan people living in exile are what makes Tibetan's more emotionally resilient.

Unfortunately, as Westerners, we don't have these teachings built into our culture. We need to have our intrinsic health pointed out to us as we did not grow up in a culture who values basic sanity as our birthright. Still, we also can learn to cultivate a non-judgemental awareness in our approach to the experience of trauma and suffering.

This allows us to turn our thoughts and emotions into allies and to form an allegiance to our own basic sanity. Through this, we can tap into our innate resilience as a means of recovering from life's trials and tribulations.

This is a big part of the work we do together in Karuna Training. In the Karuna Training program, we train in contemplative psychology which draws from these same Mahayana Lojong teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. Contemplative psychology was originally named and founded by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Dr. Ed Podvoll at Naropa University in the early 70's. Karuna Training offers 360 hours of Mahayana transformative training in the basic view and methods of contemplative psychology. The result is a deeply transformative process that impacts one's thoughts, behaviors and emotions, empowering us to access our own intrinsic health and experience more resilience when meeting life's inevitable dilemmas.

The way we go about cultivating this awareness of our intrinsic health is by focusing on a history of sanity. Not just looking at all the mishaps and scars we have incurred along life's highway, but also by examining and paying close attention to what it is that has sustained us along the way as well. If we have, how have we learned from our mistakes? How have we received the care and attention from those who have shown up at the right time and right place? How did we let the sanity reach us in our recovery? By tracking a history of sanity we actually begin to see that we have been 'writing' ourselves with resilience all along; that indeed this resilience is our birthright.

I know, as someone who put myself in perilous situations as an adolescent, that it was hard to see that any sanity was operating at all in myself. I had little support from my parents who were at war with one another at the time, in fact they taught me the manipulative skills of splitting and playing them against each other. Somehow in the midst of that, I met and allowed in one guidance counselor in high school. This counselor was a school counselor who seemed old to me at the time, but he was probably in his 40's. He had the where-withall to know that I wasn't going to be told what to do, so he bargained with me. Breaking all the rules, he told me that if I promised to finish high school and get my degree, that he would not report certain behaviors and choices that he discovered I was doing.

This gentleman, and he was a true gentleman, risked his job to help me. I somehow had the awareness and basic sanity to experience him and accept his help, to receive his care and make the bargain to finish high school. I think of him in my practice sometimes, and how much I owe to his kindness and skill. He was himself operating out of intrinsic sanity and knowing exactly what to say to me as a rebellious 16 year old.

We all have things in our history that are either in the past or may even be current ways in which it appears we are sabotaging ourselves. These can be addictions, destructive behaviors, speech patterns and emotional defenses that seem contrary to anything remotely related to intrinsic health.

If we truly examined these behaviors, the addictions and habits we've formed, we will find that we are always seeking relief and that we develop habits and addictions out of a need to care for ourselves. This is a type of self-medication, until it catches up with us.

Most of our habits are formed out of sanity to begin with and then the habit-forming nature of our mind takes over and these same habits can become liabilities. We have to

trace back to the origins of how we begin with substances and behaviors -- and why we begin things in the first place. Almost always we find that there is a grain of sanity - we are seeking relief, and it works. It works until it doesn't work.

Cultivating Awareness of Intrinsic Health with Meditation

Cultivating a notion of our unconditional intrinsic health takes experiential embodiment for it to be true and useful. We are not talking about the power of positive thinking and trying to convince ourselves of anything. Intrinsic health occurs when we synchronize our body, speech and mind in the present moment. And being synchronized happens to be a rather rare thing these days, in our 'click-bait' reality of phones and mobility . We all believe that we are professional multi-taskers.

How many times have you driven or arrived somewhere and not remembered how you got there? We have a way of doing one thing, like driving, while talking on the phone or listening to friends, and all the while thinking about other things in the back of our mind. The result is complete desynchronization with our world and an inability to feel our intrinsic health.

Mindfulness meditation practice proves to be the best medicine to synchronize our body, speech (breath) and mind in the present moment.

Speech here means any way we exchange with our world, not just in spoken word, but in breath, emotions and relationships. Speech from a contemplative psychology perspective includes breath as the ultimate and on-going exchange we have with the world in every moment. Sitting on a cushion or a chair and practicing bringing our body, breath and mind into a felt sense of the present now is exercising the muscle of mindfulness. And at the same time that synchronization is a felt experience of our intrinsic health. That is why mindfulness meditation is the baseline of contemplative psychology.

The only problem with mindfulness meditation is that you have to do it - it's a practice, and practices take precious time and space to be able to accomplish them. We have to know it's worth our while, or perhaps we land ourselves in a crisis and we turn to meditation as a way to synchronize ourselves in the midst of trauma.

There are other ways we can synchronize our body, speech and mind in the present moment even if we don't practice meditation. Even if we only give ourselves 5 minutes of space, we can sit and breathe at our desk or in our car before we have to do something. Intentionally bringing ourselves into a feeling of presence with our environment, what we are doing or about to do -- and why we are there. All this will improve the experience we are about to encounter and this allows us to tap a felt experience of intrinsic health, even if only for a minute.

Anyway we go about it, cultivating emotional resilience is readily possible.

That's all from us for now!

Warmly,
Melissa Moore and The Karuna Training Team