

## **Working With Emotions By Melissa Moore**

**Dear Karuna Training Community,**

This summer Karuna Training is offering a series of free online talks and emails - with engaging insight into a variety of Karuna related topics. Here is something about our first topic, which was explored in our online interactive session this weekend: Karuna Live....

### **How To Work With Emotions (Without Getting Overwhelmed by Them)**

Have you ever felt overwhelmed by emotions? Whether it is your own emotions, or those of others; positive or negative ones, our emotions can be unruly and difficult to manage. When interacting with others, it can sometimes feel like our emotions are way too much and we don't know what to do with them. We may decide that we need to offer others a sense of space, try to drop our boundaries and open up or we may aspire to tap into a sense of selflessness. Often we feel at a loss for how to realize our intentions for how we want to show up and what is actually happening.

If this sounds familiar- don't worry, you aren't alone in the struggle to work skillfully with one's emotions.

One thing we offer participants in Karuna Training, better than other trainings, is the capacity to touch into a selfless space. When we've approached our emotions in a contemplative way, and become able to touch into selflessness, Karuna (compassion) is actually a natural byproduct.

*When we're not protecting our territory, the world is more available and it touches us naturally. We feel the emotions of others, and sometimes those too come rushing in, which can be overwhelming.*

So how do we work with that?

We train ourselves in a contemplative fashion gradually in Karuna, and very intentionally. In fact, the entire training is based on this gradual approach to inviting space and learning to hold and feel our emotions as they are, without suppressing them and without acting them out. This finding the middle way approach is directly tied to meditation practice and there is a path to learning what is too much and what is not enough. And we're the only ones that know, because this is a very internal process and we're all uniquely different in our emotional makeup.

In Karuna we further train this intuitive internal contemplative approach to working with emotions through practicing “exchange” with others.

### **What is Exchange?**

Exchange is this capacity to tap into the nondual aspect of our make up. We are still in our own bodies of course, yet we can feel the feelings of others. This type of feeling is preverbal and often unconscious. It's a pre-language skill that we all possess and we can train, and it's called exchange.

Exchange is happening all the time. We walk into any environment and we feel safe or unsafe or neutral, we have learned to track this early on, and some people have it more than others, especially if they have had encounters with unsafe spaces. We're constantly monitoring our environments through exchange, whether we're conscious of it or not.

*We wake up next to our partners, or we walk into the office with our co-workers and we get a strange negative feeling from someone. Then we make things up, we think "they don't like me" or "I'm not good enough". And that's is actually a projection, when we project onto a situation what we made up.*

We make things up out of exchange constantly and its habit forming if we don't bring awareness to this process. Entire relationships go on for years because these processes of exchange are often unspoken and we've just made up our mind that this person doesn't like me or we don't like them and we'll never get along.

We rule our world out of our projections and a lot of what we're doing in Karuna Training, is becoming conscious of our emotional patterns and unhooking from those habits of mind. We're learning how not to make things up and how not to project onto space when there's nothing there except a feeling. We're learning to be curious and investigate what is really going on with people and places in our world instead of projecting onto them.

But how do we develop this habit of opening up to our world instead of closing down?

It can be a tall order for some of us to trust what we're feeling and be able to put words to our emotions. It's a very brave act, and it takes training. It is very organic how we learn this and we are learning to trust the tender side of ourselves and be strengthened by our tenderness. We get tenderized into our strength in Karuna Training.

Tapping into our innate compassion is key, but to do so we need to learn to trust and to work contemplatively with habits that are stopping us from accessing it.

### **Compassion in Equality**

These days 'compassion' is batted around in media as if its a common thing that we can develop easily and casually -- and there's tons and tons of classes offering to help us become compassionate.

*From a Buddhist perspective, however, compassion is an innate quality that we already possess. It's actually a bottomless resource. We have compassion naturally. Compassion is our natural state; to be caring and loving and connected with each other is something we all possess. And yet we sometimes feel cut off from our hearts.*

So what our real work is, is in creating space for our hearts. This requires we look into the habitual territoriality of ego, which is blocking us from that potency of our heart.

One of my favorite quotes about compassion is from Acharya Pema Chodron: "Compassion can only occur in a relationship of equals." This means we cannot have a one-upmanship attitude with anyone and still feel our compassion.

One has to be eye to eye and equal and there can be no hierarchy in the relationship. True compassion is the capacity to feel fully the pain of others. So it puts a very high stake on this word 'compassion'.

### **Feeling The Inseparability of Self and Other**

Last week I was walking through downtown Berkeley, CA which has a more than noticeable homeless population on the streets, and I find it can be difficult to be there with a heart wide open. I was going to the meditation center, and on my way out from nowhere came a man who appeared to be floridly psychotic, grabbing at people on the street and threatening people with aggressive language. I stopped, slowed down and eventually just watched him. He picked up a metal street horse (the kind that tells people they cannot park between such and such a dates) turned around and with the sign above his head, he looked me deep in the eyes. I felt a flash of fear. He screamed at me and threw the sign toward me all the time locked eye to eye.

*I felt in that moment my own fear and I also felt his fear simultaneously. I felt as if I was looking into the eyes of hell.*

When I held his gaze and consciously felt into my heart in the middle of this frightening encounter, he broke my gaze and quickly ran around the corner and left. I was shaking afterwards, and I was also deeply aware that this man was not in his right mind and this was not his fault.

I spent years working in the public mental health arena with people who suffer with severe and chronic mental illness. I know first hand how broken the behavioral health system currently is, how people like this are like 'canaries in a coal mine' and left to their own demise in a society that doesn't care or provide for people who suffer with mental illness. I could in that moment when looking into the eyes of hell, touch my own rage about this very topic, that in America we don't care for our mentally challenged populations properly. His hell was also my hell and I could recognize it and feel it fully. I could in the moment forgive him and feel nothing but compassion. Luckily nobody got hurt.

Without training and practice, this could have been an extremely emotionally overwhelming situation where I felt flooded by the intense emotions the man was demonstrating or inundated by my own fear or anger. Instead I was able to stay present with the situation, feel the pain I was witnessing, and still hold compassion in my heart for this stranger - even as he was attacking me.

*Learning how to meet our circumstances, no matter how difficult and stay open is the fruit of Karuna Training. When I looked deeply into the eyes of the raging man, I was touching into my own rage and owning it, verses separating from it.*

This is an extreme example of utilizing exchange to evoke sanity.

When we recognize the deep inseparability between ourselves and others, compassion, rather than overwhelm is our natural response.

### **Growing a Responsible Heart**

This is how we grow a responsible heart, learn to make friends with vulnerability, to find our voice in vulnerability and to be strong and empowered in the midst of vulnerability.

In Karuna Training we learn how to oscillate back and forth between our own feelings and the nondual interconnected nature of reality. This is how we learn to utilize the process of exchange and evoke windows of basic sanity and insight in the moment. This is how we learn to work with others skillfully using nothing but our open heart. We first have to learn to trust what we're

feeling when we're feeling it and to find the skillful means to engage others genuinely with no agenda of trying to fix them either.

The man I encountered on the street was not fixed, but there was a moment of compassion between us. In Karuna we become very conscious of the inseparability between us and our world. We can utilize the capacity of exchange to be a force for good in the world instead of creating more confusion.

*We can become stronger and more potent in our compassion by offering ourselves to others.*

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