

VDKR: Hello, Elizabeth.

EMN: Hello, Rinpoche. This is the first time I've been nervous to do a podcast [laughing], because you're my teacher. It seems like there's some more at stake.

VDKR: Don't worry. We're talking about patience, so I'll be very patient [laughing].

EMN: Thank you. Please be patient.

[Music]

Welcome to Open Question: A Call to Inner Brilliance. I'm Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel, and this is OQ 201: Unconditional Wellbeing. I'm pleased to kick off Season 2 with a conversation with my own teacher, Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche. Rinpoche is the one who introduced me to the tradition of inquiry at the heart of the Buddhist Middle Way teachings. These teachings embody the spirit and approach of Open Question. After 35 years of studying with Rinpoche, I'm still astounded by the penetrating insight that he shares in his communication.

In this interview, I think you'll hear for yourself Rinpoche's gift for taking authentic Buddhist teachings and bringing them to life for our times. Rinpoche has just come out with a new book, [*Peaceful Heart: the Buddhist Practice of Patience*](#). In the book, Rinpoche focuses on a single chapter from a classical Buddhist text, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, by the eighth century Indian scholar, poet, and vagabond Shantideva. *Peaceful Heart* is all about open questioning. It's a guidebook that teaches us how to bring humor and trustworthy discernment to a process of looking at our neurosis, and shows us how to cultivate the natural flow of altruistic warmth that lies at the heart of our deepest intentions.

EMN: The book is so full of amazing things. You could just take one sentence, it feels like, and contemplate it for a lifetime. And so I had to choose between all these gems. But one of the things I wanted to focus on is a story that you told of an experience you had in Varanasi, at the beginning of the book, about a little baby--an infant, in fact--and I was wondering if you wouldn't mind just telling us that story in brief, and what that was like for you.

VDKR: The reason I told that story in this book, as well as in my previous book, is that this book is a sequel to *Training in Tenderness*--meaning training in *tsewa*. Now, *tsewa* is translated as an innate kind of tender heart, or the experience of being able to love and care, and to emit that emotion from our heart. In the previous book, as well as here too, I was making the point that we all have that ability, and I wanted to elucidate how we have that in all of us.

When I was in Varanasi doing one of the *dana* (generosity practice) programs, one evening I was coming back to the spot where we offer the *kir*, the rice pudding, to the pilgrims who are coming back from the Ganges puja.

So one evening as I was coming back, there was some commotion very close to where we do the *dana* offering and I went up to see what it is. And there was a small baby, not more than a foot, just on a very thin cloth on the ground. And there are hundreds and thousands of people just

walking, right? Many coming back from the river. And the baby's eyes are very clear and not crying. And everybody--since they're coming back without expecting to see anything like that--when they see that, everybody stops and everybody's heart sort of naturally goes to the baby, thinking "What is this? How can somebody leave a baby there? What happened to the parents?" And I can see the love and the tenderness and the sense of great concern for the baby's safety is being poured out from all the men, all the women, and the children even, you know. Everyone--rich, poor, everyone. But it's also a confusing situation.

You don't know what to do. It's not like you could pick up the baby and just walk off home, you know? So some people are putting food there. Some people are putting some money there. And mainly they're looking around everywhere to see what's going on. Does everyone feel the same, are they responding the same way? Of course, I felt the same. So that was my point: that everyone had that ability. And there I've seen it the most. It just kind of poured out. Mind is so fast, brain is so fast, they can come up with all that love and care and concern and a sense of a holistic universal responsibility being poured out.

EMN: Rinpoche, I wanted to tell you just as a reader of your book, when I read that story I could really just immediately feel--and I wasn't even there--that flood of warmth. What you call tsewa, the topic of your last book, that tsewa or warmth or love flow through my body and my mind. As you describe it here also, you say it's the natural condition of being. So to see that immediate response from so many people upon seeing the scene was so strong in this book for me. Because it gives you a reference point for a part of the human condition. This is natural to the human condition, you're saying, and for us to recognize that we have that, and that we share that. That could be like an EMT rushing in and saving someone, or we're responding to someone in the best possible way, which is like the best part of our mind. Mind at its best.

And it's also so interesting because there's this little baby. They're so vulnerable. In a way it kind of seemed like a metaphor for who we are also as humans. So vulnerable. Vulnerable even to our mental experiences of anxiety and fear and aggression, like you've talked about. So I wanted to tell you that it was very powerful to begin a book that's also about aggression and negative emotions that we experience, but to begin with a reference point of love and natural kindness that is so easy for us to access. And I appreciated that so much. And so now that we have that, we can talk even more about the other aspects of the mind such as aggression, or neurosis, or habitual mind.

And I was wondering: what is your definition of patience? If you could just say in a nutshell what is patience, and what does it mean to lose patience? Shantideva talks about the sorrow-bearing enemy, which you describe as the propensity to be bothered, which I think is why we need patience. Can you talk about patience and the propensity to be bothered?

VDKR: Well, as I said, *Peaceful Heart* is a sequel to *Training in Tenderness*. In *Training in Tenderness*, I was emphasizing how we all have that ability to feel the tender heart and the warmth of the tender heart. And of course it needs to have the conditions, and sometimes you need to kind of purposefully cultivate those. In the case of Buddhist practice, we try to do that--seeing how oneself and others all are in need of happiness, wish to be happy, and long to be free from suffering. There are all the external differences, but in the core, we are all equal in that.

And we are all in the same boat, meaning in the same condition and having the same needs and aspirations. So when you work on that, and then equalize yourself with others, then you see how the imbalance is so much. And then you intend for the imbalance to be purposefully less and less as you spread the love and care you have for yourself to others. That kind of tenderness that innately is possible in all of us can be brought out through the meditation practice of loving kindness, right?

VDKR: Then when you have love or tsewa as a main focus of your life and your growth in the spiritual path, as well as also just in your life generally, and embrace the world and others who are in your life, then what becomes the center of your life is not the self. Normally it's the self and all of its self-focused aspirations, self-focused clinging. So then it becomes a universal aspiration for happiness for all mankind, and a universal aspiration for all mankind to be free from suffering. And so it's in the center of your life, at least in the conscious state. In the state of the unconscious, we may fall back into our habitual way of thinking. But in the state of conscious and constructive meditation practice, what becomes the center of your life is bodhicitta.

EMN: Can you say what that is, Rinpoche?

VDKR: Universal love.

If there's a family, the family becomes the output of your love. And one's circle of friends becomes the output of your love. And the coworkers at your workplace become the output of your love. And also humanity becomes the output of your love, and you extend yourself in any kind of service, trying to enhance their lives. But the difficulty sometimes comes if there has been a hurt, and if there has been a certain pain that has been stored in one's mind. So even if one is very into the idea of having love in the center of one's life, and embraces service to humanity, sometimes the hurt and the pain that one has experienced--due to many circumstances and reasons--one can actually have that impediment to not feel that warmth, tsewa, or love for humanity.

So what I'm saying in the previous books is: that's very normal. But yet at some point, one has to be able to move forward, one has to be able to release, one has to be able to move beyond that. The way to go beyond that is that you acknowledge the hurt, but then make a conscious decision to go beyond--by forgiveness. Forgiveness is at the root of all patience practice, and moving beyond. So that was in the previous book, and we didn't go further than talking about that.

EMN: Right.

VDKR: Now here, then, we have all of the ways that we can actually go deeper into protecting our mind and heart of bodhicitta or universal love with patience. Because without patience, your mind is going to be always in conflict and in an afflictive state of pain and aggression and various things.

EMN: I just want to make sure this is really clear: the definition of patience is the ability to not be bothered. And we're so bothered throughout the day. Things are always bothering us. When

you talk about patience, it doesn't just mean the ability to not be angry. Could it mean the ability to not collapse into fearful states, or anxiety, or the ability to not also get caught in neurotic grasping and attachment?

VDKR: Well, I think they're all different qualities of patience. People sometimes have a wrong understanding, a misunderstanding of the Buddhist practice of patience as "grin and bear it" with whatever is happening. Of course, sometimes we have to start from there because that's the only option, before you get into your mind and your emotions and yourself, and see what's taking place on a deeper level. But my definition of the practice of patience is coming up with a way of working with your experience that is neither a suppression of the experience of emotions or what's coming up, nor an indulgence.

EMN: The two extremes.

VDKR: Being able to resolve this so that it's no longer a painful reaction that you'd normally have to succumb to, as with the loss of your patience, loss of your cool, feeling aggression or anger--it doesn't have to be the kind of power that you have to succumb to.

EMN: Yeah. I appreciate that because it brings us back to that idea of open questioning or self-reflection, where there's another way that we can approach our experience that doesn't have to do with grasping or rejection, or being aggressive, or being passive--"grin and bear it"--or get completely lost in it.

VDKR: Let me give you an example. You and one of your friends are in the same room. And somebody starts to be insulting. I say some remarks that you feel are very offensive, and you are getting angry. You're getting upset and you're feeling "this is wrong and I need to retaliate." At the same time, your friend is taking it all in stride with humor. You understand? So seeing that makes it very clear that what you are perceiving to be happening is interpretable by two different takes or perspectives. So seeing that, then, you could adopt the way of your friend by taking it all in stride with humor and making it all a somewhat playful experience. That would be a very good way to not make any kind of a mess and burn bridges and create problems in one's life, right? Yet at the same time, it's not like what came up initially didn't come up, or that you suppressed it. You just kind of transformed it. So that would be the simplest way to explain what patience would be.

EMN: That's an excellent example, really helpful. And I think it helps me segue into my next question. Because what that example shows us is that the subjective mind is powerful.

VDKR: Yes.

EMN: And it gives us a sense of agency to work with. If we're holding the world responsible for our own wellbeing, we have no agency, we have no power to change anything. We're not in total command of what happens in the world.

VDKR: But in embracing agency, you also have to acknowledge that it's an interplay between the world and yourself. It's not like it's all you. Or it's all the world.

EMN: Thank you for making that very clear. And I think that it's really important to make that distinction. Because yes, of course we're not denying or undermining what's happening in the world. We might even agree that the situation with the one who is having humor, and the one who isn't could be difficult.

VDKR: This is what in the Buddhist teachings we call wisdom. And wisdom has to have some effect. The effect is peace, the effect is pacification of negative emotions. Then there's the skillful means. And the skillful means enhance that wisdom in practical, hands-on situations. Here, it has been humor and taking it in stride. So humor and taking it in stride enhance the wisdom of pacification, of a peaceful solution, and trying stay in the course of the relation or engagement so you're able to go forward.

EMN: Then, if your mind is peaceful, you can come up with a very creative solution that's helpful for everyone—one that's skillful, as you say.

[music]

EMN: I want to share with you what I think is an essential verse from *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. It literally comes into my mind every time I catch myself getting disappointed that the world is not the way I think it should be. Shantideva says: "To cover all the world with sheets of leather, where could such amounts of skin be found? But with the leather soles of just my shoes, it is as though I cover all the earth." The analogy of covering the entire earth with leather points out our unreasonable expectation of the world to provide us with comfort. Shantideva reorients us here by suggesting we simply wear some shoes, and take responsibility for our own minds and actions.

"To cover all the earth with sheets of leather, where could such amounts of skin be found? But with the leather soles of just my shoes, it is as though I cover all the earth."

VDKR: Yes, this is very famous. I think it comes in the context of two layers. Meaning, the layer of what you are working with right now, like there's a provocative situation and it could actually ignite your anger, and a sense of aggression, causing you to make a mess and burn bridges, to destroy relationships and so forth. So seeing that this is not what you want for yourself, not helpful for the relationship, and for the other person. Even if they are provocative, it may not be in their best interest either. So you then decide to work with your own mind to develop certain kinds of patience, taking things with a bit of humor, taking them in stride. To not get retributive.

EMN: To get into an argument.

VDKR: For example, a lot of times, you get into a situation and you get into a conversation. You get into a certain topic and all of a sudden, so much emotion and so much intensity comes out. And you know you're never going to get to clarity, or understanding, or especially to a point of peace. So you might as well as change the topic. And you're changing the topic as a skillful means, knowing that you could preserve the sanity, the connection, the love between you; you could preserve the relationship from going sour. And then it works for the best interest of both.

So in any number of ways, you can work with your mind to pacify any negative reactions that come as a result of getting worked up. If you could somehow let that go--yourself getting worked up--and then let go of the aggression. Which therefore isn't needed as any kind of defense mechanism. It allows the self to be much more agile and flexible. It allows the mind to hold a much bigger perspective, and it allows the self to become much more able to let go of its own usual, tenacious way it has the power to hold you down to get what it wants from you.

So this is just working with the present situation. Now, if this becomes a new habit, if this becomes your new ability to work with any given situation that comes...this is your mind, this is your self. This becomes your strength that later could be used in any given situation. Maybe the situation might be different, but the emotions, that self having such a strong hold on you, but you're able to release yourself from that and be flexible. Not only flexible, but able to hold a bigger picture, and then solicit a wisdom to find ways to work with the situation--from humor to anything and everything else--to serve the purpose but not be distracted by something else in the middle, in between.

VDKR: This is who you are going to be in the future as well. So in that way, you grow so much more confidence in yourself to not only work with this situation, but work with any situation in the future. So you don't have so much paranoia that something might happen. Something might not happen right now, but might happen in the future, and then I'm going to be somehow vulnerable and totally destroyed by the event or the situation. That self confidence that one can develop with the practice of patience, Buddha calls it "a great armor." That is really needed in the world, in your life.

EMN: Rinpoche, could you say that in a way, it's unconditional wellbeing?

VDKR: It's unconditional wellbeing based on your confidence in yourself and your ability.

EMN: Thank you. That's wonderful. The next question I have is about when anger arises, because it's very tricky when anger arises. Sometimes when it arises, it tricks you into feeling like clarity. You think you're right or self-righteous, and sometimes it could begin with some clarity. And at some point it turns into righteous indignation. How do you catch that moment where it is not clear anymore, but it becomes maybe destructive?

VDKR: When you are reacting so strongly, something is happening for sure. What's happening in there, in your perspective, could have some clarity. It's not like it doesn't have a clarity. And you could use that clarity in your life to move forward and change things, to enhance your life or enhance your ability to have a different approach altogether. For what's not working, either you have to find a new ways to work with that so it works, or you have to disengage and move forward so that there is a consistent path for you to be able to meet your own intention.

It doesn't mean that you have to be stuck in the situation forever to be patient, you understand. Patrul Rinpoche, I heard, said something like "you work on your own self, and then it doesn't give you a break." Then you try to have some clear communication and work through things that way, without losing patience. And then if it doesn't work that way either, then, you retreat. The

final result, he said, is a retreat. He didn't say, "you work on yourself all the time in the situation" or "you try to communicate and communicate, and even if it fails, you try, try, try, try, try." Because in many situations, such as very abusive situations, it can actually become impossible, right? So you retreat, he said. I have not read this, but this is what I heard. So what I'm coming back to is when you are upset and you're angry, something is happening. And in your mind, what you are seeing is what psychologists and what most of the Buddhist teachers say is 99% projection and delusion, right?

However, there's that one percent. There may be some clarity too. And there's some understanding, and knowing things have to be different, seeing that it is destructive, and things like that. So those can be very much possible. But the problem is when you go with the emotion, not the clarity--when you go with the emotion that is so self-destructive, that can be so burning, so spiteful, so fiery and hurtful to others. And then it has consequences. Double, triple, maybe a hundred times worse consequences than when you initially felt you had to get it all out because you couldn't bear it anymore. That kind of sensation of the burning in your body, in your mind, what the aggression brings forth--that has to subside. You cannot do things in the midst of that.

As that subsides, whatever clarity that is there, as in initially what you are seeing and what you're perceiving--when everything has calmed down, it's still there without any hindrance as you have perceived it. That could be used to figure things out in terms of what's not working, and getting it to work by trying different approaches and methods. And then if not, to move forward, and to see what would be the best way forward without any kind of big damage.

EMN: That's very helpful. You know, you've talked to me personally about this recently as I was facing something, and I have kind of my own mystery to unravel right now. And I found when I'm able to just relax, and I'm able to do what you just suggested, things kind of work themselves out in a very creative and magical way almost.

VDKR: Yes, in many ways. Patience has merit for it to provide a ground for many things to work, on its own. Or, by the grace of patience, for things to have more grace in themselves to work out.

EMN: That's wonderful, thank you.

I wanted to go back to the baby story. You know, it really haunted me to read this. And of course there's so much beauty when I think of this story on one side, because there's so much compassionate responsiveness to this little helpless being. And also I see Varanasi, and it's such an ancient holy city...the image I have of the lamps burning and the music and the sounds and the smells of this incredible place. Also very chaotic. But there's this whole other side to it that started to emerge as I was contemplating the story.

And that is, well, where are the parents? You know, I was thinking, they're having people put money and food there, but when are they going to retrieve that food? When they come to retrieve that food, hopefully the baby's going to still be there. What was their plan? And then I started to think more about what a strange method that was for earning money. And of course you start to think, well, what kind of parents are those? And then I started to think: actually, the parents must

be very desperate to have to do something. And so it kind of opened and opened and opened into this web of interdependent relationships. So I wanted to ask you about that, because there's a lot of complexity, then, it's very messy. You know, it's a very messy situation if one were to also get involved and try to solve that mystery and help on that level. It could become very complex. So I just wanted to ask you a little bit more about this, because it also brings us into that things are very nuanced. Like you were saying earlier, there are so many causes and conditions, and how to engage such a situation like that. And how maybe looking at the causes and conditions, you've said--when you see how complex these situations are, it doesn't give you as much focus to point your anger.

VDKR: Well, I realized there were parents after a little while. And then I was talking to the shopkeeper, and the mother is very young and the father is a little older. They're very desperate and they do this just for a couple of hours so that they could get some money. I don't think it's the food so much that they're hoping to get, but some money. And actually, even though the parents are very poor and desperate, when you look at the child, you could really see the child is not malnourished or anything like that, looks quite healthy and it was not crying, not crying. So I find out that this is their means for their daily needs. I don't know how long they can keep on doing that. But you get involved, involved only to a certain point before it gets very complex and complicated for you to resolve the situation.

VDKR: And a situation can also not be resolvable. And you could get yourself into a lot of--you know, out of compassion, out of love, whatever you want to do--you also have to take into the equation people's own karma, their own life, their own passions. So Buddhists, you know, we don't try to fix and resolve every situation we encounter to the point of complete perfection. Because maybe you could do something, if you have the kind of connection and you have the karma to bring it to fruition for both parties' satisfaction. For others, you could only go so far and then you have to make aspirations for things to be different in the future. And for the time being, you might not be able to go any further. And you just have to accept that's the limit that it can go.

EMN: Rinpoche, would you say that patience could also be the ability to bear that things are so complex that you only see a little piece of things? Because I was thinking of Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, in which he describes patience as the ability to bear emptiness, or the ability to bear that things are not just relegated to our concepts.

VDKR: When we are talking about the bigger picture of the complexity of the world, and where the world is right now, you may not have a clear path. But you could aspire for a clear path to emerge out of confusion. And out of no solutions, that solutions emerge. If there's always a solution, the solution cannot be creatively produced. If there's always a clear path, the clear path cannot be creatively produced. So out of no solution, out of no clear path, the clear path has to come and the solution has to come. And in that, really, I'm very much a believer in the *dharmadhatu* that is not transfixed--that it can provide that way forward in the path and clarity if we do make aspirations.

EMN: Dharmadhatu would mean just like the natural creative richness of the world?

VDKR: The world of all possibilities in the nature.

EMN: Wonderful. That's very helpful. So Rinpoche, just to conclude, unless there's something else you want to add...

VDKR: This has been a very rich conversation and I appreciate that and I thank you for that. And I hope that your podcast audience also feels the same. And in conclusion, what I would like to say is that I'm a firm believer that patience is what we all need. It's not that I'm claiming that I'm patient, or I have perfected that. But I'm a firm believer that patience is what will make our lives work, and make them peaceful and rich, and help us be able to really enjoy this life and the world with all of the complexities and everything that is going to be in the mix. Thank you.

EMN: Thank you so much.

Thanks to Rinpoche for joining me today. I highly recommend his book *Peaceful Heart*. You can get a copy shambhala.com or anywhere you buy books. Thanks so much for listening. And until next time, keep inquiring!

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It has been a pleasure producing the open question podcast for you. As we begin the second season, we would like to sincerely extend our appreciation for the warm response and feedback we've received from our listeners. Open Question is produced by the [Middle Way Initiative](#), a small non-profit that relies on the interest and donations of listeners like you to continue its mission of encouraging open inquiry. If you can help with any amount, please go to middlewayinitiative.org to make a tax-deductible gift. We hope to continue providing this free monthly podcast into the future. So please join us in the effort by offering whatever you are able.