

LETTING GO OF CODEPENDENCY

Training our thoughts to recondition the way we approach life lies at the heart of Mahayana Buddhism. The teachings can, however, be interpreted

or misinterpreted according to one's psychological conditioning.

Counselor **NGAWANG CHOTAK** shows how, using Kadampa lama Geshe Langri Tangpa Dorje Senghe's *Eight Verses of Thought Training*.



Langri Tangpa received the thought training teachings in the eleventh century from Dromtönpa, a direct disciple and spiritual heart son of Lord Atisha, who originally brought these teachings to Tibet. In an inspired and poetic manner, Langri Tangpa condensed the teachings into eight four-verse stanzas.

Traveling widely throughout Tibet, Langri Tangpa often found himself amid inhospitable and dangerous people, and found the principles expressed in *The Eight Verses* to be his supreme protection. When he finally settled down, his devotees built him a modest meditation gumpa. One day, his attendant told him that he would be visited by one of his main benefactors. He beseeched Langri Tangpa to smile a few times and to show a pleasing appearance so that the benefactor would feel less intimidated and more inclined to be a bit more generous. Langri Tangpa's response was, "Do you want me to smile because a sentient being, who is suffering in the vicious and relentless turning of the wheel of misery, is trying to buy happiness by making offerings to me?" Needless to say the benefactor did not hear any jokes that day! Rather than showing the importance of being somber and without humor, however, I think this demonstrates the seriousness of thought training.

misinterpreting the scriptures



*Whenever those I have benefited
Or in whom I have placed trust and great hope
Inflict injury and terrible harm,
I will see them as my holy guru.*

Any "self-respecting" codependent could get a lot of mileage out of self-defeating behavior through this statement from *The Eight Verses*. They could even have scriptural authority to remain in dysfunctional environments or to continue to indulge in self-deprecating, disempowering views or definitions they have of themselves. The verse also may be used to justify staying in a relationship where there is a hidden, but very real, power struggle being waged.

There are many clinical definitions of codependency, but I will approach codependency as a variety of behavior patterns. In the mental health industry codependency is sometimes referred to as "a second hand life." It is a subtle, complex and potentially a

powerfully debilitating psychological affliction. Its roots are deep and go right to the core of the person.

Generally, the codependent person derives his or her sense of self, or at least a significant part of it, from relationships with other people. In other words, "I define myself in dependence upon my relationship with you." The bedrock for this attitude essentially is a sense of guilt, shame and fear of abandonment. According to the psychodynamic model of personality development, human beings have certain basic needs, which must be met by the primary caregivers (usually the parents) with "ideal frustration." This means that the basic need must be met, but not over met, in order for the child to have a healthy sense of balance and functionality in the world.

Instead, let's say that a child was "parentified" in the family of origin. By this I mean that the child actually became the caregiver at a time of life when he or she should have been the cared for. Hypothetically, let's say that the mother is an alcoholic or addicted to pills, sleeps all day and rarely gets out of bed. The father spends almost all of his time at work or away from home. When he is home, he is often abusive to his addicted wife and daughter. The daughter, who is quickly becoming "parentified," discovers that taking care of her mother mitigates any sense of guilt that she may have. When her verbally abusive father gets home, has a few drinks, and starts telling his wife and daughter how worthless they are, she serves him dinner to please him and earn his praise. This is her way of dealing with a growing sense of shame that derives from the belief that she really is worthless just as her father has been telling her. On top of this, she has to take care of things (her mother, her father and the house) because if she doesn't the whole thing might fall apart and then what would happen to her? The mere thought of this activates a very powerful fear of abandonment. The cruel irony of this is that she has, in fact, already been abandoned. By the age of twelve or so she is the caregiver in a household where developmentally she should really be the cared for.

She grows up with this shame-based self-identity. It would not be unnatural for her to choose an alcohol and/or drug abusing, verbally abusive partner who can't keep his life together on his own. This is because we are creatures of habit. Here, we have examined only the habit patterns that developed in just one life. Of course, as Buddhists, we believe that habit patterns are developed and are carried from life to life.

Photo: Sarah Keen



Most modern schools of Western psychology assert that the contents of the subconscious, both acquired and instinctive, drive behavior unless overridden by a cognitive process. This cognitive process must be enacted and re-enacted with enough consistency to actually recondition the way we make choices and behave. Otherwise when the subconscious determines a course of action it will choose “safety” over “happiness.” Establishing a sense of safety comes first, while happiness is seen as a luxury. Followers of Mahayana Buddhism assert that the quest for happiness and the avoidance of suffering is paramount for *all* sentient beings and is the force that unifies them. How do we reconcile this seeming discrepancy? If there is no clear vision of true happiness in the subconscious or even if there is such a vision but it is obscured or distorted by other contents of the subconscious, then the decision making process that drives behavior defaults to establishing safety. This is because the known or familiar feels “safer” than the unknown and unfamiliar. So this does not at all refute, but actually supports the Mahayana position. A sense of safety is preferable to the profound suffering that is fear of the unknown. In this case the young woman actually feels “safer” in the dysfunctional relationship she’s in because the dynamics of it are all she has known in her life.

One day this young woman attends a Dharma teaching, hears Langri Tangpa’s *Eight Verses*, and is very taken by the Mahayana Buddhist vision of unconditional loving kindness and compassionate wisdom expressed in the verses. However, she does not see the true import of thought training because she does not realize that *all* sentient beings includes her as much as anyone else. She does not see that until she is able to have compassionate love and wisdom with regard to herself, she cannot truly give it to others. We cannot give away what we do not have. This lack of insight with regard to her own situation keeps her from extending it to others. It is difficult for her to have compassionate love for herself because it would mean that she must confront her own suffering and fear, as well as her unfulfilled longing for true happiness and peace.

That night her partner gets home, has a few drinks and calls her a stupid, ugly pig.

Because that day she heard the verse quoted above (“Whenever those I have benefited, etc.”) and she has an undeveloped understanding, she thinks, “Oh, this is my partner acting as my holy guru, teaching me patience and humility. I will never leave him because he is my guru teaching me how to practice Dharma.”

This is not thought training at all. It is pure codependence and has nothing to do with the accurate application of Langri Tangpa’s sacred verse. Let’s look at what’s really going on here. She’s using scriptural authority not to leave her incapable partner (to avoid guilt), to remain in a verbally abusive environment (preserving her shame-based identity) and determines to stay in the relationship (to avoid fear of being alone and feeling abandoned).

An added irony here is that if the situation were to change and be different she may even enact behaviors that would preserve the dysfunctional status quo. It is not uncommon for this to happen. Let’s say that her partner has some sort of epiphany, stops drinking and realizes he has been unkind. He makes amends to her and begins to treat her with respect. This, though it would be logical to think would make her happy, may actually make her feel very uncomfortable. It could even come to the point where she would buy him a bottle of booze and encourage him to have a drink, and then scold him for something in order to provoke abuse. The status quo is then re-established. Her partner again becomes incapable and abusive and she regains power in running the household.

All of these misinterpretations of scripture and other problems arise because she is not seeing through the web of her codependency.

Although I used the somewhat typical scenario of the substance abusing, abusive male partner and the classically codependent female partner, the truth is that codependency is not gender specific in any way. It is an almost pervasive problem in our society. Though it is subtle, it is very harmful and both men and women suffer from its myriad forms in equal numbers. This example may enable you to gain some insight into the complexity and commonality of codependency. If we know how to look for it, we will see it in ourselves and all around us.

Let’s rewrite the scenario. The same young woman hears Langri Tangpa’s *Eight Verses* and has a better understanding. This time she is able to see the depths of her own suffering and fear as well as her unfulfilled longing for true happiness and peace. She realizes that suffering and lack of fulfillment are themes in her life and that she has been tethered to a relentlessly spinning wheel of misery by a false belief system she has regarding her self-identity. She has the insight that she acquired this mistaken belief system growing up in her dysfunctional family of origin, and realizes that this is self-defeating. She sees that as long as she clings to the tether she will continue to be dragged around by the wheel of misery. She will not be able to improve the quality of her own life, much less impart to others anything of true meaning and value.

That night her partner comes home and as usual, has a few drinks and calls her a stupid, ugly pig. This time she sees through the web of her codependency. She looks at her partner and thinks, “My poor partner is so unhappy. No matter how much I have tried to help him and have hoped that our relationship would become meaningful, he only sees me as stupid and ugly. This is not going to change as long as I permit this situation to exist. He truly is my holy guru who now is teaching me that I only take care of him to avoid feeling guilty even though I know I can never really help him this way. He is showing me that I put up with his abuse in order to stay stuck in a shame-based definition I have of myself. Above all, he is teaching me that I have not left him already because I am afraid of being alone and feeling abandoned. Now I can really see him as my holy guru, showing me things about myself that no one else could.” She resolves to leave the relationship. She does this not out of anger, but even with compassion for her partner. She simply understands that without action they will both remain trapped in a vicious circle and neither she nor her partner are going anywhere but down.

She begins the novel experience of living alone. She discovers and develops strengths of character that she never knew she had and enters relationships where she feels truly appreciated. She finds that she is able to be alone with herself and feel unafraid and comfortable with who she is. Her sense of guilt, shame and fear of abandonment subside and her sense of well-being increases. She finds that she can truly be of service to others. Her life opens like a blooming lotus and she becomes a person she never dreamt she could be. Now that’s thought training.

All of these goodnesses came about because she saw as her holy guru the partner she had helped, trusted and hoped for but who only despised and mistreated her in return. Through changing her view of him, she was able to gain insight into the true motives behind her behaviors and to generate the courage to create different causes that beget different results.

I would like to close with Geshe Langri Tangpa’s closing verse of the *Eight Verses of Thought Training*.



*Practicing thus without superstition
Or defiled actions of worldly pursuits
I will become free of all suffering
Through seeing all things as illusory.*

Ngawang Chotak (a.k.a Chris Kolb) works full-time as Director of Special Projects for the Urban Health Study, which conducts research into drug users with HIV. A Tibetan Buddhist for over 30 years, and a monk for six, Chotak has spent several years in solitary retreat under the directions of Lama Yeshe and Trulshik Rinpoche. Currently based in San Francisco, Chotak teaches Buddhism at Tse Chen Ling, at Buddhist centers in Boulder Creek and San Jose, as well as in Iowa, New Orleans, Reno and Arkansas. He also leads therapy groups using meditation, and counsels individuals.



Photo: Grant Jacobs