

A Wedding Talk

“When you think about it, Dad, hope and fear are the same thing.”

Dharma teacher Garret Condon of the New Haven Zen Center gave this talk at the wedding of his daughter, Carolyn Condon and Matthew Jacobs on Sept. 27 at the Trinity College Chapel in Hartford, Connecticut. Garret and fellow dharma teacher John Elias officiated at the ceremony—the first Buddhist wedding at the Trinity College Chapel. They have been advisors to the Trinity College Zen Group, co-sponsored by the chapel and the New Haven Zen Center, for 18 years.

Garret Condon

I'd like to share a few thoughts about this extraordinary couple.

Buddhists have an optimistic view of human beings. We believe that humans are naturally kind and wise. The practice of Buddhism is to see through some of our small-mindedness and rediscover that deepest self—the “big mind” that we share with all beings. Returning to this big mind is what we mean by awakening.

Buddhists talk about enlightenment, and sometimes it sounds mystical and magical. Someone once asked my late teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn, to give a concise definition of Zen Buddhism. He said: “Zen is about understanding your mind and helping other people.” Wisdom and compassion. Very simple—not necessarily easy, but simple.

On this path toward wisdom and compassion, Buddhists identify six so-called paramitas, or perfections, which are really behaviors and virtues, which, if we nurture them, provide the elusive “win-win.” Cultivating these virtues gets us closer to our true selves, and also creates a kinder and more peaceful world around us.

The six perfections are: generosity, morality, effort, meditation, wisdom and patience. Because we are naturally endowed with wisdom and compassion, we all have the seeds of these perfections—and some of us have very healthy plants grown from these seeds. I want to talk briefly about the soon-to-be-married couple and the evidence of the paramitas in their lives.

Generosity

Seven years ago, Matt became acquainted with the Condon family at a turbulent moment in family history. Let's just say there was a lot of suffering and death—some of it tragic, all of it difficult. He didn't really know us and we

didn't know him well. Through it all, Matt had only one phrase on his lips: “How can I help?” And in every case, he helped in any way he could—driving, comforting and sometimes just being present. It was more generosity than I could have mustered at that age, and it reflected not just on Matt's character, but on Willie and Headley's values and the way they had raised their kids.

Morality

Morality in the Buddhist sense is not simply obeying the rules. It's about being able to discern the correct response in every situation. Matt and Carolyn wanted their wedding day to be a statement about their own ethical values, which is why we'll all be eating wonderful vegetarian food later tonight. They just took in a rescue dog who had been badly neglected by his former owners. That little dog is going to have a great life with Matt and Carolyn. I see in both of them the commitment to

act ethically and consciously in their daily lives.

Effort

The perfection of effort is about committing ourselves to putting our energy behind the quest for real wisdom and selfless compassion. It also means that, from moment to moment, we focus on what is right in front of us. If this perfection is the battery that powers the rest, then it's well charged in Matt and Carolyn's case. They bring energy and persistence to their personal, social and professional lives. You need only see Matt pivot and spin from breakfast to conference call, or follow Carolyn as she searches for obscure film footage in the Library of Congress to see constant effort.

Meditation

Living mindfully is at the core of Buddhism. Although

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Photo: Shana Sureck Photography

lunacy? And to whom would we pray for help? Fischer investigates this unlikely slogan by writing:

Bow to your own weakness, your own craziness, your own resistance. Congratulate yourself for them, appreciate them. Truly, it is a marvel, the extent to which we are selfish, confused, lazy, resentful, and so on. We come by these things honestly. We have been well trained to manifest them at every turn.

An ancient sutra says, “It [enlightenment-nature] and dust interpenetrate.” This means that the mind, in all its wonder and lunacy, and inspiration and confusion, is already complete.

“Pray for help” simply means: we are not alone. If we truly perceive this, we can let go of self-centered ideas and turn to others for help—not (only) for oneself, but for all beings. In Korea, Buddhist practitioners sometimes greet one another with “Seong Bul hapshida,” which means “Let’s become Buddhas together!” That’s the spirit of “pray for help.”

A few of the *lojong* slogans, such as “Don’t be a phony,” can hit like a blunt instrument. Let’s face it, when we first begin practice many of us are phonies. We mimic our teacher’s pet phrases and sometimes even their intonations. We model the behavior of older practitioners. In my experience this is a natural process, the process of “praying for help.” But, at some point, we must find our own expression of the buddhadharma. Then, compassion

comes fully alive.

For a Zen practitioner, *lojong* training can seem overly methodical and analytical, and it can present a seductive risk to those who want something from practice. Fischer understands the risks and investigates the *lojong* with humility, insight and wit; these qualities help us understand the profound wisdom behind each slogan.

Taken together, Fischer’s commentaries present a remarkably complete view into *bodhicitta*, the spacious mind of profound compassion. And just as Fischer never forgets the great vow implicit in each slogan, he also never loses sight of his own great vow:

If we are now facing hard times, much better to face them with patient, compassionate hearts than with fear and panic. We have always needed one another. Our love for one another is both natural to us and something we need to strengthen through cultivation. We need sermons we can understand and use. We need many reminders and encouragements.

Life asks so much and we so often fall short. The developers of the *lojong* mind-training system surely knew this. Yet they also knew that compassion is a profoundly human quality, fully attainable by each person.

Fischer’s book explores how to bring just a little more compassion into everyday life. A little more would matter a lot. ♦

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Carolyn and Matt don’t have a formal Buddhist practice, both have been involved in what I would call meditative activities: Carolyn in yoga and Matt in martial arts. There is more work there for them to do. Remember, there is nothing specifically Buddhist about mindfulness—there are many different paths to the same reservoir of wisdom and love. It doesn’t always involve going to a zendo or a church or an ashram. Sometimes it means stopping and listening to the rain.

Wisdom

When Carolyn was about seven, she and I were sitting at the kitchen table in our apartment on Dover Road in West Hartford. I was reading a magazine and she was coloring with crayons. At one point, she stopped and looked up and said, “When you think about it, Dad, hope and fear are the same thing.” I looked up, thought about what she had just said and I responded, “Aren’t you seven? How do you come up with this stuff?” And this is one of many such examples. I had to become a Buddhist just to keep up. So, I think between them, there are many seeds of wisdom to cultivate.

Patience

Finally, there is patience. Well, it took them seven years to get here, so I guess they have plenty of patience!

Marriage Vows

We vow in our married life together to continually break through our preconceived views of each other and see clearly.

We vow to let go of feelings that arise from selfish desires, attachments, and fears, so that we can open our hearts to one another.

We vow to be compassionate with one another and with all beings.

We vow to practice peaceful and ethical occupations and to support each other in our work.

We vow to support one another in creating a compassionate and loving home.

We vow to always be mindful of each other and to let go of our ideas and beliefs so that we can see each other clearly.

We vow to encourage each other to walk the bodhisattva path together. ♦