

INTERVIEW

From Hatred to Compassion: An Interview With
Thupten Phelgye

Joanie Eppinga

Thupten Phelgye was born in Tibet in 1957. He remembers the chaos brought by the Chinese invasion of his country in 1959. After several failed attempts to escape that resulted in their being placed in concentration camps, Phelgye's parents managed to travel with him to India. There Phelgye heard His Holiness the Dalai Lama explicate four lines of a sutra, an experience that changed his life. He became a monk and, after an individual audience with the Dalai Lama at the age of 17, went into isolation for five years. Since rejoining society he has worked hard to better the lot of his people and of animals, encouraging a vegetarian diet. Phelgye founded the Universal Compassion movement and now represents the Dalai Lama in the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. He spoke briefly with our editor about the transcendence of hatred at Gonzaga University on October 15, 2008.

EPPINGA: *The famous British nurse Florence Nightingale, who nursed hundreds of men under filthy conditions during the Crimean War, was asked what motivated her to do so. She replied, "Rage." Do you think hatred or anger can be used to a good purpose?*

PHELGYE: Can anger and rage be used to a good purpose? Yes. It's possible. A simple example; if I happened to encounter a terrorist who was about to bomb a big city, if I tried to convince him not to, it wouldn't work. If I found that the only way to stop the big disaster was to finish him right then, I would do so in order to stop the big disaster. I must choose the killing of one person to stop the killing of many people, even though killing is not good. In order to do this, of course, I could use anger as a tool. So anger can be used for a good purpose.

EPPINGA: *Our Institute is called the Institute for Action Against Hate. Many people object to our name. They don't like the word "hate"; they say, "Why don't you be the Institute for Peace?"*

PHELGYE: I think it's an excellent name. When I came to hear about your Institute I was really very touched. It's very good. Individual words don't always make much sense. Words mean a lot, but you have to take the over-

all sense of the words. I think it's a wonderful name. You cannot make everyone happy. In a community you always have differences of thinking.

EPPINGA: *In Western psychology, the belief is often expressed that if a person is feeling anger, it needs to be expressed in some manner—whether through artwork or a direct confrontation or in some other way—before the person can be rid of it. Do you think this is true?*

PHELGYE: I wouldn't say this is *not* true. It is a way to get a simple relief for that very moment. It could be a technique to get ease at that particular moment. It is not a solution to actually heal the anger.

EPPINGA: *How do we actually heal the anger?*

PHELGYE: Usually in Tibetan Buddhism we always work with antidotes—the opposite emotion. If you want to work on something, you apply the opposite.

EPPINGA: *That takes a great deal of emotional discipline.*

PHELGYE: Yes. Yes.

EPPINGA: *When a person gets angry, there are physical reactions. Muscles get tight, the heart beats faster, blood pressure rises. What should we do with these responses?*

PHELGYE: Physical reactions take place following mental disturbance. If you work with the mental disturbance, the physical disturbance will dissipate. You have to try to find balance. We work with antidotes.

EPPINGA: *Would you suggest replacing a negative thought with a positive thought?*

PHELGYE: Basically, to work with anger and hatred, the antidote would be compassion. Try to generate compassion, forgiveness, toward the cause or the person you have this negative emotion with. Try to find out a way to feel compassion.

EPPINGA: *What if you can't find one?*

PHELGYE: You will. There are techniques.

EPPINGA: *Can you explain what they're like?*

PHELGYE: Let me put it like this: Someone who is expressing anger is making a mistake. Someone who makes a mistake through anger or

hatred—immediately we say, “He did this!” “She did that!” But if you really look into it—it’s not him or her that is doing this. At that very moment he or she is suffering from anger. Ignorance is the real cause. That is the real cause that blinds you from seeing what is right and what is wrong, and that causes you to be angry or hateful, and at that very moment this person, whoever it is, is severely suffering from this anger and hatred. At that very moment this person is really one that you should feel compassion toward. Instead of getting angry against him or her—if you see a boy or a girl, whoever it is—he is really going through a hard time; he is completely disturbed. If you take it that way, from that angle, that attitude, you will start feeling compassion for this person. You may have anger right away, but you will start feeling compassion. This is the real solution.

EPPINGA: *If you are able to generate and feel compassion for this person who is doing the hateful thing, do you see that actually having an effect on that person or in the world?*

PHELGYE: Absolutely. You can feel it. You can feel how it works immediately. Instead of getting angry with this person, you have compassion. You see his lack of patience and his severe suffering; this is how that anger caused him or her to behave this way. This concept completely changes your negative feeling and you feel compassionate. If you are wise, you say maybe, “Okay, this is maybe not the right time for me to be here, to interrupt. Maybe I should give this person some space.” Instead of going against, you try to *heal* him or her. Then it actually heals in a long-lasting way.

EPPINGA: *But sometimes you don’t see it right away.*

PHELGYE: Of course, it’s not easy! This is the hardest practice! It takes time and it takes a lot of effort. It’s not easy. Things *aren’t* easy. We dedicate our entire lives in Buddhdom to practicing. And we find it very hard—not easy! Nevertheless, it does help you tremendously.

EPPINGA: *Do you think the strongest thing we can do to fight against hatred is to develop compassion?*

PHELGYE: Absolutely. Absolutely. Try to think of ways to forgive. Understand that he or she is really under severe suffering from the cause of the anger or hatred. If you are intelligent enough to know that they have this problem ahead of time, you are able to save yourself: you are able to keep yourself from undergoing anger and hatred, and you are able to help heal him or her. Otherwise, normally, if someone tries to hurt you, you try to hurt them back. You cannot tolerate it. And then you have: there’s a fire,

and *there's* a fire, and the fire goes on! When you see a fire there, instead of adding fire on, use the antidote, like water. You cool it down. That means *you* don't catch fire.