



“I wish I’d had the courage to LIVE A LIFE TRUE TO MYSELF, not the life others expected of me”

Our new columnist, the venerable Robina Courtin is an outspoken, tough and fiery Buddhist nun. Each month she answers your questions about Buddhism in a modern world. For December, it’s why you mustn’t live your life for others

I mentioned this last month: the top regret of people interviewed by nurse Bronnie Ware in her book *The Five Top Regrets of the Dying* (Hay House). Well, let’s learn from this and apply it right now, while we’re alive. The words sound easy, but the application of them, once we start to unpack the ideas, is incredibly difficult.

And we can misunderstand them, too. One of the most common misconceptions is that it’s selfish not to fulfil other people’s expectations. We can spend our lives acting like nice, kind individuals, helping others, and being good mothers, partners and friends, but this behaviour, which is good in itself, is often propelled by the fear of upsetting others, and our need to be seen as a nice person.

Buddhist psychology refers to this as ‘attachment to reputation’. It’s probably more powerful than our need for security, food, power, money, sex and the rest. It’s so pervasive, we rarely notice it. Yet it underlies most of our actions. It’s almost as if we have no other way to define ourselves except in terms of how we’re seen by others.

Look at how we feel when someone doesn’t approve of us – even a person we don’t especially care about. It’s unbearable! It’s logically true that we are who we are within ourselves, not what people think – but it’s so hard to have the courage to believe it.

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And this is only the small stuff. Look at how hard it is when it comes to making the big decisions: leaving your husband, changing jobs, finishing an old friendship that isn’t productive – we’re terrified to even go there! Why? Because we’re worried about what people think.

The first step in the process is to ask yourself: ‘What do I want?’ Really think about it, and look inside for the answers. Many of us are too scared to even contemplate the question – and already thinking: ‘No, that’s not possible. I can’t do that, I shouldn’t do that’. It involves (and requires) great courage and self-respect to even go there. But we have no choice: if you don’t know what you really want, who does? You have to be the boss of your own life.

But how do you know if what you want is the right thing? I remember the Dalai Lama once said we should always aspire to do what is most beneficial, and (if we can) try to think of this in the long-term rather than short one.

In other words, we need to get our motivations right: our reasons for doing things is what counts, not always the actions themselves.

For example, someone might give a gift, but mainly due to their craving for approval. Another person, let’s say, might leave her kids for a week to do some training for her job, but with the motivation of improving her skills, so she can take better care of her family. The first individual helped someone else, but not herself at all. While the second



Robina is teaching in London, Somerset, Scotland, France, Denmark and Sweden this month. See her schedule at robinacourtin.com.

not only helped others in the long-term, but grew as a person herself as well.

A bird needs two wings, remember: wisdom and compassion.

Of course, it’s hard to make the tough choices. There’s so much disruption and pain involved in leaving that partner, let’s say. But the long-term suffering of fear, hopelessness depression, guilt, unhappiness and resentment are far, far worse.

We really do need to be brave. ‘What do you want?’ ‘What is the right thing to do?’ Once we can ask those questions, the rest will follow. The deeper we look inside, the more we’ll aspire to do what is most beneficial, and the greater courage we’ll have to make the right choices. So much pleasure and fulfillment comes from that!

BIOGRAPHY



Australian-born Tibetan Buddhist nun Robina Courtin travels the world teaching Buddhist psychology and philosophy and helping those in need. Well-known for her work for 14 years with people in prisons in the US and Australia, including inmates on death row, Robina’s life and work is the subject of Amiel Courtin-Wilson’s award-winning film *Chasing Buddha*. Visit robinacourtin.com