

Interview with Venerable Thubten Chodron

By Robert Sachs

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Robert:

Thank-you Venerable Chodron, for being willing to participate in this book project.

From the questionnaire that I sent you, you can see that parts of it have to do with seeking understanding from the various teachers on a Buddhist philosophical and cosmological understanding of the times we live in. So, for example, I have received answers from many of the teachers about their perspective on what in Buddhism is called a “dark age” and whether or not they think we are – in fact – in a Dark Age and what that means practically speaking. Then there is my desire to get more ordinary, personal perspectives on the kinds of issues that the average person would hear about if they turn on FOX News or CNN: fundamentalism, terrorism, global warming, and various other issues and their buzzwords that create tension and strife in our culture and society. I would like you to feel comfortable in sharing your perspectives on such philosophical and practical issues based on your training and life experience, knowing that the intention of this book is to reach a general – rather than Buddhist – audience.

To begin, what are your thoughts about the notion of a “dark age?”

Venerable Chodron:

I have heard this time being described as a “degenerate age” rather than dark age. I try to be sensitive to terminology and not use the word “dark” to mean “negative.”

The thought training teachings describe our time as a “degenerate age,” in the sense that sentient beings’ disturbing emotions and wrong views are strong. The Kalachakra teachings prophesize a devastating war, but the good forces from the kingdom of Shambhala are to win the day.

To tell you the truth, I don’t find this way of thinking helpful. I do not let my mind adopt the way of thinking that says, “This is a degenerate age. Things are getting worse and everything is falling apart. There is so much wrong with the world – so much war and horror. What a terrible state we are in!” I don’t find that frame of mind helpful. The media plays on the fear and dread that come from adopting that view, the “It’s the end of the world” Armageddon way of thinking. I don’t buy into it. So, from my perspective, is it a “degenerate time?” To be frank, all of *samsara* (cyclic existence) is degenerate. Samsara, by definition, is basically flawed. If we expect perfection, then anything will appear degenerate in contrast. However, if we give up the unrealistic expectations that somehow sentient beings plagued by ignorance, hostility, and attachment will live in a perfect world, we’ll see goodness around us and will be able to increase that goodness. In addition, we’ll aim for real happiness, which is not to be found in *samsara*.

Actual joy is born from transforming our minds, from spiritual practice that increases wisdom and compassion.

The situation we're in is what we are in. It exists due to the karma we created in the past. It is also an opportunity for us to act for the benefit of others; to contribute to the well-being of others in the world and create good karma that will influence our future experiences. Accepting the situation for what it is and seeing it as the environment in which we will develop equal love and compassion for all sentient beings brings more happiness now. It also enables us to create the causes for future happiness.

The reason why I really recoil from this terminology of "dark" or "degenerate" age is that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. This way of thinking makes us suspicious and afraid, which creates more ill will in society. The media plays on our fear and the American public buys into it. I refuse to accept that worldview. It is neither accurate nor beneficial.

Robert:

In that regard, Venerable, if you see what we are exposed to by the media regarding our current time as hype and that people are buying into it, beyond the methods of contemplation and meditation encouraged by Buddhist tradition, how else would you inoculate people to become more resistant to that kind of indoctrination which is freaking them out?

Venerable Chodron:

The first thing I would tell them is to turn off the television set and the radio and to get in touch with the goodness and willingness to help that they have inside. People need to be much more careful and mindful of how they relate to the media and how they allow media to influence their lives and the lives of their children. The media persuades us of a worldview that is false. What is that worldview? Having more possessions will make you happy. Having more sex will make you happy. Telling off the people who harm you will make you happy. The more money you have, the more successful you are. Terrorists, rapists, and kidnappers are around the corner, trying to harm you, so don't trust anyone. Bombing your enemies will bring peace. Is this true? All we need to do is look at our own experience and we'll see that it is not true.

People are exposed to hundreds, if not thousands, of advertisements daily. The underlying theme of these advertisements is, "You are deficient as you are. You need something that you don't have. You need to be different than you are." They give us the message that happiness is outside of ourselves. It has nothing to do with who we are on the inside. All of those messages tell us that to be happy, you have to be young and have a lot of sex, because sex is the ultimate happiness. To be attractive sexually, you have to wear certain clothes, drive a particular type of car, look a certain way, and so on. Is any of this true? We idolize youth, but no one is getting younger; we're all aging. Are people really happier having more sex? Or does this worldview make people more fearful of being inadequate or unattractive?

This consumerist worldview feeds attachment and dissatisfaction. When we don't get what we want (because we are supposed to want all of those things outside ourselves – consumer products, sex, people, love, whatever), then we get angry. From anger come many of the other problems we see in society.

Those of us who don't want to have this worldview will pay attention to how the media conditions us, and we will thoughtfully, and with discernment, consciously choose how we let the media influence us. We deliberately remind ourselves daily of what we believe and how we want to train our mind. The disadvantages of adopting the worldview that believes that objects of attachment will make us happy is that if we don't get what we want, we think we have every right to take it from somebody else or to destroy whoever impedes us from getting what we want. This is what is enacted on television programs. They're all about attachment and violence. When we watch them, they condition us with their worldview and as a result, our greed and anger increase. Such clinging attachment and anger motivate us to act in harmful ways. Not seeing that our own harmful emotions create discord, inequality, and injustice, we label this a "degenerate age" and think that others are the source of the problem. Thinking the world is in an awful state makes us despair and fall into depression. We medicate these feelings by being greedy and buying more things or by having an extramarital affair. Or we think that expressing them will alleviate the bad feelings, so we get angry and shout at our family. Or we drink and drug and do all of the above. And thus the cycle continues.

If we don't have that worldview or don't want to be conditioned by that worldview, we avoid reading the magazines and newspapers or watching the TV programs that propagate dissatisfaction, fear, and violence. When we meet people who have been conditioned by that worldview, we are aware that they mean well but we don't follow their advice. For example, let's say you prefer to spend time talking to your children instead of climbing the corporate ladder, and other people say to you, "What do you mean you prefer to work at a lower paying job so that you'll have more free time? You should hard now and then retire early and enjoy." With wisdom, you see that it's not that simple, that if you work hard now you'll wind up with more commitments and obligations. In the meantime, your children will grow up and you'll miss out on really getting to know them. You'll miss out on helping them to grow up to be kind human beings who feel loved and who know how to give love to others. So keeping your priorities clear in your mind, you do what is important and don't mind what others say about your life.

I advocate that we live according to our values. To know what our values are, we need time to reflect, and to have that time, we need to disengage from the TV, radio, Internet. Nowadays that can be hard. People have so much sense stimulation from the time they are children that they have forgotten how to be peaceful and quiet. In fact, they feel strange if there is not an abundance of noise and activity around.

We don't watch TV at Sravasti Abbey where I live. Because I travel a lot to teach, once in a while I'll watch part of a movie on the transoceanic flights. The scenes change so much faster than when I was a kid, and I can't keep up. Because kids are used to watching the scenes in movies change so quickly, it's no wonder that there is so much ADD or ADHD

Robert:

Or that they expect things to happen immediately.

Venerable Chodron:

Yes. Everything happens so quickly. So, you become conditioned like that from the time you are very little and you are hooked on a diet of sensory over-stimulation. As a result, you are out of touch with who you are. You have not taken the time to ask yourself what you really believe because the consumer society is constantly conditioning you and giving you an identity. This is especially true in the West, but it is happening more and more in the developing world as well. There is never any time to stop and think, “Do I believe what they are telling me?” and “What do I think is important in my life?” and “What do I want to be the meaning of my life?”

In brief, there are two factors. The first is that we are conditioned by society and its value, and secondly, we buy into the conditioning and do not think for ourselves about what is important. Then, in fact, we become part of the society that conditions children and adults to be overly busy. The situation cycles on from there.

Instead, we should think about what we believe and live according to it as much as we can. We don't propagate our worldview by standing on street corners, but if we walk our talk, people who are open will notice it and connect with us. That happens to me a lot when I travel. I'm just being me, but people see the monastic robes and I guess they watch how I act and they'll come up and ask questions or talk to me about their lives.

Robert:

What you are saying is quite practical. I see that you are not talking about any intensive meditative practice per se, but rather the simple willingness to be more active in your own life regarding the influences you have in your life. You're asking us to think about whether we want those influences or not, and then to take some time to actually reflect on what really matters to us as a person. For example, when we watch TV, we can examine how what we are watching makes us feel and whether or not it agrees with or supports what we believe about life.

Venerable Chodron:

Yes.

Robert:

I noted your comment about not going onto the street corner with your beliefs. This segues into a question I have about fundamentalism, because I observe that if people are not being inundated with a consumer, material-based worldview, and if they do not have some tradition or education to develop their abilities to be more contemplative, there is the tendency in our society to seek more simplistic answers. Thus, there appears to be a growing interest in fundamentalist views in the world. What are your thoughts on this and how you think fundamentalism is influencing our current situation?

Venerable Chodron:

Fundamentalism is a reaction to modernity. Things have changed so quickly due to technology. The structure of the family has been challenged and has disintegrated due to the pressures of the global economy. The comfort of small communities and community life has changed due to transportation and telecommunications that enables us to go to places we couldn't visit before and to communicate with people who we don't live with all over the world. So how people think of themselves has changed. Most people don't really have a sense of who they want to be. They

are fed a stream of television propaganda about what they are supposed to be. But, nobody is that. Everybody looks at the characters on TV shows or in movies and thinks, “I should be like them, but I am not like them. They are young and attractive and interesting; I’m aging and not such an interesting person.” People think that they should be other than who they are, but they can’t be that gorgeous beauty or that spectacular athlete that they see on TV or in magazines. So they look for something that will give them an identity, someone who will tell them what to be and what to do in order to worthwhile.

If you join a group that has a strong identity, then as an individual you will have an identity. In addition, you will have a group to belong to; you won’t be alone in this confusing world with all of its choices. You will be protected from the “bad” people who lurk behind every corner. Furthermore, you will have a purpose that seems to be more meaningful than just consuming more and more.

A lot of religious fundamentalism is a reaction to being overly stimulated by the message that “Craving and desire bring happiness”—this message that brings on dissatisfaction and thus depression. In addition, fundamentalism provides a very quick solution to your scattered social life and a simplistic analysis of what is wrong and how to remedy it. When you feel dislocated, simplistic doctrine taught by a powerful leader gives you a feeling of belonging, a feeling of meaning, and some direction in life. Because you have been conditioned by the media to not think so much, then the leaders of fundamentalist movements can tell you things and you don’t do much analysis. You follow because it’s easy, because they are a symbol of power when you feel confused. In any case, you are not used to thinking deeply about things. Only now instead of the media feeding you a version of reality, the fundamentalist movement is.

While it superficially seems that there are so many fundamentalist movements, actually they are all very similar. If there were a convention of fundamentalists from all over the world, I think they would get along very well because they think alike. They just have different beliefs and names that they latch onto, different causes that they are attached to, but their way of thinking is remarkably alike.

Robert:

So in that regard, you don’t see much of a difference between the various fundamentalist movements worldwide?

Venerable Chodron:

Not too much. They hold different beliefs and have somewhat different conditioning due to the different scriptures, cultures, and circumstances. But in the sense of offering a simple analysis in which the problems we face are due to other people and the solution is to follow the instructions of an external authority—be it God, Allah, or a political or religious leader—they are very similar. People are looking for meaning and direction in life and would like to have a quick and relatively easy solution to problems. From this viewpoint, we can see there are also fundamentalist Democrats, fundamentalist Buddhists, and even fundamentalist vegetarians! It all boils down to the belief that problems are due to other people and their ignorance, and the solution is to convince others of the correctness of one’s own views. Why should others hold one’s own views? Because they are the correct ones.

Fundamentalists of all types believe they are being compassionate in their words and actions. They don't see what they are thinking and doing as intolerant, but truly believe that it is their duty to convert everyone to their way of thinking. They think, "My way thinking is the right way. I have compassion and care for you, therefore I am going to try and get you to think the way I think." Violent fundamentalists believe that they are being compassionate in freeing the world from what they consider harmful people who have dangerous beliefs (i.e. beliefs that are different from one's own). But the way fundamentalists go about their conversion attempts is permeated with disrespect for others' cultures, beliefs, customs, habits, and in some cases others' physical safety.

One thing that attracted me to Buddhism was my teachers saying that a diversity of religions is good. Why? Because people have different dispositions and interests. One religion is not capable of meeting the needs of everyone, whereas if there is a diversity, then people can choose the religious beliefs that make the most sense to them. Since all religions teach ethical conduct and kindness to others, people will practice these if they understand the meaning of their own religion correctly. Of course, if people don't understand the purpose of their own religion or actively misunderstand it, it's another case all together.

In the light of honoring diversity, I must say that what I say in this interview are my personal opinions. Please do not confuse my personal opinions on political and social matters with Buddhist doctrine. Buddhists are free to vote for whom they wish; we do not have a social and political dogma that everyone must adhere to in order to be Buddhists. I'm simply applying what I know of Buddhist principles and values to the questions you pose. Other Buddhists may have other ideas. These are all our personal opinions.

Robert:

And to some extent they think, "I am doing you a favor if I annihilate you because as an infidel, you would never go to heaven anyway." Looking at the current wars and debacle in the Middle East, some have likened it to being a modern Crusades-like situation, a battle between fundamentalist Christianity and Islam. Some have made it more specific in saying that it is war between the fundamentalist American administration and Islam. Others look at this as just a cover for what they think is really going on, that being modern corporate greed. From your perspective, what do you see as the primary factors in this conflict? How much do you think it just boils down to war profiteering and corporate greed or a real battle of fundamentalist ideologies? Or, is it a combination of the two?

Venerable Chodron:

In college I majored in history where we were asked to consider these various factors. As a young person, I was shocked to discover that in European history, during almost every generation people killed each other in the name of God. There were so many religious wars and in some cases, they were masks for leaders' greed for wealth and power. I think the roots of such problems go much deeper than just religious philosophy and much deeper than just corporate greed. It seems to me that it has to do with people's need to feel worthwhile and respected. Our self-grasping ignorance wants recognition that we exist and that we are worthwhile. According to

society's values, one way to gain respect and a feeling of self-worth is to have possessions. I am not saying that that is correct, but that's the way people think.

Several centuries ago, the Islamic world was much more advanced than the western world, more cultured and economically well to do. Minorities and women generally had more freedom in Islamic countries than in Christian ones. But the Industrial Revolution in the West changed the relationship between Islamic and Christian countries. Europe surged ahead materially and Islamic countries had a hard time catching up. This brought on feelings of inferiority because they lacked the same technology, industrial products, and consumer goods. Meanwhile the West dove into materialism and consumerism, which we see has harmed family structure, increased substance abuse and sexual freedom/promiscuity (depending on how you see it). Muslims look at this and think, "We are not respected because we haven't caught up materially, but we don't want the cultural disintegration that materialism and consumerism have brought about in the West." There is no other model for how to modernize—how to take the best from technology and the best of traditional values. This sets the stage for Islamic fundamentalism. I believe people in the USA who have turned to fundamental Christianity feel the same displacement in the modern world. Technology is bringing a great deal of change very quickly, and as societies we have not thought of where we are going with this. People are looking for something secure and predictable. They are also searching for some ethical standards and common customs that bring them together.

Robert:

Would you say this is also an underlying matter of just plain human pride?

Venerable Chodron:

Yes, that is involved as well. So often, people would much rather die to protect their honor than risk their life to guard their possessions. Honor is your worth, your value as a human being; it is more valuable than possessions.

I'm not justifying fundamentalism, but if we can understand how the people who turn to it think, we will be able to communicate with them better. See it from their side: they don't have what the Western world has materially and their traditional ways of life—the emphasis on family, the traditional power structure in society—is being challenged by the West. How can Islamic societies see themselves as worthwhile and worthy of respect in their own and others' eyes? This may be part of the issue from the Islamic side.

From the side of the West—particularly in my country, the USA—there is a lot of greed and arrogance. We arrogantly flaunt our material and technological success, and unfortunately we export the worst part of our culture, not the best. I've traveled in and lived in third world countries. What do they see when they finally get TV in their village? American movies with sex, violence, and extraordinary opulence. Kung fu movies. What about exporting our compassion, our respect for cultural diversity? What about enacting our values of justice and equality in our foreign policy?

I don't think the conflict in the Middle East has to do with our wanting Iraqis, Palestinians, and others to have democracy and freedom. After all, the current administration is curtailing

democracy, freedom, and justice in our own country! It seems to me that the conflict in the Middle East and Iraq is over oil and although I am loathe to say this...

Robert:

I guarantee you, Venerable, that if you are about to make a politically incorrect statement, considering some of the other comments from Rinpoches and teachers, you are in good company. (laughter)

Venerable Chodron:

Okay, from my personal observation on a human level, I think that George W. Bush had a personal grudge against Saddam Hussein arising because his father did not unseat Hussein. Of course, Bush was not consciously aware of it: most people think they have good motivations. Bush believes that what he is doing is right.

In addition, the American public is attached to its comfortable lifestyle that depends on oil. We are unwilling to cut back on our oil use and consumer goods—in short on our disproportional consumption of the world's resources—in order to share with other people in the world. That has fueled the war as well.

Robert:

Looking at the notion of terrorism and the way it is being used in the media, how would you define this word and what a terrorist act is?

Venerable Chodron:

Terrorism is in the eye of the beholder. I was born Jewish, part of the first generation of Jews born after the Holocaust. As a result, supporting the underdog, helping those who were persecuted or oppressed were very much a part of my upbringing

In the late 1990s, some Israeli Dharma practitioners in India invited me to go to Israel to teach the Dharma and I happily accepted. Most Israeli Buddhists are liberal politically, like American convert Buddhists. On one of the visits to Israel, some of my friends took me to an old British prison in the north of Israel where the British had imprisoned many Jews who wanted Israel to become a nation and were working in various ways towards that goal. Some of them were Zionists who fought the British in order to be able to stay in Palestine. They were arrested, sentenced, and executed at this prison. This prison is now a museum commemorating the struggle for independence. In it was the place where these Jews were hung, and on the walls were pictures of these men together with the stories of what they did and why the British arrested them and imprisoned them. Some of them had sabotaged British officials, attacked buses, and planned bombings. After reading some of their stories, I turned to my friends and commented, "These guys were terrorists, weren't they?" And my friends looked shocked and one of them said, "No, they were patriots."

That is why I said terrorism is in the eye of the beholder. What one person considers terrorism, another considers patriotism. For example, wasn't the Boston Tea Party terrorism? Weren't some of the Europeans attacks on the Native Americans terrorism? Terrorism is labeled from the perspective of the people who receive harm that they felt was unfair, harsh, and harmed civilians.

Seen from that perspective, terrorism is not anything new. What is new is that it is the first time that middle class America is experiencing it.

Robert:

One of the hopes for this book is that it will go to countries and be read by people who might be finding themselves in situations with acts of terror happening around them; where they witness bombings and on a day-to-day basis may suffer personal fear of an act that might harm them or the people that they love. What would you encourage people in those situations to do? In many of the “hot spots” on the planet—Iraq, Darfur, and other places—it does not seem that such terror is going to go away soon. In what ways can we help people to cope with these situations?

Venerable Chodron:

I have never experienced what people in Iraq are experiencing, so I don't know if I could give advice that would be helpful.

Robert:

I appreciate your candor, Venerable. But at the same time, when you go to Israel, you have met people who live in Tel Aviv and have to make choices as to which bus they feel most safe on and which market they feel safest going to for groceries.

Venerable Chodron:

In a way, I think it is a little presumptuous of me to give advice about a situation that I have not lived through. My suggestions would be merely theoretical, never having had to face those challenges myself.

Having said that, if I ask myself – and I have definitely thought about this – what would happen if I were in that situation? Circumstances can change very quickly and without notice, I could find myself in that situation. So I think about what I would say or do if I were to be faced with a terrorist activity of some sort or a fearful situation – how would I practice? From this perspective, I could share with others ideas I've had about how I could bring my Dharma practice into that type of situation. Of course, when a frightful event happens, we're never sure that we will have the presence of mind to think of Dharma methods, or if we will fall back on old habits of fear and panic. So I'm not going to pretend to be sure that I'd able to practice what I preach.

Robert:

You're just walking us through your own process.

Venerable Chodron:

Yes. I would try to focus on the kindness of sentient beings – which sounds like the total opposite of what is happening in that situation. But, that is exactly the point. What is the opposite of hatred, fear, panic, and angry—the emotions that would automatically arise in the minds of most of us? Strong positive emotions are needed, and in this case, I would try to remember the kindness of sentient beings and generate feelings of warmth, affection, and compassion for them. From a Buddhist perspective, when we look back over beginningless previous lives, we see that all sentient beings have been our parents, friends, and relatives and have been kind to us. They

brought up us and taught us all the skills we have. In addition, in this life, too, everyone has been kind; we are intricately interrelated in society and we depend on others for our food, clothing, shelter, and medicine—the four requisites for life. When we are aware of being the recipient of such tremendous kindness from others, automatically we feel kindly in return. In addition, when we think that all sentient beings are just like us in wanting to be happy and to be free from suffering, we can't push them away mentally or emotionally.

When we think they are bound by their ignorance, mental afflictions, and karma, compassion naturally arises. I would see that the people who are trying to hurt me are suffering at that very moment and that's why they are doing what they are doing. If they were happy, they wouldn't be doing what they are doing. Nobody harms anyone when they are happy. So these people are unhappy. I know what it's like to be miserable and this is what these people are experiencing even though they may mask it by threatening others in order to feel powerful. So actually, compassion is a more appropriate response than fear and hatred to those who are suffering.

If I can feel that kind of equality with them – that we all want to be happy and free of suffering, that we are in this boat of samsara together – and if I can see them as having been kind to me in the past, then my mind will not make them into an enemy. And, if my mind does not make them into an enemy, I won't feel afraid. The feeling of fear is the biggest terror of terrorism. If you get hurt, that event doesn't last for a long time. But fear can last a long time and causes tremendous suffering. We fear what has not happened; we fear what does not yet exist. That fear is a product of our mind. Nevertheless, fear is excruciatingly painful. So in a dangerous situation, I would do my utmost to avoid letting my mind fall into a state of fear.

When we feel kind towards others, with love and compassion in our hearts, there is no space for fear or anger. Then there is peace in our hearts. Fear and hatred won't solve the problem of being in a stressful situation in which our life is in danger. In fact, they will make it worse: first, we aren't thinking clearly and could easily do something that exacerbates the situation. Second, even if I were to die, I would rather die with compassion and a free heart, not with anger.

Those are the methods I would use to deal with a threatening person or people: think of their kindness, remember that they are suffering, contemplate that we are equal in wanting happiness and not wanting suffering. More specifically, from my Buddhist training, I would remind myself of their Buddha potential: that these people possess the clear light mind, they have the empty nature of the mind. Under all the commotion of their lives and the chaos of the situation is buried the primordial clear light mind. If they could realize that, all this confusion wouldn't be going on. However, being completely overwhelmed by ignorance, anger, and attachment at this very moment, even though they want happiness they are creating the causes of unhappiness for themselves and for others. So, there is nobody to hate here. How can we hate people who are overwhelmed by ignorance and mental afflictions and aren't even aware that they are harming themselves by harming others?

In addition, these living beings are just karmic appearances. If I could see them as such, there would be space in my mind; I would not be grasping so strongly to the view of inherent existence. I would see that they are not solid, "concrete" people. In fact, they are karmic bubbles. And I, too, am a karmic bubble, just an appearance created by causes and conditions.

Furthermore, our karma brought us together: my karma definitely had a role in putting me in this situation and since the situation is unpleasant, certainly it was negative karma created by my self-centered attitude that is the culprit. So here we are, two karmic bubbles wandering in the confusion of samsara. There is nobody to hate here. There is nobody to be afraid of. It's a situation that calls for compassion above all else.

Robert:

In some ways you are giving the reader a variation on the Four Immeasurables (Editor: A classic Mahayana prayer that reads, "May all beings happiness and its causes. May all beings be free from suffering and its causes. May they never be separated from the great happiness free of suffering. May they dwell in equanimity free from attachment, aggression, and prejudice."). You are also implying that if someone took time each day to practice mindfulness of those four, their mind would be clearer and more compassionate. In that case, when they left their house, they wouldn't be so afraid. If they faced a dangerous situation, they might just have more resourcefulness to act more constructively and wisely than the average person caught in their own panic. They might be able to prevent the situation from happening altogether or at least they could make sure that the least number of people were harmed.

Venerable Chodron:

Definitely. Because when our mind is under the influence of fear or anger, there's not much we can do in a situation. But if we can find commonality with those that threaten us, we are clearer, and if we can then point out some type of commonality to those who might harm us, we might be able to calm the situation. People find it much harder to harm others if they feel that they share things in common with them.

Robert:

If speaking is one of the options in that situation.

Venerable Chodron:

Yes, or whatever way you can find to point out a connection that you have with them.

Robert:

Venerable, I would like to come around to another point if I may. Many Buddhist prayers express the wish for sickness, poverty, and warfare to end. In reflecting on these three challenges and causes of suffering for people, which do you think stands out most today? How do you see that one fueling the other two?

Venerable Chodron:

I have to re-write the question before answering it. From my perspective, ignorance, clinging attachment, and hostility are the sources sickness, poverty, and war. That said, if we look at those three results, I think that poverty is the main one because when poverty is rampant, people do not feel respected and they do not have access to what they need to sustain their lives. When people lack resources, they cannot take care of their health and illness follows. When people are poor, oppression and prejudice are often involved and thus fighting erupts. In addition, if someone is poor and falls ill, they cannot receive proper treatment, and if the poor are trapped in a war zone, they do not have the resources to flee to safety.

Poverty not only affects the poor. It also affects the rich because we live in an interdependent society. If we have enough but live in a society where people are poor, how do we feel about that? How do we feel about having possessions, education, and opportunities that other people don't have? How do we feel about social structures that favor our group over others? We could easily have been born in another group, and our present situation could change in any moment—so it's not the case that we or anyone else is guaranteed happiness in the future.

The rich have their own type of suffering. For example, I have taught in many countries, among them Guatemala and El Salvador. The middle class and wealthy people there live behind barbed wire, just like the inmates at the prisons where I do prison work. The well-to-do houses in those countries are surrounded by high walls and circles of barbed wires. Security guards stand at the gates, and the residents inside live in fear of being robbed or in some cases, even kidnapped due to their wealth. These people are prisoners; they imprison themselves to protect themselves from the poor. To me, that constitutes suffering – the misery of the wealthy.

In the US, the very wealthy can't walk down the streets. You and I have so much freedom because we aren't wealthy. I can walk down the street and no one will try to kidnap me. If I had children – which I don't - they could go to a public school and play at the park. But the very wealthy and their families don't have that freedom. Their kids don't have freedom because they are rich. With wealth comes another kind of suffering.

Robert:

There's probably not a government structure on the planet that doesn't favor some and disfranchise others, either by design or not. If you were to educate the wealthy and advantaged on the dilemma you are describing, what would you say to them? Or let's say you were asked to testify to Congress on the matter of war profiteering and how it is affecting people, what way is the most insightful and beneficial way to approach these powers?

Venerable Chodron:

Whenever a situation is already happening, it is difficult to get people to listen and it is hard to work with your own mind as well. For that reason, I advocate preventative measures, and that begins with the education of children.

Let's educate children on how to share and cooperate with others, how not to make differences of opinions into conflicts, and how to resolve conflicts that do inevitably arise when human beings are together. At present the educational system stresses the learning of facts and skills and neglects teaching how to be a kind person and how to get along with people – in other words, how to be a good citizen of this planet. I was an elementary school teacher before becoming a nun, so this is something dear to my heart.

Kids need to learn human values, and these can be taught in a secular way, without preachers being in public schools (Separation of church and state is very important!). If we want good citizens, we have to teach secular human values beginning in childhood. I would like to see the educational system emphasize this because when we train kids to be able to open their eyes and see the situation of others, when those kids grow into adults they will have more empathy. When

people are more empathetic, they will not be so blind to others' needs and concerns. They will not be apathetic and will not exploit others. This relates to what I was saying before about all sentient beings being similar in wanting happiness and not wanting suffering: kids can understand that.

Once, somebody asked me to a luncheon with some wealthy people who weren't Buddhists: he thought they would be interested in meeting a Buddhist nun and asked me to give a short talk after lunch. I spoke about all beings being equal in wanting happiness and not wanting suffering. We all suffer from aging, sickness, and death, and we all love our families and don't want our families or ourselves to be hurt. We all want to be respected. By the end of the talk, the feeling in the room and the look on these people's faces had changed. Their hearts were open just hearing a short talk. I wish these things could be said in front of the Congress or at an NRA convention; it resonates so deeply within us as human beings. So often all they hear from society and the media is the view that "Something outside of me is going to make me happy" and "It's an adversarial system and everything somebody else gets I don't have." On the news, they seldom hear of events where people help each other; TV programs seldom illustrate positive human interactions and human respect. Where do people see examples of patience, and kindness? How can children learn these without seeing examples of them?

Media people say they report what people want to hear, but it seems to me that they hype up scandals and violence to sell their publications. So the public has become starved to hear about goodness. That's why people who aren't Buddhist flock to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Because, who else is going to just give them some message of basic human peace and goodness? Just hearing a short talk on how to see others with love and compassion relaxes their minds. They get in touch with something positive inside themselves and can see that others also have internal goodness. They become more optimistic. With this kind of view in their minds, their behavior changes.

Robert:

I am hearing you speaking about the Buddhist notion of basic goodness; that we are basically good and that we actually know what is best, whether we are willing to admit to it or accept it or not. I mention this because although I can more easily identify with the aspirations of – let's say – the anti-war or environmental movements, their message often is "This is what is going on. This is what you are doing or allowing to be done." And "You should do this...". And what I hear you saying is that if you just focus on goodness, kindness, and human commonality, that people will give themselves permission to do what needs to be done rather than succumb because they were badgered into that position.

Venerable Chodron:

Exactly, because Americans are very individualistic and do not like to be told what they should do. When they do something out of obligation or because they feel guilty, they feel pushed, whereas when people get in touch with their own human values and human goodness, naturally they will express that and act according to it without others telling them what they should do.

This is very evident in the prison work I'm engaged in. The inmates teach me so much—much more than I teach them. Some of the men I write to have done the crimes that terrify me the

most. Yet, when I get to know them, we are just two human beings and I am not afraid of them. While the “get tough on crime” moment portrays inmates as monsters, they are human being like everyone else. They want to be happy and to be free suffering, and most of them have seen a lot of suffering in their lives. They tell me about their lives, what it is like to be them. We discuss our values, emotions, and behavior from a Dharma perspective.

Robert:

Which would never come out if you told them what they should do.

Venerable Chodron:

Exactly. The following isn't a general statement about all inmates. But, the inmates who write to me are sensitive and thoughtful. When they look at the war in Iraq, their hearts go out to the civilians who are being adversely affected. Their hearts go out to our troops, who are often young men from lower class families who think joining the military will be their ticket out of poverty. One inmate told me about seeing a little Iraqi girl on TV. She was horribly injured due to a bomb blast. Then a week later, on a TV special about a hospital in Iraqi, he saw her in a hospital bed with a cast on. She looked so much better that he started crying for joy.

One inmate who is in a dreadful prison in Illinois was working in the prison kitchen. A little Calico cat came around from time to time. She hadn't been around for a while and they were afraid that something had happened to her. One day she appeared again, and the inmates were so delighted to see her again—these big rough tough men who were in for murder—their hearts just melted when they saw that little cat. They took food from their own plates and went out to feed the cat. They were cooing and playing with her. This shows that we all have human kindness that comes out when we see another living being that we connect with.

Robert:

Venerable, I would like to focus on a specific issue that you probably saw a good deal of with the respect to the prison population and affects the population at large. That issue is drug addiction. What is your understanding of drug addiction in this country and what do you see as some of the antidotes that society can offer to deal with this problem that seems to be getting larger.

Venerable Chodron:

I would like to broaden this to include alcohol addiction as well. Even though alcohol is legal, it does just as much damage.

Robert:

Sure. That would be fine. We could go into the use and abuse of prescription medications as well.

Venerable Chodron:

About 99 percent of the inmates I write to were under the influence of alcohol or drugs when they did the crime that landed them in prison. There's a battery of issues on an individual level, some of which we talk about. These are personal issues of the individual: people not feeling good about themselves, not feeling worthwhile, feeling pressured to be better than they are, different from how they are. Some of this is fed to us from the media, some is the assumptions

that ordinary people act from, some comes from the schools. In any case, the general message is that we are supposed to be a certain way and we aren't that. We are lacking and inadequate in one way or another. We need something—the items that are being advertised, a relationship, or whatever—to make us whole and good people. This breeds low self-esteem, and drugs and alcohol are quick ways to numb the discomfort that comes from the lack of self-confidence. Depression, feelings of unworthiness or of being bad—these feelings come about in a variety of ways and are often due to multiple causes. Family dynamics and interactions are certainly a factor: domestic violence, parental substance abuse, physical or sexual abuse of children, poverty—these are a few.

Another element is society's blindness to policies that can benefit us as a whole. It's sad: People want to lower the drug and alcohol rate, but they also advocate welfare cuts for poor families and single moms. They don't understand that increasing financial pressure on poor families who are already stressed will only increase the drug and alcohol rate. Parents will be absent from the family, so children lack a sense of belonging or of being loved.

In addition, voters don't want to spend more money on schools, education, and extracurricular activities for children and teenagers because they say this will increase their taxes. People who don't have children ask why their taxes should pay for the education of other people's children. This makes me sad because they don't see the inter-relationship among people in society. They don't understand that another person's suffering and happiness is linked to their own. When children don't have a good education and lack skills, their self-esteem plummets. When they become teenagers and adults, they turn to drugs and alcohol to medicate their pain. Children who don't have the opportunity to engage in constructive activities after school—sports, dancing, art, music, and so forth—are alone in their homes or more likely, on the streets, and trouble results: drug and alcohol use, weapons, gang activity. Whose houses do they vandalize to get money or to prove their power? The homes of the very people who refused to pay more taxes to support schools, childcare, extra-curricular activities at schools and community centers! This happens because we are interrelated. What happens to other people's children affects all of us. If we live in a society with miserable people, we have problems too. Therefore, we have to take care of everyone. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama says, "If you want to be selfish, do so by taking care of others." In other words, since we influence each other, to be happy ourselves, we have to help those around us. When we live with others who are happy, we have fewer problems; when we live with people who are miserable, their misery affects us.

Drug and alcohol abuse isn't a problem just in poor communities; it's just that it is easier to arrest the poor because more of their community life occurs outdoors on the streets and because the police focus on those areas of a city. Domestic violence, substance abuse, and children feeling unloved is a problem in middle-class and wealthy families as well. Sometimes the parents in those families are so busy working to earn money to get their children more possessions that they have little time to spend being with and talking to their children.

In addition, people are unwilling to acknowledge that their behavior plays a role in family members abusing drugs and alcohol. The people who tell their children, "Don't drink and drug just because your friends do. Don't give in to peer pressure; just say no when they ask," are the same people who succumb to peer pressure themselves. These adults do things because their

friends are doing it. They say, "I have to go out with business clients and have a drink when we discuss business arrangements. I won't be able to close the deal otherwise." Or they say, "My friends drink so when they invite me to parties, I must too. Otherwise, they will think badly of me. Some lay Buddhists say, "If I don't drink, they'll think I'm a prude and will think badly of Buddhism. So I drink with them so that they won't criticize Buddhism." This is a rubbish excuse!

Robert:

I have had the opportunity to work with some youth programs locally. The programs have been for kids in some dire circumstances who have acted out and gotten themselves in trouble with the law. Invariably, we end up talking about the D.A.R.E. program (Drug and Alcohol Resistance Education), which by all accounts is a dismal failure. I tell these kids that DARE is not to keep kids off drugs as much as it is to keep parents off martinis and Prozac. The parents are role models for their children. The parents drink or drug in order to relax; they need something to cope with stress and turn to alcohol and drugs. But, when their kids feel unhappy or confused, these same parents can't offer constructive advice and instead tell their kids to endure those feelings. In the end, the children do just what their parents do. Rather than go to the liquor store or ask their friend the physician for a prescription, the kids go to their dealer. So, we are really looking at the issue of parenting and modeling.

Venerable Chodron:

Yes.

Robert:

I would like to touch on the subject of the environment before we close.

Venerable Chodron:

I feel very strongly about that. At least two Buddhist principles prompt us to awareness about the importance of caring for the environment. The two I'm thinking of are first is compassion and second is inter-dependence. One attitude that lies behind environmental pollution is the greed to have more and better. Another is the apathy that says, "If it won't happen until I'm dead, why should I care?" Both of these are antithetical to compassion. Compassion for sentient beings is an essential principle in all Buddhist traditions. If we truly care about other living beings, we have to care about the environment that they live in. Why? Because sentient beings live in an environment, and if that environment is not healthy, they will not be able to survive. These sentient beings of the future may be your children and grandchildren, or they may be you in your future lives. If we care about them, we can't leave them a devastated environment to live in.

In addition, we live in an inter-dependent world, not only dependent upon other living beings but also upon our shared environment. This means that we must care about the planet as a whole, not just the area where we live. It also means that we have a personal responsibility to protect the environment. It's not just large corporations or government policies that affect the environment; our individual actions are involved as well. The individual is related to the whole and the whole to the individual.

As individuals, we can act to preserve the environment. If we cultivate an expanded worldview, then helping sentient beings and protecting their environment are not difficult. For example, we want the newest computers, cell phones, cars, clothes, sports equipment, and so on. Do we really need these to be happy? Producing so many goods and disposing of them later after they are obsolete (even though they still function perfectly well), harms our shared environment. As Americans, we use a disproportionate amount of the world's natural resources by consuming things that we really don't need and that don't make us truly happy. This is not to mention the amount of resources consumed to fight wars or sold to others involved in warfare. Of course, other countries will not be pleased with us for this. Why are we so surprised that other peoples are not fond of us when we are acting in such self-centered ways?

We don't really need for everyone in the family to have their own T.V. or their own computer or their own car. What about using public transportation or carpooling? Walking or cycling to nearby destinations will improve our health. But it's hard for us to relinquish the attitude, "I want freedom to get into my car and go where I want to go when I want to go there." What would happen if, when we got into the car, we asked ourselves, "Where am I going and why am I going there? Will that bring happiness to me and to other living beings?" Just pausing for a moment before zooming off, we may discover that we don't really need to go to all of the places we think we need to go. In fact, we may even be less stressed and have better family relationships if we aren't so busy going here and there.

Robert:

Along with this sense of individual responsibility at the local level, how do you think individuals can most effectively make efforts to influence large structures and institutions such as governments and corporations?

Venerable Chodron:

Recycling and reducing waste are extremely important, but even the most well meaning people sometimes neglect these. For example, once I was having lunch with a husband and wife who were both professors of ecology at a university. They cared very much about the environment and encouraged government leaders to adopt policies that benefit the environment. One day, one of their kids came home from school and said, "Why aren't we recycling? It helps the environment." The parents told me that they had never thought of that before, but because their child reminded them they started doing it.

Robert:

Finally, Venerable, many of the teachers have spoken about some of the difficulties we may be facing in the immanent future. So, after speaking about the issues around war, environmental issues, and so on, if you were to look at the next 100 years, what do you see? What would be some of the issues most easily solved? Which ones do you think will persist or become worse?

Venerable Chodron:

To be honest, I don't find that kind of question very useful. My opinion about what could happen in the next 100 years doesn't make a difference. It doesn't improve the situation. Spending my mental energy thinking about the next 100 years is a waste of my mental energy. Even if I did

put my energy there and developed an opinion, I don't think that opinion would be very useful for anybody.

What is important is cultivating a kind heart right now. Forget the next 100 years. Right now, we need to emphasize the importance of training our minds to see the goodness in other people and generating a kind, patient, tolerant heart inside of ourselves. Your first question was about a "degenerate age," and your subsequent questions concerned war, sickness, and poverty. Underlying all of these questions is the assumption that everything is falling apart, that there is no human goodness, that we and the world are doomed.

I don't accept that worldview. It's unbalanced, discourages us from taking positive action that could be helpful, and becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. There are many problems—we are in samsara so we must expect that. But, there is a lot of goodness and we need to pay attention to the goodness in other people and the goodness in ourselves and to put more energy and time into cultivating it. That needs to be done right now. If we do that now, we don't need to worry about what life will be like 100 years from now.

Robert:

I remember once speaking with a female American meditator by the name of Karma Wangmo. I brought up the idea of the "dark age" and she thought that, in fact, people were actually more aware and compassionate. Due to the immediacy of mass communication, we hear of all the wars and problems around us. Could it be that those have always been there, but we no longer hide or deny their presence? We not only know what is happening in our own town, but we hear what is going on elsewhere, and it has an impact on us. And, because of this, we are now trying to do something about it.

Venerable Chodron:

Human beings have always had ignorance, anger, and attachment. We know more about each others' lives and environments due to telecommunications. That there are conflicts between human beings is nothing new, even though weapons used are more sophisticated. Suffering in samsara is age-old.

Robert:

In this time period, the counter-culture movements—be they the anti-war or environmental groups—often confront the situation and those who they perceive as the main perpetrators with an "anti" position. It seems that this inevitably leads to certain results when their objectives are not achieved. They become demoralized and subsequently slide into ignoring the situation. Those whose hearts are still in the "struggle" get depressed. What advice would you give people to encourage them to be part of the solution to some of the problems we have been discussing? What would be your parting word to them?

Venerable Chodron:

First, it's important to have a long-term view and purpose. Having an idealistic hope for quick change is a set up for discouragement. But if we cultivate inner strength, we can act compassionately and consistently for as long as it takes to bring about good results.

Second, stop thinking that you as one individual can change everything and solve all problems. We are not that powerful. Of course, we can make a worthwhile and powerful contribution, but we cannot control what other people do. We cannot control all the various conditions that affect the world.

Third, do not get depressed because you can't effect quick change and solve all the problems in the world. No matter how wonderful it would be to be able to do this, it is an unrealistic belief. What we need to do is to become much more realistic. We are all individuals and we have the responsibility of an individual. Thus we must think: What can I do within my capabilities? I certainly can't do things that I am incapable of doing or don't have the skill to do, so there's no sense in being dejected by that. But I can act within my capabilities, so I must consider how to use my abilities in an effective way to benefit others. In addition, I have to think about how to act consistently over time, without going up and down a lot. In other words, we each act according to our own individual abilities and at the same time, work to increase what we are capable of doing. By this, I don't just mean necessarily typing ability or computer ability. I also mean internal abilities, such as developing compassion.

Let's pull ourselves out of this all-or-nothing attitude, this attitude that says that I should be able to change everything or I get depressed because change doesn't happen quickly. Let's have a long-term perspective and take one step at a time cultivating our good qualities and abilities and influencing others in a constructive way so that we can contribute over a long period of time. To me, that is what the bodhisattva path is about. When you follow the bodhisattva path, you have to be willing to hang in there with sentient beings for eons and eons and eons, no matter how they treat you and no matter how much they do things that sabotage their own happiness. Buddhas and bodhisattvas are hanging in with us too no matter how obnoxious we are. Isn't that wonderful? Where would we be if they gave up on us because we keep doing the opposite of what is good for us? We have to cultivate compassion like theirs, compassion that can bear anything without discouragement, compassion that keeps helping no matter what.

From the Buddhist perspective, ignorance that misapprehends reality is the source of all our problems. This ignorance can be counteracted because it is mistaken. As we develop the wisdom that knows things as they are, it eliminates this ignorance. Without ignorance as their support, all the mental afflictions such as greed, resentment, and so on crumble. Without the mental afflictions that motivate destructive actions, such actions cease. With this comes the cessation of suffering.

Here we see that suffering isn't really necessary. It isn't a given. It has a cause. If we can remove the cause then the suffering results are eliminated. So that allows for an optimistic perspective with which we can move forward.

Ignorance and suffering can be eliminated. Can this be done quickly? No, because we have a lot of conditioning behind us. We have a lot of bad habits, some of which we're not even aware we have. But, it doesn't matter how long it takes to eliminate them, because the direction we are going in is a good direction. If we don't go in that direction, what are we going to do? The only alternative is to have a "pity party," but that's not much fun, and self-pity is of no benefit at all. So, you do what you can, what you are capable of, with a happy mind going in a positive

direction no matter how long it takes. You find joy and satisfaction in the doing of whatever you are capable of doing. In other words, be more concerned with the process of what you are doing than with attaining a specific result that is part of your agenda.

Robert:

Before closing, I have a practical question about the current debacle of the US with the Middle East. How do you see this conflict most quickly coming to resolution?

Venerable Chodron:

I have no idea. I cannot give you a quick, practical prognosis.

Robert:

Well then, what are the elements that are important for a solution?

Venerable Chodron:

What is needed is respect for every human being. People need to trust each other. That, I think, is the most difficult point in the Middle East conflict right now. The Israelis and Palestinians don't trust each other. The Shiites, Sunnis, and Americans don't trust each other. When you don't trust others, then everything the other person does you see in a bad light. When there is a lot of hurt, pain, and violence, trust becomes difficult.

I heard about a program called "Seeds of Change" which took kids from areas of conflict and got them together in a summer camp in New England. There they met actual human beings—kids their own age who were on the other side of the conflict that they were all caught in the middle of. This personal contact allowed for some empathy and trust to grow. How to accomplish this when millions of people are involved, I don't know. So I start with myself and try to cultivate forgiveness and trust. It's hard enough to release my individual personal grudges; on a group level, doing so is much more difficult. But we keep trying.

Robert:

Thank you so much, Venerable.