

Precious Human Life – part 4 of 4: Conclusion (lightly edited transcript)
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Let's look at the first sheet that says "Overview of the Lamrim: Outline*". We've just finished a major topic talking about the precious human life. One of the goals of this course is to give you an overall view, so I want to have you look briefly at the major topics in the outline* as we move into the next section.

How to take advantage of our precious human life?

In the outline*, 4.B.1 is "Being persuaded to take advantage of our precious human life." We did that already. We've persuaded ourselves that we have something precious. So now we go on to the next stage which is: "4.B.2 How to take the advantage of our precious human life". Within this, there are three main subtitles:

- A. Training our mind in the stages in common with a person of initial motivation
- B. Training our mind in the stages in common with a person of intermediate motivation
- C. Training our mind in the stages of a person of higher motivation.

The whole gradual path is set up with the goal of becoming a Buddha, with the goal of generating the altruistic intention to become a Buddha for the benefit of others, and that is the highest level of motivation. The reason the first subtitle is called training our minds 'in common with' a person of initial motivation is that some people only have the initial level of motivation. We practice in common with them but not just as they do. And then some people only go as far as to have the second level of motivation. We practice in common with what they are doing but not just as they are doing. We are going beyond. So from the very beginning, the whole gradual path is set up for us with the idea that we are going to go to the end of it, we are not going to get stuck somewhere in the middle.

Expanding our minds progressively through the three levels of motivation

It's very important to understand these three levels of motivation because within them is contained all of the teachings of the Buddha. If you understand these three levels of motivation, the different practices that are associated with them, then whenever you hear any teaching by any teacher of any tradition, you'll know where it fits into the gradual path. And this does away with a lot of the confusion that we often have in practicing the Dharma.

These three levels of motivation are a very progressive expansion of our minds. Initially when I come to teachings – I can't speak for you, I can only speak for myself – I wasn't really looking for anything. I knew something was not quite right in my life and I knew there was something more. I didn't know what it was, but I was basically just wanting to have a better life and be happy. Often we come to Buddhist things initially just because maybe somebody died, or we have problems in our family, or we are unhappy, or we feel like there is something more and we're looking for something that is going to help us quickly solve whatever problems we're facing. That is the motivation with which we usually come to

teachings, although I can't speak for any of you. And that motivation is okay. It's a very real, earnest motivation that we have.

As we come into Buddha's teachings, we gradually begin to expand that motivation. The initial motivation is basically concerned with our own personal happiness now, isn't it? Most of us want to be happy now. Fair enough. We are not thinking, "I want to be happy three eons from now and it's nice if other people are happy", but we basically come because we want to be happy immediately. That is our basic motivation. Now, as we start practicing the teachings, we begin to expand that motivation.

The first way we start to expand it is time wise. We begin to look ahead a little bit more in the future. Instead of being like the child, "I want my soccer now mommy, I don't want it after dinner, I want it now," instead of approaching life with that kind of attitude, we begin to look ahead in our life and we begin to see that our life will have an end. That death is something that will definitely come. It's definitely in the script and there is no way to rewrite it. So we start thinking, "Oh, if I'm going to die, what is going to happen after death?" And we start thinking about rebirth – what is going to happen to us after we die. It's not like some big empty hole. There is something that continues. What is going to happen to us at that point? And so, by looking ahead and seeing that this is definitely something that will happen and that there is no way to get around it, we become concerned with, "How can I die in a peaceful way? How can I make that transition to a new life in a peaceful way? How can I have another life that will enable me to keep on practicing? How will I have a good life instead of being born as a duck in Green Lake?" No offence to the ducks, [laughter] but if you had your choice, where would you rather be right now?

So, we start to expand our motivation. Each of these three levels of motivation involves looking at something we don't want (something that's undesirable), seeking something that is a resolution to that, and thirdly, finding a method to bring that about.

Level 1. Training our mind in the stages in common with a person of initial motivation

In this first level of motivation, we are turning away from having a restless, tormented death and a confused, painful rebirth. We are seeking to die peacefully, to have a happy transition, and to have another rebirth which is happy, in which we can continue to practice. The method for doing that is by keeping ethics, specifically observing karma, abandoning destructive actions on one hand and putting our energy into acting constructively on the other hand, because our actions create the cause for what we are going to become.

So we have something we're turning away from, something we are seeking and a method to attain it. That is the first way of expanding our mind. Instead of my happiness now, it's my happiness at the time of death and in the future life.

Level 2. Training our mind in the stages in common with a person of intermediate motivation

Then after a while we begin to think, "Well it's great to get a good human rebirth. I really want that. It's better than being a duck. It's better than being a worm. But if I am just going to wind up with another good life, I am still going to have problems in it, and I am still going to get old and sick and die, and I am still going to be confused, and I am still going to get angry, and I am still going to have attachment and jealousy, and I am still not going to get everything I want. If I am still going to have all these difficulties, then what is the end point? There has got to be something more than just having a rerun of what we have now." So at this point, what we are turning away from is all the pleasures of having a life like we have now, or even having a life better than what we have now while still caught in this whole system of afflictions [Note: 'afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes and negative emotions'] and karma, in which our minds are completely propelled by whatever thoughts that come into our mind uncontrollably.

We are turning away from all of that confusion, all of that garbage situation of being born and getting old and getting sick and dying and not getting what we want and getting what we don't want. What we are generating is the determination to be free from all of that. We are aspiring for liberation. We say, "I want to be free from these things. It's nice to have a good rebirth, but I want to get off this Ferris Wheel. There has got to be something better." So we are aspiring for liberation or nirvana, which is the cessation of being under the control of our ignorance and afflictions[#] and karma, and all of their consequences and difficulties. We are turning away from that whole cycle of rebirth. We are turning towards liberation and nirvana, where we can have a lasting kind of happiness.

The method to attain that is called the three higher trainings. There is the higher training in ethics, which we have already started to practice; the higher training in concentration, so that we can control our mind and subdue the gross defilements; and the higher training in wisdom, so that we can understand reality, and thus do away with the ignorance that plagues us. That's the method that we are going to use, with this second level of motivation. You can see we are still expanding our motivation.

Level 3. Training our mind in the stages of a person of higher motivation

Now, with the third level, the highest level of motivation, we are expanding our motivation yet again. Instead of my happiness now, instead of my happiness at death and in the next life, and instead of my happiness in liberation, we become very, very aware that we live in a world with billions and billions of other living beings. And that we're incredibly dependent on them. And that they've been unbelievably kind to us. They want happiness as much as we do and they want to avoid problems as much as we do. And so, to just pursue our spiritual path with the attitude of bettering our own rebirth or attaining our own liberation is rather self-centered. We come to confront that part of ourselves that is still looking out for my own happiness, except now it's my own spiritual happiness. And so we look and say, "Hey, I am capable of doing more than this. I am capable of being of great benefit to all other beings, and considering their kindness towards me, I should exert myself for their benefit."

So at this point, what we are turning away from is the self-complacent peaceful state of our own liberation. We are saying being liberated myself is nice, but actually it's limited. We want to turn away from that. And what we want to do is to develop a very strong altruistic intention to become a Buddha so that we'll be best able to lead others to lasting happiness.

The method we practice to do that is called the six far-reaching attitudes. Sometimes it's translated as the six perfections or in Sanskrit, the six paramitas. In the refuge prayer when we say, 'By the positive potential I create by practicing generosity and the other far-reaching attitudes' – it's referring to these six: generosity, ethics (here comes ethics again, can't get away from it [laughter]), patience, joyous effort, meditative stabilization or concentration, and wisdom. And then after we've done that (those six far reaching attitudes), the method we'll use is the tantric path.

You can see, as we look at these three levels of practice according to the three levels of motivation, that it does contain all the teachings of the Buddha.

Appreciating the different traditions

The Theravada teachings include the first two levels of motivation – seeking a good rebirth and seeking liberation. And then there're elements of the Theravada path that talk about some of the things in the third level, like love and compassion. But it's the Mahayana teachings that emphasize the cultivation of love and compassion, and put that as supreme, and provide all the techniques for developing that third level of motivation.

So you can see in this schematic layout that what we call 'Tibetan Buddhism' contains the teachings of Theravada, Zen, Pure Land – all the different Buddhist traditions. All those teachings are contained within this framework of the three levels of motivation, and the methods that one practices to attain the goals that one is looking for at each level of motivation.

Understanding this alone is a very strong reason why we should never, ever criticize any other Buddhist traditions. We may practice one particular tradition, but the practices of other traditions are in our tradition. It's not like all the different traditions do separate things that are unrelated. Not at all! So, this opens our mind to appreciating the teachings of other traditions and other presentations.

It opens our minds also to appreciating that different people have different levels of spiritual aspiration at one particular moment. We might have one kind of aspiration. Our friend might have another. That's okay. You can see there's this sequential process.

The three-step process needs to be practiced sequentially to develop an intense third level of motivation

We can see by this layout that we have to go through this sequence (of the three levels of motivation). This is very important. We have to go through the sequence of developing each level of motivation in a very intense way. Some people would rather not develop the first two levels of motivation. They want to go directly to the teachings on love and compassion. "I want to meditate on love and compassion. I want the method of the bodhisattva. Generosity, effort, patience – I want all that. Don't tell me about the method of the lowest level motivation where I have to think about death. I don't want to think about death! And don't tell me about the practices I have to do in the intermediate level of motivation, where I have to think about ageing and sickness and ignorance and suffering. I don't want to think about that either! I just want love and compassion." [laughter]

It's good to want love and compassion. It's better than a lot of what other people want. But if we want our love and compassion to be intense, if we want it to be real gutsy, courageous love and compassion, the way to do that is by thinking about the first two levels of motivation. Why is that so? Well, in the first level of motivation when we are thinking about death and future lives and aspiring to make them both go well, we are thinking about impermanence. By thinking about impermanence and transience, that will lead us later into the practices of the second level of motivation, thinking that all of cyclic existence is impermanent.

Since everything in cyclic existence is transient, we can't hold on to any of it. And because it's always changing all the time, and because there is nothing that we can finally grasp on to, to make ourselves secure in the worldly way, we have to acknowledge the limitations of our present state. We see the defects of being as we are now. We have to look quite honestly at our own dissatisfaction, at our own being uncontrolled, at the fact that no matter how much effort we put into making this life or any life go well, there is always going to be headaches. No matter how much social action we do, no matter how much legislation we have, no matter how many demonstrations we go to, that this is still going to be samsara. It's still going to be cyclic existence. Why? Because we are under the influence of ignorance and anger and this whole afflicted vision that we have. We have to confront that head on, really see the disadvantages of our current way of being (this is what is meant by suffering), and the situation that we're stuck in by the force of our own confused, ignorant, disturbed mind.

Having compassion for ourselves

Seeing that, we develop the determination to be free. A more Western way of saying the determination to be free is to say having compassion for ourselves. You don't find this in strict Buddhist terminology. But the meaning of the second level motivation of determination to be free is to have compassion for ourselves. In other words, we look at the situation we're caught in by the force of our ignorance and our karma, and we develop compassion for ourselves. We want ourselves to be free from this whole cycle of confusing mess, not only now but forever. We recognize that we're capable of another kind of happiness. We have that very deep compassion wanting ourselves to be happy, and in a very far-reaching way, not just wanting happiness in chocolate.

The deep compassion for ourselves comes from looking at our own difficulties and miseries. You can only generate this kind of compassion - compassion which is the wish to be free of difficulties and miseries - when you recognize what the difficulties and miseries are. That's the only way. Before we can think about others' difficulties and miseries, we have to look at our own. Before we can generate the altruistic intention of the third level of motivation, wanting others to be free from all their difficulties and problems and confusion, we have to have that same compassion and attitude for ourselves. Before we can understand the depth of others' pain, we have to understand the depth of our own pain. Otherwise understanding others' pain is just intellectual blah-blah; we won't have any gut feeling if we're completely out of touch with our own situation.

So you see, to have the third level of motivation, which is real compassion and altruism for others, seeing their difficulties and wanting them to be free from that, we have to have the second level of motivation in which we're in touch with all the disadvantages of being in cyclic existence ourselves. And before we can see that, we have to think about the fact that everything is impermanent and transitory and there's nothing to hold on to – the basic practice in the first level of motivation.

If you understand this, you'll see how, if we're going to develop love and compassion, we really have to go through this three-step process to get it. Otherwise, our love and compassion becomes Pollyanna [foolishly optimistic]. It becomes very Pollyanna. We can't sustain it. We lack courage. Whenever we face hardship in trying to act compassionately, we just lose our courage. We become discouraged. We back down. We need to do the first two steps, and get everything at a very deep level.

Keeping in mind the three-step framework enriches our understanding whichever step we are currently practicing

Meanwhile, while we're doing the first two steps, we have the goal of the third one in mind. So from the very beginning, when we're meditating about death and unfortunate rebirths, refuge, and all these other topics, we have in our mind, "I want to be a bodhisattva. I want, at the end of all of this, to be able to free all beings from their misery."

Really spend some time contemplating this. When you go home the next few days, in your morning meditation, think about these three levels, that they're each turning away from something. They're each seeking something. Each has a positive aspiration, and there's a method to do each one. Really think about them and go from the first to the second to the third and see how they develop organically. And then go backwards and see how, to have the third, you need the second, and to have the second, you need the first. Think about how all the teachings are contained in these three.

At the beginning, I was learning all these different meditations and all these different techniques, and although my teacher taught me the three levels of motivation, I didn't spend enough time thinking about them and how they fit together. So there was a lot of confusion about all these. But once I took the time and thought about how they fit together, then things start to fall in place.

While we practice sequentially, we still have the final higher practices as our aspiration and as our goal. This is why in your Lamrim meditations, you do a different subject each day, starting at the beginning – spiritual teacher, precious human rebirth, death, unfortunate rebirths, refuge, karma, four noble truths, how to free ourselves from suffering, equanimity, seeing sentient beings as our mother, developing love and compassion, etc. We do each meditation in sequence, and then we come back and we start again. We keep doing these in a cyclical manner.

That can be very, very helpful. It's not that when we do the first one about spiritual master, or the one about precious human life, we just think about that and don't think about anything else. Rather, we might focus on these earlier meditations because that's where we're really at in our practice. But we also have the overall view because we've done a little bit of meditation on all of the stages. We can see how they fit together. We can also see that the more we understand the end practices, when we come back to meditating on the earlier practices, for example precious human life, or the importance of having a spiritual teacher, the better we'll understand them. The more we understand the beginning practices, the more it helps build the foundation for the later ones. The more we understand the later ones, the more it enriches our understanding of the beginning ones.

So we begin to see how all of the teachings fit together. Of course this takes some time. We need to put some effort into thinking about all of these. Nobody else can do it for us. There's no little pill to take. We have to put in the effort to do the contemplation and meditation ourselves. But as we talked about last time, all the highly realized beings attained their realizations on the basis of the precious human life. We had a precious human life too. The only difference is that they put in the effort while we went sunbathing and drank Coke instead. It's basically a matter of putting in the energy.

That doesn't mean pushing ourselves and driving ourselves and dragging ourselves, but it means that we have to know where we're going and put the energy in to get there. We do that in worldly things, don't we? If you have a career goal, you know what you want to get away from (which is living out on the streets), and what you want to get towards (which is money and security and so on), and the method is to go to school all those years to fill out a good resume. And you have the energy to do it. And you do it. If we can do it for worldly things, certainly we can do the same for spiritual things, because when we do it for worldly things, all that benefit disappears when we die. But if we put that same effort into spiritual practice, the benefit doesn't disappear when we die; it continues on. It's really just a matter of putting our energy in that direction.

[Audience:] What do I do if I keep getting distracted during analytical meditation, and have a lot of doubts about where my practice is going?

For that, it's very good to do some breathing meditation to settle the mind down. Also, I think it could be very good to go back to our basic motivation. A lot of time, the distractions come because our motivation at the beginning of the meditation isn't very strong. So we come back and develop a good motivation by going through the three steps. We recognize our own ability and our own potential. We have this heart-felt commitment to other beings. We want to develop ourselves in order to benefit them, and that acts as a very strong motivation for our doing the meditation well. When we have a sense of universal responsibility for others, we develop a feeling that what we're doing in our meditation is important. It may not bring about the ultimate happiness of others this instant, but when your faucet is leaking and you're filling a bucket, all the drops are necessary to fill the bucket. The present meditation may just be a few drops in the bucket, but it's going towards filling up the bucket. Does that answer your question okay?

[Audience:] What's the difference between contemplation and meditation?

Well, by contemplation, here what I mean is thinking about the things. Checking them up. We have a three-step process which is hearing, thinking or contemplating, and meditating. Hearing is getting the information, like hearing the teachings or reading books or discussing. Thinking about it is establishing its veracity, gaining some confidence that this is the way it is, checking it up. Meditating on it is the actual step of transforming our mind into that feeling.

So when I say 'contemplating', I'm emphasizing the second step. You hear the teachings now. When you go home, you contemplate and think about them: Is this true? Does this make sense? Are there really these three levels of motivation? Can I develop them? Do I need the first two to have the third? How do they relate together? Do I even want to do this?

So you think about whatever that has been explained. You think about the different points in the explanation. You think about what it is you're turning away from in the first level of motivation, what it is you're going towards. What's the method to achieve that? How does that method work to achieve it? And then having done that, is that sufficient? Well, no, because I want to get out of cyclic existence altogether. So that's what I'm turning away from, and what do I want to go towards? I want liberation. What's the method? The three higher trainings. How do those three higher trainings work to eliminate the ignorance that's binding me to cyclic existence?

You think about these things – how they work, how they interrelate. And then you go on to the third level of motivation. Is my own liberation sufficient? You imagine yourself, "I'm here in this huge enormous universe. Billions of solar systems. Billions of different beings on this earth and in all of the universe. Is it sufficient that I'm just concerned with my own liberation? Well, actually I'm capable of more. It'd be much better for everybody concerned if I really use my potential." And so we think about that, turning away from the self-complacent peace and going towards full enlightenment, looking at the six far-reaching attitudes and the qualities of the tantric path to know how those things enable us to attain that goal.

You sit there and really think about it. You're going to have to think about it many, many times. All these things in the Lamrim, I've been doing this kind of contemplation since I started at the beginning, and I feel like I still don't really understand the very depths of what's going on. As you do it, you understand different layers of it. Your thinking about it isn't just intellectual thinking. It isn't like writing a term paper on the three levels of motivation. But by thinking about it in relationship to yourself and the significance it has for your own life, then some feeling comes about your own potential, and about the direction you want to take in your life, about how you want to live. Some very strong feelings can arise when you contemplate these things. At this point, you really concentrate on the feeling that's arising. You really hold that, and this is the third step: meditation.

[Audience:] The three points that are supposed to help us realize the rarity of a precious human rebirth are all based on certain assumptions, and I'm not convinced. How do we know if they're really true?

Trusting the Buddha's words

Yes, they are all very hidden phenomena. In Buddhist teachings, a way to deal with extremely hidden phenomena is to explain that if there're some things that the Buddha said that you know for sure are true, you begin to have trust and confidence in the Buddha. So then you believe the other things that he said, basically out of trust and confidence in him, even though you may not know it from your own experience. But that sometimes just makes us go completely bonkers. [laughter]

But there's no way around it. Anything we do in life involves a certain amount of trust. When you start first grade, you're trusting that there's going to be a high school for you to go to and there's going to be funds that operate the high school. There's an enormous amount of trust that we use in living our lives. Now, it's not a question of, "Well, I'll just not think about those things. I'll trust them even though I don't understand them," but rather, we accept it provisionally, "I'll accept it, and I'll see how it works. I'll continue to check up on those things and I'll continue to work where I'm at." This is also what I was saying earlier, that as you understand the later things, you'll understand the earlier ones better.

You see, one of the big hindrances we have is that we have a very strong conception of who we are. When we say 'I', we have this very strong feeling of 'I', 'me', this body, this mental state, right now. We have that so solidly that we can't imagine being anything else. We can't even imagine being old. Have you ever looked in the mirror and imagined what you're going to look like if you live to as old as eighty? We don't even think about that. And that's something that's going to be our own experience: being old and wrinkled, and the body not working. Have you ever imagined what it would be like to have Alzheimer's? Some of us are going to get Alzheimer's. We can't even imagine that, and yet I'm sure if we really think about it, yes, why not? Somebody's got to get Alzheimer's. It's not just those other old people. It could be me.

We can't even imagine what it's like to be a baby, even though it was our own experience. We were definitely a baby, but we can't even imagine what it's like to be one and not understand anything about what's going on around us, and to be completely dependent and helpless. And yet that was our own experience not that long ago. So you see, this very rigid idea of who I am makes us so close-minded, so that we can't even get in touch with our own experience of this life, let alone think about death and future lives.

Changing our perception

Actually, we can look at any experience from more than one angle. You can comb the cat and squish the flea and think it's a wonderful thing. You can comb the cat and squish the flea and all of a sudden here's the whole path to enlightenment in your mind, because you're thinking about ethics and everything. And so it keeps coming back to the fact that – here is where you see the whole idea of emptiness – we think everything we perceive is reality. We think everything that we think, everything we perceive, all of our interpretations, all of our biases, all of our prejudices, all of our opinions, we think they are reality. That's our big problem. And part of that is we think who we are now is actually who we are. That's what locks us in to so many things, because that prevents us from even considering the fact that things might not be exactly as our opinion thinks they are. It's so difficult for us to even question our opinions.

When we begin to see this, we begin to understand why ignorance is the root of cyclic existence and the root of all the problems. We begin to see how we are so framed in by our ignorance and yet we think we know everything. This is our big problem. So that's why sometimes, when we begin to get a sense of how we imprison ourselves by our own way of thinking, we start to create a little space to think, "Well, the Buddha turned me on to the fact that I'm imprisoning myself, and that I'm all hung up in my opinions and perceptions and interpretations of who I am. He opened my mind to begin to question that. Maybe Buddha knows something I don't. Maybe I should just consider some of the things that he talked about. I don't have to believe them as a big dogma to be a good Buddhist, but I can let them into my mind, because the Buddha did open my mind in one way that is very important. I can start to check up on some of these other ones." And then we think about them. We start watching things. We start observing things. Then things start to fall into place.

So, still on this question of, "How do we know that ethics creates the cause for good rebirth? And that

generosity, patience, joyous effort, concentration and wisdom create the conditions to have this precious human life? Because that isn't our experience." Well, if you start looking at your own life a little differently, maybe it is. Maybe that framework could be used to describe our own experience.

For example, I look at my own life. How is it I am a Buddhist nun? In our society, we usually attribute things to genetics and environment; there's no talk about karma. If I look genetically, there is not one single Buddhist amongst all my ancestors. So I don't think I'm a Buddhist because I have genes to be a Buddhist. Now if I look into my environment, I was not raised as a Buddhist. The community I grew up in was not Buddhist. There was one Japanese boy whom I went to school with, but I'm not even sure if he was a Buddhist. [laughter] All I knew about Buddhism was those pictures in the books on the world's great religions. The people with these joss sticks and these statues – I look at them and I thought, "They worship idols, how terrible! Aren't these dumb?" That was my impression of Buddhism as a youngster. So in my environment, there was nothing to make me a Buddhist. Why am I a Buddhist then? Why did I decide to become a nun? It wasn't due to the genes, and it wasn't my environment this life.

So that opens my mind to begin to think that perhaps, there was something from previous lives. Perhaps there was some familiarity, there was some inclination, there was some contact that happened before this life, so that this lifetime, somehow, my mind was interested in it. I can't see my past lives to know what happened, and I have no memory of them at all. But you can start to see that maybe, this whole idea of rebirth could explain that. And maybe, this whole idea of karma could explain what is in fact my own experience this lifetime. So our mind begins to stretch a little bit.

You said, "These are extremely obscure phenomena. We can't prove them to ourselves. We don't know them. Why should we take anybody else's belief, especially the Buddha's, because who is this guy?" Then, look in your life, and see how many people you've trusted. When you get in an airplane to go somewhere, you don't know for sure the guy was licensed. You don't know if he's not drunk. There's an incredible amount of trust when you get on the airplane.

We use electricity. Do we understand how it works? Every new thing that scientists come up with, it is like God's latest revelation, we're sure it's true. The fact that next year, they do a different experiment that changes the whole thing, doesn't make us doubt at all. We completely go along. We believe. We read something in the newspapers, we believe that what the journalists interpreted is correct. We go through our life with an incredible amount of trust and belief, most of which is in beings who are not fully enlightened.

Be realistic about being in control

We like to be in control, we like to believe that what we perceive is real. We like to believe that our opinions are true. We like to feel this whole sense of control and security. And so we go through our life trying to be in control, trying to be secure, trying to prove that everything we think about is right. And yet, if we look at our lives, we can see that that whole endeavor just brings us all of our problems. Because all of our conflicts with other people mostly center around our wanting to convince them that our way of seeing the situation is the right way. Whoever we're in conflict with, they're seeing the situation incorrectly. If they'd only change their mind and see it as we do, and change their behavior, we'd all live happily ever after. And as my friend who does conflict mediation says, he gets all the nice, agreeable, flexible people who come to his courses, and all the other idiots who were stubborn – they stay away! [laughter] He always marvels, "Isn't that interesting?"

When we really start to look, to question things, it can be a tremendous shaking up of our world view. If we come to the basic question of whether everything is completely wonderful in my life now, if we just ask ourselves that question – do I have everlasting happiness at this moment? The answer is very clearly, 'No'. We can see that. Besides having to deal with all those other obnoxious people, and the society and the war and the pollution, just the fact that we're going to get old and sick and die is not something we would choose to do on our holiday. Just having to face that is not a hunky-dory situation. And if we look at that, and say, "Hold on. I'm in this situation. This is what's going to happen. Is it really wonderful? Is this all I'm capable of in my life? Is this what I want to keep experiencing?" Then we may begin to say, "Hold on. No. There's got to be another way to live. There's got to be a way out of this mess." We begin to think, "Well, maybe if I change my way of thinking about things, I could also change what my experiences are." That gives us a little bit of encouragement to start to re-examine our opinions and beliefs, because we begin to see that our current opinions and beliefs just keep us stuck in this situation that is not 100% fantastic.

And then the whole thing about control. We like to have control. We feel we're in control. But if we ask ourselves, how much in our lives do we control? We can't control the traffic on the highway. We can't control the weather. We can't control the economy. We can't control the minds of the people we live with. We can't control all the functions of our own body. We can't control the aging process. We can't even control our minds when we sit to do the breathing meditation for ten minutes. It's also a fantasy to think that we're in control, because if we really open our eyes, we're not in control. The point is, we can become in control. There is hope. [laughter] Or what we can also do, is we can relax into the fact that we're not in control. Instead of battling reality, and making our lives this constant battle, we can just relax into it and accept what's happening. But that involves a change in our ideas. That involves letting go of our opinions.

Of course we can still have aspirations. We still relate and change things and all. But we want to avoid this mind that approaches every situation with, "This has to be what I want it to be," and when nothing is the way we want it to be, gets angry or disillusioned or discouraged.

This whole "should" mind. "There shouldn't be wars." Why shouldn't there be wars? As long as we have attachment, anger and ignorance, why shouldn't there be wars? This is the reality of the situation. But we get all hung up and insist, "There shouldn't be wars!" Instead of dealing with the attachment, anger and ignorance, we're busy battling the reality of the war. And we get overwhelmed by it.

On the specific issue of control during meditation. When you're doing mindfulness meditation, just be aware of our own lack of control and relax with it instead of fighting it. Become aware of what's happening in each present moment without trying to put the blueprint of what we want it to be on top of it.

[Audience:] How solid does our 'determination to be free' have to be for us to persist in the practice?

It's like all the other understandings of the path. It's something that grows on us. It's like any of the topics we understand. When we first hear them, we understand it. Then we go deeper and we think about it more. We hear about it again. And we think about it again. And it keeps growing and growing and growing. The determination to be free - it probably starts out with most of us being fairly intellectual about it, but as we keep coming back to it, and we keep understanding our own situation better and our own potential better, then the determination to be free automatically grows. At one point in the path, they say it becomes spontaneous, day and night. You don't even need to cultivate it anymore. But however much we have of it now, it can act as a motivation to keep practicing, and that enables us to develop that determination more, practice more, and so on.

[Audience:] If we can't change old age, sickness and death, why even think about them? Why don't we just accept them and go on with our life instead of trying to make a determination to be free from them?

Well, on this issue we actually need two minds. There're two minds that come together. We need to accept something, but we can accept something and try and change it at the same time. In other words, accepting it means that we accept that this is reality. This is what's happening. But that doesn't mean that we have to accept it as a pre-determined, forever and ever thing, when it's actually within our power to control the causes and conditions that produce it.

This is where we get confused in the West. We think that if you accept something, then you don't try and change it. It's like, "If I accept social injustice, then I won't do anything to try and remedy poverty, racism and sexism." So then we get into this thing of, "I won't accept it." And we get all self-righteous and morally indignant, angry at all these creeps who are racist and sexist and pollute the world, and who don't run the world as we think it should be run. The thing to do in that situation, is we have to accept, "OK, the world is like this. This is what's happening right now." That doesn't mean we need to get angry about it. That doesn't mean we need to continue to let it exist either. We have to accept that it is the present reality right now, but we can change the causes that are going to produce it in the future.

It's the same thing with aging, sickness and death. They are our reality, so we accept them. We're going to get wrinkles. We're going to die. We're going to get sick. That's just our reality. That's the reality of

having the present body that we have. But there is a possibility to do something about this in the future so we don't have to keep going through it.

If we could really accept just that one thing of aging, we could approach it seeing its benefits, and grow old gracefully. Similarly, if we look at the issue of our own death, which is what we're going to talk about next time, if we can accept the fact that we are going to die and be able to look at that reality and just come to terms with it, then we won't be so afraid of dying. Because we don't want to look at it, we pretend it doesn't exist. We color it and we make it beautiful and we ignore it and we build up so much garbage around it, but that's all a big mask for the very real fear that's sitting in our hearts because we won't accept it, because we won't look at it. So just being able to accept that we're going to die, then we can die and be perfectly happy.

OK. Shall we sit for a few minutes and digest everything? Try and think about what you heard in terms of your own life. Let it sink in. Make it part of your own being.

*This teaching is based on the *Lamrim* or *The Gradual Path to Enlightenment*. Please refer to the following web-page for its outline and other transcripts or to listen to the audio recording of these talks: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/GradualPathToEnlightenment/outline.html>

#'Afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes and negative emotions'.