

The Ten Destructive Actions - Part 1 of 6 (lightly edited transcript)
by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. 1992.

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There are ways of thinking, speaking and acting that lead us to unpleasurable, painful and miserable results. People are going to have various reactions to this. Many things we've heard, I'm sure, are values that we grew up with, but what we're getting here is a much broader view. I'm going to go into these things a lot more in depth. It's not just: "Don't do this and don't do that. If you do it, you're naughty and you're going to hell!" That's not the Buddhist view.

Buddha didn't say: "Don't do these things or I'm going to punish you!" Buddha didn't create positive and negative actions. He just described what actions bring what results. Buddha had no wish to punish anybody. There's nobody running the universe.

We're going to get a little more into the details about the destructive actions so that we have some tools with which to assess our own actions, including hypothetical actions, or actions of other people, as well as to get more of a feeling for the differences in actions.

After we talk about these ten destructive actions, we're going to talk about what makes an action heavy or light. This is important. Sometimes people say: "Well, there's got to be a difference between stepping on an ant accidentally and going out and shooting a person. But you're saying that all killings are bad!"

I'm saying this (maybe I'm getting defensive!) because it's clear, isn't it? There's a big difference between stepping on an ant accidentally and going out and shooting somebody deliberately. There's a huge difference! So of course there will be differences in the result. As soon as we understand the different components of a negative or positive action, we begin to see what the differences between actions are and we begin to recognize the differences. The whole idea is to get us out of our black and white mind that's judgmental about ourselves and others.

Also, going over these, somebody might say: "Why don't you go over the ten positive actions?" "You talked about death. You talked about the hell realms. Now you're talking about the harmful actions. Why doesn't Buddhism talk about the positive ones?" Well, we'll get to those. Be patient!

I don't know about you, but one thing that I had to come to terms with when I first got involved in Buddhism, is when I started looking at my actions or what I had done most of my life, most of my actions were negative. I began to understand why the Buddha talked about negative actions first. I was much more familiar with those than the positive ones!

I could "tune in" to what he is talking about. I had a 100 million examples of them from my own personal experience. I think it was helpful for me to be honest with myself instead of whitewashing my actions: "I'm really good. I feel guilty but actually, I'm really good." We never work anything out when we do that to ourselves. But when we're able to be honest at a very basic level and then begin the purification process, then we're able to change and to let go of many of these emotions that we've been holding on to.

The one that everybody goes most berserk about is the unwise sexual conduct. They also go berserk about wrong views and idle gossip – every person looks embarrassed and hopes I'll shut up.

The ten destructive actions are very basic general categories of putting many different things into a simplistic arrangement in order to get some handle on the material.

There are:

- three physical ones
- four verbal ones
- three mental ones

The three physical ones are killing or taking life, taking what hasn't been given to us, and unwise sexual behavior.

Four branches of a negative action

Each of the negative actions has four branches, and these four branches go into making a complete harmful action. They are:

- 1) The object (I'll tell you what the object for each action is as we go through them.)
- 2) The complete intention. This is subdivided into three:
 - a correct recognition of the object
 - the intention to do the action
 - an affliction [['Affliction' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitude'.](#)] that is accompanying it
- 3) The action itself - actually doing it
- 4) The completion of the action

If any of these are incomplete, if you're missing any of the four, then you don't get an 'A plus' negative action. But when we do have all four there, we get 'A pluses'. This gives us some way of evaluating what we've done.

Taking somebody else's life

This is negative because a being's life is what they cherish the most. Just as our principal baseline value is to stay alive, so it is for all other beings. Killing is the most harmful of all the destructive actions, interfering with the happiness and well being of others.

The first branch, **the object**, in killing, is any sentient being other than yourself. Already, you can see that suicide is not a complete action of killing. This doesn't mean suicide is good. It just means that it is not 100% complete because the first branch – the object of the action – has to be a sentient being other than ourselves. It can be any sentient being – insects, animals, spirits, human beings, etc.

The second branch is the **complete intention**. Under this, remember we have three parts. The first part was the recognition. In other words, you have to recognize the sentient being that you want to kill. If you want to kill a grasshopper but you kill a gopher instead, it's not going to be a complete negative action. Or if you want to kill John but you kill Harry by mistake, it is not a complete one. In other words, we have to actually kill the sentient being that we have intended to kill.

Then there has to be the motivation, in other words, the intention to actually do it. If we do the action by accident, then this part is missing. There is no intention to do it. The motivation element is missing.

One of the three afflictions* - the initial motivation or the causal motivation that makes us kill, can be due to:

- Desire – for example, due to a desire to eat meat, you kill animals
- Anger – for example, wanting to harm somebody you are angry with
- Ignorance – for example, animal sacrifice

Any of these three afflictions* can be the affliction* that motivates the killing. This is the initial motivation. Killing is usually completed with the motivation of anger. There's some kind of wish to destroy. But it might start out with the initial motivation of attachment or ignorance.

The **actual action** is killing a sentient being. In other words, killing a sentient being by poison, weapons, magic or mantras. It also includes helping somebody commit suicide. This is an interesting one. Also, if we incite other people to kill, even though they do the killing, we will get the negative karma as well since we told them to kill.

The **completion of the action** is that the other sentient being dies before us. If they die after us, then it's not a complete action. In other words, you may intend to kill somebody, you may be unsuccessful and they don't die, and then you die first. Or they don't die because you only managed to injure them. The action of killing is not complete.

Like I said, suicide is not a complete action, first of all because the object isn't there. The object of taking life has to be somebody else besides ourselves. Also the branch of completion isn't there -- the other sentient being has to die before us. In the case of suicide, that doesn't happen. Suicide is missing two of the things.

Killing somebody accidentally is not a complete action of killing. Since the motivation is the chief, prime factor that's going to determine the weight of an action, you can see that killing by accident is not a complete action.

Similarly, if you are coerced into killing, if somebody else makes you kill, then you don't have the motivation to kill. Somebody else has coerced you. They're forcing you to do it. Definitely the motivation isn't: "I want to kill!" You're being pushed into it. It is not a complete action of killing.

Eating meat

[Audience:] What about eating meat?

In terms of eating meat, what they say is if you kill the animal yourself, definitely that's killing. If you ask somebody else to kill it for you, that's definitely killing. If you know that somebody else has killed the meat for you even though you didn't ask them to, you shouldn't eat that meat. For example, somebody invited you over to dinner and you knew that they went to the store and got live chickens especially for your dinner. Then, it's not good to eat that.

In the case of buying food at the grocery store, the party line is that (and it's up to you whether you want to believe in the party line or not) you didn't ask for that animal to be killed. The butcher killed it. You went in the store and bought it. You don't have the negative karma from killing it yourself or asking somebody to kill it.

Now, most of us think: "But there is supply and demand and if you're on the demand end, even though you didn't ask directly for it..." and I completely agree with that. But to me, I do see that there is a difference between killing the animal yourself and the fact that the butcher killed it, it was put on the shelf and you happened to walk in to buy it. There is a difference in what's going on mentally. There's a different impact on your mind when you actually lift the knife up and kill the animal. I can see that there's going to be a difference in the karma. But, personally speaking, somehow if you're on the demand end, there's got to be some karma involved. That's my personal opinion. All the Tibetans who eat meat don't agree with me.

It's very interesting that each Buddhist tradition has a different position on the issue of meat. The Buddha did not say: "Don't eat meat." In the Theravada tradition, you're supposed to go around with your begging bowl from house to house and the people give you alms. The idea in doing this is to develop a sense of detachment from your food and eat whatever you are given. Whether people give you meat or vegetables, you're supposed to take it all and eat it, instead of being fussy and say: "Look, I don't eat chicken. How about those string beans over there?" That doesn't look so good when you're trying to be humble and non-attached to your food. For that reason, the Buddha allowed them to eat meat.

Also, one of the reasons the Buddha allowed it was because at that time in history, a lot of the people thought that if you ate the right food, you would become spiritually enlightened. A lot of people today think that too, and one becomes a fundamentalist vegetarian, thinking that your spiritual realizations are what you eat. The Buddha, I think to make the point that gaining realizations was a mental thing, didn't make any specific dietary restrictions for the monks and nuns at that time. He only said to not kill the animal, not ask for it to be killed or not eat it if it's killed directly for you.

Now, that doesn't mean that what you eat doesn't affect your practice. What you eat obviously affects your practice. If you eat a lot of sugar and your sugar level is going up and down, it's going to affect how you meditate. They say that eating meat does affect your meditation. That's why in the Mahayana tradition, they emphasize vegetarianism. The emphasis in the Mahayana tradition is non-harmfulness of others. Out of kindness to others, they do not eat meat.

In the Chinese monasteries, the people are very strict vegetarians. The monks and nuns take strictly vegetarian food. There are all these mock pork, mock chicken, mock this and mock that. It's amazing. I can't eat some of them because they look and taste so much like meat. It's so funny because people think that if you're vegetarian, you really want to eat meat, but some of us really don't.

In the Tibetan tradition, the monks and nuns are not on a vegetarian diet because, first of all, Tibet is above the tree line so it is very difficult to have vegetables. Second of all, in the case of very advanced tantric practitioners, they are doing very subtle meditations on different channels and energies in their body. For that reason, they need to keep their body elements very strong, and have to take meat. But that's only for very high level practitioners. In Tibet, most of the Tibetans ate meat because of the climate and the altitude. Now that they live in India, His Holiness encourages them to eat vegetables. But they don't always put into practice what His Holiness says.

The basic thing is to look at ourselves instead of looking at other people, and make a decision for ourselves of how we want to be. If somebody does eat meat, there are mantras to say that can help the animal. His Holiness, for example, says that he would like to be a vegetarian. He was a vegetarian for some time, then he got sick and the doctor told him he had to eat meat. Now he eats meat. I think there is also a difference, whether you do it for medical reasons or whether you do it for taste reasons.

Abortion

Before we move on from killing, we will take a look at the Buddhist viewpoint about abortion. If the consciousness joins with the fertilized sperm and egg in the womb, then abortion is a form of killing. That doesn't mean that as Buddhists who believe in compassion, we go out on a rescue operation. I think in the abortion debate nowadays, there's a lot of anger and hatred on both sides.

Whenever people ask His Holiness about the abortion issue, he just says: "This is very difficult." And it is very difficult! There is no easy answer. Our American mind wants a nice, easy answer: "Tell me it's okay because then I won't have to think about it." Or: "Tell me it's not okay." But some of these things, it's like whichever way one does it, it is going to be negative. The thing is to at least try and modify the action in some way. Try and avoid the action altogether. But if one decides on abortion at least try to not do it with whole-hearted rejoicing.

Other forms of killing

You can see that euthanasia does involve taking life. It is a difficult issue. Again there are no black and white answers. What about if you get worms? Do you take medicine and kill the worms? It's a very difficult decision to make. Some people say that the worms die anyway when they leave your system. But what about our motivation? Again there's a big difference in motivation between: "I'm going to kill those worms. I can't stand them!" and a sense of: "I really wish I could offer my body to these worms but I can't. And so I do this with an incredible amount of regret and I really wish I didn't have to." You make some prayers for the worms.

You see, when you know more about these different branches, at least you can modify your actions. You can see the difference that it makes when you do that. The thing is, we're alive and we do move and we do kill. We have to keep on living. We do the best we can. If we don't have the intention to kill, it will not be a full karma. If we know there's definitely going to be animals in a particular place, then we try not to walk in that place. We modify what we do. When we have animals in our house, there're ways to deal

with it. We don't always have to take out the Raid [insect repellent], contrary to the advertisements. We don't always have to do that. There are many ways to deal with it.

I found, when I lived in France, that we have an interesting kind of flying ants, ants with wings. They made a home right by our sink. During summer, they would always come out just after dinner and were all over the place. There was no way you could turn the water on without killing them. So what we did was, we just left our dishes there in the sink. The flying ants would all go back home in about an hour or an hour and a half, and then we wash our dishes. We worked out an agreement with them. There are many things to do along this line, to avoid killing. With cockroaches, you can put boric acid around and they don't come back. With ants, you can use lemon juice, or you can put things in water.

You try and do the best you can.

Taking what has not been given to us

The next one is taking what hasn't been given to us. Here, the first branch, **the object**, is something that doesn't belong to us. It can be something that belongs to another person or something that is not owned. It can be something somebody lost but maybe they have some attachment to it. If they lost it and they've completely given up on it, it's one case. But it's a different case if their mind is still attached to the object.

This also includes taxes, fares, tolls, fees, and things that we're supposed to pay that we don't pay. That's considered taking what hasn't been given to us because actually, these things belong to others.

In India, when you take computers into the country, they were charging about 250% customs. I was in Singapore at one time and somebody in India wrote and asked me to get a computer and take it into India. That meant getting it through customs without paying the duties, and I wasn't prepared to do that. Amchog Rinpoche was there at that time and I asked him about it. I said: "I don't want to avoid paying the duties, but on the other hand, the Indian government charging 250% is outrageous! That's just out of sight for a duty!" I said if somebody does smuggle one in to give to a friend or something, is that stealing? He made the remark: "Maybe you get 50% of the negative karma and the Indian government gets 50%."

Another form of stealing is when someone forces another to give a penalty that is more than what is reasonable or more than what is written in the laws. This is very touchy. Like in the previous example, it's stated in the law that the customs is 250% but it seems like a very unreasonable amount. Again it's one of those very ambiguous things – what do you do?

Or you go to a country where everything is done on baksheesh. Everything! The whole government is run on bribes! Do you bribe or don't you bribe? This is accepted policy! You do business through bribing. It's one of those sticky things that I think everybody is going to have to look at themselves and see how much they want to get involved in it.

The second branch is **the complete intention**. The first part is the recognition. This means we have to steal what we intend to steal. In other words, if you take a radio when you intended to take a TV, then it's not a complete action. Also, let's say you gave something to somebody, but you forgot you gave it and you took it back thinking it was yours. That's not a complete act of stealing. Or if you borrowed ten dollars but you forgot how much you borrowed and repaid only five. Again, this is not complete.

[Audience: Inaudible]

Jonathan came up before dinner and asked me if he could have some water. He didn't need to do that because I think in our culture, things, for example, in the bathroom that are left out on the shelves are generally offered. If you're staying in somebody's home, the things that are open, like the soap, shampoo, Kleenex, toilet paper – they're meant for everybody's use. Water, too. But if you go into somebody's cupboards and start rummaging through it, it's a different thing.

I always try, when people come to stay, to say quite clearly to them: "If you need anything and I'm not around, just go ahead and take it and tell me later." It's good to be clear like this. Otherwise, things like paper clips and rubber bands, could drive you crazy.

With other things, I think it is good to ask and not just assume. Sometimes we take something that belongs to somebody else and we forget to tell them, and then they don't have it. We borrow a pen, we don't give it back, and then they're rummaging all over because it's their only pen. It's good to be aware. One nice thing about this kind of guideline is that it makes us extremely aware of how we treat other people's property, what we think could be used communally, and what we feel is good to ask for.

The next part is intention, if you intended to steal the object. If you only repay five dollars instead of ten because you forgot that you borrowed ten dollars, you're not intending to steal the other five dollars. Or if you gave something to somebody but forgot that you gave it and took it back, you didn't intend to steal it.

The third part is our motivation. You can steal out of anger, for example plundering after a war and just wanting to devastate somebody else, wanting to harm the other person by stealing things. Stealing out of attachment is the most common one. One steals something because of wanting it for oneself. Stealing out of ignorance is, for example, thinking: "Oh, it's perfectly all right to steal." Or "I'm a Dharma practitioner. It's okay if I steal, because what I'm doing is important."

Also, we often think there's nothing wrong with stealing from the government. Or there's nothing wrong with stealing from big companies. We don't like somebody so there's nothing wrong with stealing from them. Check up! Now, if somebody, let's say, doesn't want to pay the portion of their taxes that goes for military means because they don't want other beings to lose their lives, my personal view is that is not stealing. However, if you're using that as an excuse so that you can keep the money, then that's not so good.

The third branch of **action** refers to actually doing the action. It could be threatening somebody by force. It could be breaking into their houses. Or it could be what we most commonly do - we cheat a little bit here, we cheat a little bit there. We borrow something and we don't return it. We use the things at work meant for work use but we use it for our private use without getting permission for that. Like doing hundreds and thousands of photocopies on the company machine. We make long distance calls from the office when it's clear they don't want us to do that. If that's one of the perks of our job, it's okay. But if it's not a perk of our job, then it's considered stealing. Or we could use fraudulent weights, or overcharge somebody, or other ways of taking what hasn't been given to us.

Also, we are taking what hasn't been freely given if we coerce somebody into giving us something. We oblige them to give us money, even though they don't want to. We put people in positions where they can't turn us down. And for people who are ordained, if the benefactors pass out the offerings and you take twice your portion, it's stealing. In Dharamsala, sometimes people make offerings to all the monks and nuns attending the teachings by His Holiness. They'll go around and offer each monk or nun some money. If you sit in one place and collect the offering and then move to another position before the person who distributes the money gets there and collect some more, that's stealing.

And then the fourth branch is the **completion of the action**, feeling: "This thing belongs to me. This is mine." This refers to having a sense of ownership over the object.

Unwise sexual behavior

Now we're going to go on to unwise sexual behavior. There're four basic types of unwise sexual behavior: with an improper person, in an improper way, in an improper place, and at an improper time. Like I said last time, I'm not sure exactly how many of these are culturally determined and how many of these are naturally negative.

In terms of the **object**, it can be somebody who is celibate, somebody who is in the custody of their parents, somebody who is related to you, or even with your own partner: if it is done in front of holy images, or on days when you have taken precepts.

They also say in the day time – I have yet to understand why they say that. It could be because in ancient India, everybody was supposed to be working in the day and not messing around at home. It could also be because everybody – mum, dad, grandma, grandpa, aunts, uncles, and the chickens – all live in one room, and in the day time, it might be a little bit embarrassing. [laughter]

But the chief, principal unwise sexual behavior is going outside of your own relationship. This applies even if you're single, if your partner is in another relationship. This is what is commonly called 'adultery'. This is the principal thing to avoid, basically because it causes a lot of pain and confusion in people's lives. It's very clear, and I kind of marvel at our society: everybody is in much pain and confusion because their partners sleep with other people, but then when they want to go sleep with somebody else, they don't think twice about the effect it has on their partners. If you want to make confusion in your lives - this is a real 'good' way to do it. Look at your own life. Look at your friends' lives. What do people talk about all the time? This is one of the big things that is very problematic in their lives because the mind is jumping around from person to person.

It is especially problematic if there are children involved. It creates incredible difficulties for the kids. His Holiness tells people to really check up well before they get married, and when they have kids, to recognize that the marriage commitment is definitely beyond just the two of them. And to really have the wish to take care of the children, not having the attitude of: "Oh well, my husband/wife is just a pain in the neck. So ciao! Good-bye! Sorry, kids." I think those of you who come from divorced families know how painful it is. Knowing the pain from one's own experience, then at least try to avoid the pain and confusion for one's own partner or children.

The first part of the second branch (**complete intention**), recognition, means you have to have sex with the person you are intending to. If you intend to rape Joan and you rape Mary instead, it's not a complete action.

There has to be the recognition of the person, then the intention to do it. And then the motivation is usually attachment. It's always completed with attachment though it could be initially motivated by anger. I think a lot of rape might be motivated by anger. It can also be initially motivated by ignorance. For example, coercing somebody into having sex, thinking that this is some great spiritual practice.

The **action** is the meeting of the organs.

The **completion of the action** is when one experiences delight, in other words, orgasm.

What is very interesting about these seven negative actions of body and speech is to see whether you can have them complete by telling somebody else to do them. In other words, if I tell you to go and kill, then when you kill, both you and I get the negative karma of killing. But with unwise sexual conduct, if I tell you to go sleep with somebody, I don't get the negative karma of unwise sexual conduct—I didn't get the bliss at the end. [laughter] This is the only one of the seven actions of body and speech that you can't do by telling somebody else to do it. But of course, encouraging somebody to go outside a relationship isn't a good thing to do.

I'll tell you a story here. When I went to Hong Kong, the Dharma center put a little announcement that I was coming. One man called and invited me out to lunch. This is kind of common, people offering lunch to the ordained. We went out to lunch and he started telling me how he had just gotten involved with this new group and they were using sex in spirituality and so on. He thought since I was a religious person, I would be really in tune with this. I was thinking: "Get me out of here!" [laughter]

This is a good example of having ignorance as the motivation. A lot of people in the West hear about tantra, but first of all, they don't know that there's a difference between Hindu tantra and Buddhist tantra. And they don't know that there's a difference between real tantra and flaky tantra. And so they get all involved in: "Oh look! You can have Dharma and sex at the same time. This is great!" Buddhism isn't anti-sex, but this mind that rationalizes and says: "We're going to turn this into some high, great, mystical, spiritual experience to rationalize doing it as much as possible with whomever we want to, without any kind of responsibility." – this kind of rationalizing attitude is an example of ignorance.

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.'