

The Ten Destructive Actions – Part 2 of 6:
the destructive actions of speech (lightly edited transcript)
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We have been talking about karma. Karma means intentional actions, actions we do with the intention to do them. This teaching on karma is one of the most important teachings that the Buddha gave. It is laying the groundwork for all further practice that we do. In other words, the first principal thing we have to do when we start practicing the Dharma is to get our ethical conduct together, which means to get our daily life together. Ethics is not separate from our daily life. Ethical behavior relates basically to how we relate to other people, how we relate to ourselves.

When some people come into Buddhist practice, they don't want to hear about cause and effect. The last thing they want to hear is about the ten destructive actions. They want bliss and void. [laughter]. "Give me the highest class tantric initiation. I want bliss and void. I want to visualize myself as a deity. I want to play a drum and a bell and [deepens voice] chant in Tibetan in a big, deep voice. [laughter]. I want to look very holy. I want to look like a spiritual practitioner, but please don't tell me to watch how I talk to other people. [laughter] I don't want to hear that."

With that kind of attitude, there's no way we can get anywhere on the spiritual path. Spirituality isn't something airy-fairy in the sky. It is a basic feet-on-the-ground way of living with people. For this reason, karma is an important teaching. It will make us look at how we have been acting since the day we were born.

The last time we met we covered the three destructive actions that we do physically – stealing, killing and unwise sexual behavior. Tonight we are going to get to the four destructive actions of speech. They are lying, divisive speech, harsh speech, and idle talk. It's amazing that one small mouth can do so many things. [laughter]. And as with the actions of the body, these actions have four branches:

- 1) Basis
- 2) Motivation:
 - i) Recognition of the object
 - ii) Intention
 - iii) Affliction*
- 3) Action
- 4) Completion of the action

If we have all of these branches intact, then that's an 'A' number one, super-duper, perfect negative action - a "Ph.D." negative action. [laughter]. If one of the branches is missing, then we just didn't do it so good, and it is not a complete karma.

Lying

Lying is classified under the destructive actions of speech because we usually do it verbally. But it can be done physically: we can make a gesture that tells something false with our hand or with our head, for example. Lying is basically denying something we know is true, being very clear about that and knowingly misleading others, knowingly giving the wrong information; or inventing things that are false in order to harm others. These are all included in lying.

1) Basis

The *basis* is another human being whom we lie to, who understands what we are saying in our human

language. I don't know, it doesn't talk about lying to your dogs. I suppose you could lie to your pets. You could tell them you are going to give them food, then they follow you to where you want to lock them up and you don't give them food – except we usually give them food and we usually don't lie to them. Usually, lying is in relationship to another human being. I suppose you can do it to an animal as well.

2) Motivation

Then, in the second branch about the *motivation*, we have to recognize that what we are about to say is false. We know very clearly in our mind that what we are saying is false. In other words, it is not accidentally saying something we think is true that we later find out isn't true. It is actually knowing something isn't true when we say it; recognizing what we say as false.

The second part of that second branch is the *intention*; in other words, intending to lie, intending to deceive the other person.

The *affliction** underlying the action of lying can be attachment, anger, or ignorance. When we lie out of attachment, we're lying to get something for our own gain, our own benefit. Or we lie out of anger: we lie in order to harm somebody else. Lying out of ignorance is thinking that it is perfectly okay to lie and there is nothing wrong with lying. "Everybody does it, so why shouldn't I? Everybody cheats on their taxes, why shouldn't I? Everybody else punches up the time clock this way, why can't I?" We think that there's nothing wrong with lying.

3) Action

The *action* is lying, telling something false, usually verbally, sometimes through a gesture. Or it can be done in writing.

The most serious kind of lie is lying about our spiritual attainments. This is very serious. It is very, very harmful to other people if we claim to have spiritual realizations we don't have. We are misleading them. If we don't know what in the world we are talking about, yet lying and proclaiming ourselves to be some glorious teacher while people in their naïveté follow us, then this lie becomes very harmful to them.

It's also very harmful to lie to our spiritual teachers or to the Sangha, to the Triple Gem, or to our parents, because these are very powerful objects. Our teacher and the Triple Gem are powerful in terms of their qualities. Our parents are powerful in terms of what they have done for us. Our parents are probably the chief ones we lie to [laughter], especially when you are between the age of twelve and twenty. [laughter] It is something to think about. Lying is definitely heavier if it costs somebody's life or if it harms somebody in a serious way.

Of course, there is a big difference between lying which gets somebody killed, and telling a little white lie. There is a difference in gradation there. But telling a little white lie is included under lying, and so is knowingly exaggerating the facts of a situation. This is real interesting. For me it made me look at how very sloppy my speech is, and somehow I haven't managed to correct that. "Everybody liked that." – Everybody? "I can't do anything right!" – Anything? We make these incredible black and white statements that are in fact exaggerations. We say them to other people, we say them to ourselves. They are a form of lying. It's a form of exaggeration. "You never listen to me!" [laughter]. You see what I mean; it is definitely an exaggeration. There are many things to be aware of here. How we use the words reflects how we think. It reflects how we think in this categorical, 'all or nothing', 'always or never', 'everybody or nobody' way.

4) Completion of the action

The *completion* of the action of lying is that the other person hears us and they understand and believe us. If they don't believe us, then it's not lying, it's just idle gossip. It's not quite as bad. But if they believe us, then we have done a number one, perfect action of lying.

We can see a lot of disadvantages from lying in our lives. One reason I always find it difficult to lie, is I can never remember what I have told whom. I get all tangled up. I tell one story to one person and another story to another person. Then I can't remember, "Oh, did I tell them *this*, or did I tell *that* to them?" – how to make it all fit together so that the lie holds together. When we get involved in lying, it creates a lot of anxiety in us, because we have to keep track of the lie. We have to put a lot of energy into continuing to lie to make sure that the other person continues to believe our lie. Lying takes a lot of energy. Then there's the underlying anxiety, "Maybe he is going to find out that I am lying. What do I do

if he does?" It creates immediate problems for us. You can see this. If we look deeply, we will see that a lot of the anxiety, tension and pressure that people feel comes from this mind that likes to cover things up or lie.

Divisive Speech

The next destructive action of speech is divisive speech, or what is sometimes called slander. This is the kind of talk that we use that causes other people to not get along. We can be either telling people things that are true that makes them quarrel, or telling them things that are false that makes them quarrel – in which case, it becomes not only divisive speech, but also lying.

1) Basis

The *basis* for this action is either people who are friendly with each other or people who have already quarreled. In the case of people who are friendly, we use divisive words to make sure that they don't continue with their friendship and they go separate ways. For the people who are already at odds, we make sure they don't get reconciled.

2) Motivation

The *recognition* is recognizing the parties involved, making sure that if we want to divide Jack and Jim, it's Jack and Jim that we cause the schism between and not two other people.

The *intention* is to destroy their relationship, to make them quarrel, to stir up trouble, to create division.

The motivation behind this action, again, can be any of the three *afflictions**. We can use divisive words out of attachment. For example, we do it out of attachment to people who are friendly with each other. This often happens with romantic relationships; we are attracted to one of the persons in the relationship. We want to say things that cause them to break up, so that we can have that person as our partner.

We can use divisive words out of anger. We are angry with a colleague, so we speak negatively about him to the boss in order to make the boss upset with him. In addition, if we want to get the promotion by doing this, then we are also motivated by attachment – attachment to getting a promotion for ourselves.

Lying out of ignorance would be using divisive words and thinking that there is nothing wrong with it. "It's perfectly okay. It is for my benefit."

Also, we quite often use divisive words when we are jealous. Two people are getting along quite well. We're jealous, we want to create a schism between them because we can't stand their being happy. They could be a couple; they could be our boss and colleague; they could be our spouse and our child. Somehow we can't endure their being happy and getting along well together. We have to do something to disrupt it, motivated by jealousy.

3) Action

The *action* can be done in a variety of ways. One way is that, with both people there, you just start stirring up trouble. Another way of doing it is subtler. You go to each one individually: "I think you should know that, blah, blah, blah... You shouldn't trust him, you know." And then you go to the other one: "Did you know....." You talk with them individually and create a schism, doubt and mistrust in their relationship.

4) Completion of the action

The *completion* of the action is when the people we are trying to divide don't get along. Or if they are already not getting along, we make quite sure that they will not reconcile. In other words, we make their schism quite serious. It is a very strong action if we cause divisiveness between a spiritual teacher and his or her student. To divide a teacher and a student of the spiritual path is very heavy. They are having a special relationship. It is potentially a very beneficial relationship. We are impeding somebody's spiritual progress if we alienate someone from his or her teacher.

It's also very heavy karma if we use speech to divide a spiritual community, creating schism and getting everybody all riled up and broken up into factions. A spiritual community that is supposed to be

harmonious and supportive of the members' practice now becomes divided and split into separate groups. Also, feeling animosity towards the other group is very heavy negative karma.

The *completion* is that they believe you and decide not to get along. In other words, we got what we wanted. We also got a lot of negative karma with that! [laughter]

Harsh Speech

Basis & Action

The next destructive action of speech is harsh speech. Harsh speech is any kind of speech that hurts another person's feelings. If we are not intending to hurt their feelings but what we say hurts their feelings, then it's not harsh speech. It could be that they are just being supersensitive and very touchy. Harsh speech is when we are fully intending to hurt somebody else. It ranges the whole gamut from yelling and screaming and telling somebody everything they did wrong over the last five years – like somebody loses one piece of paper and all of a sudden, everything we have been storing up for five years comes out – to being sarcastic or teasing people, especially about something they are sensitive to. Making them confused so that they feel like an idiot.

We do this a lot. Sometimes, adults do it to kids. They use this kind of sarcastic teasing to make kids confused. For example the adults will tell the kids, "The bogeyman is going to come get you!" I think it is very cruel – making kids afraid when they don't need to be afraid.

There are lots of ways to use harsh words. It also includes swearing at people. Or insulting them, putting them down. Anything that is going to make them feel lousy. Harsh speech is one of my 'favorites'. It's really something. It comes out so easily.

Motivation

The *recognition* for this verbal action is another sentient being that we want to harm. Sometimes we can get abusive towards the weather or towards our car when it won't start. [laughter] I used to work in a laboratory. When the machine wouldn't work, I used to kick it. That is abusive, but it's not the full-blown thing. It has to be a sentient being. The recognition is that you insult, lie, abuse, harm, tease or are sarcastic towards whomever it is you're intending to direct it to.

The *intention* is that you want to hurt him. The sneaky thing about this is that sometimes we aren't very aware of our intention. Or we rationalize it. We sugarcoat it with, "I'm telling you this because it's for your benefit." Or, "Really? Did I say something that hurt you?" when we know real well that we did. Or, there is a wish to hurt, but we aren't being very frank and honest with ourselves; we're not looking at our own intention to hurt. But the intention is still there. Often, we aren't aware that we had the intention to hurt them until after we've hurt them.

We can do this out of any of the three *afflictions**. If we use harsh speech out of attachment, it could be, for example, to get in good with a bunch of people who use harsh speech. Your whole group of friends is sitting there attacking somebody, or a group of colleagues is bad-mouthing somebody. Out of attachment to your reputation or wanting these people to like you, you jump in and bad-mouth the person they're bad-mouthing. It's real easy to do this.

Most of our harsh speech is of course done with anger, resentment, belligerence, holding grudges – with a harmful attitude, wishing to strike out at somebody.

We use harsh speech out of ignorance when we think that there's nothing wrong with it. "I'm doing it for your benefit." "I'm doing this because I care about you." "It hurts me to say this to you, but..." [laughter]

At this addiction conference that I went to, one priest was talking about religious abuse. He was talking about people who quote the bible before they beat their kid: quoting the bible, "It's for your own good," and then laying into somebody. It's a similar kind of action, although here, we're talking about laying into people verbally.

Action and Completion of the action

The *completion* of the action is that the other people hear, they understand and their feelings are hurt.

Like I said, the action itself can be done in a variety of ways. It can be done with a nice, smooth, calm voice; it can be done with a really harsh voice; it can be done with all sorts of voices, all sorts of means.

[Audience: Inaudible]

Any sentient being. Telling your dog off. You can look at some of the animals, they certainly pick up the tone, don't they?

Idle Talk

The next destructive action of speech is idle talk. We don't need to talk about this one, do we? [laughter] Idle talk is yak, yak, yak [laughter]. They say that idle talk is one of the biggest hindrances in our spiritual practice. Why? Because it wastes so much time. "I'm going to sit down and meditate this evening, but first I'm going to make a quick phone call." And then two hours later, "Oh, I just got off the phone. I'm too tired." Time spent yakking and yakking.

That's why we often do our retreats in silence – at least we get to the meditation session! [laughter] If you have a talking retreat, people never come on time. They are too busy talking in the middle of the session. When they are meditating, they're thinking about what they're going to talk about after the session. The mind goes berserk. When we sit down and meditate, we can see that we are distracted by the conversation we've just had or we're planning what to talk about next. These thoughts are going through our mind the whole time we're trying to watch the breath.

1) Basis

The *basis* of this action is something that has no great consequence in the matter of affairs, but we're treating it as if it's important and meaningful.

2) Motivation

The *recognition* of that is thinking that what you say is important and meaningful. [laughter]

The *intention* is that you want to talk.

And then the motivation is quite often out of the *affliction** of attachment. We just want to hang out and relax, waste time and make ourselves seem important, and think that we're great because we can entertain somebody else. Or we want to be entertained, so we sit and listen to somebody else talking.

We can do it out of anger, for example, doing idle talk with the intention of preventing somebody else from doing something. Or out of anger, we definitely want to interfere with what they're doing, we take up their time talking to them.

Again, we do it out of ignorance when we feel, "There's nothing wrong with idle talk. Let's do it."

Now, it doesn't mean that all of our casual talk is idle talk. Sometimes we might have quite a good motivation for doing idle talk. For example, you visit somebody in the hospital. They're depressed. Or they're sick and they need their spirits to be lightened up. You chitchat with them. You don't get into a heavy, philosophical discussion. You chitchat. You do something to lighten the other person's spirits. Or if the atmosphere is heavy and tense, or somebody is very depressed, then, with a kind motivation towards them, you can start cracking jokes or switch the topic to something lighter. You're doing it with a very clear understanding of what you're saying. We intentionally try to benefit the other person.

It is idle talk if it's done out of attachment to wasting time and making ourselves seem important or if we want to be entertained. What's suitable for talking with your neighbor? Often, it's just chitchat. Or with your colleagues in the office? It's just light stuff. But you're aware when you're talking about this light stuff. You're doing it because this is the way to make contact with this sentient being; this is the way to keep the door of communication open with them. The motivation in this context is out of care and concern and to make an honest relationship with the other person, not just out of attachment to our own ego or for our own amusement.

3) Action

Getting back to the times when we speak out of attachment, there are different types of speech that are considered idle talk. This is real interesting. The *action* itself is speaking the words. This can include just monopolizing the conversation – on the phone for forty-five minutes, while the other person is desperately trying to hang up because they have to do something. But we won't let them hang up. Or talking about legends, myths, prayers and gods that are non-existent. Doing spells, praying for terrible things to happen. Talking with an attempt to persuade somebody. Talking about a wrong philosophical belief.

Also, gossiping about what people are doing – telling stories about what the person on the right or on the left does, what the person upstairs or downstairs or across the hall is doing. Telling stories from our past – “Oh, on my vacation, I went here and I went there...,” doing it out of ego, making ourselves a big shot. Telling stories or jokes that draw attention to ourselves.

It's also considered idle gossip when you teach the Dharma to somebody who's not interested. Isn't that interesting? That's called true idle gossip [laughter]. Somebody has no interest in and no respect for the Dharma, but you stop them on the street corner and you talk to them about the Dharma.

Also included in idle gossip – bickering, speaking behind other people's backs, reciting liturgies of other religions for no good reason. That's a real interesting one. I often wondered about it. When I lived in France, I became quite good friends with some Catholic nuns and sometimes we would visit them. Sometimes we stayed overnight. One day we were attending prayers with them, and we were singing the prayers. They were very surprised that we sang Christian prayers. They would never say Buddhist prayers. But in our minds, we were very, very clear about our purpose in singing the prayers. Although I was using their vocabulary and their words, I was translating it all into Buddhist meaning. I think in that kind of case, it wasn't idle talk. But if I were saying it and thinking about the meaning, not in terms of Buddhism, but in terms of another system that I myself didn't believe in, then it would become idle gossip for me.

Sometimes when we're with our family, they want us to go to a religious service of our former religion. Last year, I went to Passover dinner with my parents. (They are Jewish.) That may happen, and that's perfectly all right. I think it's good to spend time with our family. But the thing is to keep our mind real clear, and if we don't feel comfortable saying prayers, we shouldn't say them. When I was at this Passover dinner, whenever there was a prayer about God I didn't say it. When they had other prayers about kindness or whatever, those I said. We can attend, but be very clear about what we're doing, be very clear about what we're believing and not be wishy-washy, "Do-I-believe-in-this?" or "Do-I-believe-that?" Or believing in this but praying to that, because then our mouth isn't matching our mind.

[Audience: Inaudible]

The purpose here is to keep our mind clear about what we're doing. It's not to detach ourselves from other people or make ourselves elite. Whether it becomes idle gossip or not depends upon whether or not our mind is clear.

Other things considered idle gossip: singing jingles [laughter]. We have all the commercials memorized and we chant them, don't we? Humming, singing, whistling – this kind of speech, done for no particularly good reason, filling the environment with lots of noise, like when we walk around the office humming.

If you're doing it for a specific motivation – for example, you whistle or crack a joke to cheer somebody up – fine. But if you're just going around whistling and you're completely mindless/oblivious to what you're doing, or you whistle because you want everybody else to know how well you whistle (because you can do those really neat kinds of whistle) then the motivation is questionable. [laughter]

Also considered idle talk is complaining, grumbling: “Why doesn't this happen? Why don't we do that?” (That's my favorite one.) Telling stories and gossiping about government leaders, politics, sports, fashion for no good reason. Just being busy-bodies and bad-mouthing other people. If you're talking about politics for a good reason, for example because you're trying to get some information about what's going on in the world to carry on conversations with other people, that is fine. That is great. We should know what's going on in the world. It becomes idle talk only when we're doing it not to have basic information but to fill the time or to complain about other people, or to distract ourselves.

Spending lots of time talking about sports – how much time people spend talking about what others do with little round balls! There is an amazing amount of time spent on that. Or speaking stupidly. Just being silly for no good reason. If you're silly for a good reason, that's fine. There are situations in which it's very good to be silly. But again it's being silly mindfully.

Idle talk in conjunction with the five wrong livelihoods

Any kind of talk that is done in conjunction with any of the five wrong livelihoods is also considered idle talk. For example, *flattering* other people. We flatter people not because we really want to tell them something good they did. Praise – we should definitely do – is not idle gossip. But flattering people so that they'll give you something or do something for you is idle gossip. Also considered idle talk is speech that we use to hint at what we want other people to give us. Actually, *hinting* is called being polite in America. We're not supposed to ask directly. We're supposed to drop hints. But this is actually idle talk. Talking to *coerce* somebody into giving you something is also idle talk. Putting them into a situation in which they can't say, "No." Or you *bribe* somebody. You say a little nice thing for them, and they'll say a little nice thing for you. Or you say a little nice thing for them and then they'll give you something – that kind of bribery. Or talk where we're basically being *hypocritical*...

[Teachings lost due to change of tape.]

Also included in idle speech is saying to someone else, "You go tell somebody else off." Or, "You go call him a name." Telling somebody else to do it and engaging somebody else in idle gossip. In this case both parties create the negative karma.

4) Completion of the action

Just expressing the words out loud is the completion of the action. The most serious type of idle talk is distracting someone who is practicing Dharma.

Questions and answers

Reading and Idle talk

[In response to audience:] I think that would probably be considered idle talk. Even though you may not be reading them out loud, you're filling your mind with idle talk. If you're reading a novel for another motivation, then it doesn't become idle talk.

There're lots of ways to read novels. There're lots of ways to watch movies. You can read or watch TV where your greed, ignorance, jealousy, anger and everything is completely involved with the situations in the character's life, so that your mind is generating a lot of negative action; or you can read or watch TV, and it becomes a meditation on the gradual path.

You can clearly see the disadvantages of the afflictions* in the movies, novels, and newspapers. It's very clear, because you read what happens to people. You read the stories in the novels and see what happens to the characters. You come to see clearly the disadvantages of destructive actions. Reading the newspapers is like reading a column on karma. It's incredible. Read the newspapers and think about karma. Think, "What kind of causes did these people do to get the result that they're experiencing now?" Think of the kind of causes that people do to experience that, and then watch what they're doing now and think, "What kind of results are they creating the cause to experience?" You see the event both from the viewpoint of it being a result of past karma, and of it being the karma or the action that's going to cause a future result. It helps you develop a very good understanding of karma, a lot of appreciation for karma as well as giving us a much stronger motivation to be aware of what we're doing.

If you read a novel, watch the TV, or chitchat with somebody, but you do so with an awareness of karma, it's quite productive. But if you're doing that same action with a different motivation and different emotional cognitive processes, it can become a destructive action.

[Audience:] Is it possible to give a short definition of mindfulness?

The word "mindfulness" is used slightly differently in the Theravada tradition and in the Tibetan tradition.

I quite often use it in terms of the Theravada way, where mindfulness means just being aware of what you're thinking, what you're feeling, what you're saying, what you're doing. In other words, being in the present moment, and being aware of what's going on with your body, speech and mind.

In the Tibetan tradition, mindfulness has more of the connotation of being mindful of how you would like to be with your body, speech and mind. In other words, being mindful of the constructive actions, holding those in mind and then trying to live like that. That's more the connotation in the Tibetan tradition. In the Theravada tradition, mindfulness is more of just being aware of what is happening at the moment.

[In response to audience:] Actually, the Tibetans have another word for the Theravada meaning of just being aware of what's going on – “introspective alertness”. In the Tibetan tradition, they talk about having that same aspect of being aware – what am I saying, doing, and thinking; do I need to apply an antidote or not? That is called introspective alertness.

The Tibetan meaning of “mindfulness” would be more like before you go to work, making a strong determination, “OK, today, I don't want to do any of the ten destructive actions, and I'm going to keep in mind what these ten destructive ones are and what the ten constructive ones are. I'm going to keep them in my mind and use them to check up what I'm doing, saying, thinking and feeling during the day.”

What is a Buddhist friendship like?

[Audience:] What would a friendship between two Buddhists be like?

I think they'd probably get along real well. [laughter]

[Audience:] Would they have casual conversations?

Oh, sure! “I heard this great teaching tonight on the ten destructive actions!” [laughter]

Being a Buddhist doesn't mean that all your conversations must be meaningful. You try and have meaningful conversations, but it means when you're talking to people, you're very aware of why you're talking to them and how you're talking to them, and the effect that your words are having on them. Your talk isn't just mindless; you aren't on automatic, letting whatever is coming out of your mouth come out. But it's thinking about what you're saying and being aware of why you're saying it. Perhaps reflecting, “Hold on. If I'm talking to make myself look good, or if I'm talking to make somebody else look bad, or if I'm talking and wasting my time or wasting the other person's time, well actually, that doesn't fit in with my goals in life. I don't want to do that.”

Can you imagine having a friendship where people in the relationship don't try and divide each other's relationships with other people; you don't lie to each other; you don't waste each other's time; you don't speak harshly to each other or ridicule and make fun of each other? You don't talk to your friend to appear important and be amusing or get lots of attention to yourself. You don't talk to your friends so that they reconfirm all your garbage thoughts: “This person made me so mad. Don't you agree they're idiots?” [laughter] Our friendships would be much healthier. We just talk simply and honestly. If the other person is down, you joke or say something to cheer them up, and you're aware of what you're doing. You're doing it for a good reason.

[Audience:] What's the role of humor?

I think the role of humor is quite an important one, and it stems very much from the motivation. Like you said, often we'll use humor as a way of masking our hostility, or a way of making an unkind comment to somebody else. That kind of humor is actually harsh speech. It's meant to hurt somebody. It's antagonistic.

The kind of humor that is meant to ease a situation, or make somebody laugh, or make a connection with other people, or the kind of humor where we laugh at ourselves - instead of taking everything we do so seriously, being able to laugh at ourselves and release tension - I think that kind of humor is truly healthy. In a Tibetan monastery, people laugh a lot. The Tibetans laugh a lot. You'll be in the middle of a teaching, and Geshela will crack a joke and everybody cracks up. Or something happens and things get all excited, and we're saying, “Geshela, you can't say that...” and he'll say something and we'll all laugh.

I think humor is very important. It's an important part of our practice. But it's the motivation with which we use the humor that matters. One of my teachers says that humor is a form of wisdom. That has always stuck with me. Being able to laugh instead of making everything like lead in our life; being able to laugh at ourselves so that we don't get embarrassed or self-conscious; we don't try to lie to cover up our junk, but we learn to look at it and expose it - that's important.

I think laughter is also very good in preventing you from getting uptight and nervous – what the Tibetans call 'lung'. When you push too hard...you're pushing and pushing – "I'm meditating so much. I'm going to be a Buddha!" "I'm doing so many prostrations." "I'm doing so many mantras." "I looked at the ten negative actions and I've done all ten!" Just this kind of worry and tension that we build up in the practice – humor is important so that we pull ourselves out of that.

[In response to audience:] I think a comedian's humor is different from the humor that we use amongst each other. Often the humor you see on TV is derogatory, whereas often when we joke amongst ourselves, it is not to put somebody down.

Action and Motivation

[In response to audience:] In Buddhism, *why* you do something is much more important than *what* you do. What you do is important, but why you do it is the real critical thing. Why you do something can make it positive or negative. Why you do it can make it light or heavy. The *why* is really important. And that's why at the beginning of all our teachings, I say "Now, let's cultivate a good motivation." We make sure that we're here out of a good motivation. Even if you have to consciously, with effort, create a good motivation, it's still very beneficial.

[Audience:] A lot of our speech is just unmindful; we're not consciously aware of our motivation although our motivation may be quite conscious. So how does that influence the karma?

If you premeditate whatever it is you're doing, it will be much more forceful than if the intention or motivation just comes at that moment when the event is happening. In other words, if you sat and planned how to get your revenge on somebody else, and you thought, "Oh, they're very sensitive about this. I can just say this in a certain tone of voice the next time I see them. It will really get to them." If we think about how to do it and say it, that's going to be a lot heavier than if something just came out of our mouths spontaneously and we hadn't spent time thinking about how to hurt them. Why? The motivation is strong. There's a lot of energy behind it.

Of course, we might make a very sarcastic remark to someone and not realize it. When we check up later, and if we're honest with ourselves, we might discover that at that moment, we did intend to hurt the person. But we weren't aware of it at that moment because we're so spaced out at the time. That's why I think it's good to spend some time at the end of the day to reflect about what's happened. Go back over what happened, see what we've said to whom and why we said it. Our motivation often becomes more obvious to us. Or sometimes at the end of the day we might be feeling a little bit uneasy about an encounter we had with somebody. We're not sure exactly why, but when we go over and we start looking, remembering what we were thinking and feeling doing it, then we can find harmful motivations, the wish to harm, the wish for revenge, or the wish for power.

This is why going over something at the end of the day is valuable. We are much more aware of the kinds of things we do habitually, but which we aren't aware we are doing. By becoming aware of them in the evening, it makes us much more attentive and mindful during the day. We can catch it sooner when we do it.

Regret influences the heaviness/lightness of karma

[In response to audience:] You hurt somebody, and immediately after the words came out of your mouth, you said, "Oh, I wish I hadn't said that." That's going to be much, much lighter than if we say it and then think, "I'm so glad. I hope they're really hurt!" Our response to our own action – whether we rejoice or whether we regret it – is going to definitely make our karma heavier or lighter. If we rejoice, it's beefing it up. If the regret comes immediately after, you have completed the action but it's not going to be as heavy. It might happen that in the middle of doing it, your motivation changes. In this case the action will

not be complete. For example, you start to kick your dog and your foot is almost there, but you think, “I really don’t want to do this. This poor dog.” But the momentum is there and the dog gets kicked, but your motivation has changed in the middle.

[Audience: Inaudible]

That’s when we become more sensitive to these things and we start examining, “Why am I doing that?” That’s when we start getting to know ourselves. I think actually, that would be like what people do in therapy. “Why am I doing this? Why am I thinking this way? Why do I want to hurt somebody?” Asking ourselves these questions, we will come to understand our own anger and jealousy better. By recognizing the harm done to the other person and the harm done to ourselves putting all these negative imprints in our mind, it gives us much more impetus to clean it up. We can then either stop the action verbally and physically (even though the motivation may be there) or, going a step further, work on the motivation and stop it, which is really what we have to get to. First we have to at least stop ourselves before it gets out of our mouth or out of our body. Then we have to work with the mind and try to let go of the energy that’s motivating it.

Guilt is completely useless

[In response to audience:] That’s a very good point. Guilt distracts us from the purification. It distracts us from understanding what we are doing in life. We get so caught up in our own little spinning that we lose the ability to look at what’s really going on. That’s why from the Buddhist viewpoint, guilt is completely useless. It is something to be abandoned.

Let’s sit quietly for a few minutes.

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".