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Three Destructive Actions of Mind

Let's get back to the ten destructive actions. We discussed the three that we do physically and the four that we do verbally. Now we will talk about the three destructive actions that we do mentally—coveting, maliciousness, and wrong views. These mental actions are actually the result of the three afflictions* carried out to the full extreme. We can do these mental actions without saying anything or doing any other action. We can do them when we are lying in bed, we can do them when we are sitting in perfect meditation posture, we can do them in front of the Buddha, we can do them while walking around Green Lake. We can do them anywhere because they are purely mental actions. This is why it is important to observe, or watch, the mind. By learning about these three mental actions, we can see how important the mind is and precisely how the mind is the motivator for all the other actions. We can also see how the destructive actions of coveting, maliciousness, and wrong views develop quite easily in our minds. As I said, we don't need to move a muscle to do them. These actions (or defilements) get into our minds and then motivate us to do the other seven destructive actions.

[Note: The three destructive actions of mind are discussed using the framework of the four branches that make an action complete:

1. Object or basis
2. Complete intention:
 - a. Correct recognition of the object
 - b. Motivation
 - c. Having one of the three poisonous attitudes or afflictions (attachment, anger, or ignorance)
3. Actual Action
4. Completion of the action]

1) Coveting

The first destructive action of the mind is coveting. This is an attitude of "We want!" This is the one that the American economy is built on. [Laughter] We are taught to covet from the time we are children. It's good for the economy. "Try to get more, try to get better, increase your wants, plan how to get what you want and then go out and do it!"

Let's look at coveting in terms of the four branches that make a destructive action complete. The first branch is the object, or basis, which can be anything we desire. The object that we covet can belong to other people, it can belong to someone in our family, or it can be something that nobody owns, although nowadays there aren't too many things that nobody owns. We can covet any kind of possession, including a talent, a quality, or an ability that belongs to someone else.

The worst type of coveting is coveting something that belongs to the Triple Gem—the Buddha, Dharma, or Sangha. An example of this is if someone places an offering of chocolate brownies on the altar, and you think, "Hmm...I wonder...nobody is looking, maybe I can take one." This is the mind coveting things. Another example of coveting things belonging to the Triple Gem is someone going to a temple and

thinking, "This temple has so much stuff. I wonder if I can take this, that, and the other thing." It is especially harmful to covet things that belong to the Triple Gem.

The second branch that makes a destructive action complete is the complete intention. This branch has three parts—first, we recognize the object for what it is, then we have the intention or the wish to get the object, and finally, we have the affliction* which motivates our action, which in this instance is attachment. The complete intention might include these thoughts: "Gee, wouldn't it be nice if I could have this," or "I sure wish I could have that."

The third branch is the action. Here the thought is developing. We might be thinking, "Hmm, I'm going to get this! I will do it!"

The fourth branch is the completion of the action, and the thought might be, "I am definitely going to get this, and this is how I am going to do it!" We start planning exactly how we're going to get what we want, "I am going to the store and I am going to the section where they are selling this thing, and I am going to get it and I'll pay for it with my VISA card, and" You know how it goes. It is interesting to see that the last three branches—the complete intention, the action, and the conclusion of the action—all belong to one thought flow.

Now, someone might ask, "Does that mean we can't buy anything?" [Laughter] I don't want to be too hard on the economy, you know [Laughter]. Of course we can buy things. There is a difference between recognizing the things that are useful for us, and developing a mind that covets, wants, craves, plans, schemes, and connives. There is a difference; you can see this. If you look in your refrigerator and it is empty and you think, "I have to go shopping to get some food," and then you go buy the food, there is no problem with that. We need food for survival.

Coveting is when we go to someone's house and they have this incredible cheesecake and there is some left over, and we think, "I want the rest of that cheesecake. I hope they give it to me. How can I drop a hint so they will give me the leftovers? And if they don't give it to me, we will stop at the store on the way home and get some cheesecake." This entire series of thoughts is imbued with the energy of coveting. That's what coveting is. Do you understand?

[Audience:] What's the difference between coveting the qualities of the Triple Gem and aspiring to develop these qualities?

The thoughts that occur when we covet the qualities of the Triple Gem might be, "I should have the love and compassion; the Buddha doesn't need it. Everybody will then make offerings to me and not to the Buddha." Coveting is very different than aspiring to get something. Aspiring is when we recognize the value of something, we recognize it accurately, and our heart moves us in that direction. Coveting is when we overestimate the value of something, especially overestimating its value in relation to ourselves. And we're left with this clinging, grasping mind wanting and craving the object.

[In response to audience:] [Laughter] Right, but when we aspire to have bodhicitta, we are not overestimating the qualities of bodhicitta. Our mind is responding with faith and aspiration, which is a very light, hopeful quality of the mind. On the other hand, when we covet bodhicitta, we are not understanding the qualities of the bodhicitta. What we're wanting is the respect and offerings that come with bodhicitta rather than bodhicitta itself. Our coveting thoughts might be, "I don't want other people to have bodhicitta because then they get some benefit. I want the benefits for myself." As you can see, aspiring and coveting are two very different mental actions.

2) Maliciousness

The second destructive action of the mind is maliciousness. Maliciousness is thinking about how to harm other people. We might want to harm others out of sheer hatred and for revenge, or because we are competing, and we are in rivalry with them. Or we may be holding a grudge against them. Although they may have apologized, we are still angry and want to hurt them. Planning how to harm someone else is maliciousness.

Now, the first branch in completing a malicious mental action is that there needs to be an object, which,

in this instance, is any sentient being. This is followed by the complete intention—we recognize the sentient being, who it is, and we recognize that they could be hurt if we did whatever it is we want to do. Our intention is, "I wish I could harm them. Wouldn't it be nice if I could harm them?" This is the opposite of the four immeasurables—the malicious intention might go something like this:

"May all sentient beings have suffering and its causes [Laughter], especially this person whom I can't stand!"

"May it happen as soon as possible with no delay and obstruction."

Okay? Do you understand this way of thinking? The intention is, "Wouldn't it be nice if they had some misfortune," or "I wish I could get my revenge." The action is, "Hmm...that looks really good. I'm going to do it! I'm definitely going to harm this person." The completion is when we start thinking about exactly how to do it, and our intention becomes very firm. We think, "I am really going to get this guy! And this is how I am going to do it." You can see the flow of one thought moving from the intention to the action to the completion.

You can see that with both coveting and maliciousness, we don't just have the passing thought, "Wouldn't it be nice if I had this. Wouldn't it be nice if somebody else had some misfortune." Coveting and maliciousness put energy into that thought, feeding the thought so we get to the point where we are determined to act on it. This is why it is so important to catch the afflictions before they develop in our minds. If we don't, then they gradually worsen and soon become coveting or malicious thoughts.

Self-respect and Consideration for others

With both coveting and (especially with) maliciousness, we're in the process of getting to the point of deciding. This is the premeditated part of any crime, where one is premeditating how to steal or how to kill. In the process, we're completely ignoring or abandoning two very positive mental factors, self-respect and consideration for others. Although self-respect and consideration for others are overlooked when we covet or act maliciously, they are also overlooked whenever we do any of the other destructive actions.

When we have self-respect, we observe an action and decide, "I can act better than that. I'm not going to do that (negative action)," or, "I'm a Dharma practitioner, and I don't want to get involved in this." Out of respect for our own integrity as human beings, respect for our own practice, we decide not to get involved in thinking this way or acting out our destructive thoughts.

When we are considerate of others, we abandon thinking or acting harmfully by taking others into account, "If I speak that way, I might hurt someone. It might affect their family, too. I really don't want to do it," or, "If I act that way, other people will lose faith in me. I am trying to cultivate other people's trust. I am trying to be a reliable and honest person. I don't want other people to lose faith in me or make them lose faith in the"

[Teachings lost due to change of tape]

...we're completely ignoring these two other possible mental factors. In fact, we are lacking self-respect and consideration for others. These are two very important mental factors to try to develop because they help us avoid not only the physically and verbally destructive actions, but also the mentally destructive ones.

Now, we have to understand what self-respect and consideration for others mean. We often misinterpret self-respect to mean self-judgment. For example, if we have self-respect, we might think, "I am a Dharma practitioner. I don't want to do this," or, "I have the Buddha nature. I don't want to pollute it by acting negatively." But if we are judging ourselves, our thoughts might be, "I shouldn't do this. I am a real jerk if I do it, and I'm really proving to myself that I am awful." When we have self-judgment, we have a heavy, critical voice. Self-judgment easily masks as self-respect, but it's not. Self-respect and self-judgment are two completely different mental factors.

Similarly, consideration for others, where we truly consider the effect of our actions on someone else and decide not to do them, can be subtly twisted. We might think we are being considerate of others, but instead we are attached to our reputation, "I'm not going to do this because if I do, no one will like me," or, "I'm not going to do that because if I do, everybody will criticize me. I want them to like me. I am

attached to and want people's approval." Attachment to reputation is an affliction*, whereas consideration for others is not. We should cultivate consideration for others because it allows us to calmly and precisely see the effects of our actions on others and then decide not to do the harmful actions. Do you see the difference between these two attitudes?

This is something quite important because if we are not aware of these differences, we can go a long time in our practice thinking we have self-respect and consideration, when actually what we have is self-judgment and attachment to reputation. [Laughter] It is important to be able to distinguish between being attached to reputation and really caring about the effects of our actions. Likewise, it is important to know when we are judging ourselves versus when we honestly have a sense of our Buddha nature and therefore want to act according to our potential.

3) Wrong Views

The last of the ten destructive actions is wrong views. Wrong views, as discussed here, involve denying something important that is true or accepting something as true that, in fact, is not true. Wrong views pertain to our philosophical beliefs, to our outlook on life. We are not referring to wrong views in the sense that we vote as a Republican or as a Democrat. Wrong views involve matters of major importance, such as the existence of cause and effect, the existence of the Buddha, Dharma, or Sangha, the existence of Enlightenment, or the possibility of attaining Enlightenment.

Having wrong views is harmful because it sets the basis for us to get involved in the other nine harmful actions. For example, people who have no moral conscience, who have no sense of ethics whatsoever, do not see the effects of their actions. They might think, "I can do whatever I want. I can kill, I can steal, I can hurt others because there are no consequences. There is just this one life, so I can do whatever I want. As long as I don't get caught, it's perfectly all right!" This view denies past and future lives, denies cause and effect, denies the possibility of becoming Enlightened. When we have wrong views, we actively think about something and decide, "I do not believe in this and I am going to refute it. I am going to deny it!" The mind that holds this wrong view is a very strong, stubborn mind full of misconceptions.

[Audience:] Having doubts is not the same as wrong views, is it?

No, it isn't. Having doubts is perfectly normal. In our Dharma practice, especially when we first begin, we are filled with many doubts. First, we think, "Well, maybe. I am not sure. No, I don't think so." Then later we think, "Well, maybe. I am not sure, hmm..." And finally, "Well, maybe. I'm not sure...well, it could be." We all start with doubt and disbelief and then progress toward a deeper understanding.

To resolve our doubts, we can ask questions, participate in discussions, hear teachings, or get more information. We can take as much time as we need and be patient while doing this. When we have doubts, we have some openness, although our preconceptions may still keep us from seeing reality. There is also a wish to enquire.

When we have wrong views, however, we have strong, stubborn views such as, "There are no past and future lives. They absolutely, positively do not exist!," "There is no such thing as cause and effect. I can do whatever I want. There is no consequence," or "It's impossible for sentient beings to become Enlightened. Why even try to act positively because it is totally impossible. We are born sinful. No way to do anything about it. Human nature is completely miserable." You can see that if we hold wrong views, we are mentally giving ourselves permission to do whatever we want and to completely abandon any kind of ethical restraint.

[Audience:] A Catholic nun who is living ethically but doesn't believe in karma, is that negative?

Although she may say she doesn't believe in karma, in actuality she probably does. What's in her mind may be, "It's Jesus' teaching that 'thou shall reap as thou sow.'" In other words, you reap the crop you plant. For that reason, she may abandon harmful actions. Also, because she sees the results of the harmful actions on other people, she has some consideration for them. However, if you ask her, "Do you believe in karma?" she might say "no" because she thinks karma is something funny that Asian people believe. But if we consider the meaning of the word "karma," her thoughts indicate she probably does believe in it.

As we watch and listen to people, we begin to understand the power of wrong views. We see very clearly how they get people way off track and how they make the mind stubborn and very obscured.

So, let's review the four branches that complete a destructive mental action, this time in terms of wrong views. First, the object is something that is true, that exists, and that we are denying. As I said, the object could be the existence of cause and effect, Enlightenment, the Triple Gem, past or future lives, or anything of an important nature. The intention is knowing clearly what we believe but denying it, and the affliction* is ignorance. So the intention is, "I don't believe in this." The action is, "I don't believe in this. I definitely don't believe in cause and effect." And the completion is completely deciding this is the right view, "Yes, I am absolutely, positively certain. There is no cause and effect! I am not only going to think that, but I am actually going to promulgate that view among other people and teach them." That view then becomes a very firm, hard, wrong view.

General Comments about the Ten Destructive Actions; Causal Motivation and Timely Motivation

Now I want to talk a bit more generally about the ten destructive actions. Any of the destructive actions can be initiated with any of the three poisons (anger, attachment, or ignorance) and completed with another.

For instance, we could begin to covet someone's possessions out of anger and then complete the action with attachment. The motivation we start with is called the causal motivation, and the motivation we have at the time we are doing the action is the timely motivation.

Killing, harsh words, and malice are always completed with the motivation of anger, though they may start with other afflictions*.

Similarly, stealing, unwise sexual behavior, and coveting may start with a particular affliction*, but the timely motivation we have when we complete the action is attachment.

With wrong views, we complete the action with ignorance.

The destructive actions of speech—lying, divisive words, harsh words, and idle chatter—can be completed with any of the afflictions*.

As I said before, of the seven actions of body and speech, six of them can be committed by telling others to do them, and the seventh, unwise sexual behavior, you have to do yourself.

The three destructive actions of the mind can't all exist in the human mind at the same time. They are in different mind moments. Our thoughts may move from coveting to maliciousness and then to wrong views, and to any of them again, but the three are never in our mind simultaneously.

Wrong views is the strongest of the destructive actions and the worst because it sets the stage for doing the other nine. Killing is the next most harmful action.

Of the three destructive actions that we do physically, killing is the most harmful, stealing is next, and then unwise sexual behavior.

Of the four destructive actions of speech, the order from most to least destructive is lying, divisive words, harsh words, and idle talk.

The most harmful of the destructive actions of the mind is wrong views, followed by malice, and then coveting.

So, this concludes our discussion of the ten destructive actions. Let me pause here to answer any questions you have about what we have talked about tonight.

[Audience:] Could you list again the four branches of a complete action?

The four branches of a complete action are the basis or the object, the complete intention, the action, and the completion of the action. As I said previously, the second branch, the complete intention, is subdivided into three parts. The first part is recognizing the object—the thing, the person, or whatever—that we are intending to act upon. The second part is intending to do whatever the action is. And the third part is that we have one of the afflictions*, which motivates us to take action.

You may have heard Buddhist teachers or practitioners talk about the three parts of a complete negative karma: the preparation, the actual action, and the completion. If you ever hear this, don't get confused. They are actually referring to the four branches but looking at them in a different way. The preparation, which is the first of the three parts, includes the first two of the four branches, the basis and the complete intention.

Again, knowing all the branches is helpful because it gives us the ability to look at our actions and put them into perspective. I know that when I have done only part of a negative action, my karma is not as heavy as when I have done a complete, absolutely perfect negative action.

This awareness also helps us in the future. We are not able to completely change and abandon all of our negative actions right away—it would be nice, but things just don't work that way. By knowing the branches that complete a destructive action, when we act harmfully, we can at least make an effort not to complete all four branches.

[Audience:] Is coveting like desire?

Coveting is similar to desire. But coveting is the kind of desire that is clinging, grasping, and possessive. It is the kind of desire that carries the thought, "I'm definitely going to get that!" You might call coveting first-class desire. [Laughter]

[Audience:] Could you explain ignorance?

Ignorance is an unknowing or an unawareness in the mind. When we are unaware, we misconstrue how we, other people, and other phenomena exist. Let's use the analogy of walking into a dark room. The darkness is the obscuration, the thing that limits our ability to see. There can also be obscuration in our mind. But there is not only obscuration, there is also active misinterpretation. This would be like going into the dark room and seeing something in the corner that's coiled and striped, and thinking, "Ahh, it's a snake!" But in fact it's a rope. Because of the darkness, we project something that is not there, become afraid, and start screaming.

It's the same with ignorance in the mind. There is a foggy obscuration, and we project what we call inherent or independent existence onto phenomena. We make the objects of our thoughts into something solid and concrete, existent in and of themselves. This is the primary ignorance. There is also a secondary kind of ignorance, which is the ignorance of cause and effect. This is an ignorance of how things function on a relative level, for instance, not realizing that if you kill something, that action affects what happens to you later.

[Audience: inaudible]

Let's say you have the basis and the complete intention (the first two branches), but you don't have the action (the third branch). You have the thought, "I would like to go buy a new pair of skis." In this instance, you are not really mulling it over or thinking seriously about it, so it is not a complete action.

When we bring attachment into a manifest state in our mind, it is, nevertheless, habituating our mind with attachment. The more we bring attachment into our mind, the more attachment will keep coming.

[Audience: inaudible]

Yes, definitely. We have many desires and defilements regularly during the day, but we only notice them

when we are sitting and watching the breath. You are right that sometimes the desire seems to increase when we put ourselves in an environment where we are not allowing our desires to run rampant. For example, when you let your dog run wherever he wants, he doesn't make a fuss. But as soon as you put him in a yard, he starts barking and yelping, making a big fuss. This is what our baby mind does. Our mind yells and screams when we put it in an environment where it can't fulfill every wish that pops into it.

About ignorance

[In response to audience:] Yes, ignorance is the mind that believes everything is fixed and solid and real and existent in and of itself. It's like saying, "I am a horrible person; that's all I am! There is a *me*, there is a very definite *me*, and its nature is completely horrible." Making that thought completely solid, without any space in the mind at all when, in fact, there is no solid, concrete person there to start with. We are creating something where there is nothing.

Similarly, if we think about money, it is just paper and ink. But we superimpose on top of this, "MONEY, I've got to have it!" We make it solid; it isn't just paper and ink anymore, "This is real, inherently existing stuff that is very, very valuable, and all my self-respect depends upon it!" So, ignorance is believing that everything is concrete, existing in and of itself, when in reality all things are made of parts, that things arise and fade away because of causes.

[Audience:] Could you elaborate on the two kinds of ignorance?

There are two kinds of ignorance, ignorance regarding the ultimate and ignorance regarding the relative.

Ignorance regarding the ultimate is the belief that all things are concrete, independently existing, and solid when, in fact, they are not. Everything depends on parts, causes, and labels for its existence.

Ignorance regarding the relative is not having an understanding of cause and effect, completely denying the existence of cause and effect, actions, and their results.

Both types of ignorance are inborn, although they can also be learned. Society teaches us many wrong philosophical systems. When we follow such systems, over time our thinking becomes skewed, and we then live according to that ignorance.

Evaluating our thoughts

[In response to audience:] [Laughter] I think you are right. Our mind is quite unreliable. Within our mind there are many different kinds of mental factors that can arise or manifest. Very contradictory mental factors can actively manifest in our mind at different times. So the mind might, at one moment, have a wrong conception, such as, "There is no cause and effect." And then later, the mental factor of wisdom might arise, "I think there is cause and effect." At one time we might have self-respect, "No, I'm not going to act negatively because I have human dignity, and I am not going to undercut that." And at another time, we may completely throw our self-respect out the window and do anything we want.

So, we have all these different thoughts, many of which oppose each other, and they occur at different times. What we are trying to do in Dharma practice is learn to identify our thoughts and feelings, "Oh, that is consideration for others!" "That's lack of consideration for others!" "That's mindfulness!" "That is confidence!" "And that is anger!" "That is grudge holding!"

This is why it is very important to listen to teachings, to think about them, and to meditate on them. The teachings give us guidelines on how to evaluate the quality of our thoughts. Instead of having the all-encompassing belief, "I think it, therefore it is true," we begin to question and evaluate what is true and what is not.

[Audience: inaudible]

I was talking with someone today who said that whenever she meditates on the four immeasurables, she tries to include George Bush because she feels he is trying to do his best but somehow he is obscured. [Laughter] And I said, "Well, yes, I think Saddam Hussein, from his point of view, is also trying to do what

he thinks is right! He acts with what he considers to be a good motivation." She replied, "Yes, it's just amazing how people can think they are right when they are really out of touch." I responded, "Yes, but when we are right, we are really right, aren't we?" [Laughter] "We're definitely right! No other way to look at it."

What the Dharma does is bring a bit of doubt into all of our "certainty." Instead of assuming that, "I think it, therefore it is right," let's not take our thoughts and feelings so seriously. Let's step back and look at our thoughts, "Well, is that right or not? Am I acting properly or could my behavior be improved?" or "Is this really an honest relationship or am I fooling myself and the other person?" Dharma practice is about being observant and asking ourselves questions. We may not get instant answers, and sometimes we will have difficulty identifying our thoughts, but this is the value of continual practice and meditation over a period of time. Through practice, we become more familiar with what's going on inside our minds. Things become clearer.

I've often had the experience that while something is happening or right after something has happened, I can't tell whether I was angry or just being practical. Maybe a few months later, when there is more space in my mind, I realize, "Oh, that was anger, wasn't it?" or "No, actually it was okay what I was doing." Sometimes we don't really know at the time what we are thinking or feeling. When our mind is too confused or we're too involved in the situation, it is difficult to analyze. Again, if we practice meditation over a period of time, we begin to look back on events, see them clearly, and learn from them.

We have to develop the attitude of, "Yes, I am going to make mistakes, but there is no other way to do it!" When the critical mind says, "I have to have everything clean and concise and in its proper box. From the beginning, I have to be able to do everything perfectly," or "I should be Enlightened tomorrow!"—don't bother to recycle those kinds of expectations. Just put them in the garbage dump, okay? [Laughter]

[Audience: inaudible]

[Laughter] That's why, again and again, we try to understand through analysis, "This hundred-dollar bill is just ink and paper. That's all. There is nothing else to it. It becomes valuable simply because my mind gives it importance." If you gave that bill to someone from another culture or to someone from a culture where paper money isn't used, they might use it to light a fire. Why? Because the paper money has no inherent value. It exists completely because we give it the concept of value.

[Audience:] When I'm meditating, I know the \$100 bill is void of inherent existence. I'm not attached to the paper, but I'm attached to what I can get with that paper.

[Laughter] Yes, in that situation, you're seeing not only the money as inherently existent, but you're also seeing the thing that you want as inherently existent. For instance, we might say, "I want this glass, this really beautiful, fantastic crystal glass!" Again, the glass doesn't exist as a glass. It doesn't exist as valuable. It doesn't exist as beautiful. The glass does not actually have those characteristics; our mind simply projects those concepts onto it. You were saying that when you meditate, the thought keeps occurring, "When is the food coming?" [Laughter] That thought gets very big. The food is definitely inherently existent. But if you take a moment to think about the food, you see that, basically it's just manure, water, [Laughter] nitrogen, carbon, oxygen ...What the big deal? [Audience speaks.] We do need food to live. But it is our minds that give the food qualities that, in reality, do not exist. You could say, "I need food to live," or "I NEED FOOD TO LIVE!"—there's a very big difference there. [Laughter]

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'.