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[Front portion not recorded.]

...When we talk about the three levels of motivation on the path, an understanding of karma is involved in all three.

Importance of Karma in the Three Levels of Motivation on the Path

1. Aiming for a good rebirth.

Aiming for a good rebirth is our most immediate concern. And the way we go about doing that is by abandoning destructive actions and creating positive ones. This is following karma, the functioning of cause and effect. Understanding karma helps us achieve that goal of having a good rebirth, because if we don't understand how cause and effect works, we won't understand how to create the causes for a good rebirth and abandon the causes for a rotten one.

2. Liberation from cyclic existence.

In order to be liberated from cyclic existence, again we need to understand karma. What is it that keeps us trapped in cyclic existence? Our afflictions [Note: 'afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes'] and our contaminated actions or karma that we create under the influence of those afflictions*. Since contaminated karma is one of the chief things that binds us to this cycle of constantly recurring problems, the better we understand karma, the better we're going to be able to control it and the easier it will be to attain liberation, instead of being under its influence.

3. The altruistic intention aimed at enlightenment

This is the highest level of motivation. Here karma is important for a couple of reasons. Firstly, when we do the bodhisattva practices (the six far-reaching attitudes), what we're doing is we're creating the karma to be able to become a Buddha. We're creating the causes to get the resultant state of Buddhahood. We're also purifying very strongly the karma that keeps us in cyclic existence.

Also, understanding karma helps us to generate the compassionate wish to become a Buddha, which is what the altruistic intention is. The more we understand that other beings are trapped by their afflictions* and karma, the more compassion instinctively arises in us for them. As we see the extent of their predicament, instead of getting angry at them because they're confused and have problems, we are able to develop an altruistic intention wanting to free them from their afflictions* and karma.

We can see that although karma comes under the first level of motivation of the path, understanding it is going to influence our entire practice. It's an important topic.

Other Ways of Differentiating Actions

Throwing and completing karma

Throwing karma are those actions that ripen in terms of the rebirth we take. They're the ones that throw us into a particular rebirth. They're the ones that cause us to be born as a human being or as a god, or as a donkey, or whatever.

Completing karma are those actions that complete the different conditions that you have once you've entered that rebirth. For example, we take Palden here [from the audience]. He had the throwing karma to be born as a human being. His completing karma is he was born as a boy. He was born with Carrie as his mama, and he was able to live in America and come to Dharma teaching, so all that is his completing karma. The completing karma also influences the different things that happen to us, whether we're human beings or an animal or a god or whatever we're born as. So the different events that we experience, the place that we're born in are the results of completing karma.

Throwing karma is the karma that propels us into another rebirth. This generally involves actions that have all four parts in place:

1. basis or object
2. intention
3. actual action
4. completion of the action

Alternatively, there're three parts:

1. preparation, which includes the basis or object and the intention
2. actual action
3. completion of the action

If an action has all those parts in it, it's a complete action, and that can act as a throwing karma that causes a particular rebirth.

It's interesting. *An action can at one time be a throwing karma and at other times, a completing karma.* Remember when we talked about the four results of karma – maturation result, result similar to the cause (in terms of experience and in terms of behavior) and maturation result? An action acts as a maturation result if it ripens in the realm you're born in – the body and mind you get. It is thus a throwing karma. When an action ripens in terms of the results similar to the cause, or the environmental result, then it's acting as a completing karma. In this case it's completing the circumstances of another rebirth, that is, not the same rebirth that it was the throwing karma for.

With throwing karma, sometimes it can be one throwing karma producing many, many rebirths. Not everything is a one-to-one correspondence. Remember there's lots of play and dance in this whole thing about karma.

For example somebody killed a person. It's a complete action. It becomes a throwing karma. It can actually act as the cause for many, many rebirths, particularly if one does what we call one of the five heinous actions, such as killing one's father or killing one's mother.

On the other hand, you can have many, many actions, all of which, put together, act as a throwing karma, and they produce one rebirth. For example our having precious human lives is dependent upon having had very good ethical conduct in previous lives. We did many, many actions of keeping good ethical conduct. Maybe we took the five precepts in previous lives. That's five different actions done repeatedly, all of which came together and acted as a throwing karma to cause one particular rebirth – the precious human life we have now.

So what we're getting at is, sometimes one action can cause multiple births, and other times, multiple actions can cause one birth. This is concerning throwing karma.

Like I said, one karma can act sometimes as a throwing karma, and other times as a completing karma, *depending upon which result happens to be ripening at that particular time.*

There are actions done that don't have all the four parts complete (only two or three of the parts complete). These actions are weaker and so they don't bring such a forceful result like a rebirth. They may ripen as the completing karma which complete the circumstances of your rebirth, determining your gender, whether your body is healthy or not, what you experiences are in life, where you're born, whether you're rich or poor, whether you're able to have an education or not. Those are all results of completing karma.

Various possibilities of throwing and completing karma

1) You can have somebody who is experiencing the results of a *good throwing karma and a good completing karma* at the same time. If you look at our situation right now, you'll see that we're experiencing good throwing karma, because we're born in an upper realm. We also have very good completing karma because we have enough to eat. We've been able to encounter the Dharma etc.

2) There're other beings that have *good throwing karma, but very unfortunate completing karma*. So they might be born as human beings, but they're born, let's say, retarded or handicapped in some way, or in a country where it's so difficult to eke out a living, where there's a lot of starvation and great difficulties.

3) Then there're others who have it the other way about. They have *unfortunate throwing karma and fortunate completing karma*. For example, Achala is born as a cat as a result of unfortunate throwing karma, but for a cat, he has a really good circumstance. That's fortunate completing karma.

4) And then there're other beings that have *unfortunate throwing and unfortunate completing karma*. Let's say a dog in India. Most of the beings in the lower realms have this kind of situation, where it's a problematic rebirth and the whole environment they're born into is also problematic.

Summary

This is interesting to think about, how all these different actions bring different results, how all the different actions combine in such a variety of ways to bring so many different results. We begin to get a feeling for the power of karma, that cause and effect is something quite real. We also get a feeling for the incredible possibilities within it, with all the different possible results and how they can inter-mingle and influence one another.

[Audience:] What would be the karma of a still-born baby, or an aborted baby?

In that kind of circumstance, that being would have the throwing karma to be born as a human being, but there is very strong completing karma that completely inhibits their actually getting to live a full life. If you have that completing karma, it can be pretty serious.

Sometimes what they say is that babies who don't make it out of the womb, or children who don't live very long, have the karma to be born as a human being, but they didn't have the karma to live a long time as a human being. So sometimes that's the case, that the karma to live in a certain body is very limited.

Other times, a person may have the karma to have a long life but they had some other very, very heavy karma that ripens. Even though they have the karma to live long, this other karma is so strong that they end up dying early. This is called an untimely death.

Definite and indefinite karma

We're taking the subject of karma here and looking at it from different ways, but none of these ways are separate things. They're just different ways of cutting the pie. And by cutting the pie different ways, we understand the pie better.

Another way of cutting the pie is to talk about definite karma and indefinite karma.

When Amchog Rinpoche was here, I asked him what really is the difference between definite and indefinite karma. This was the time when he was trying to make his travel arrangements to go to San Francisco, and he kept changing his mind, and so he said to me, "Definite karma is like when you have your flight and you have the ticket and it's confirmed. Indefinite karma is kind of like what we're doing now, lots of change of plans." I think that's a really nice way of putting it.

Definite karma is karma which has a certain amount of potency so it's pretty strongly going towards a specific goal. Of course any karma can be purified. Nothing's fixated and cast in concrete. Rinpoche said that definite karma is like when you have the ticket and it's confirmed, but you can still change your mind.

Indefinite karma has more leeway in exactly how it ripens, when it ripens, what result it brings, whether it's a strong result or a weak result.

Definite karma, in general, has, again, all four factors complete in it. Like I was saying, with definite karma, you're pretty strongly going in a certain way, but it can be influenced.

Remember when we were talking about purification, I was telling you that when you start to purify, you might experience negative things happening? Remember the story about that nun who had a big boil on her cheek? Sometimes when people go to their first meditation courses in Nepal, they get sick. Everybody gets the cold and the flu. I think there is some kind of purification going on.

Often what's happening is that as soon as you start to engage in the practice, by the force of your Dharma practice, some of the karma that was definite – let's say definite to be born in the hell realm for x number of eons – ripens and you get the flu instead. Or you get a boil. Or you get depressed. Or you feel sick.

In such cases, it's a definite karma, but *by the power of your practice, you're altering it, and it's ripening now in a comparatively small suffering*, compared to what it could have ripened as, if you hadn't done any purification and it had remained as that definite karma going strongly towards its specific goal.

If somebody has the definite karma to be born as a dog and also the definite karma to be born as a human being (because we've done all sorts of actions during our life), and if one is stronger than the other, then that one will probably ripen at the time of death. If they're both of equal strength, then the one that's more habitual will probably ripen at the time of death. So we can have more than one definite karma, but it doesn't mean they will all ripen at one time.

Like I was saying, you can have definite karma either for a lower rebirth or definite karma for an upper rebirth, but then if you do something to counteract that or to put some obstacle or interference with it, then that *definite karma can be obstructed*. So if you have definite karma to be born in the lower realms but you start doing purification, like the Nyung Nay practice, then that can interfere with the ripening of the definite negative karma and you may just feel a little sick (instead of something more serious).

Or you may have a definite positive karma, some positive action you did that is pretty definite to result in rebirth as a human being or in the god realm, but then you get really, really angry over something, and by the force of your anger, the force of your wrong views, you impede the ripening of that positive karma. So again, definite karma isn't cast in concrete. There're other factors that influence it.

Ripening of Karma

Definite karma, in general, ripens in one of three time periods. It can ripen in this life. Or it can ripen in the very next life. Or it can ripen in any of the lives after the next life.

For karma to ripen in this lifetime, it's usually very strong karma. A lot of what we're experiencing in this lifetime is due to our previous rebirths. Of course some of what we experience is due to things we did in this rebirth, but these are usually the very, very strong actions. For example, if you did a negative action out of extreme attachment to your body or your possessions or your life, or you did a positive action with extreme generosity in terms of your body, your possessions or your life, that kind of action can ripen in this lifetime. It has a strong intention.

Or an action that has a very strong object, for example, you swear at a bodhisattva and criticize a bodhisattva. That's fairly heavy karma, and that can ripen in this very lifetime. Similarly, if you make offerings to a bodhisattva, it can also ripen in this very lifetime. Any kind of actions that we do that are very strong in terms of powerful objects like Buddhas, bodhisattvas, our spiritual teachers, the Triple Gem – the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha – those things can ripen in this lifetime.

This is one of the reasons why the tantric practice is said to be very effective for attaining enlightenment in this lifetime, because through it, you can create a lot of this kind of karma, that is, karma that ripens in this very lifetime that brings enlightenment in this lifetime.

Another type of actions that can ripen this lifetime rather than other lifetimes is actions done with a very strong malicious intention towards sentient beings, or a very strong compassionate attitude towards them.

Summary

Generally, if an action is done with a very strong intention, if it's done towards a powerful object, if it's done repeatedly over a long period of time, or if the preparation for it took a long time, this action can ripen in this lifetime. We could probably make some examples from our life of very strong actions, positive and negative, that could easily ripen in this lifetime. That may give us a little bit more enthusiasm for purifying, and also some enthusiasm for rejoicing. Thinking about that is quite helpful.

But then we can also see that there are a lot of actions that we've done that haven't been strong in terms of how long they've been done or the length of the preparation, or our intention, or who we did them towards. These actions are probably going to ripen either in the very next lifetime, or the lifetimes after the next.

I want to emphasize that nothing's pre-programmed. Somebody once asked His Holiness whether he could read karma and tell the future. His Holiness said, "Well, you never really know what's going to happen until it happens." You can get some strong indications of the way something is flowing, but you're never sure what's going to happen till it's actually happening.

Questions and Answers

[Audience:] Are all instances of cause and effect karmic, or are there some cause and effect that have to do with the material elements and other cause and effect that have to do with karma?

Yes, quite definitely. In other words, the leaves falling off the tree, you can't say that's karma. That is due to the biological functions and the cause and effect of the physical elements going along in the tree.

Karma is referring to the functioning of cause and effect in our mental continuum. It doesn't mean that absolutely everything in the universe is caused by karma. Karma is involved with actions that bring the results of happiness and suffering. The leaf falling off the tree, or the plum growing out of the plum blossom – these are the cause and effect that's existing in terms of physical elements.

[Audience:] Could you comment about clairvoyance in relation to karma?

In terms of clairvoyance, some people have clairvoyance due to karma. If somebody is a spiritual practitioner, their clairvoyance isn't due to karma, it's due to their own spiritual attainments. It's due to the development of their mind.

[Audience:] Every single tape recorder that I buy breaks down.

Yes, I have that with clocks. I understand your situation completely. There was a time in my life when I went through so many different clocks. They would break down when I use them. I gave it away and it worked for the other person!

Your experience of suffering is due to your karma. The tape recorder breaking or working is due to the atoms and molecules and things like that in the tape recorder. So we shouldn't see all these different kinds of cause and effect as things with big brick walls between them. They very much inter-mingle.

[Audience:] Does group karma create universes?

They say that the universe is created by karma. His Holiness uses this example. Before you could move into a house, you have to build it. You painted it. You fixed it up. And you created a certain environment. Then you moved into it. He uses that as an analogy to say that the beings who are born in our particular universe have some kind of shared or collective karma that influenced exactly how our universe was, or is. And that that started to develop before we were born into this universe.

We then asked His Holiness whether that means that everything that happens in the universe is controlled by karma. He said, no, that there's a lot of physical functioning, inter-relationships of the elements, the atoms and the molecules that are functioning along physical laws – laws of physics and biology etc – that bring the results.

It's like you have all the different cause and effect systems working together and inter-mingling. And when we really pushed His Holiness, "When is it just the physical functioning of the elements and when is it our karma?" He said, "Hmm. I don't know. That's a really fine line." So I figure if His Holiness can beg ignorance, I can also.

I remember him saying one time when we were in Dharamsala. There were those pretty flowers growing outside his room. And he was saying the growth of those flowers is due to just the physical elements. But the fact that the bees and the birds and human beings enjoy them and reap benefit, that part is controlled by our karma, or influenced by our karma. So there's no hard and fast distinctions on all these things.

[Audience:] When freak accidents happen, for example, a person struck by lightning, is that karma or just the physical functioning of the elements?

It's both things together. The scientists can explain the whole lightning bolt coming down. But the fact that that person was there underneath it and got hit by it, and experienced suffering, that's due to that person's karma. So there're a couple of things going on at the same time.

[Audience:] I could see that the person is there due to their karma, but to see that the person is there in order to get hit by the lightning, I don't.

No. They're not there to get hit by lightning, because there's nobody sitting up in the sky that says, "Hey you, go over there. There's lightning coming."

Let's say you have a lot of causal energy going towards enlightenment, but you also have some very strong negative karma that you haven't purified. When that negative karma meets all the co-operative conditions, like a seed getting water and fertilizer and sunlight and everything, then that negative karma can ripen at that particular time.

It inter-reacts with the physical world, but your karma doesn't cause the rock to fall, as I understand it. But the rock falling and your being underneath it – you have different systems of cause and effect working together to bring that about.

[Audience:] You don't just happen to be there?

No. You don't just happen to be there.

[In response to audience:] I don't think you consciously know that the rock is coming. But it's like in the past you've created some kind of energy, let's say energy of harming somebody else. That energy has stayed in your mind. Today is the day that it's starting to get watered, and it's starting to germinate, and that energy is somehow propelling you, so that that day (and not some other days), it happened. Maybe there's an earthquake, or an avalanche, and this big rock comes rolling down. It's not like anybody preplanned it and scheduled it, and it's not like you consciously knew it. It's just that there was that energy there that made you do that that day. From the physical side, there was the earthquake and the avalanche that happened. And the two things came together.

[In response to audience:] What do you mean by 'knowledge'? I gave the example last week. Do you have knowledge of what you thought about in the car ride over here?

[Audience:] No.

But it happened.

[Audience:] Right.

And it was your experience. So there're lots of things that are your experience that you don't consciously understand and have control over.

[In response to audience:] You didn't sit on top of a cloud with a little interview form, "I'm going to choose my parents now from the applications being received." You didn't sit there and say, "Hmm, let's see. Shall I be born to these parents? What about these parents? What lessons do I need to learn in life? Gee, I think I'll be born as an abused child and learn that lesson." When you talk about choice, it's not like that. It's not this conscious "I'm going to do this, this, this, this." But there's definitely some energy pushing us.

[In response to audience:] Yes. Very much like a bad habit.

[Audience:] So there's no such thing as an accident of any kind?

No, not really. But what do we mean by 'accident'? Do accidents have causes? When you have a car accident, does it have causes? Even though in our conventional language, we give it the name 'accident', we can see that it still has causes. Things don't happen without cause. If things happen without causes, then you could have a peach tree growing in the front yard in the middle of the asphalt without a peach seed, because things don't depend on causes and conditions.

If you say that things don't depend on causes and conditions, then it's like saying anything can happen for absolutely no reason at all. You won't need to work to get money. You don't need to do anything to get money, because things don't depend on causes. But as we can see, things do depend on causes.

[Audience:] Do all things depend on causes so that there're no random events whatsoever?

We're framing things in the wrong way. We're getting into our 'either or' mentality. By 'random events', do 'random events' mean without any cause? Or do 'random events' mean that there's a cause but we don't understand it? So 'random' doesn't necessarily mean without any cause. It may just mean we don't understand what the cause is.

[In response to audience:] But remember what I said, it doesn't mean things are unrelated and completely separate, because things obviously influence each other. Everything is inter-dependent. This is the very essence of Buddhism.

We are very inter-dependent here as a group. We don't exist as a group independently. By all the different people each working in their own way, each doing their own thing, we bring something about. If one person wasn't here tonight, it would be different tonight. And if another person who wasn't here came, it would again be different. So we're creating something here together that's dependent on all of us. Yet within that, we can still say there's Carrie and Lily and Leah.

It's the same thing with the environment. We're influencing the environment. The environment is influencing us. Everything is involved in a cause and effect. Karma's referring to one particular kind of cause and effect. But again it's not a totally isolated, frozen category that's unrelated to other kinds of cause and effect, just as you aren't a frozen, isolated person that is unrelated to other people.

This subject is extremely difficult to understand. I'm only giving you my present level of understanding, and when I go to my teachers, I question and ask and debate and wrestle with this as well. I remember them telling me at the beginning that karma is a very, very difficult topic.

In many ways, to understand it completely is more difficult than understanding emptiness, because really understanding karma means you understand every little bitty cause and effect and how it relates with every other itty bitty cause and effect in the entire universe. It is quite complicated.

Remember the butterfly in Singapore flapping its wings and then it can affect worldwide weather patterns? That one small thing changes, it influences something else, which in turn influences something else, and pretty soon, you have an incredible result. Well, that's exactly how this world is functioning. Everything is interrelating, influencing everything else.

[Audience:] I have noticed that the same causes and conditions seem to ripen repeatedly over time, but I experience them differently.

That's because you're having similar but not exactly the same causes and conditions on the external level, but your internal causes and conditions are very different. Anything we experience is a combination of something from the outside and a lot from the inside. You see, we see things as isolated, unitary, inherently existent events. You've seen in discussing this, what makes it so difficult for us is we're coming smack up against our conception of nice, solid, clearly definable categories called independent events. And what we're coming up against is what you've pointed out. There're things from the outside. There're things from the inside. So we experience things differently. Two people have the same external thing but they experience it differently.

You're sitting in this teaching. When this teaching is over, somebody (I hope) will say, "Wow, a fantastic teaching!" And somebody else is going to leave the teaching and say, "She doesn't know what in the world she's talking about! I'm completely confused." Heard the same words, but completely different experiences. Why? Because different causes and effects come together to create different experiences.

[Audience:] Not all cause and effect is karma?

Yes. When peach grows from the peach blossom, that's due to all the biochemical things going on in the peach blossom. When you pick the peach off the tree and taste it and it tastes good, your feeling of pleasure from that is related to your karma. But again, they inter-relate.

A lot of things are going on at the same time, and depending on which framework you pull out of your toolkit, you can describe it in different ways – from the biology angle, chemistry angle, etc. But if you only pull one tool out, you're going to have a somewhat incomplete description of what's going on.

[Audience:] What's the point of knowing these inter-relationships?

It strengthens our understanding of dependent arising and inter-relatedness. It strengthens the understanding of emptiness, the wisdom realizing emptiness, which is the third principal aspect of the path. They say that because things are dependent, therefore they're empty. And because they're empty, therefore they're dependent. In other words, dependent arising and emptiness aren't two little distinct boxes, though they're two things. You look at one thing from this side and you say, "Ah! Dependent arising." You look at it from this side and you say, "Ah! Emptiness." But it's the exact same thing.

When you start to examine and understand all these incredible, intricate causes and conditions, all these different parts and all these different elements, and that so many things fit in together almost miraculously, magically, at one particular moment to make one particular thing, then you really see how things don't have any independent, inherent, solid existence. Because they're just *this momentary collection of all the parts due to all the causes and conditions coming together at that particular moment the way they did*. And then it all changes and becomes something else.

So there's nothing solid, and you can begin to see how those two things just go right together.

[Audience: Inaudible]

Well, you can say that conceptually, we can talk about karma and conceptually, we can talk about biology and physics cause and effect. But in actual fact, they're influencing each other all the time in our life. If you have a spaghetti plate, and they're all mixed up together, when we start talking about one or the other, we're pulling one noodle out and looking at it. Or like maybe we're looking at the spaghetti from this side as opposed to that side, or some other way. Imagine being inside the spaghetti noodle looking at the plate. It's going to look very different, isn't it? And how you describe what the plate of spaghetti looks like if you're inside one of the noodles looking out, is going to sound totally different than if you're outside looking in, and yet it's similar...there many things going on there.

This is one of the things that I find myself fighting so much. In Buddhism, everything is broken down into these nice, neat little categories: three of this, four of that, five of that. For example, they may say there's one major thing, and it has three branches. The first branch has three sub-categories. The second

branch has seventeen sub-categories. The first sub-category of the second branch covers the first two sub-categories of the first branch. And the second sub-category of the second branch covers half of the third branch's six sub-categories. As one lama said, symmetry is stupid!

I don't know if it's our mind or our educational system, but when we study things, we like to think that once we have a list of categories, they are nice, distinct, independent, isolatable things that we can examine and know absolutely everything about, without studying everything else. But the world isn't like that. *Everything is affecting everything else all the time.* And when you really think about it, it's totally mind-boggling. You begin to realize your categories are conceptual conveniences to help you understand things. They're not rigid things. In other words, categories are descriptions. I used to think that first, you have the categories, then you fit the world into it. But it's not like that. There are all these experiences and existences, and categories are only ways of describing them. We made up the categories. They don't exist by themselves.

[Audience:] How do we reconcile all these complexities with what the text said, in simple terms, about ripening karma?

I think they're doing that simply to get across the point that there is a cause that brings a result. If we think one will be born in the lower realm if one kills somebody, and that's all there is to it, it is like a biology professor saying if we plant a peach seed, a peach tree will grow from it – it's too simplistic. It's too simplistic because whether the peach seed grows into a peach tree depends also on the weather patterns, the pollution, the ground level, and so many other factors.

So if in the text, it says that if you do this, that happens, it doesn't mean that there's only one cause and one effect with no *other intervening conditions*. Rather, it just means that if you let this happen, there's a lot of potential to bring that result. But exactly what happens depends on so many other factors.

[Audience:] Are you saying that a ripening karma has to involve a consciousness that experiences pleasure and pain?

In general, yes. The ripening of karma is intricately involved with sentient beings' experience of pleasure and pain.

[Audience:] If a ripening karma has to involve a consciousness that experiences pleasure and pain, then how are the body and karma related?

Throwing karma produces all five aggregates. When we talk about a rebirth, we're not just talking about the form aggregate. We're also talking about the mental aggregates, the mental components. We're talking about the body and mind. Which level of body and mind we take is influenced by our throwing karma. Although your body and mind themselves are not pleasurable or painful, the fact that through your body and mind you experience pleasure and pain, shows that they're related to karma.

[Audience:] What do you mean by the five aggregates?

The five aggregates are the five psycho-physical aggregates, and the composite is what we call the person. The first aggregate is the form aggregate. That's referring to our body. The other four are mental aggregates, which are different types of consciousness. One of them is the mental factor of feeling. The other one is discrimination. The fourth aggregate is called compositional factors, which includes many different mental factors. The fifth aggregate is the primary consciousness aggregate, which is the five sense consciousnesses and the mental consciousness.

When we have a throwing karma ripening, and our throwing karma is ripening to be a human being, we don't just get the body of a human being. We also get the consciousness of a human being. Our consciousness becomes the consciousness of a human being. The body we get is made up of atoms and molecules, so it's not positive or negative; it's not pleasure or pain. But through the body, we experience a lot of pleasure and pain. That is how karma is related to it.

[Audience:] Is karma involved with only the pain and pleasure of sentient beings?

In general – this does not mean absolutely all the time – the results of karma have to do with things that are involved with the pleasure and pain of sentient beings. It doesn't mean that the results of karma *are* the pleasure and pain. It means things that are involved with pleasure and pain, for example our body.

But again you come to the situation where it's really hard to isolate what's karma and what's physical conditioning – what's the law of physics, what's the law of biology – because they influence each other a lot. When we talk about karma, we're looking from the aspect of what factors are involved with the pain and pleasure of beings.

[Audience: Inaudible]

It doesn't mean that the rock isn't going to hit you. It means that maybe the rock hits you, but because you have changed your attitude, you feel completely okay about it. It's just like what Patty Joe was saying, that the same thing happens to her at different times in her life and she reacts very differently. It's the same here. If you change your attitude, then you're changing how you're experiencing what's happening.

This is the reason why we do the thought-training practice. We may have karma pushing us and we find ourselves in certain external situations that would generally lead us to experience either pleasure or pain. In situations where we normally experience pain, if we transform our way of thinking and not get angry or disturbed, we will avoid creating more negative karma, and we will also act in a way that purifies that karma.

That's why we say everything that happens to us is an opportunity to practice the Dharma.

[Audience:] The psychologists talk about the “unconscious experience of pain”.

This is an interesting thing. What do we really mean by 'unconscious'? The idea we have is you went through some kind of traumatic event in the past and you've been experiencing pain from it ever since, and that's influencing your life. We have the idea that we're experiencing this pain all the time, twenty-four hours a day, though we're unaware of it. But if you start to look at your experience, are you really experiencing the pain from some incident that happened five years ago, twenty-four hours a day?

What we think is an unconscious experience could actually be a conscious phenomena that we're not aware of. For example, you're usually not aware of what you're thinking when you're driving. You are actually thinking and feeling a lot of things as you are driving. They are conscious phenomena. But because you're so distracted by external things, you're not aware of what your own conscious phenomena are. So you say they are unconscious phenomena.

Or you may be angry and not know you're angry. But your anger is a conscious experience.

Going back to the pain from the traumatic event, is it there every single moment of the day? It may not be. The pain comes up only when you think about the incident.

Or maybe the pain is there but you're not aware of it. Some thought processes are going on that are causing you to remember something or causing you to look at the world in a certain way that's giving you pain. You're not aware that you're thinking that, though you're definitely thinking that; it's your conscious experience. But does it happen twenty-four hours a day?

It's real interesting when you start to look at your own experience. When we say “I have a hang-up,” or “I have a problem,” it is as if there is this incredible boulder that's on my back, and it's there twenty-four hours a day. But whatever problem you have, is it there twenty-four hours a day?

When you're enjoying eating frozen yogurt, are you at the same time necessarily caught up in “Five years ago, somebody did this and that thing to me?”

What I'm getting at is, if we look at our experience, there are so many different mental factors, attitudes, feelings, emotions at play – they come and go, come and go. The idea of any particular experience of

pain or pleasure or any particular attitude as being concrete, fixed and always there... if we begin to look at our experience, we'll see that that's completely not the way it is. Look what happens when you watch your breath. How many different things go through your mind when you're trying to watch your breath? Can you say that there's this one solid "my problem", "my trauma" that's there all the time?

It's not there all the time. At times, it may surface and influence how you see things, but it doesn't mean that it happens twenty-four hours a day.

Let's sit quietly.

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'.