

**General Advice on How to Engage in Positive Actions and
Avoid Destructive Ones** (lightly edited transcript)
by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. 5 Aug 92

Contents (click on heading to view text)

- Contemplating cause and effect
- Generating a wish to practice cause and effect
- Developing confidence in the Buddha as the true source of the teachings
- Understanding emptiness helps us understand cause and effect better
- Being mindful in daily life
- Developing the conviction to not act negatively
- Measuring our level of understanding of cause and effect
- Questions and answers

We are near the end of the section on 'Karma'. If you look in your Lamrim outline* you will see that we are at the section about how to practice actions and the results of actions in general. In this talk I will give you some general advice about how to put into practice all the teachings on karma we have had up till now.

Contemplating Cause And Effect

First, try and continuously contemplate cause and effect in terms of our own life. In other words, look at our present experiences, the different things we experience on a day-to-day or yearly basis and see those things in the light of the kinds of actions that we did in previous lives. We do this because it is those actions that brought about our present experiences. Similarly, look at our present actions and think about the kinds of results that they are going to bring in the future.

This relates a lot to the section that we just finished where we talked about the ten destructive actions and their different results. So now, you begin to see that you can look at the results and go backwards and see what the causal actions were, and you can also look at your actions and go forwards and see those results. Always think about it in terms of our own life experience.

For those of you who are really keen to learn more about this subject, there is a book entitled "The Wheel of Sharp Weapons" (verses explained by Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey) that is really good. It talks a lot about different aspects of cause and effect and is very, very interesting. It is called "The Wheel of Sharp Weapons" because of the use of the analogy of a forger who makes his own arrows and bow and then winds up getting shot by the very things he himself crafted. So in the same way, we act and create certain energy and we put that energy out. That very same energy comes back and we experience it as different events that happen in our lives. That is how the book got its name.

Generating A Wish To Practice Cause And Effect

Also, generate a wish to practice cause and effect by contemplating the different results of positive and negative actions. If we merely listen to the teachings on karma and the ten destructive actions, we might just start feeling, "Oh, yeah, yeah, this is just a bunch of blah, blah, blah." But if we start looking at it in terms of our life and in terms of what specific results come from our actions and start imagining ourselves experiencing those results and tracing those results to what we have done in our life, then it becomes very, very much alive. It then becomes something that we want to follow.

So, rather than thinking, "Oh yeah, here I am engaging in the ten negative actions. I *should not* do this. I *am not supposed* to do it. I *ought not* to do it. I am going to go to hell because I am sinful," we will instead have an attitude of, "Oh well, look what I am doing. This is not an isolated event in the universe. It will bring about certain results. Are these results things that I look forward to experiencing or not?" If we do not look forward to experiencing the results, then at that point we have the choice to not create the cause. On the other hand, if we can see the results as something attractive and something we would like, then we can go ahead with our decision and do whatever it is we are doing.

Extending our Thinking Beyond This Lifetime

In the same way, in our regular life we should always check things out before we do them. If you are going to do a business deal you do not just go and buy any kind of corporate stock for instance. You look at what the results are going to be. You do not do things haphazardly but always ask, "What are the benefits?" This is the same way of thinking except that now we are extending it beyond this particular lifetime. This gets us out of the rut of thinking that all we are is this body. We are beginning to see our consciousness as a continuity coming from previous lives and going to future lives, and that birth and death are actually just major transition points, but they are not a beginning and an end.

Being Mindful Not to Resort to Justification and Rationalization

So karma involves having a new view of how we fit into the universe and the results of our actions. If we begin to do this, to really take seriously our actions and their results, then we will also stop justifying and rationalizing about the things that we do. Or put it another way, as long as we continue to justify and rationalize the things we do, we are going to find it very difficult to understand and live according to cause and effect.

Psychologists often use terms like "justify" and "rationalize". These terms essentially mean making excuses. And not just simply make excuses, but making excuses to explain what we are doing in a way that makes us happy. Here in speaking about karma, we use the terms justification and rationalization in the same way – to explain what we are doing that makes our ego happy. We use them to give us the logic to do whatever it is we have already decided we are going to do.

For instance, the mind out of attachment or anger wants to do something, and we explain the action away to ourselves in terms of karma. We think, "Well, I have a good motivation for doing this." But in reality there is jealousy all over the place but we are not looking at it. Or we think, "This is just a little negative action." Or maybe we think, "Well, it is a big negative action, but the people I am harming do not even know they are getting harmed. I am just ripping off the U.S. government which will not know the difference." So we rationalize. We justify. It all comes around to this thinking of, "Here am I, the center of the universe, the most important one." And we make up reasons to fit what our attachment and aversion have already decided we are going to do. This is a big obstacle to understanding cause and effect.

Overcoming rationalization and justification

One way to overcome this obstacle of rationalization and justification is to spend some time just thinking about our actions and the results that they bring. Really make examples in our own life. Similarly, we can look at our present results and experiences and see what the causal actions were. This helps us get over this hump of rationalization. But do not get mad at yourself for rationalizing because that just adds more confusion.

Developing confidence in the Buddha as the true source of the teachings

Another thing that is useful in making this section on cause and effect come alive is to develop confidence in the Buddha as the true source of the teachings on this subject. In other words, this subject is something that is quite difficult to understand with our limited abilities. Just as whenever we have some limitations in understanding something, we go to an expert, here also, when we have limitations in our understanding of cause and effect, we rely on the expert, the Buddha. That is why when some of these sticky questions come up, I always remind you (and myself, too) of what my teachers said. They told me that in actuality, understanding all the tiny, microscopic details and specific instances of cause and effect is much more difficult than understanding emptiness. Only the Buddha fully understands all the minute ramifications of any particular action. So we do need to rely on the Buddha's word a lot on this subject.

Relying On The Buddha's Speech

Relying on the Buddha's word is something that most Westerners find difficult. There is something in us that feels a little bit edgy about believing something because the Buddha said it. This is often because we are reminded of our previous religious associations. However, we readily believe something whenever scientists say it. Remember when some scientists said they created a new source of energy called Cold Fusion? It was in the newspapers and everybody said it was fantastic. Everybody believed it. We never questioned it. We never thought that scientists make mistakes. We never thought some

scientists lied on their lab reports. We trust scientists. Really, talk about blind faith! We have lots of blind faith in science.

But developing some kind of conviction in the Buddha's word is not a matter of just developing blind faith. It is a matter of checking out the Buddha's qualities, seeing if the Buddha lies or does not lie, seeing if the Buddha explains things with a good motivation or a bad motivation, seeing if the Buddha has wisdom that can see things correctly or does not have that wisdom. If we have some kind of confidence in the Buddha's qualities, then it becomes easier to believe in the things that he has explained because we recognize that he is an expert in a certain field of which we are quite ignorant. This kind of confidence in the Buddha takes some time to develop. I think it is good to open our minds to allow that kind of confidence rather than just shutting it out.

Where We Should Place Our Confidence

This leads us to also question why we have confidence in different things such as our faith in science and faith in all sorts of things. There are so many things in this world that we take other people's word on. We never check their word to see if what they are saying is true. Look at our whole education when we were kids. Did we ever doubt what we were taught when we were kids? No, we believed it. We still believe most of it right now. Sometimes as an adult we might actually start questioning what our parents and teachers taught us. But often we do not. We just believe.

So, if we have this kind of blind belief in limited beings who are not omniscient, why do we have difficulty trusting the Buddha's speech when Buddha has high realizations? I am not saying just to believe it but the thing is, if the Buddha is an expert in this, we can take the different things he said about cause and effect a little bit more seriously than if Joe Blow says them. This helps us gain some conviction in it.

Is this making some people squirm?

Are the sutras actually said by the Buddha?

[In response to audience:] You are questioning that we get a lot of instructions from various sutras and that the sutras did not appear publicly all at the same time. The fact that some of them appeared later, is it not possible that there were things that were attributed to the Buddha that were not actually said by the Buddha?

These teachings on cause and effect you will find in the early sutras. Regarding the texts that appeared later, it is explained that the Buddha spoke these texts but the majority of the people on earth did not have the karma or the open-mindedness to understand them then.

Some people did practice the teachings in these texts, but they practiced them in small groups and the teachings were passed on orally just from teacher to disciple and never in big groups. They were kept very quiet until later on when they became more public. It is also said that some of these texts were taken to another land and kept there in a safe place until people's minds were ripe to understand the teachings of those texts. The idea of going to another land was the ancient equivalent of putting something in a safe deposit box.

About The Mahayana Texts

Those texts that appeared later are mostly the Mahayana texts. The Mahayana texts speak specifically about the emptiness of inherent existence of all things. That is also spoken about in the earlier texts. It is elaborated on more completely in the later texts.

And also, the bodhisattva path is spelled out in the Mahayana texts. I think if you listen to the teachings that appear in the later texts and think about them, if they make some sense to you then it seems like the Buddha must have said them. When you consider the teachings on the bodhisattva practice and the aspiration to become enlightened for the benefit of all beings, for me, I cannot see anything better than that aspiration, notwithstanding that everybody has a different mind. I cannot see anything that is deficient in it. So, the texts that teach that kind of thing do not make me have doubts because it seems to me that is the most noble thing in life in which you could engage.

I once asked Amchog Rinpoche this question about how we know that in the texts there are no mistakes. There are different renditions of certain texts where a particular passage may be present or

absent. I asked about the people copying it down, is it not possible that they made mistakes when they were writing them, that they made mistakes when they were memorizing and passing them down? Amchog Rinpoche said, "Yes, I am sure there are mistakes. I am sure there are translation mistakes. But we may not have the wisdom to be able to figure out just what is a mistake and what is not right now." [laughter]

The Buddha's Knowledge

[In response to audience:] You said that the Buddha said he did not hold anything back. But the Buddha did not explain everything he knew. I do not care if you are talking about the earlier texts or the later texts, what is written down is merely a fraction of what the Buddha knows. The Buddha only spelled out in the teachings what was essential for us to know in order to be able to practice. The teachings do not even attempt to fathom the entirety of Buddha's knowledge.

Logic, Experience And Faith

[In response to audience:] His Holiness says that in the end, you have to rely on logic and on things that make sense to you and not just on faith. If things can be proven logically, or can be proven by your own experience, you have to rely on that. For the things that we cannot prove logically and we do not have the capability yet of experiencing, then we have to rely on the word of somebody who knows more than we do.

So for instance, we may rely on scientists who tell us things we do not know and if we train in Science we could verify what the scientists say. Similarly, we may rely on the Buddha for things we do not know and if we practice the path, we will be able to verify through our own experience whether what the Buddha said is true or false. So in the end it does come down to our experience, although it may be something we cannot experience right now.

We often use the criteria of, "If it says what feels good to my ego and is what I already believe, then it is true. If it says something that makes me feel uncomfortable and something I do not agree with, then it is obviously wrong." At some point we have to check things out and see how they feel to us. But I think it is good to always remember that our understanding is limited and leave some space in there to alter our thinking.

I think the basic thing is to try and understand things as best as we can. Feel free to doubt what you doubt. Feel free to not understand what you do not understand. There are lots of things I do not understand and lots of things I doubt. I 'quarrel' with my teachers all the time. We have nice debates together. And so, in the end it comes down to each of us figuring it out for ourselves. But that does not mean throwing something out simply because we do not understand it right now and cannot perceive it right now.

When In Doubt

[In response to audience:] That is very true, when we put our mind to it we can find fault with anything. I think what really helps is to always come back to the point of what it is that makes sense to us. Why did we get involved in this in the first place? Why are we continuing on? There is obviously something that the Buddha said that touched our heart. And if you come back to that and that major impact that the Buddha had on your life, then you feel much more connected to the Buddha and it becomes easier to hear the teachings.

Understanding emptiness helps us understand cause and effect better

Understanding emptiness can help you to understand cause and effect better. This is a very important point to remember because some people hear a little bit about emptiness and they think emptiness means nothingness. They may think, "Oh, well, if everything is nothing and everything is an illusion, then actions have no effects." Sometimes you hear people say, "There is no good. There is no bad. There is no right. There is no wrong." Sometimes you even hear this in Buddhist teachings. But we have to correctly understand this. If we misunderstand it, our incorrect understanding becomes poison to us. Emptiness does not mean that things nihilistically are non-existent.

Emptiness does not negate cause and effect in any way. In fact, if you have a real understanding of emptiness as the lack of inherent existence, then you understand cause and effect much better. If your understanding of emptiness makes you think that there is no cause and effect, your understanding of emptiness is not right. This is very, very important to understand.

It is important because if you understand emptiness correctly and understand that things do not have an inherent nature, then things must arise due to causes and conditions. And if they do arise due to causes and conditions, then there you have the functioning of karma.

If things are empty of inherent existence, they do not have their own solid self-nature and they must arise out of causes and conditions. If they arise out of causes and conditions, then actions have results and our experiences have causes.

If instead things were indeed solid and existed in and of themselves with an intrinsic essence, if they were inherently existent, there could be no functioning of cause and effect. Everything would automatically have its own inherent nature that it got without depending on anything else. And if things did exist without depending on anything else, then there is no way cause and effect could work.

If things were inherently existent, you would have to conclude that there is no cause and effect. People who do not understand emptiness correctly often think the opposite. They think that if things do not have inherent existence, there also must be no cause and effect. This is incorrect understanding.

The Buddha's Comments On Emptiness And Cause And Effect

When the Buddha said that there is no good and there is no bad, people with incorrect understanding take that as literal. They might think, "Oh, there is no good, there is no bad so I can kill somebody. I can do whatever pops into my mind." Basically that thinking is how we have always lived our lives... "(there is) no good, no bad, it does not matter what I do."

The Buddha did not literally mean that there is no good and no bad. What he meant was that there is no inherent good and no inherent bad, no inherent right and no inherent wrong. In other words, things do not become good or bad, right or wrong, constructive or destructive because of their own self-nature. They only become good or bad because of their relationship to other things.

Remember at the beginning of this Lamrim section when I started talking about karma and I spoke about the way we distinguish constructive from destructive actions in Buddhism? Remember I said that the only reason killing is called a destructive action is simply because its result is painful? In other words, anything that has a painful result we label that cause a "destructive action". Anything that has a happy result in the long term, we label the cause a "constructive action". Things are only constructive or destructive, right or wrong, good or bad in terms of how they fit into the whole relationship with other phenomena. This is incredibly important to understand.

Instant Understanding of Emptiness?

Often nowadays people very quickly think they have had experiences of emptiness when they first begin to practice. It seems that it is really glamorous to think that you understand emptiness. When I was a beginner in Buddhism, I remember some of my own experiences in meditation and how I thought, "Oh wow, now I am getting it!" In those days Lama Yeshe used to have some of the older students give talks to everybody. And so when I was a young student I thought, "When I become an old student, I am going to give a talk about emptiness because I really understand that well." [laughter] It is very easy to think you understand emptiness when you do not. That is why we always have to stay really grounded in cause and effect and never see emptiness as contradictory to cause and effect.

Illusion Versus Being Like An Illusion

Many people do not listen properly. They say phenomena are illusory, or phenomena are an illusion. Buddha did not say everything *is* an illusion. Buddha said everything is *like* an illusion. There is a big difference between being an illusion and being *like* an illusion. Just like there is a big difference between real chocolate and being like chocolate. That is a big difference. [laughter]

So some people misunderstand and say, "Buddha said everything is an illusion, that means nothing exists, that means I can do anything I want because nothing exists." This is completely incorrect understanding.

Things are *like* an illusion in the sense that phenomena appear to exist in a certain way. But they do not actually exist in that way. For instance, you are in Disneyland and you look and see a ghost sitting next to you. That ghost is a hologram. It appears to be a real ghost, but it is not. But there is still the appearance of a ghost next to you. You cannot say that there is nothing there.

In the same way, phenomena appear to exist solidly and inherently, but they do not. However, that does not mean that they are non-existent. So if you go to the extreme of denying all existence and think everything is non-existent and an illusion, then you also deny cause and effect and that is really, really dangerous.

If you deny cause and effect, you completely take out the underpinnings for any kind of ethical code. If you deny ethics then the society falls apart. Witness what happens all around us. Why is our society having so many problems? If you closely look at it you see that it is a matter of ethics. All the problems that we read about in the newspapers basically happen because people do not abandon the ten negative actions.

Being Mindful In Daily Life

Here is another piece of advice. After you know the difference between constructive and destructive actions and after you learn about what makes something a neutral action or what makes it a constructive one, try and be mindful and alert in your daily life and put that awareness into practice. Become aware of what we are saying, thinking and doing.

For instance you can ask yourself, "What is my motivation for doing what I am doing? Is it a good motivation? Do I need to change my motivation? If I change my motivation, can I still do the action?" Or "If I change my motivation, will I lose interest in doing the action?"

Transforming Our Motivation

Maybe we are doing something like washing the dishes, sweeping the floor, washing the car or taking out the garbage. Ask yourself, "What is my motivation here?" If it is a neutral motivation, can you transform that into a positive motivation? Start asking yourself things like, "What can I think about while I am doing this action? How can I do it so that my motivation can be transformed into a positive one?" Remain mindful during the day of what is happening and try to apply cause and effect to our life in a way that allows us to really use cause and effect in every circumstance.

Developing the Conviction To Not Act Negatively

Also, try to develop and increase your conviction to not act negative. The more conviction we have in this, then even if other people try and encourage us to act harmfully, we will not do so. When we have a real deep conviction about actions and their results we become more immune to pressure from our peers.

Also, a deep conviction about actions and their results affects our attachment to reputation. If we are really attached to our reputation, then peer pressure can easily affect us and cause us to act negative. But if we have a very strong conviction about actions and their results and wish to not act negative, then even if people pressure us and even if our reputation seems threatened, we will not go along. We will not care because we are living according to our own ethical principles and that becomes the important thing.

I think it is a great freedom when we have the ability to evaluate inside of ourselves what is harmful, what is beneficial and act with a clear conscience and not worry about what other people think of us. Do you realize how much time we spend each day worrying about what other people think of us? Unbelievable!

Withdrawing from the World?

[Audience:] Buddhism says to not withdraw from the world. But it seems that if you really understand cause and effect, you will stop doing a lot of the things that you used to do. Isn't that withdrawing from the world?

I think that part of withdrawing is quite good. We should not get the idea that just because something exists in the world it is therefore good. We tried to find happiness in this world independent of the Dharma since beginningless time but we have yet to find it.

To withdraw from the world means to stop caring about others. If we withdraw from the world, we're leaving behind others and just going off on our own trip. But being involved in the world does not mean we do everything everybody else does. Look at this world, do you want to be involved in the same way that everybody else is involved? Pick up Newsweek magazine. Do you want to act like the people you are reading about in Newsweek? Newsweek is an excellent teaching for me about how I do not want to act. [laughter] I do not find a whole lot of heroes in there.

You want to live in the world but not be of the world. We do not want to be clinging, attached and doing everything that everybody else does. We can still live in the world and participate, but do so with a different motivation and different attitude, not doing things just because others do them. So what if you stop drinking? You think the world is going to fall apart if you stop drinking? You think all your friends aren't going to like you because you don't drink and take drugs anymore? If that's the only reason they like you to start with, then you must have a really lousy personality. [laughter]

Look at the world today, most people in the course of one day kill something. They may not kill a human being but most people kill an animal or kill at least one insect in the course of the day. Do you want to do that? Is that what you need to do to be able to communicate with other sentient beings? In other words, do you think that for you to be beneficial to sentient beings you have to do everything they do and so everyday you have to kill something? This is not correct thinking.

The Buddha lived in the world and Buddha was of tremendous benefit to others. Twenty-five hundred years later people are still practicing the Buddha's teachings. Buddha did not kill anybody. Buddha did not steal anything. He did not drink. He did not do everything that everybody else did. Look at Jesus. Did he do everything everybody else did? It is basically because he did not that he made such a strong impact.

Measuring Our Level Of Understanding of Cause and Effect

One way to evaluate and measure our level of understanding of cause and effect is to see what interests you more – this life or future lives? If you have a weak understanding of cause and effect, then this life interests you more. If you have a good understanding of cause and effect, then future lives are quite an important thing.

It involves a paradigm shift. Our usual paradigm is, "I do this because it makes me feel good now. What is important is what makes me feel good now. What else is there to life? Is this not why I am here?" As long as we live our life with that as our chief paradigm, our "A" number-one-framework with which we evaluate everything we come into contact with, then it is going to be extremely difficult to practice cause and effect because there is no space in that thinking for delayed gratification.

Delaying Gratification

Psychologists talk about learning to delay gratification. Instead of doing something that makes you feel good now but in the end is self-destructive, we learn to do something simply because it will bring about a good result in the long term. Karma is the exact same thing as what the psychologists are saying, except it just goes beyond this particular body (future lives).

Through understanding cause and effect you might decide to delay some immediate gratification. You understand that doing whatever it is you are doing now may make you feel good this lifetime, but bring a lot of pain in the next lifetime. So if you delay the gratification and learn to do without this particular

action now, then in future lifetimes much more happiness will come. This is the same psychological principle except that we are now looking beyond this particular body.

Questions and Answers

[Audience:] If we delay gratification, won't we suffer now? Is that not psychologically unhealthy?

That depends on the attitude with which you delay your gratification. If you are doing it in the sense of self-denial, "I am going to suffer now so that I can be happy later," then that is not so psychologically healthy. But if you recognize that what you are going to do now through the delay of immediate gratification is going to bring happiness later, then it does not seem like a big suffering trip. You are quite happy to do it because you know what the result is going to be.

When you become pregnant and have a baby, going through childbirth can be miserable. But when you think of the baby that you get afterwards then you become willing to go through it. Childbirth does not seem like a horrible thing to you and something to avoid, if your mind is focused on the result of childbirth — the beautiful baby that you are going to have afterwards. So it becomes a matter of putting things into perspective and not getting into a self-denial trip. Rather, it is learning to have a balanced attitude.

I think one big problem is we have gotten so sensitive to every tiny thing that bugs us and so sensitive to any tiny thing that could bring us the least bit of pleasure that we get totally confused. You go to the shopping center and you become confused. You do not know what to buy because you do not know what is going to make you happier, a blue sweater or a green sweater. Since we want the most happiness that could possibly be, we feel we have got to make the right choice! And we make ourselves miserable that way. Whereas, if we stop caring about what is going to make us happier, either a green sweater or a blue sweater, then even if we wear a purple sweater we will be happy.

Gratification and Emptiness

[In response to audience:] When we talk about future gratification it does not mean we have to suffer now. If you realize that no situation exists as inherently good, inherently bad, inherently painful, inherently pleasurable, etc., you can give up some small pleasure and the experience can be transformed right now into a happy one. So when we talk about delayed gratification, it does not mean you have to suffer now in order to be happy later.

Keeping Ethics Does Not Mean Suffering

[Audience:] I do not think it is in people's nature to enjoy doing harmful things and so I think giving up these negative actions would not be such a sacrifice.

Yes, we are trying to give up the harmful things. It is as you said, things like killing harm us too and make us feel miserable. So it is not as if giving up killing makes us think, "I really want to do it, but I cannot now because I have become a Buddhist."

In the same way, some people think taking nuns' vows is putting yourself into this incredible prison of being frustrated all the time – "I want to do all these things and now I cannot!" [laughter] Instead it is more like realizing that if you just give up the attitude that wants to get involved in that stuff, then you can be quite happy now.

So keeping ethics does not mean suffering now. It means giving up actions that cause you suffering later, that make you hate yourself now. And in that way, you begin to like yourself a lot more, right now.

[Audience:] Did it make you unhappy to give up some of the things you had to give up when you became a nun?

That is what I too grew up thinking, "Oh, all these people must be really unhappy. They cannot do all these things." But start by looking at your own experience. Look at some of the things that you used to

do that you thought made you happy and you later realized were self-destructive behavior. Once you realized they were self-destructive, you gave them up and you became happy.

So you can see from your own experience what it is like. Basically you are giving up self-destructive behavior, not because you should or ought to, but because you have finally begun to acknowledge that it is self-destructive. You realize that it is not making you happy, it is making you miserable.

It is just like when the alcoholic finally comes to realize that drinking is not solving their problems, it is creating them. Or when anybody who has any kind of addiction realizes that what they are addicted to is part of the problem; it is not a solution.

Attachment to Appearance

[Audience:] Didn't you have to change your views about your long hair and why it was important to you?

The way I changed my views about why long hair was important to me, was that I imagined having beautiful long hair, more beautiful than my hair was already. Do you think I did not have beautiful long hair? I'll show you pictures! [laughter] So, I imagined having this really, really beautiful hair and then I thought, "O.K., I go through my whole life with beautiful hair and then I die with beautiful hair. I lie in my casket with this beautiful hair and all these people will come and say, 'Wow, she has such beautiful hair!'" [laughter] And I realized, "What good does that do me? If it does not do me any good after I am dead, what is the use of it when I am alive?"

[Audience:] If you had not made that transition so convincing for yourself, you would still be suffering, would you not?

I would be very worried if I had not made that transition. I would be really worried about my hair getting gray. Now, I can cut it all off. [laughter]

[Audience:] You had to force yourself to come away with a new way of thinking, right?

I tried to come to terms with it before I cut my hair so that when I did cut my hair I felt really good about it. I did not think, "Oh, I should do this because I am attached to my hair and therefore I should deny myself." It was not like that. It was more that I had done a lot of serious contemplation about what good did it really do me to have long, beautiful hair? What ultimate benefit was it to me? Of what ultimate benefit was it for the sake of others? Did the fact that I had long, beautiful hair help to alleviate other's problems?

[Audience:] What ultimate benefit is there in having short hair?

There is no virtue in having short hair. It is not the short hair that is virtuous, it is the mind that gives up attachment to your physical appearance that is a virtuous practice. That kind of mind frees you from a lot of difficulties. You could have short hair and be very attached.

[Audience:] What about clothes and robes?

Actually, at the time of the Buddha the monks and nuns wore clothes that were made from rags. They used to go to the cemetery and gather the old clothes and stitch them together. Sometimes lay people would offer nice cloth to the monks and nuns. But even if somebody offered nice cloth they still had to cut it up into patches and sew it together. If you look at my robes, they are all patches sewn together and that is quite deliberate. It is to help us not become attached to having some beautiful, new smooth piece of cloth for robes.

At the time of the Buddha, monks and nuns wore old, scruffy stuff and nobody cared. If you did that nowadays people are likely to get quite upset and think that you are really stupid and do not have anything valuable to say. One of my teachers once said, "Therefore, make sure that your robes look reasonable." Otherwise we would look like a nineteen sixties era monk or nun [laughter] and that destroys other people's faith. People do not have real clear minds about this stuff. They often cannot look beyond appearance at the beginning.

Recognizing the Harm Of Attachment

[Audience:] What really matters is the mind that is attached to things. It is not about the hair and it is not about the robes. And the mind can get attached to anything, so what is to be done?

You are right. Our mind can get attached to absolutely anything. We can get attached to incredible things.

Look at pigs. Look at what they are attached to. I think it is real helpful to look at pigs sometimes because their minds are exactly like our minds. It is just that the objects of their attachment are different.

So I think the bottom line is, we have to recognize the harm of attachment. We have to recognize how attachment is like somebody pulling us along like a donkey with a rope through its nose. Attachment just leads us around and when you recognize that the attachment is what makes you bound, that gives you some inspiration not to keep buying into it.

Religion And Religious Abuse

[Audience:] Do you think religion can seriously warp people? Can you give an example of this?

Definitely, religion does warp people in serious ways. [laughter] Definitely. You want me to give an example? I can give you many examples.

I was just at a conference and there was one person who was talking about religious abuse. One example he gave was the fact that women are given away at marriage ceremonies. You never give away a man. You always give away a woman. I think that is quite destructive and an abusive use of religion. I would think that has nothing to do with what Jesus taught. But we call it religion because it belongs to an institution.

Or take the example of parents who say, "I have to beat my kid to a pulp to instill the fear of God." This is definitely religious abuse. Making people feel guilty and making them feel horrible about themselves have nothing to do with the real teachings of the real religious leaders. These things are misunderstandings taught by religious institutions and can be quite harmful.

That is not what we are talking about here when we speak about giving up attachments. We are not trying to make anyone feel guilty, or lousy, or bad about themselves. The thing is, sometimes we look at the Buddha's teachings through the filter of our previous upbringing and that creates difficulties for us.

Rebirth

[In response to audience:] This is a difficult thing we have to deal with – not feeling convinced that rebirth exists. I think one of the big hindrances is that we are so habituated with just identifying with this body.

We do have some sense of continuity because we can imagine tomorrow and we can imagine our child growing up and we can imagine getting old. Sometimes it is hard to imagine yourself getting old, but it has been happening so far and I do not think it is going to stop. We can even imagine ourselves dying when we let ourselves. But then somehow when we think beyond this body, we start to have all sorts of doubts.

One thing that is helpful is to look at how much our body has changed. Imagine you could see your entire life and look at how you appear as a baby, as a teenager, as an adult and as a senile old person. Look at the differences in the same body. They are incredible differences. There are also incredible differences in the mental state. And yet this is all a continuity of the same person.

When we talk about future lives, it is just another change in the external appearance, another outside change. Just as the mind has been changing moment to moment to moment and as the body has been changing moment to moment to moment, that process does not stop at death. The mind is going to keep going on one moment following the next even though the body might be a different body. This makes us think about ourselves a little bit differently than we usually do.

Responding to Suffering

[Audience:] When we see the suffering of others, how do we keep from getting completely overwhelmed and discouraged and depressed by it?

This is one of the chief practices of a bodhisattva. A bodhisattva is somebody who cherishes others more than him or herself, who works to benefit others and does so with a happy mind. To have a happy mind you have to protect yourself against being discouraged.

One of the ways that a bodhisattva does this is by remembering that all beings have the Buddha nature and the potential to become fully enlightened beings. Bodhisattvas know that all the suffering happening is something that can be removed because the cause of suffering, which is ignorance, can be removed. So it is not as if suffering is something that is permanent, eternal, everlasting and overwhelming. It is something that arises from causes and those causes can be stopped. I think in that way a bodhisattva has very, very deep faith and optimism. They understand that things change and that everybody has the possibility to generate wisdom and compassion.

We get overwhelmed when we see things just in terms of the present and what is happening in the present. If you see suffering disjointed from its causes and its results, then it seems overwhelming. It seems like there is no cause, or there is no control and it is just this horrible thing. But when you start to see suffering in the context of its causes and its results, then our mind gains some space.

[Audience:] How do we know when to help someone and when not to help?

Where is the point where we stretch ourselves? That is a tricky thing and something that is different for each person and each situation. It might not be immediately clear to us.

There is often a lot of blur in our own mind about knowing where to draw the line and say, "This is my limitation." Or of knowing where to push a little bit beyond, which is good, or knowing when we have pushed ourselves so much beyond that, actually, we are being destructive and may be doing something with a hero mentality instead of genuine compassion. That is something we only know by looking at our own mind. We have to become real, real sensitive to ourselves. Nobody else can tell us. This is a very difficult thing.

It would be nice sometimes if somebody could tell us what our own motivations are because sometimes we cannot tell our own mind. But who can crawl inside anybody else's mind? Maybe somebody who is clairvoyant can, but I certainly cannot.

I think in the end, even if other people could tell us, what we have to learn to do is develop that sensitivity in ourselves and learn to assess our limitations. We need to learn when we can stretch a little bit and when we are putting on a phony motivation and being a Mickey Mouse bodhisattva. And we need to learn to give ourselves the space to make some mistakes instead of thinking we always have to be perfect.

Didn't you wish I had given another answer? Something like, "All you do is you put electrodes on and the machine will tell you your level of motivation." [laughter]

Let us sit quietly for a few minutes.

*This teaching is based on the Lamrim (the Gradual Path to Enlightenment), an outline of which is available from the following web page in .doc and .pdf formats:
<http://www.thubtenchodron.org/GradualPathToEnlightenment/outline.html>