

The Four Opponent Powers (lightly edited transcript)
by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. 10 Aug 92

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Does 'me first' approach make us happy?

In modern psychology, the whole emphasis is that we've got to take care of ourselves, as if we had been ignoring ourselves our whole life. Is there any of us, when we really look over our whole life, who can honestly say, "I've spent my whole life just taking care of others and ignoring myself?" Anybody here has done that? If you do, you'll get the Bodhisattva Award. [laughter]

But it's just so interesting. We've spent our whole life trying to take care of ourselves. We're always trying to protect ourselves from harm, trying to protect ourselves from criticism, to get as much praise and approval as possible, to fit in with other people because we want to fit in. We try and get as much material possessions as we can because that makes us feel good. We try and make our body healthy and attractive. We try and give ourselves a lot of pleasure. We want to get career advancement and high prestige.

We spend a good portion of our whole life, if not twenty-five hours a day, taking care of ourselves. And yet in pop psychology they're making it seem like we've been ignoring ourselves our whole lifetime: and so we have to get back to basics. Start being selfish because we've been too generous our whole lives. [laughter] But if we really look: is that our problem? Is our problem that we've been too generous? Is our problem that we've been so incredibly kind and patient and tolerant that people have taken advantage of us? Is that our problem, that we're just so incredibly forgiving that we never get angry, and so everybody just runs all over us? Is that our problem?

I think we need to start looking again at what is the path to happiness. It's true. We all want happiness. We all want to avoid pain. That's been true throughout our whole lifetime since we've been born. But up until now, have we succeeded in finding the happiness we want, and what kind of method have we used to get happiness? And if we look, our whole life, we've spent trying to be happy, and we've used the method of 'me first'.

Even in the circumstances when we've been nice to other people, it's usually because then they'll do something nice for us back. Even the nice things we've done haven't been completely generous and open-hearted and free. We usually attach lots of strings and obligations to them, and if we can't control the other people enough to have strings and obligations, then we have lots of expectations.

And so we've tried to be happy our whole lives using that method, taking care of ourselves first, doing what suits us first, doing what's going to make us more accepted, most popular, most wealthy, most cared for, and where have we gotten? Where have we gotten? Have we gotten any happier?

I'm just asking questions, because I've learnt with Americans, you can't tell them very much, [laughter] myself included. So I ask questions for us to look at our lives, to check up your own life. Where have we gotten with the whole way we've been living our lives up until now? Where have we gotten to?

So considering that we spent the whole life basically caring about ourselves and ignoring everybody else, we could, for variety's sake, try another method. We always say, change the spice of life (or something like that), don't we? We could try cherishing others and add some spice in our life. But then you'll say, "No, no, no. We don't want to do that. That's too scary. If I cherish others, what's going to happen to me? If I don't take care of myself, who's going to take care of me? If I don't make sure I'm happy, then maybe I'm going to be miserable."

This is our fear, isn't it? I've got to take care of myself, otherwise what's going to happen to me? It is a bad, mean, cruel world out there, and I've got to set up my defenses, do what I need to do to protect myself against it, otherwise it's going to overrun me. That's the way we approach life.

Learning to take care of others

And yet it's so interesting, because the more and more you get into Buddhism, what does Buddhism talk about? The benefit we've received from others. And we start looking over our whole life, from the time we were conceived in our mother's womb, how much benefit we've received from others. And when we really contemplate that very deeply, then this whole notion that the world out there is big and bad and so I have to protect myself from it, that gets negated very quickly. Because we can begin to see how completely false it is, because when we came into the world, there was no possible way we could take care of ourselves. Nothing. We couldn't feed ourselves. We couldn't even tell other people what we wanted. We couldn't give ourselves shelter. We couldn't do anything. The whole reason we survived from the time that we were infants, is due to the kindness of other people. The whole reason we got educated, the whole reason we can speak, the whole reason we know anything at all, or can do anything at all, is because of the kindness of others.

And so our whole life, we've been the recipient of so much incredible kindness and benefit from others, and yet we perceive the world as this harmful place that we have to defend ourselves against. It's really interesting, isn't it? It's like when we really look at it, our mind is totally out of whack with the reality of the situation, because when we look at the amount of benefit we've received our whole life, compared to the amount of harm, it's like there's almost no comparison. No comparison.

Even if you take the worst, most horrible, miserable day of your entire life, and you think of the benefit you received from others that day and the harm you received from others that day, still, there's no comparison. Say, there was one day where you were beaten really badly, you were attacked and beaten. OK, that's some harm. But where did we get the food that day that kept us alive? Where did we get the medical attention that saved our life? Where did we get the moral support from other people? Where did we get the skills that we had to cope with a bad situation? The mental skills we have – where did they come from? So even if you look at the most horrible day in your life, still, on that day, we've been the recipient of so much kindness and benefit from others.

So this whole perception we have, that the world is hostile, it's really not like that. But there's something in us that feels really scared to admit that, because it involves giving up the whole way we've organized our lives. We've organized our lives around 'I'. Solid, concrete 'me', 'I', 'my' and 'mine'. My boundaries. My likes. My dislikes. There's a mean world out there. I have to defend myself against it because it's never done anything for me except harm me. Opening ourselves up to receiving kindness from other beings just threatens that whole preconceived way of viewing our life.

I don't think the problem is that we haven't taken enough care of ourselves. It's that we've taken the wrong kind of care of ourselves. Because by approaching the world as if it's harmful, and being antagonistic and defensive and aggressive to the world, we've elicited those same kind of actions in response. It's karma, isn't it? You get back what you put out. So in our attempt to be happy, we've basically created more and more problems for ourselves. Continually blaming it on the other people, on the environment, on the government, or whatever.

And so, we've never really taken the right care of ourselves, in spite of how much we care about ourselves. We love ourselves. We want to protect ourselves. We want ourselves to be happy. In spite of

all that, we've never really taken the right kind of care of ourselves, because if we really understood cause and effect much better, if we stop to really check up what our situation was instead of just acting blindly, we would begin to see that the best way to take care of ourselves would be to take care of others. Because the selfish way of taking care of ourselves has gotten us absolutely nowhere. We have however many years we've been alive to prove that to ourselves. Look over your own life and see if what I'm saying is true or not. But how often have we tried taking care of others, and seen if that's made us any happier?

Taking care of others is something we've never really done, not really with a totally free, open heart, with no strings attached, with complete giving. If we take care of others in that kind of way, with a genuine kindness, then that actually acts as the best way to take care of ourselves, because if we start acting kindly, then that's the kind of energy we attract back to ourselves. If we frame our mind with the conceptual view that the world is a kind, friendly place, then that's the way it's going to appear in our eyes. Our whole experience comes from our own internal mind, not from outside.

So we need to learn to take the right kind of care of ourselves. That right kind of care is to care for others. We care for others not in a co-dependent, ulterior, manipulating way, because that isn't taking care of others, that's taking care of ourselves. People in dysfunctional relationships say that they spent their whole life on others. But they aren't taking care of others; they're taking care of themselves. That's the problem. The problem's that we never genuinely take care of others.

Taking care of others means letting go of all of our own expectations, all of our own strings and conditions. All those things are what make us so unhappy, because as soon as we take care of somebody else with expectation, then of course 99% of the time, our expectation isn't fulfilled. Why? Because it wasn't realistic. We take care of others with strings attached, and then we get hurt afterwards. It's because we're the ones who put the strings there. If we didn't put the strings there, then there wouldn't be anything for the other person to break. We have control over our experience if we choose to take that control.

Negative behavior reflects an unbalanced mind

Tonight we're going to finish up the section on cause and effect. There's something about cause and effect that I think is really important to go into. I was thinking about it today. The fact that we do actions, in other words, karma, and then results come from it, it doesn't mean that we're getting punished. It's not a system of reward and punishment. And when we act negatively, it doesn't mean that we're bad people. It just means that we've made mistakes.

In spite of stressing this so much, and having it stressed to me, at times I can still see within my own mind, when I act harmfully, or create negative karma, a part of the mind that says, "Oops, you messed up again, didn't you?" Kind of, "You did something bad!" Kind of this little voice that says, "Oh, I did something bad again. Wouldn't you know it!" And then this kind of apprehension comes, like, "I do believe in karma. I do believe in cause and effect. I just did something bad. Ai-yai-yai, what's going to happen? What's going to happen to me in future lives?" Some kind of quite uncomfortable feeling. And that really is falling very much into the Judeo-Christian paradigm again.

It struck me that instead of seeing it that way, I can simply recognize that if I have a spiritual aspiration working for the happiness of myself and others, trying to become a fully enlightened Buddha for the benefit of others, then when I notice that I've acted negatively, what that signals to me is that my mind is out of balance. That somehow, I'm not on track towards what I've decided is a really noble goal in my life. And the thing that makes me get off-track is my hallucinating mind.

Lama Yeshe used to say this to us all the time, "You think you're perceiving reality, don't you? You only think you're hallucinating when you take LSD. But I tell you, you're hallucinating now!" [laughter] I can't even begin to impersonate Lama Yeshe, but he really emphasized, "You're hallucinating right now!"

And so that's the thing. When we start acting negatively, it's indicative that we've gotten bent out of shape. We've begun to get involved in our hallucinations thinking that they're reality. When we act negatively, what is going on? We're usually very attached to something, or very angry at something, or extremely fearful or jealous, or very proud and wanting to make ourselves well-known. We're involved in

something like that, and if we look at any of those motivating attitudes, they're all quite out of whack. They're not balanced. They're not in tune with reality. There's an exaggeration there somewhere.

So when we're acting negatively, it's indicative that our mind is unbalanced, that we're hallucinating, and we're going further away from what we've already decided was a noble goal and a beneficial way to actualize our human potential. Rather than get angry at ourselves because we've acted negatively, we should take the negative action as like the burglar alarm going off, the warning signal going off, of "Hey! I'd better look at what's going on in my mind here. Something's out of whack." This is a really different attitude with which to approach our negative actions, instead of just, "Oh, I did it again! I'm always flopping up. I'm so negative! I'd better go do some purification!" [laughter]

We can think, "This is an opportunity to learn something about what's going on in my mind. This is an opportunity to stop for a minute and check up what's happening and to get myself balanced again, because if I don't get balanced, I'm going to get further and further out of whack." You can see how this happens. Something happens in our life and we get a little bit angry, but we don't take care of our anger. So then every situation we meet, we get angrier and angrier, because everybody starts appearing to us as if they're harming us and bugging us. Or we get a little bit jealous but we don't recognize it. We don't take care of it. So then everybody starts appearing in a very competitive, threatening way to us. And then we start acting our jealousy out, and then other people get more and more apprehensive around us.

Purification helps to restore balance

So rather than just fall prey to these recurrence of patterns of behavior, to stop and look, "How am I misconceiving things? How am I off-balance?" And get ourselves back and balanced again. That's how the purification process works. This is what helps us get back in balance.

That's why it's advised to do some purification every evening, at the end of the day. We sit down, and we look over the day's activities, and we check up on what went well, what needs to be improved. We do not do this in terms of "What did I get?" and "How can other people be improved?", [laughter] but in terms of the motivation that we generated in the morning to not harm others, to be of benefit, to act in a way that will lead others and ourselves to enlightenment. Checking, and seeing what went well according to that. How was I actually able to approach enlightenment or create some of the causes for enlightenment, and then rejoice in that. Did I mess up in some way today? Are my old behavior patterns pushing me on automatic? How can I improve that?

So this is the basis for the purification practice, developing the ability to evaluate ourselves in an accurate way so that we're no longer so dependent on other people's approval. One of the big problems we have is we feel so dependent on whether other people like us, approve of us, and tell us how wonderful we are. If they do, we feel that we're okay. If they criticize us, we feel we're lousy people. And so we feel completely dependent on other people for our own self-image, and that's basically because we've never developed the ability to evaluate our own actions in a balanced way. If we could do that, if we have our ethical standards very clear in our mind, and a good understanding of what is constructive behavior and attitudes and what are destructive behavior and attitudes, then we can begin to evaluate ourselves in an accurate way, rejoicing at what we do well, purifying when we mess up, and then we aren't so dependent on other people's opinions of ourselves.

That doesn't mean that we tune other people's feedback out. We still listen to it, but we listen to it and we check up if it's true. We don't just take it automatically as true or automatically as false, but we use this information. Only we know our own internal reality. We might act very negatively, and everybody in our family tells us we're wonderful, "Wow, you're really smart! You're so clever! You did this and that. You've got the best business deal and the IRS will never find out. You're great!" But we know our own internal reality. And if we know we're acting in devious ways, it doesn't matter what other people say.

Similarly, we might be acting with a completely kind and pure open heart, and other people might totally misinterpret what we're doing, and blame us, abuse us, criticize us. But again, if we know our reality, if we're in touch with our motivation, and we know clearly the direction we want to grow in, then even if people come and say, "What in the world are you doing? Why are you going on retreat? You're taking a week off work to go sit with your legs crossed in silence? This is your holiday? You're going to sit in silence with aching knees? You've got to be crazy!", if you know what's good for your own mental health,

you know what's good for the direction you're taking in life, then other people can tell you that you're from Mars or that you should go there, [laughter] and you don't really care a whole lot, because you recognize, of course, that's their opinion, but I know my own reality. I know what's happening in my own mind.

So this process of checking up every evening is really good for helping us to get to know ourselves, and also developing some kind of confidence in the direction to go in our life, especially when it comes to keeping ethical conduct. Because a lot of people may theoretically tell us it's wonderful to keep ethical conduct, but then when we start to and they don't like how we're acting, because we won't lie for them anymore, or we won't snitch things for them anymore, or we won't kill mosquitoes for them anymore, then they might get angry at us and start criticizing us for being so ethical – “Who do you think you are? Goody-two-shoes?” [laughter] And they get really upset by that. But again, if we know what we're doing and why we're doing it, then we can be a little bit patient with other people because we know that they don't have those same values. They don't understand, but we're clear on where we're going, and that's the important thing.

[Audience:] What if we check up and then start getting critical with ourselves, even to the point of hating ourselves for our negativities?

One thing that I've experimented doing, which does help, is the taking and giving meditation, the *tong-len*, where we imagine taking on the negativity of others and using it to destroy our own egoism and self-centeredness and negativity, and then giving our happiness and benefit to others. When I get into this down-on-myself thing, I try saying, “As long as I've messed up, and as long as I'm hating myself and feeling miserable about it, may this suffice for all the pain and misery of all other beings.”

Being too self-critical and hating ourselves is really one of our big problems. When I think of how other people hate themselves so much, and how much pain so many people live in because of that, then I want to say, “OK, as long as I'm experiencing that, may I take that away from them.” During the taking and giving meditation, when I'm breathing in the smoke, I think of taking in others' self-hatred and guilt from them, and then using it to destroy the egoism, the self-centeredness and ignorance in me. And then thinking of all the good things I have, multiplying it, making it more beautiful and more wonderful and giving them away.

The Four Opponent Powers

The four opponent powers are the four steps for purification. To completely purify an action, we need all four steps, and we also need to purify repeatedly. In other words, it's not sufficient just doing it once, because sometimes one or the other of the four powers may not be so strong. Also, we have done some of the habitual negative actions many, many times, so it's wise to purify many, many times, to make sure that our purification really hits home. We can't just purify once if we have so much energy pushing us in an off-balanced way; we need to purify again and again to build up some force this way.

1. Regret

Regret is not guilt

The first one is developing regret. Remember that there's a big difference between regret and guilt. Regret is very much just acknowledging our mistake. Guilt is hating ourselves because of it. It really blocks our development, because when we're guilty, we're completely revolved around 'I'. There's no space for anything else in the world, because it's very “I”-centered.

Often, guilt takes responsibility for things that aren't our responsibility. In the case of abused children, very often the children feel guilty for it, taking responsibility for something that isn't their responsibility. Or for example your kid goes to school without a sweater and gets a cold, and then you blame yourself, “Oh, I should have told them to wear a sweater. I'm such a lousy parent! I'm guilty. It's all my fault!” Maybe it wasn't your fault. Maybe the kid next to your kid had a cold and sneezed all over your child. Guilt often takes responsibility for things that have nothing to do with us. Or if something is our responsibility, then guilt exaggerates that, and then we hate ourselves because of it. So it's quite an unrealistic state of mind.

I think it's important in our practice, to acknowledge where we feel guilty, and to be very clear about it, and maybe even write it down. Write down the things that we feel guilty about. First of all, determine if they are our responsibility. If they aren't my responsibility, then no need to feel guilty. And if they are my responsibility, how would it feel to have regret for it rather than guilt? What would regret feel like? Do some very deep introspection, do some house cleaning this way, because guilt immobilizes us. It's very difficult to grow when we feel guilty. And there're so many things that we might just habitually feel guilty about.

I speak from lots of experience. [laughter] When I made the decision to become a nun, my family was incredibly unhappy. And I began to realize that the whole pattern in my life was whenever my parents were unhappy, I felt guilty about it. Why were they unhappy? Because I was a rotten kid and misbehaved. When they're unhappy because of something I do, obviously it's my fault.

The thing is just to see that kind of pattern. I just saw the same thing coming up again. I wanted to get ordained but my parents were unhappy, and miserable. I felt guilty. I felt responsible for their being unhappy. And I had to sit down and do a lot of introspection and working around with that one. To figure out what is my responsibility in this and what is their responsibility. If I'm acting with an ulterior motivation, or a motivation to harm them, and they are harmed, then I have some responsibility in it. But if I'm acting with a good motivation, and they're misinterpreting it because of their own mental veils, that part isn't my responsibility. But it took a lot of working with this repeatedly to sort out what belongs where.

Sorting out and acknowledging our responsibilities

This first power of regret is very important, because if we don't do this sorting out in our mind between what is regret and what is guilt, and what is my responsibility and what isn't my responsibility, and if we also avoid bearing responsibility for things that are our responsibility, then our growth will be hampered.

In other words, if we rationalize and justify and push off to others things that are actually coming from us, and not do any kind of housecleaning, we'll walk around our whole life with this incredible, mental malaise. We'll just feel totally rotten all the time, feeling like we're walking on top of a sewer, and we're afraid that the thin layer separating us from the sewer is going to break. And what's the sewer? It's just all this incredible mishmash of our unsorted out feelings and our unacknowledged responsibilities, the whole crowding there.

Purification practice is very good because it helps us get some clarity on our issues, even though at the beginning we may not be able to be 100% clear. Sometimes we'll sit and we'll think back about things in our life, and we'll just get confused, because we can't sort out: why was I doing that? Was I acting kindly or was I acting with an ulterior motivation? Sometimes we just start thinking about it, and the mind gets confused even more. Sometimes it takes a while to sort through things, to know that when we're working on things, there've been issues in our life from many, many years, that we work on them in layers, and in stages.

You work on them like peeling off the layers of an onion. You purify that much, you gain that much clarity. But you acknowledge that there's a whole lot of other stuff that's not clear to you yet. That's OK. We don't have to be clear overnight. So whatever we can get clear about, to feel good about that, to recognize there's a lot of other stuff there, but it's going to take time, and when our mind is ready to deal with that, we'll be able to start making headways on those things.

So you see, this is why we do purification from now until enlightenment, because it's a process of peeling away layers of the onion. We have to go into the purification process with that kind of attitude because we can't squeeze ourselves and force ourselves, "OK. Tonight in my meditation session, I am going to get my relationship with so and so sorted out, completely 100% forever!" [laughter] We have to work gradually and clean things out. But as we start to purify, the benefits of purifying become apparent, because our mind gets clearer, we understand ourselves better. We're quicker to catch on to what's going on in our mind, because we've spent some time examining it.

Also, when we sit down to listen to teachings, the teachings make more sense to us. That's again why I encourage a lot of purification, because otherwise, if you just listen and listen and listen to lots of teaching, but you don't try and put anything into practice, and you don't try and purify, then after a while,

either your mind's going to get tough like cardboard, because the teachings all seem very intellectual and dry to you, or you're just going to feel like it's all useless.

It takes this kind of purification, accumulation of positive potential, to keep the mind fertile, so that when you listen to teachings, something goes in. So that it doesn't just become intellectual blah-blah-blah. Because it could become so – “There're four of this and five of that, and this is the definition of this and that” – you can know all of that stuff, and yet your heart is totally like a slab of concrete. Purification and accumulation of positive potential are very important that way.

2. Restoring the relationship

The second step, I like to call it restoring the relationship. The actual translation is something like the dependent basis. What it means is when we've acted negatively, it's usually been in terms of an object, either holy beings or other sentient beings. In some way, we have damaged our relationships either with the holy beings or with the sentient beings. And so this is the process of restoring the relationships by depending on the very people that we harmed. We restore the relationships by cultivating more constructive attitudes that will act as antidotes to the destructive attitudes that we had when we harmed.

Altruism as antidote to harming sentient beings

In terms of ordinary sentient beings, when we harm them, we might have jealousy or belligerence, or resentment, or grudge-holding, pride, something like this. As an antidote to those kinds of negative feelings that we had towards others that made us harm them and that made us act destructively, the remedial attitude to cultivate in our own mind is one of altruism, bodhicitta, this attitude of working for the benefit of others, of cherishing others, of respecting them, of wanting them to be happy and wanting them to be free of their problems. You can see how this attitude of altruism is the direct opposite to the very self-centered, antagonistic mind that usually is in operation when we harm others.

Taking refuge as antidote to harming holy beings

In terms of harming holy beings, you might wonder, “How in the world do we harm holy beings?” Well, when you steal things from the Triple Gem or you steal things from the Sangha community, or – this is a good one – when you've made up your mind to offer something and then you change your mind and don't offer it. Have you ever had that? I used to do this all the time in Nepal. You bought a box of cookies: “I'm going to offer this at the altar.” And then, “Well, I'm hungry. I'll eat this box. I'll buy another box later.” Just things like this. Once we've offered it mentally, it no longer belongs to us. So this mind that offers and then takes it back, is actually stealing from the Triple Gem.

There are also times when we've criticized the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. For example, I've heard lots of people say, “Buddha left his wife and child to become a monk, that's cruel. Why in the world did he do that? He's totally irresponsible!” I've heard lots of people say that. Or belittling the Sangha community: “A bunch of lazy bums. All they do is sit around and mumble prayers and expect us to support them.” I've heard many people say that. [laughter] It's very easy to do the same thing.

When we have those kinds of negative attitudes, we're harming ourselves because the Triple Gem is the refuge. Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are showing us the way to liberation. When we start seeing the beings and the things that are showing us the way to liberation as things that are harming us, then our mind is really out of whack. Isn't it? The very ones who are the most compassionate, who work for our welfare - when we start seeing them as harming us and we criticize them, then we're taking our minds totally in the opposite direction from enlightenment. Who's going to help us then? Very difficult. Very difficult.

We've probably all done this. I have. If we haven't done it this life, we've probably done it past lives. It's important to purify this kind of critical attitude, because if it isn't purified, then the result is that then either later on in this life or in future lives, we're separated from the Triple Gem. Then we wind up, let's say, taking birth in a country where it's impossible to meet a spiritual path, where even if you have a spiritual yearning, there's nothing outside to guide you, to help you, you're there in a total spiritual vacuum, in a desert.

I think it will be tremendously painful, just that whole feeling of separation from the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. And if you're born in a place where it's impossible to get teachings, it's impossible to make that contact, then how are we ever going to get the information that's going to help us improve ourselves?

How are we ever going to know the difference between a constructive action and a destructive action if we don't take teachings and have some way to purify our mind and know how to discriminate these things? So it's extremely important to purify the negative karma that we've created in relationship to the Triple Gem.

The way to do that is by taking refuge in the Triple Gem. Because the attitude that was critical of them was pushing them away, saying, "Buddha, Dharma, Sangha is just a pooh-pooh, who needs them?", so what we need to do in fact to re-institute the relationship in a healthy way is to open ourselves up to the benefit we can receive from them and take refuge. When we take refuge three times in the morning and three times in the evening, or when we take refuge before teachings or before our meditation session, this is helping us to purify the mind that has turned its back on the teachings.

Avoid being sectarian

Having a mind that is very sectarian is also a way of turning our back on the teachings. As soon as we get sectarian, "My lineage of Buddhism is the best and the purest, most wonderful lineage, and all the others are....," then we criticize other teachings, other lineages of teachings. It's so easy for people to get into it. So easy! It's like, "My football team is the best!"

This is incredibly harmful, because all these teachings came from the Buddha. If you call yourself a Buddhist, how can you criticize any teachings that came from the Buddha? If you criticize teachings that come from the Buddha, again, you're walking in the opposite direction. If you're criticizing those teachings, then you're never going to practice them; if you don't practice them, how are you going to get the results? So the sectarian attitude is very damaging for our own practice. Taking refuge is very important in this way, to purify that.

[Audience:] Is it okay for us not to think well of other religions?

I think it's very damaging to criticize other religions. We have to be very clear here: we can say certain ideas do not make sense; certain ideas are not logical. But that's very, very different from saying that the whole tradition is rotten to the core, because within every single religion, you can find something beneficial. So you can't put down any religion with a blanket statement and say, "That religion is an awful religion," because every religion has some ethical conduct as a part of it. Every religion has some talk of loving-kindness.

You can say certain thesis or certain principles of certain religions could be logically refuted, or you can say that the institution of that religion maybe doesn't act according to the spirit of its founder. You can express that as an opinion. But to indiscriminately label a whole religion as bad is not very smart for our own practice, and it definitely doesn't lead to harmony in the world.

This is a very tricky thing. Because sometimes people say, "Well, then I have to say 'All religions are one.'" We can't say that either, because all religions aren't one, because they do have different assertions, different beliefs. And whether they are all going to the same goal, I don't know. I can't say 'Yes' or 'No'. I don't even understand my own religion, let alone someone else's, so how can I say whether they're going to the same place or not? If my own mind is completely empty of realizations, how could I say whether St. Francis and the Buddha had the same realizations, when I don't understand what either of them are talking about?

So I can't say, "Yes, yes – they're all one,". And yet I can't say that this one is good and that one is totally awful either. What I can say is, "This one makes more sense to me, and certain assertions in this other one, we need to logically check out whether they're correct or incorrect. But even if they're incorrect, maybe for some people they're beneficial."

Westerners used to go to Asia, and we'd all sit there in Nepal and go, "Rah, rah, Buddhism. We're going to go back to the West. We're going to tell our parents. We're going to tell our friends." And Lama Yeshe used to say, "If somebody else believes in God, you don't need to tear their belief in God down, because if you tear their belief in God down, and they aren't ready yet to accept something else, you might in fact destroy their whole reason for keeping good ethical conduct. At least the people who believe in God don't have ultimate faith in their own ego. At least they're willing to admit that maybe their ego isn't the biggest know-it-all in the world. That maybe there's something that knows more than their own ego. So

to that extent the belief in God is very constructive for those people. And so unless somebody's really questioning and ready and open, don't just go around smashing other people's beliefs."

[Audience:] Can we express any doubt in Buddhism?

In some religions, it is said that if you doubt your religion, it's a sin. Buddha said to not believe in anything he said just because he said it, but to check it in the same way that you would test gold. You wouldn't just go and buy gold, taking somebody else's word for it. There's this whole process, where you rub it, burn it, you do all these things so that you could tell whether it's real gold or whether it's a facsimile. So similarly, the Buddha said, with his own teachings, you check them out and you see if they work or not. You see if they make sense. You don't believe them just because you are told to believe them.

There's this wonderful sutra called the Kalama sutra. All these people called the Kalamas came to the Buddha and they said, "There's this whole spiritual supermarket out there. What do we believe?" Buddha said, "Don't believe it because it's tradition. Don't believe it because somebody has some so-called logical argument. Don't believe it because you're supposed to because of your family background. Don't believe it because everybody else believes it. But you try it. You test it. And if it works, then you believe it." Buddha was really encouraging personal experience here.

Now there're a lot of things, higher realizations, that we can't have personal experience of at the beginning because our minds don't have the openness, aren't fertile enough to have that. So we have to look and see if it makes sense or if it doesn't make sense. If it makes sense and if we have some kind of confidence in what the Buddha said, because the Buddha had said other things that were true, then we're willing to accept this one provisionally. But it never really becomes our own belief unless we get some experience of it.

Of the ten destructive actions, the last one is that of wrong views. One of the wrong views is negating past and future lives, or negating enlightenment, saying that it doesn't exist, or negating the existence of Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, thinking, "Gee, if I believe that, then I'm a heretic, then I'm going to hell." Rather, we should check it out, and if those beliefs seem to help us, seem to make some sense, then work with them.

If we ever notice that our mind is getting belligerent and angry, then to use that as a burglar alarm, "Oh oh, maybe I'd better check up what's going on here." So again, instead of getting into this thing of, "I'm bad because I have doubt," it's just, "My doubt can be useful to help me gain new levels of knowledge, and if my doubt is getting me angry and belligerent, then I need to look at my mind and see what's going on in it."

[Audience:] What's the difference between doubt, question and criticism?

There're three kinds of doubt. There's the doubt that is inclined towards the right conclusion, the doubt that is in the middle, and the doubt that's inclined towards a negative conclusion.

Take the example of rebirth. Let's say before you come to teachings, you might first of all have a wrong view: "There's no such thing as rebirth. I'm absolutely convinced there's no rebirth!" Then you come to teachings. You begin to have a little bit of doubt, the doubt that's still inclined towards no rebirth, "Well, maybe there's rebirth but I really don't think there is."

And then you study, practice, listen, think about it, then your doubt moves to that second kind – equal balance, "Maybe there is. Maybe there isn't."

Then you keep on going, you're questioning, talking, discussing with other people, then your doubt starts to shift to, "Hm, I'm not sure if there's rebirth or not, but I think maybe there is."

And then you keep going and going, and then you get what's called the 'correct assumption', and you start thinking, "Hm, I think there is rebirth. It kind of makes sense some way."

And then you just keep going and thinking about it, and then you can get a correct inference of it, when you know with clear logic that rebirth exists.

Then you keep meditating and practicing, and then you get to the point where you can actually, with clairvoyant powers, see past and future lives. Then for sure, you can't go against that. You see, it's this whole process of stretching the mind, expanding it, making it grow.

Criticism is more like wrong view, saying, "This doesn't make any sense. I absolutely don't agree with this. It's just hog-wash. Anybody who believes in it is a jerk!" That kind of criticism is very close-minded. It's really proud and arrogant. "I know what's right. And anybody who believes that is an idiot."

Whereas the doubting, questioning mind, there's some space in it. There's some openness, and depending on which of the three kinds of doubt you have, there's more or less openness. You learn. You think. You discuss. If you don't doubt and think and discuss and get more information, then you'll never grow. If you just say, "I believe!" and then you think, "I must be an 'A', number one, disciple because I believe", then when somebody comes and asks you a question, you can't answer because you'd never thought about it yourself. And then you get really fanatical and dogmatic with the other person, "Don't you doubt! It's very negative if you doubt," because this is what you've been telling yourself for so long. But what you really mean is, "Don't doubt, because if you doubt and ask me questions, I don't know what to say because I don't even know what I believe. So, don't stir the pot!"

[Audience:] If we see someone making a mistake and comment on it, is that being critical?

In terms of your criticism of certain people's behavior, you can be critical with an angry mind, or you can be critical just with "Well, I've observed this" kind of mind. When you're working with people, you might have to observe somebody else's mistake, and you might have to comment on it. Some people would say that's being critical, but it depends on whether your mind is being critical. If somebody hasn't done something by the deadline that they said they were going to do it by, and you're pointing out that they haven't done that, you can point it out with a nice, balanced mind, or you can point it out with an angry mind. It's a big difference.

3. Determination not to repeat the action

The third opponent power is to make a determination not to do the action again. In one way, we want to say the line, "I'm not going to do that again," with as much power as we can because the more powerful we say it, then the more actual possibility there is not to do it again. But at the same time, as much as we want to make it powerful when we say this, we also want to be very clear that we're not lying to the Buddha, so I think you have to have both of those in your mind at the same time.

There may be some things in our life that we've looked at that we can say, "I do not ever want to do this again," and make it quite firm, and be pretty confident that we won't ever do it again, because we've seen that we don't want to act in that way. And then there might be other things in our life, for example, if we said, "I'm never going to idle gossip again," then that would almost be like a lie. [laughter]

So I think what we have to do there, is set some kind of useful time period for ourselves, like if we realize, "Oops, I got involved in idle talk again today as usual," then to say, "For the next two days, I'm going to make this a real strong focus and I'm going to try to be very, very aware of my idle talk, and really try hard not to do it for the next few days." So set ourselves some kind of time limit where we can focus on working on this.

Generally, the stronger our determination not to do it again, the easier it will be not to do it again. One of the reasons we habitually keep on doing the same things is because our determination not to do it again isn't very strong, and one of the reasons for that is because our regret for having done it isn't very strong. So it all comes back to regret. The stronger the regret, the more we're going to have the determination not to do it, then the easier it's going to be to change our behavior patterns. To develop regret, we have to think deeply about the disadvantages of the action, the disadvantages for others, the disadvantages for ourselves and become convinced of that. That's one of the chief things for giving ourselves the 'oomph' to break some of those habits.

[Audience:] How do we deal with the issue that when we drive, we're killing insects on the roads?

When you're getting in your car, you're not deliberately driving in order to kill the insects. You do know it's an outcome, but you're not motivated to do that. You lack the intention to do it. Some ways to actually avoid the harm to others, is don't drive unless you really need to, and carpool when you can. And to be careful about these things and not just get in our car and go here and there and all around the city when we really don't need to. But to plan our errands in a way where we drive as little as possible, and to carpool when we can so that with fewer vehicles, fewer animals get squished.

And then also, at the end of Pearl of Wisdom Book II, there is this mantra for your feet for when you walk: you say the mantra and then you spit on your feet or you could just blow on your feet. You can do that on your car tires, and you can make prayers – I do very often – I pray that no insects are going to get killed, let alone people or animals, by going in this car. And then feeling, “Knowing that there's risk to other beings' lives when I drive around in my car to go to places for my own pleasure and amusement, then at the least, I want to try to be of benefit to the people that I will be meeting on the trip.”

4. Remedial Actions

The remedial practice is basically any positive action that you do. They specifically describe six actions, but it could be any others. I'll give you the six:

1. Reciting sutras, for example, the Heart Sutra.
2. Reciting mantras, for example when people do the Vajrasattva practice or the Chenrezig practice.
3. Meditating on emptiness. This is the supreme way to purify. Meditating on emptiness is the way to really cut our afflictions. [*'Afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'delusions.'*]
4. Building statues or paintings or commissioning them, not modern art paintings, but paintings or statues of the Buddha and the deities and teachers.
5. Making offerings to the Triple Gem, offerings on the shrine or be a benefactor to people who are studying the Dharma, like some of the monks or nuns in India.
6. Reciting the names of the Buddhas, for example, the thirty-five Buddhas.

These are six remedial actions that are specifically spelt out, but in actual fact, any positive action we do – reading a Dharma book, coming to class, studying, doing some meditation, doing community service – they all become remedial actions. Lama Zopa was saying one of the best ways to purify is to take precepts, because if you take a precept not to do something, then you are actively not doing it and you're purifying that negative karma.

So that's concluding the section on karma.

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>