

**The Four Noble Truths According to the Three Levels of Practice and
the Six Unsatisfactory Experiences of Cyclic Existence in General** (lightly edited transcript)
by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. 9 Sep 1992

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The Four Noble Truths According to the Three Levels of Practice

We have been talking about the four Noble Truths in terms of the intermediate level person's path, because that is the level at which the four Noble Truths were taught by the Buddha in the first discourse - how to gain liberation from cyclic existence. Although the four Noble Truths technically falls within the practice in common with the intermediate level person, it can also be explained in terms of the initial and the advanced level practitioners. So we are going to understand the four Noble Truths in a slightly different way; I think it is quite interesting and it helps us see that the Buddha taught in a consistent way.

Initial Level Practitioner

An initial level practitioner is somebody whose motivation is a good rebirth. What is true suffering in the context of that practitioner? *True suffering* for that practitioner is having a meaningless, directionless life and having worse rebirths. For that level practitioner, the *causes* of a meaningless, directionless life and worse rebirths are first, not having refuge, and second, the ten destructive actions. When you do not have refuge and are confused, then you are prone to do the ten destructive actions (lack of basic ethics), which are the true cause of worse rebirths.

So, in the context of that initial level practitioner, what are the *cessations*? What is it that they want to stop? They want to stop having a directionless life by having a meaningful life and they want to stop having bad rebirths by having good rebirths. That is the true cessation and what they are aiming for. The *path* to get to that is first, by taking refuge and second, by following ethics and abandoning the ten negative actions.

This is how the four Noble Truths can be explained in terms of the initial level practitioner: you have first, the suffering; second, its causes; third, the cessation; and fourth, the path to actualize that.

Intermediate Level Practitioner

Now, for the intermediate level practitioner true suffering is any kind of rebirth in samsara, any kind of rebirth within the six realms, and the *causes* of that rebirth: the afflictions [Note: 'afflictions' as used throughout refers to the disturbing attitudes.] and karma. So *true suffering* is this uncontrolled rebirth in the six realms caused by afflictions¹ and karma. The *cessation* of that is nirvana. The Eightfold Noble Path is the *path* to stopping those rebirths and stopping their causes. Specifically, here we are talking about the determination to be free that makes you practice the Eightfold Noble Path and the three higher trainings.

So, again, there is this consistency of suffering or undesirability, the causes of those, the cessation of them, and the path to cessation. Remember, whenever I say 'suffering', it means undesirability. It is just easier to say suffering.

High Level Practitioner

The high level practitioner's motivation is to benefit others by becoming enlightened. In that context what is true suffering? True suffering for the high level practitioner is everybody else's problems and everybody's unsatisfactory conditions. It is no longer just a thing of *my* unsatisfactory conditions, *my* samsara, *my* cyclic existence, but it is *everybody's* cyclic existence.

The true suffering at this level is also the practitioner's own limitation of not being omniscient because they are not yet a Buddha. They do not have the perfect wisdom, compassion, or skill to be able to benefit others due to the lack of an omniscient mind. So their *true suffering* or undesirable experiences consist of two things: everybody's cyclic existence and their own limitations of not being omniscient.

The *true cause* for those undesirable experiences is the self-centered attitude, because the self-centered attitude is what keeps us from working for the benefit of others and from becoming enlightened. The only reason to become enlightened is to be able to benefit others, so the self-centered attitude is a limiting cause. Another cause is the cognitive obscurations [Note: 'cognitive obscurations' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'obscurations to omniscience'] on our mindstream. These are the subtle stains left behind by the afflictions¹. We have to remove not just the afflictions¹, but also the subtle stains, what they call the appearance of inherent existence, or the subtle dualistic appearance, which is the cause of the lack of omniscience.

The *cessation* that we are aiming for here is full enlightenment, which is the ceasing of all of the selfish mind, all of the limitations and defilements on the mindstream, and the development of all the good qualities to their full extent. The *path* to practice this is the bodhicitta motivation, the six far-reaching attitudes of the bodhisattva and the tantric practice. These become the true path that we practice in order to gain the cessation, which eliminates the true suffering and the true causes.

So you see how this pattern of the four things – the undesirable experiences, the causes of the undesirable experiences, cessation and the path to cessation – continues through from the initial level practitioner, to the medium level practitioner and on through to the advanced level practitioner. I personally think that is incredibly interesting. It gives you a lot to think about and another way of rearranging the material. Learning the Dharma material is not just getting it, but it is being able to look at the same thing from a whole lot of different viewpoints because as you do that, you gain new perspectives on it. I find that this way of thinking about the four Noble Truths actually gives you a whole overview to the entire lamrim.

Two Levels of Obscurations

[Audience:] What are the subtle stains to omniscience?

We have two levels of obscurations. We have afflicted obscurations [Note: 'afflicted obscurations' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'deluded obscurations'] and we have the cognitive obscurations³. The afflicted obscurations are what we are trying to eliminate in the four Noble Truths according to the middle level practitioner. The afflicted obscurations are the ignorance that grasps at a true or an inherent existence, as well as all the afflictions¹ and all the contaminated karma. If you can eliminate all of them, you become an arhat. You no longer get reborn in cyclic existence. But you still have the subtle stain on your mind, so the mirror is still a little bit dirty.

Now, why is the mirror still dirty although you have realized emptiness? They say it is like when you cook onions in a pot. You can take the onions out, but the smell of the onions is still there. Similarly, you can remove the ignorance and the afflictions¹ from the mindstream, but there is still a stain left in the mindstream from them. The stain is the appearance of true or inherent existence. Because of the stains and taints on our mind, phenomena appear to us as truly or inherently existent. The ignorance and the afflictions¹ then grasp at this true or inherent existence. So there is the appearance of inherent existence, and then on top of it, there is our grasping at it.

The grasping is easier to eliminate than the appearance. The grasping is eliminated by realizing emptiness, removing the afflicted obscurations² and becoming an arhat. The appearance of inherent existence is eliminated by cleansing the mind. This happens through repeated meditation on emptiness so that you no longer have this veil of the appearance of true existence.

When arhats are in meditative equipoise they see emptiness and only emptiness. There is no veil. There is no appearance of true existence in their meditation on emptiness. But, once they get off their meditation cushion and are walking down the street, things still appear to be truly existent. The arhat does not believe in that appearance anymore, but things still appear that way. Becoming a Buddha means eliminating that false appearance, eliminating the appearance of inherent existence so that when you see phenomena, you are just seeing them as dependently arising. There is no false appearance.

Television as an Example of False Appearance

When you watch television, it seems like the images on T.V. are real, does it not? That is a false appearance. When you believe that those are real people and you start getting incredibly emotionally involved with everything that is going on in the T.V. show – “I am behind this character and I am against that character” – that is similar to grasping at inherent existence due to our afflicted obscurations².

The arhat is someone who stops grasping at false appearance, but in post-meditation when he is walking around the streets he is still experiencing the false appearance. The images on the T.V. screen still appear like real people. But the Buddha would not experience it this way. The images would not appear to the Buddha as real people. Buddha would just recognize that as the dance of the electrons on the TV screen.

[In response to audience:] Turning the TV off would be like going into your meditation on emptiness where you only perceive emptiness. That is the difference between an arhat and a Buddha. An arhat, when he or she is in meditative equipoise, cannot perceive relative phenomena. When they come out of their meditation on emptiness, they see relative phenomena. They experience an appearance of true existence, so they cannot simultaneously directly perceive emptiness.

In the case of a Buddha, because there is no longer this appearance of true existence for them, they have the ability to perceive emptiness and to perceive the relative dependently existent phenomena at the same time. Whereas prior to that on the path, once you focus on emptiness, that is all you see. There is no appearance of other phenomena to that consciousness.

[Audience:] What is enlightenment?

There is a very easy definition. Enlightenment is when all the things that are to be eliminated have been eliminated and all the things that are to be developed have been developed. All the defilements on the mind – the afflicted obscurations² and the cognitive obscurations³ – have been purified and removed. All the good qualities – confidence, responsibility, wisdom, compassion, patience, concentration, etcetera – all these have been developed to the fullest perfection. In Tibetan, the word for Buddha is “sangye”. “Sang” means to clean or purify, “gye” means to develop or evolve. So just in those two syllables you can see the definition of what a Buddha is and see that it is something to look forward to.

Actual Meditation on Unsatisfactory Experiences

If you look at your lamrim outline* under, ‘B. Training the mind on the stages of the path which are in common with a person of intermediate level’, we talked about, ‘1a. The Buddha’s purpose for stating the truth of suffering as the first of the four Noble Truths’ and now we are going on to, ‘1b. Actual meditation on unsatisfactory experiences.’

Thinking of the Suffering of Cyclic Existence in General: the Six Unsatisfactory Experiences

We are now going to be talking a lot about undesirable experiences. It is very important that you have a good attitude when you are studying this and realize that the Buddha taught all about the undesirable experiences so that we can realize where we are at and thus develop a determination to free ourselves. When you start meditating on these undesirable experiences, do not get depressed. Do not sit there and think, “Oh there is the suffering of this, the un-satisfactoriness of that, misery and all this other stuff.” Do not get depressed by this. Try to see it as a way to develop the ability to look at our experience with clear, open eyes and recognize that we have the potential to change it and have a better existence.

So do not get depressed and down by all these things, although it is a bit sobering; it is definitely sobering. But we need to get sobered up because we have basically been skipping through life enjoying the merry-go-round and having a good time. It is like we want to have a good time but we also want to

have a little Dharma practice in there for good luck, or we want to be more well-rounded, or we think a little bit of Dharma practice adds some spice or something. But once we start looking more seriously at this, we begin to understand that what we thought was fun and games is actually rather unpleasant and unsatisfactory compared to what we really could be. So this is definitely a sobering kind of meditation that makes us cut through a lot of our fantasies and a lot of our daydreams.

I think for me personally this has brought about an incredible amount of honesty. By admitting all these undesirable aspects of my existence, I can at least be honest now. I do not need to go through life like everything is hunky-dory. I can just say, "Look, this is what is going on." So it is like overcoming denial. For those of you who are familiar with therapy, denial is one of our favorite things. "Let us pretend it does not exist and then maybe it will not."

Now we will look at the different types of unsatisfactory experiences. First we are going to think about the unsatisfactory experiences of cyclic existence in general, then we will think about the unsatisfactory experiences of the specific realms of existence. We are going to be very thorough here.

a. No Certainty

When we think about the unsatisfactory experiences of cyclic existence in general, the first one is that there is no certainty about anything. There is no reaching a stage in which we have security. We are always looking for security in our job, in our relationships, in our health, in everything. We want it to be secure and unchanging. But the very nature of life is that it does not work that way. There is no certainty in anything because everything is always constantly changing.

No Certainty in Our Health

Our health is constantly changing; there is no certainty at all in our health. We work so hard to be healthy as if we think, "Now I am healthy and I can put that on the back-burner and go and do some fun things." But we are never in the state of perfect health where we have some security in it. That state is non-existent.

No Financial Security

It is the same thing with financial security. We work so hard to get financial security. Who has financial security? Even if you have billions of dollars, is that secure? It is not. You can have billions of dollars today and nothing tomorrow. That has happened to many people. The stock market goes down. People get arrested for fraudulent dealings. Somebody rips open their mattress and steals the million dollars [laughter]. There is no certainty that any of these is going to last.

No Certainty in Relationships

There is also no certainty in relationships. You have probably heard me mention this before, but I find it so interesting in America how we want to get our relationships clear. We want certainty and say things like, "Are we or are we not going to have this relationship?" Have you ever had people say that to you? Or you say to other people, "Look, there are two choices, yes and no. If it is 'no', let us get that straight and forget it. I am not going to talk to you again. If it is 'yes', then we have a contract, you will fulfill your part and I will fulfill mine and that is it, we will live happily ever after [laughter]."

But there is no certainty in any of that. What do you mean we can decide how our relationship is going to be? Do you mean we are going to decide and then it is going to be like that forever, that it will always be the same way and completely certain and predictable? It does not work like that. We are constantly relating to people. Relationships are always changing. You might make a lot of decisions about how this relationship is going to be, but that does not mean it is going to be like that. That does not mean you have any control over it. Everything is changing all the time.

A part of our mind thinks, "Let us get this clear in the relationship and we are going to get this settled. I am going to confront whoever this was in my past and we are going to settle this once and for all, get it straight and get our relationship put into perspective. Then I am going to live my life." I do not know of anybody who has been able to do that. Relationships are always changing, changing, changing. They are good sometimes and they are not so good at other times. You do not always have control over it; it is completely uncertain.

The Nature of Existence is Uncertainty

What we are getting at here is the fact that everything is changeable and uncertain. Our health, finances, relationships – everything is unsatisfactory. Looking at that becomes a cause to want to be free from it.

That everything is uncertain is the very nature of our existence. I think it is so valuable just to think about that and to really imbue our mind with how uncertain things are, not in the sense of making us apprehensive, nervous and ill at ease – because that is looking at uncertainty from an afflicted¹ point of view – but in the sense of just recognizing the changeability and then having a flexible attitude. Then the mind can be flexible and we can go with the flow and roll with the punches. But our mind wants security, certainty. It likes to put things in categories. It wants to fix everything up, get everything straightened and put a bow on it then shove it in a corner. It just does not work like that.

If we can look at that and recognize that change is part of life, then we can relax into the change instead of fight it. The apprehension, the fear and the anxiety is in fighting the reality of change. If we fully accept that change is just the ground upon which our whole life is built, we can be a little bit more relaxed about it and at the same time recognize that we can free ourselves from this unsatisfactory state. This is really sobering to meditate on.

Look at the people in war torn countries. Talk about uncertainty. The way people's lives were before war and the way they are during war, is a complete and total change. You look at World War II and people's lives then – from one day to the other, everything just totally changed. The family, the finances, the environment, health, everything changed. Recognize that this is entirely within the realm of possibility in our own life. Even though things might seem to be consistent, in actual fact they are changing all the time. Also, we do not have such a great ability to control and predict all those changes because they are very much a result of our past karma.

b. No Satisfaction

The second aspect of the suffering of cyclic existence in general is that there is no satisfaction. "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" sang Mick Jagger. He knew what he was talking about [laughter]. Maybe he did not understand completely what he was saying, but it is true nevertheless. If you look at it, everything we do and all the activities we engage in, we try and find satisfaction in them but we cannot. It is as if there is no lasting satisfaction in anything we do.

When I first met the Dharma, this was one of the things that convinced me that the Buddha knew what he was talking about. When I looked at my life, even though I thought everything was pretty okay, going along okay and looking on the up and up, actually I was totally dissatisfied. Everything in my life just bred more and more dissatisfaction. When I was really honest and able to look at that in my life I thought, "Buddha knows something about me that I do not know. This guy knows what he is talking about."

The Constant Search for Pleasure

It is like we are in a constant search for pleasure and we never have satisfaction. This is where the mindfulness practice is so important. We become mindful of all the dissatisfaction and the continuing, unfulfilled grasping we have from the time we wake up in the morning. We are unsatisfied because we did not get to sleep long enough. We are unsatisfied because the alarm clock does not sound nice. We are unsatisfied because the coffee is too hot, too sweet, or it gets cold, or it ends and we want more, and so it continues on throughout the day. It is like everything we do looking for satisfaction, does not bring any lasting satisfaction.

No Satisfaction in Sense Pleasures

It is this way with all the sense pleasures. You might get some pleasure from going to an art gallery or hearing a good concert, but in the end you are dissatisfied. Either the concert lasted too long and you cannot wait to leave, or it did not last long enough and you want some more. Even if it lasted just the right amount of time, after a while you are bored again and you need some more to feel satisfied.

It is the same with all the meals we have eaten: have we ever been satisfied? If you had been satisfied, you would not have to eat again. But we eat and are full, then we are dissatisfied later on and we need to eat again. Look at any kind of sense pleasure – sight, sound, smell, taste, touch – has any of it brought any lasting satisfaction? When you make love and have an orgasm, does that bring you lasting satisfaction? If it did, why do you have to keep doing it? Anything we do that we get pleasure from in and

of itself, does not bring lasting satisfaction. We will have to do it again. We will have to make more effort to have pleasure and so we have this constant dissatisfaction all the time.

No Satisfaction in Attachments

Dissatisfaction is a big function of attachment – the more attached we are, the more dissatisfied we are. We can see how attachment is the cause of unsatisfactory experiences and why attachment has to be eliminated. It just breeds constant dissatisfaction all the time. We are dissatisfied with ourselves. We are not good enough. We are not enough this, or enough that. We are dissatisfied with others. We wish they were a little bit more this, or a little bit less of that. We are dissatisfied with the government. We are dissatisfied with everything!

When you look at it, nothing is perfect. We want things to be different and are unhappy and disgruntled. We are in a situation of living in constant dissatisfaction, with a mind that is constantly seeking satisfaction, never getting it and using the wrong method to try and get it. This is the tragedy of samsara. Here we are, sentient beings wanting to be happy and trying so desperately to be happy, but because we do not have the right method to get happiness we are perpetually dissatisfied. We think the method is through sense objects, external things, external people, an external something-or-other and we keep seeking happiness that way. Even though we all want happiness, the method we are using to get it is incorrect. This is the tragedy. This is samsara.

[Teachings lost due to change of tape.]

...how I am always unsatisfied, how my attachment breeds my dissatisfaction. So we can look at it that way. We can look at it more from the bodhisattva way about how this is the plight of all sentient beings. This is the tragedy of samsara. This is why becoming a Buddha is so important, so that we can overcome this in ourselves and in others.

We can look at it in terms of refuge, because once we recognize the kindness of the Buddha in pointing out to us this whole dysfunctional dynamic, then this incredible feeling of trust and confidence in the Buddha comes up. The Buddha was able to say, “Look, you are constantly dissatisfied. It is due to attachment and here is what you do to get rid of the attachment. Here is what you do to get rid of the ignorance.” When we understand that, even when we understand it just a little bit intellectually, incredible faith comes in the Buddha. We see Buddha’s wisdom and Buddha’s kindness in turning the Dharma wheel and teaching us.

c. Having to Abandon Your Body Repeatedly

Then the third unsatisfactory experience in cyclic existence is our having to abandon our body again and again, having to die again and again. If we all look at our lives, we know our death is definite. It is not the number one thing we want to do today and it is not something we look forward to. If we think about how distasteful the idea of separating from this body is now, imagine doing that over and over and over again from beginningless time.

Imagine this whole process of leaving the body, the circumstances of aging, getting sick, dying and all the circumstances that lead up to death and how unpleasant that is. Then remember that it is not just this lifetime that this happens. This has happened millions and millions and trillions of times before to us and it is unsatisfactory. If we had our choice, we would rather not die. We would rather not be in this whole position of having to die. But you see, as long as we are under the influence of ignorance, anger and attachment, we do not have any choice in the matter. We may not want to die, but we cannot do anything about it as long as our mind is ignorant. So this is the whole reason for gaining wisdom, the whole reason for eliminating the grasping at true existence.

d. Having to Take Rebirth in Cyclic Existence Repeatedly

Not only is dying again and again a drag, but the next unsatisfactory experience of samsara is getting born again and again. We cannot say death is bad but birth is great, because if you do not have death, you do not have birth. It is a real interesting thing in our society that we celebrate birth but mourn death. Actually they both go together because as soon as you are born, you are going to die and as soon as you die, you are going to get reborn. So why do we celebrate one and mourn the other?

We could celebrate when people die, because then they will get reborn. We could mourn when people get born, because then they are going to die. Or we could look at the whole thing and say the whole

thing stinks! That is what we are trying to get to, the determination to be free of cyclic existence. Instead of just mourning death, let us recognize that birth also is no great experience to go through.

The Womb Experience and Birth according to the Scriptures

In the scriptures they go into great detail about how unsatisfactory it is getting born. It is quite interesting because it is very different from a lot of modern theory.

A lot of modern theory says that being in the womb is comforting and secure and that is why people curl up in fetal positions – they want to be back in the womb where they felt safe.

In the scriptures it says that being in the womb is quite uncomfortable because when your mother eats very spicy food, you feel discomfort as a baby but do not understand what is going on. When your mother goes out jogging, you are bounced around [laughter]. The womb is kind of claustrophobic – you are shut in and there is no space to move. You are kicking and so forth but have no real understanding of what is going on so the whole experience of being in the womb is quite uncomfortable. You do not know you are in the womb. You are just having all these experiences and do not know how to understand them.

Then at some point you get expelled from this whole closed-in environment when the mother starts having labor pains and the muscles start pushing down on the baby. They say that it is quite painful for the baby. The opening to the womb is quite small and the baby's head is quite big and coming out through that narrow opening, they say, is like being crushed between two mountains. There is a feeling of being scrunched. Then you come out into the world and it is cold and there is air and then what do they do? They whack you on the bottom, turn you upside down and sprinkle drops in your eyes. So they say that the whole birth process itself and the whole process of being in the womb is quite uncomfortable, quite painful and quite confusing.

Usually we cannot remember this time but I have one friend who remembers being in the womb because his mother slipped at some point, fell down some stairs and he remembers feeling the fall. So I guess some people do have some memory of that time. Sometimes people think, "Oh, if only I could be in the womb again and be a baby again; a baby is carefree and does not worry about the IRS." Realize that it is not fun and games in the womb. It is not something to return to that will give us lasting security. Being in the womb is quite painful and confusing.

e. Changing Status Repeatedly, from Exalted to Humble

The next unsatisfactory experience is a change in status. We are always changing status. We go from being rich and famous, to being poor and ignoble. We go from having a top quality job, to living on the streets. We go from being respected and praised, to being deprecated. We go from being born in the god realms with incredible pleasures, to being born in the hell realms. Then we go back to the god realms. Our status is always changing. They say we go from eating nectar in the god realms, to eating molten iron in the hell realms. Now that is a change of diet [laughter]! It is a lack of status, a changing status, a lack of security, lack of settlement and lack of something to hold on to.

Look at your own life and how you have changed status. Look at how you have changed status in one person's eyes. One person loves you one year, cannot stand you the next year and then loves you again the following year and cannot stand you the year following that. We may be rich one year, then poor the next year, then rich again and then poor again. We are famous one year and considered as trash the next. This is what samsara is all about and it is not only our own experience, it is the experience of all beings.

I think this is important to meditate on, to see it in our own life and to recognize that this is what everybody else experiences too because that is the foundation of gaining compassion. When we meditate on this in terms of ourselves, we gain the determination to be free. When we meditate on the fact that everybody else has exactly the same experience, then we gain real deep compassion.

f. Essentially Being Alone, Having No Friends

The last unsatisfactory experience is that we are continually alone and there is no friend that can intervene, protect us and go through all these things with us.

When we are born, we are born alone. When you are sick, you are sick alone. You might say, "Oh, I am not sick alone, I am in this hospital with 500 other people who are sick." But you experience your own suffering alone. We have no friends in the sense that nobody else can come in and take some of our suffering away. We might have a lot of friends, so to speak, but nobody can remove our suffering of birth; nobody can remove our suffering when we are sick; nobody can remove our suffering when we are depressed. When we are born, we are born alone; when we die, we die alone. This is just the state of existence. It is nothing to get emotionally frantic about because this is just reality and the way things are, but it is something to recognize and to make a determination to free ourselves from through generating wisdom. When we recognize that this is everybody else's situation too, then we gain compassion.

These six unsatisfactory experiences of cyclic existence in general are quite important to go through repeatedly and it is important to remind ourselves of them often. I think this acts as a really good counteractive measure for when our minds are getting flighty and excited and we want to merely talk about something. You meditate on these six and the mind kind of settles down. It is a very good antidote to a speedy, excited and distracted mind. Like I said before, do not get depressed when you think about them, but just recognize that this is the reality of cyclic existence. This is what we experience under the influence of anger, attachment and ignorance. But it is also possible to be free of these. That is why the Buddha taught about this, so that we can be free of it.

Questions and Answers

[Audience:] Understanding these six unsatisfactory experiences and the fact that they permeate the nature of our existence – how do we put that together with seeing our options in life and making good decisions?

Well, this is where we have to get our motivation in life really, really clear. Because if we understand these six really well and we have a firm decision to be free of cyclic existence, then all the decisions we make in life will be based on how this decision can help me to be free from cyclic existence. Right now, most of our decisions are based on how the decision can help us get the most happiness within cyclic existence.

It is like we are still seeing cyclic existence as something wonderful and desirable and trying to make good decisions that will bring us a lot of happiness in cyclic existence. That attitude, in and of itself, is what keeps us going on in cyclic existence. This is because if we are always looking for happiness in cyclic existence, we do not practice the Dharma and then we create negative actions, get distracted and so on. So shifting our decision-making basis to how we can become a Buddha and using that as the criteria for evaluating the options in our life, is going to change things drastically. It does not mean that we have to ignore the happiness in this life. But it does mean that we have to give up craving for it. You may still wind up with a lot of happiness in this lifetime, but you are not sitting there craving for it all the time.

Even though we call ourselves Dharma practitioners, so many of our decisions are based on how we can have the most happiness in cyclic existence. We are not thinking about future lives and abstaining from negative actions. We are just thinking, "How can I have more happiness right now?" We do not even want the delayed happiness of future lifetimes. We just want our happiness now.

I think it was Maslow, or one of the other famous psychologists who said one sign of maturity is being able to delay gratification. When we talk about from the time when we were babies, to being adults now, yes we can delay our gratification. But in talking about ourselves compared to somebody who has actually entered the path, we do not delay our gratification at all. We want gratification to be real quick and most of our life is geared around that, and that is what keeps us bound in the whole situation of cyclic existence.

[Audience:] If your whole motivation was to be free of cyclic existence, samsara, then many things would not matter. It would not matter what job you have, or whether you have a job or not. It seems that you would just spend your whole time doing Dharma practice.

It would be nice not to have to worry about what job you have, wouldn't it? It would be nice to have a mind that was not all hung up in what kind of job you have, a mind that was able to work at this job if you

needed to do it and able to work at that job if you needed to do that and not get all involved with, “Am I making a certain amount of money? Am I getting enough respect? Am I this and am I that?” But taking a job as just a job and if you need the money you work at it, and that’s it. The mind is completely peaceful about it. Would that not be nice [laughter]? You do not sound convinced [laughter]!

If we thought about it, a lot of the things that we worry so much about, wouldn’t it be wonderful to not worry about them? Making the determination to be free is deciding not to worry about things that are not worth worrying about. Instead to be concerned with something that is worth being concerned about.

[In response to audience:] The wish to be happy is something innately within us. It is this clinging on to and craving for happiness from external things that is the cause of a lot of unhappiness. So when we are saying, “May all beings have happiness and its causes,” one of the causes of happiness is non-attachment. On a superficial level when you say, “May all beings have happiness” you may be thinking “May everybody have pizza, chocolate cake and wonton soup.” But when you look at it differently, you will see that that does not bring lasting happiness. So when you say, “May all beings have happiness,” you are really wanting them to have the happiness that is free of thinking that things like money and chocolate cake is important, because their minds will be so much happier when they can direct their energy towards Dharma happiness rather than getting stuck in a plate of spaghetti [laughter].

[Audience:] Are there beings who are not Buddhas who can realize happiness without craving?

Yes, some of the high level bodhisattvas and the arhats can do this. I think when you enter the path either by having the spontaneous determination to be free or spontaneous bodhicitta, just by having that (spontaneous determination to be free or spontaneous bodhicitta), you start getting a lot more happiness. Perhaps you do not get perfect happiness, but you get a lot more happiness. Because we realize that so much of the junk that makes us confused and miserable just isn’t important. And it’s not sour grapes, “Well, I don’t want that big job anyway.” It’s not like dropping out of samsara because you can’t get the happiness there anyhow because somehow you’re deficient. Rather, it is recognizing that the whole thing of samsara is crazy and who wants to stay in it?! It’s also based on recognizing that we have the potential to be liberated. That being confused is not an innate quality nor an inherent part of ourselves. It may be something we’ve been for a very long time, but it’s not our inherent nature.

[Audience:] It seems you are saying that if you can accept the sadness of cyclic existence, that that makes you happy?

It does not make you happy the way we are happy as Dharma practitioners, but it makes you a lot more peaceful. Accepting the tragedy of cyclic existence does not mean you accept it and do nothing about it. It means that you are willing to accept that that is the way things are instead of being involved in the whole denial process.

If you do not accept that, it is like you are looking at something in your life and consistently trying to get happiness from it but never can. It is like banging your head against the wall because you keep trying to get happiness from this one thing but happiness never comes. For some people the thing they try to get happiness from is food, for some it is sex, for others it could be their relationship with their parents, or their job. Everybody has their own thing and they keep coming back to this thing, acting it out again and again, trying to get happiness from it.

It would be a big relief to finally get to the stage and say, “Actually, this thing is never going to make me happy so I am going to stop banging my head against the wall and I am going to do something else. I am going to stop letting this thing trap me.” I think that brings tremendous freedom. You finally just accept reality and realize, “This is what it is. I am going to stop fighting the reality of it.” By giving up grasping at happiness through this thing, you would probably be a lot more content. Like I said before, this is not sour grapes, because if it is sour grapes then your motivation was not a clear motivation. Rather, it is opening your eyes and saying, “This is dumb! I really do not need to keep doing this. This is really unnecessary.”

[Audience:] Beings like the high level bodhisattvas who voluntarily take rebirth to help others, do they get all the rest of the package with it (no certainty, no satisfaction, having to abandon your body repeatedly, having to take rebirth in cyclic existence repeatedly, changing status repeatedly, essentially being alone)?

These six things are describing cyclic existence which is taking rebirth under the force of ignorance and karma. When you are a high-level bodhisattva, you take rebirth under the force of compassion, not ignorance. When you get even further along, when you get to what is called the eighth stage of bodhisattvahood, then there is no ignorance left in the bodhisattva's mindstream at all. Then it is purely taking rebirth by the force of your prayers and compassion. So a bodhisattva does not experience these things in the same way we do because the causal factors aren't present in their mind.

But the thing about a bodhisattva is that when a bodhisattva says, "I am willing to experience all of this for the benefit of others," somehow by being totally and completely willing to experience the suffering, they do not experience it. But you cannot say, "I have got to be willing to experience this so that I will not experience it." You have to be really willing to experience it and then, somehow by the force of your compassion, by the force of your good karma, by the force of the wisdom that you generate on the higher level, all these different levels of suffering get peeled away gradually as you progress along the path.

[In response to audience:] We associate compassion with being depressed and being miserable ourselves. What happens is, we meditate on others' suffering, we get that feeling of sadness and then we get stuck in it, feeling helpless and hopeless. That is not what a bodhisattva does. A bodhisattva sees a suffering and knows that in actual fact, the suffering is totally unnecessary and is all created by the mind. So for a bodhisattva, they look at it and they would think something like, "This does not have to happen. It can be changed. These people can be free of this suffering."

So the bodhisattva has a really upbeat look. They completely face the suffering, but they know that it does not have to be there. That is what gives them the courage to hang around and help because they are not overwhelmed by just feeling hopeless, helpless and strung out. They are not sidetracked by getting stuck. I think a bodhisattva is both the perpetual optimist and the perpetual realist at the same time. We usually think that realism means being pessimistic, but from a Buddhist point of view it is not that way at all.

[Audience:] All the great masters that we really pray for to be reborn, should we not just kind of let them get the fruits of their practice and relax a while?

That is one way to look at it. But another way of looking at it is that they are bound by compassion. There is one prayer about Chenrezig and it talks about Chenrezig being bound by compassion. To me that image of being bound by compassion is very powerful. We are not talking about being bound by attachment, clinging, or craving. We are talking about being bound by compassion. So what we are doing is recognizing that the presence of these beings is essential for our own practice as well as for the happiness of other beings. We need these people around and that is why we ask them to come back. I think your way of looking at it is that we are asking them an incredible favor, but I think recognizing that makes us more appreciative of what they do for us. It makes us practice the teachings better because we really have a sense of their kindness.

Let us sit quietly.

*This teaching is based on the *Lamrim* or *The Gradual Path to Enlightenment*. Please refer to the following web-page for its outline and other transcripts or to listen to the audio recording of these talks: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/GradualPathToEnlightenment/outline.html>

1. "Afflictions" is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of "disturbing attitudes".
2. "Afflicted obscurations" is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of "deluded obscurations".
3. "Cognitive obscurations" is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of "obscurations to omniscience".