

The Eight Unsatisfactory Experiences of Humans – Part 1 of 2 (lightly edited transcript)
by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. 14 Sep 92

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[Listening to these unsatisfactory experiences with an open mind](#)

Last time, we talked about the unsatisfactoriness of cyclic existence in general and the six different kinds of unsatisfactory conditions we face. It's important to meditate on all of these. We talked about the general ones last time; now we will talk about the specific disadvantages of each realm within cyclic existence.

This is one of the greatest areas in which we have denial and resistance operating, in that, part of our mind does not want to look at the faults of the situation we live in. Part of our mind wants to whitewash everything and say, "Yeah, there are some problems, but actually it's not so bad." There seems to be a strong denial on our part, and, as I start getting into some of these topics, your mind might start to resist. If you find that happening, just observe it. Observe the resistance. And recognize it but then try to look beyond it because the resistance is coming out of a lot of fear and irrational emotion. If you can notice that and be a bit courageous to try and listen with open ears and an open mind, then you may find that the irrational fears really have no basis.

What we are trying to do here is look very objectively at our situation without whitewashing it. We will be talking about unsatisfactory conditions and recognizing that everything about our existence is unsatisfactory at a very basic level. This really shakes us up.

Although we may admit we have some problems now, we don't really want to change that much. We just want the bad things in our life to go away but all the nice things to hang around. What we don't see is that the nice things and the bad things are interwoven. And it is actually possible to have a happiness that goes beyond either of those. We have to have a far-reaching mind that looks beyond just the small concerns now.

As we start to look at the unsatisfactory conditions of individual states of existence, we will talk about the lower realms of rebirth. Those of you who were here in autumn know what resistance we encounter when we talk about the lower realms. Now that it's been a few months since you heard those teachings, let's look at the material again to see what the resistance is all about.

It's interesting to consider why we don't want to believe it's possible to be reborn as an animal. Some of us may have, at some corner of our mind, a certain fear about it. "I don't want to be reborn as a cricket. I don't even want to think about it. And if I don't believe it, it won't happen."

Or we might be afraid for someone we care very deeply about who died and who created a lot of negative karma. It might be painful for us to think of them being born as a lady bug or a spider or a cockroach. And so, because of our attachment to the person, we don't want to think of them experiencing great suffering. So, again, the mind blocks it out and says, "If I don't believe this, it might not be true and then that person won't have that kind of pain." So, it's good to see the resistance in our mind.

There might also be another feeling, "Oh, ME, I can't be anything else. This is ME. I am ME." And again, as soon as we start to observe that and see whether it's true or not, we see that who we think we are is something that isn't made of concrete. It's very transient.

Now, I won't go into too much depth about the disadvantages of the lower realm of rebirth, so you can relax a bit. [Laughter] But it's good to recall them, that if we are born into a life form of extreme pain, the life is extremely painful. And if we think of just a human life, where there's constant physical pain all the time, and then we just think of that as our body, our environment, our life—it is possible for that to exist, isn't it? Many people in human body experience continuous pain. Why isn't it possible that there is just another body that's like that?

Or taking a body of a hungry ghost. Look at some of the photographs coming out of Somalia now. They are human bodies, but they look very much like the descriptions of the hungry ghost realm: big bellies, big necks, little legs, barely can walk. And when you're that famished, even when you see food, you can't ingest it; it makes you sick. That's exactly the description of the hungry ghost realm, and that's something we know exists here with human bodies. So, why not just another kind of body that has the experience?

And then, animal realms; we can see very clearly they exist. Sometimes we just think of animals as really sweet and cute, isn't that wonderful. I have a great time playing with Achala (the cat). Sometimes when I sit there and I play with him and I see how he gets so excited over something that you dangle – he just gets enthralled – one part of me says, "Oh, isn't that cute?" and another part is really sad, because there is this intelligence that is so easily deceived. Nothing especially wonderful to get so excited about, just the limitations. I look at him and here he is. He has so much contact with the Dharma. So many people complain, "I want to spend more time with the teacher." He spends a lot of time with me. [Laughter] And my teacher had many dogs. The dogs spent so much time with my teacher. I hardly ever got to see my teacher. The dogs always were in there. [Laughter] But then you look at it, how much can that benefit? What does he benefit from it? He hears some mantra, but he can't understand the teachings.

And so if we think of that, just the pain of having that kind of limitation, and that we have experienced that in previous lives and there is the potential to experience that again in the future. If we think squarely about that, it gives us some energy to avoid that and to see that as something unsatisfactory. And so, the mind might say, "OK, the lower realms are definitely unsatisfactory. I am going to try and get a good rebirth. I want to be born as a human being, or as a demi-god or as a god because those beings have lots of pleasure."

Human beings—it's a nice mix of pleasure and pain. Then you hear about the demi-gods, and the gods, "Hm, sound good." And so the mind thinks, "Well, that's not so bad, let's take rebirth there." At this point we start to contemplate all the disadvantages and the imperfections of being reborn in an upper realm, and come to see these very, very clearly. We come to see that wherever we are born in samsara, by nature, it is unsatisfactory. In other words, within samsara there is no security anywhere you search.

When we talk about samsara, we are not talking about the planet earth; it is not that wherever we go on earth, or in this universe, there is no security, there is no lasting happiness. It's not that. Samsara is a body and mind under the condition of afflictions [['Afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes' and 'delusions'.](#)] and contaminated actions. And so, whenever we take a body and mind that are under the control of these two, the afflictions* and the karma, whatever body and mind we have, no matter where we are born, no matter what's going on, at the end of the day, it's going to be unsatisfactory. There isn't going to be any lasting kind of pleasure there, or security, or solace.

This shakes the foundation of our being because if we look, most of our lives are spent trying to find some happiness within cyclic existence. We say, "Let me just get away from the pain and I'll latch on to whatever happiness comes my way." This is like having the rug torn out from under us, because somebody is saying, "Well, you can grab at all that happiness, but it isn't going to last and it isn't really happiness." Then we think, "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. No, I can't handle this." [Laughter] But I think it's quite important that we look at this, because it's only through seeing the disadvantages of our

present state that we will ever get the effort and the courage we need to arrive at a state of lasting happiness and freedom.

Also, by seeing the disadvantages of all of the different realms of rebirth, it cuts away at our grasping at utopia. Because part of our mind believes, and so much of our attitude indicates, that if only this would change, things would be okay. I've been reading the letters to the editor of *Tricycle*, and it makes me sad because people are continually saying, "This person does this wrong and that person does that wrong, blah blah blah." The underlying message is, if only all these things didn't happen, then the world would be fine, and I would be happy. And I think that's totally missing the point, because the point is "What's happening inside me?" That's the whole point.

And so, this attitude of ours that, "If only Clinton gets elected instead of Bush," or "If only Bush gets re-elected instead of Clinton," or "If only we pass the better gun law," or "If only we didn't renew the most favored nation status for China," or "If only we'd stop the loggers from cutting down the trees," or "If only we did this," or "If only we did that." We carry these big, tremendous causes with the belief that if only something changes, then basically everything will be okay.

When we begin to understand that wherever we are born in cyclic existence, there is no lasting happiness, then we begin to see that all this wishing for "If only something would change" is totally missing the point. Because changing all the external things does not cut the root of cyclic existence. The chief cause of our problem isn't the loggers. It isn't Bush. It isn't Saddam Hussein. It isn't Hitler. It isn't our boss. It isn't our parents. It isn't our kids. That is not the overriding source of all of our confusion and pain.

The overriding source lies within our own mind. It's our own afflictions*, our own contaminated karma. And so, always trying to change outside, always wanting a return to the utopian society, trying to get back to Eden by creating it outside, it just doesn't work. Understanding the disadvantages of cyclic existence cuts all that kind of fantasy away.

Of course, we have to be concerned with social issues—I am not saying stick your head in the ground and be an ostrich. What I am saying is the mind over exaggerates the importance of these things, and to recognize that as long as there is anger, there will be riots. You can legislate all you want. You can change the economic structure all you want, but as long as there is anger, there will be riots. And as long as there is greed, there will be poverty. You can, again, change the government structure all you want, you can change the education system all you want, you can improve those things externally, but you are not going to be able to cut the root of them, because as long as there is greed, there will be poverty in the world.

And so, we keep coming back again and again and again to the real source of the problem, which lies in the mind. It lies specifically in our own mind. Of course, other people have their difficulties and things like that, but we have to take responsibility for what we're putting out in the world instead of, "If only everybody else didn't have greed, anger, and ignorance!" Yeah? [Laughter] No. It's "If only I didn't have them, then things will be okay." So, this whole meditation throws us back upon ourselves and teaches us to take responsibility for what happens to us.

When we think about all the disadvantages of cyclic existence and all of its forms, it's quite a sobering meditation, because a lot of our grasping at pleasure, when we begin to analyze more deeply, is really not what it is at. It's very, very sobering, and instead of being afraid of that, it's nice to welcome the sobriety of it. Because if you look at your life, what is it that makes you so confused? It's usually attachment, because we are trying to get the most pleasure out of every single common occurrence that happens in our life. And we get totally confused about how to create the most pleasure. We get confused because if we look for pleasure this way, someone may not like it, and then I will experience displeasure from them. But if I get pleasure for them, that's not going to go well because then I may not get pleasure for myself. And so, we get really stuck and our mind gets confused and we get angry and all that stuff.

Whereas when we get our feet on the ground, "Hold on. Wherever I am born in this cyclic existence, it's not going to be satisfactory. Well then, why do I need to get so confused, trying to eke out every little morsel of happiness and pleasure? It isn't worth the effort." And somehow when we let go of that craving for pleasure, our mind gets quite peaceful and calm. It's interesting, isn't it? When we let go of the

craving for pleasure, that's when the peaceful, calm mind comes. The mind that is constantly craving for pleasure because it thinks there is some lasting pleasure in cyclic existence, that mind is perpetually in turmoil. We just need to look at our own lives; it's so clear.

So, when we start thinking of the faults of the human existence, let's start with our human realm, where we are born right now. Because our usual view is, "Oh yeah, there are some problems, but basically it's okay. I mean actually life is pretty okay. This is some junk but basically it's okay." And what we are trying to get at here is not a depression, not a discouragement about life. We are not trying to take the fun and joy out of life. What we are trying to do is to see our life for what it is so that we can have actual fun and joy, instead of the mind fantasizing about things that don't exist.

The Eight Unsatisfactory Experiences of Humans

1. Birth

When we talk about human existence, we talk about specific kinds of unsatisfactory circumstances. The first one is getting born.

You can see right away, this goes completely against our culture, doesn't it? Many things are going to go against our culture. So this is the time to start checking up what we believe in. Because if we look, really, what is so wonderful about getting born? We always celebrate it. But what is it? As soon as you are born, you start on this whole life of getting old, sick, and dying and all the problems that come in your life. So, what's so exciting about getting born? I heard one person saying, "The thought of having to go through adolescence again is enough to make me not want to take rebirth." [Laughter] You start wondering what's so great about getting born, because then you start having all the problems of childhood and adolescence and everything else.

And then the whole birth process is painful. Again, as I said before, we usually see the womb as something warm and cozy and wonderful. In the scriptures, it says that the womb is confining and it is dark. You don't have your own space and you are trying to move and you keep on hitting something. What's so wonderful about it?

And then the whole process of getting born is again, a very painful process. So what's so wonderful about getting born? That makes us start questioning what's so wonderful about our body? Because we usually associate birth with getting this body and in our usual way of thinking, this body is our great source of pleasure. Isn't it? Look, all day long we get so much pleasure from this body, the pleasure of drinking coffee, for instance. [Laughter] The pleasure of eating breakfast, the pleasure of nice soft kiddies to pat [Laughter], the pleasure of nice things to see, the pleasure of nice smells, scents you put on your body, scents you smell around you, nice sounds, and music, sexual pleasure, the pleasure of going to sleep. We are looking so much for the pleasure of the body. And so we usually see our body as a source of pleasure, something that's wonderful, "Isn't it great to have a body!"

And Buddhism says, actually let's look again and see if it is that great to have a body. And so Buddhism says, what is our body? Well, it's skin, blood, internal organs, muscles, skeleton, limbs, nerves. You take any of those things by themselves, and they are not particularly wonderful. And so, what is this body that's so pleasurable?

When you sit here and you just kind of visually imagine what your body is, not imagine, but look at what your body is. Just sit there, and instead of feeling like this happy bubble, well there is a skeleton inside. Why do we get so frightened of seeing dead people? We're basically a walking dead person, aren't we? [Laughter] I mean, we have this skeleton and all the things that dead people have. What's so fantastic? When we see a human skeleton, we get the creeps, but we're walking around with one all the time! And then we go and hug others. That's what it is, isn't it?

If you peel away the skin and see all the muscles and all your internal organs, it is really nothing particularly beautiful. So, why do we cling to this body as a continual source of pleasure? So excited about getting born and getting another body. Look what it is.

Now, we have to be clear here that Buddhism is very different from Judeo-Christian culture. We may have been brought up with this view that the body is evil, sinful and dirty. I don't know, people are of

different backgrounds and religions. You may have some of that in your background. Some of that may have been internalized. That's not what Buddhism is talking about. Buddhism is not saying your body is dirty, evil, and sinful. "Dirty" in the sense of evil and sinful. We are not making a judgment about the body. "Your body is impure, so you have to punish your body!"—this whole kind of harshness sometimes permeates Christian culture. That is not what Buddhism is talking about. So, if you find yourself reacting in that way, be aware that you are bringing your own background in. And you are not listening clearly.

Because we don't want to hate the body. Hating our body is a form of hatred, isn't it? Hatred is a form of affliction. So, we are not trying to hate our body. Let's get that very clear. It's not a question of hating the body, because that is very afflicted. It's very unhealthy. It is instead, a thing of seeing the body for what it is and what it isn't. And just seeing that basically, what it is—and you are going to laugh, but this is what His Holiness says—your body is basically a waste manufacturer. And if you think, all day long, we eat, we eat, we eat. And then, we go pee-pee and ka-ka [Laughter] It's like everything that comes out of our body, from all the orifices...you look, any orifices you have in your body, does anything pure and beautiful come out of it? Out of your eyes or your nose or your mouth or your ears or any part? The sweat out of the pores. Everything that comes out of our body, we regard as impure, don't we?

And the food...we look at food. The food looks real clean, but as soon as we put the food in our mouth, if we then take it out without even swallowing it, we wouldn't say it was clean food anymore. It's like our body makes it dirty. Just look at how we are thinking. We eat this clean food and it comes out as dirty ka-ka. So, when we look at it, what is in this body that is so fantastically wonderful that we have to get so excited about it? If we truly look, we recognize that the body is something that acts as a basis for a lot of our own afflictions* and the afflictions* of others. Because what is one of our chief sources of attachment? Our body. Yeah? Our attachment to the body is a big one that preoccupies our mind. We waste our life running after attachments to the body. Perpetual discontent.

So, what we are getting here, as I said, is not to hate our body. But rather to see it for what it is. And to work with it for what it is. If I think my body is totally garbage, I am going to go kill myself to get rid of this body, and I am not understanding properly...because, anyway, I will just get another body. But, it's not a thing of hating the body. It's not a thing of just feeling dirty and disgusting. We are not trying to create a bad self-image. We are just trying to look at that mind that is so attached and obsessed with the body and recognize that there is absolutely no need for that. There is absolutely no need for all the confusion in our life that centers around our body. If we realize the body for what it is and how it is filled with all sorts of impure substances, then, what's the use of worrying so much about how it looks? Why do we get so worried about our physical appearance? And so worried about other people's physical appearance? It's senseless. It's stupid.

So you see, when we see the body for what it is, then this kind of attachment that agitates the mind fades away. "OK, I keep my body neat and clean. I don't need to worry about whether it is gorgeous." Whether I have a gorgeous garbage dump or not, it is immaterial. So, I use this body for what it is useful for—it's useful as the basis for my Dharma practice, but beyond that I am not going to worry about whether it is too thin, or too fat, or whether the hair is the right color, or this or that. No sense. Just put that down. See, that's what I mean by saying that this meditation is very sobering, but in that sobriety, there is a lot of peace. Because when you stop being so obsessed with your body, your mind starts to get very peaceful.

Is this coming through? Do you see how our mind is saying yes...but? "Yes, that's true. But, there are people that are nicer looking than others, and I want to be one of them and I do get some pleasure from my body. What's wrong with it?" Nothing's wrong with having pleasure from your body. But it's just how much pleasure does your body give you compared to the amount of time and energy you have to put in arranging it all. Compared to if you put that time and energy into real practice, to free yourself from the afflictions* and the karma that make you take a contaminated body to start with.

So, we start looking at birth as unsatisfactory. Not hunky-dory. It's not wonderful.

Another way to look at this body is to recognize that our body and mind that are in samsara are a product of previous afflictions* and karma. So, the cause of this body and mind is something contaminated. Isn't it? How do we get a human body? It's because we are under the influence of afflictions* and karma. So, the cause of the human body is something contaminated. Then, the effect of the human body, because it acts as a basis for us to generate so many afflictions* and thus so much

karma, then the effect of the human body is more contamination, more problems, more difficulties. And, the body to boot acts as the basis for our present suffering and problems. So, it's produced from contamination, it gives rise to contamination, and it is a hassle. It is unsatisfactory. It is suffering in nature. Because just by having the human body, we set the stage, we set the basis for so many problems in life.

So again, it is not a thing of hating the body. What we are trying to do is free ourselves from the mind that clings to having a body. If you are a bodhisattva, you can choose to have a body. And you do so out of compassion. Not out of obsession and compulsion. But if you look at us, we are just obsessed: "I've got to have a body! I've got to have a body!" And it is that attachment, that clinging that makes us again and again and again find ourselves in bodies, even human bodies. Of all of them, the human body is pretty okay, but still it's basically unsatisfactory. So, birth is something unsatisfactory.

2. Sickness

Now, what happens after birth? As we live our life, we get sick.

So, again, you can see, just by having a human body, you have the basis upon which to get sick. If we didn't have the attachment and the karma that made us take the body, then we wouldn't have all the sickness, and the pain, and the misery from sickness that comes later. But we have the attachment. We didn't free ourselves in past lives from it. So, again, in this life we were born under the influence of afflictions* and karma, with the body that by its very nature gets sick. We can remember all the times we were sick, from the time when you were a little kid and you get sick, and how awful it feels, to the time when you are an adult when you get sick, and how awful it feels. And then we think of future sicknesses.

All of us have the basic necessary equipment for getting cancer, and getting heart disease, and getting AIDS, and getting all the other completely miserable diseases. By having a body, we are totally open to all of that. And sickness is not something that is wonderful. Nobody likes it. By remembering all these unsatisfactory conditions, we are trying to develop the courage to let go of the attachment that keeps us bound to an unsatisfactory situation. We are trying to generate the determination to be free, to have a lasting kind of happiness that isn't so conditioned by these things.

So, when you are meditating on this, think of all the different kinds of sicknesses and imagine having all these different kinds of sicknesses. Because like I've said, we have the basic thing it takes to have them all.

3. Aging

And then, think about aging. Again, very natural. As soon as we are born, what do we start to do? We start aging. We usually see growing up as wonderful and then we turn forty and then it's downhill.

From a Buddhist point of view, we are aging, we are getting old, we are dying from the time we are conceived. So, it isn't like everything is uphill and then everything is downhill. It's more like we're heading towards death from the moment we are born; we are in the process of aging from the moment we're conceived in the womb. So, what's so wonderful about the aging process?

I remember when I was in my 20s, I didn't think aging was so bad, and then when I turned 30, definitely there was a psychological change going on. Because I started feeling the energy in my body change. And then when we turn 40, there's more psychological change, because again, our body's changing. And then we turn 50 and 60 and 70 and 80. You just watch what's happening to the body.

And they say in the scriptures that it's very good that we age slowly because we have time to get used to it. Because they say, imagine just getting up tomorrow morning and looking in the mirror and there is an 80-year-old face. And just imagine all of a sudden being 80 years old. What would it be like to be 80? Or, if you don't want to be 80, be 70, or 60, you can pick. But think about what it is like to have an old body. When your body doesn't have as much strength. All the things that you used to like to do and you used to be able to do, you can't do anymore.

I think the people who are so attached to the different athletic abilities, when they lose those as they age—that must be incredibly painful. Because the mind wants to do those same things so much. You want to skate, or you want to play softball, or you want to swim, but the body just doesn't work anymore.

I think it's important to visualize ourselves being old. What will it be like to have a body that doesn't work so well? A body that is painful when we go downstairs, is painful when we go upstairs. A body that when we sit down, it's painful. Have you ever watched how old people sit down? They kind of lower themselves over the chair and plunk! And then how difficult it is to get up.

A few years ago, I visited my grandmother. She was in an old folks home, in the ward of the people who were the really out-of-it ones. She didn't recognize me, but can you imagine what would it be like, that you don't recognize people? How would you feel not being able to recognize people? It was incredible just walking up toward the ward she was in and hearing the sounds coming out of it. The kind of moans and groans and really unearthly sounds. Because when people are old and senile, just the mouth does a lot of things, completely uncontrolled. People don't know what they are doing.

And then, we walked into the room, and some of the people are lying back in chairs, and some are in these baby chairs with the plate in front. And they're drooped over like this. These are people who used to be healthy and strong and successful in society, the kinds of people that, when we were little, we looked up to. They used to be able to handle things very well and knew what they were doing. To think that that is going to happen to us, if we live that long. And imagine what would it be like? What would it be like as you start to get senile.

One of my friends, his mother has Alzheimer's. Sometimes she wanted to say things but she couldn't express herself. It's like she knew what she wanted to say, but she couldn't get it out. Imagine being that person. You know very clearly what you want to say, but your mouth doesn't work right to get the words out. So other people look at you like you are really stupid and out of it. How do you feel then? How do you feel knowing that you are losing it? Knowing you can't talk clearly to other people and make yourself understood.

And her mind will get garbled sometimes. She would put lipstick on her toothbrush. They both come out of tubes but you get confused. You put lipstick on your toothbrush. And you put on three or four pairs of pants. What would it be like to be like that? To put on three or four pairs of pants and then recognize that you did something dumb, but you don't know how to get them off? Or recognize after the lipstick is on your toothbrush, that something is wrong? What would it be like to know that you are mentally losing it? You can't control your mind anymore.

[In response to audience:] Exactly. Right. That's the next point actually. As you get old, how do people start treating you? Even the people who love you very much, when you start to lose it, it becomes very difficult for them to be with you, because it is very painful, they don't like to see somebody they care about lose it. So they kind of block you out and don't go visit you again. They can't say, "This is causing me a lot of pain." So they just make up a lot of excuses and don't come to see you because you are not so much fun to be with anymore.

And then you hear them talking to your friends and to your relatives behind your back and you can understand very clearly, but they don't know that you can. They're sitting there talking about how you've gone so downhill, how you can't hold it together anymore, that you are going to die soon and isn't this a tragedy. Here are all the people you trusted, all the people you loved, all the people you cared for. And they are judging you and they're ostracizing you, basically because of their own pain in the situation, which they cannot acknowledge.

And then, how does that feel, from our side, to be that person? How does it feel to rely on social security, or rely on Medicare? You used to be in society, able and capable and you could go do this and go do that, and you had enough money to do this and that, and do what you want. Now all of a sudden you're old and retired, and you don't have so much money. And you're at the whim of a lot of bureaucrats; you don't have so much free choice anymore about what you want to do? And then you hear all your children talking about putting you in an old folks home. And you don't want to go to an old folks home.

This is another thing. My friend's mum did not want to go to the old folks home, and when she went, every time he goes and visits her, when he has to leave, she is crying and crying, because she wants to come with, and she can't. How would it feel to be like that? We're basically kind of locked up, after we have been an adult in-charge, capable, able to do everything and now all of a sudden we can't even leave a building by ourselves, they won't let us.

The whole aging process is not a wonderful one. And you can see again, the more we have attachment, the more painful the aging process is. That is one thing to be aware of in this meditation. But even deeper than that, is to recognize that we have to go through all the suffering of aging because we have the attachment that wanted to have a body in the first place....

[Teachings lost due to change of tape.]

4. Death

[Teachings lost due to change of tape.]

...Again, that's the one thing in life that we know is definitely going to happen. One thing that we definitely have to do is die, and it's something that we do totally without choice. Nobody wants to get old, nobody wants to get sick, and especially people don't want to die. And yet, here it is, without choice. Because we got born under the influence of afflictions* and karma, we have to die without choice.

And all kinds of pain go with the death process. We might die very suddenly, so you have the suffering of a sudden death in that you don't get to clarify everything and do what you want to do and clean things up and say goodbye. Or you might die very slowly in a prolonged way and that may involve incredible physical suffering.

This suffering is something we are not free of. It comes through getting a body out of afflictions* and karma. There is the physical suffering that you get as you approach death, and also the mental suffering; mental suffering through having a lot of regret over the negative actions we did in our life and not having done positive actions, and now at the time of death, there is no time to change that situation in any way. There is no time to apply any remedial measures because you are dying, you aren't young anymore, you can't go back and undo the mistakes you did and create a lot of good karma. You didn't purify because you were too busy having a good time, and then death is upon us and we have a lot of regret for what we did, regret for what we didn't do, and fear about the future.

And then the suffering of parting from everything we know in our life. How hard it is, even now, to separate from small things. We separate from a good friend and we missed them. How are we going to feel when we die? There, it's not a short separation. There, it's really goodbye. This is it. So, again, we try to gross over everything in our society. It's like, "Well, we have so many medical advancements, so we are going to be able to cure our sickness. Medicine is going to be able to keep us from getting old. Medicine is going to keep us from having pain when we die." Baloney! It's just not like that. All you have to do is just be with people who are dying. It is not a fun process. Again, you can see that the more ignorance, anger, and attachment people have, the worse the death process is going to be.

So, it is important to think about these things, to see the role that ignorance, anger, and attachment play in them, and to try to lessen these. And then to see that we are here just having to go through this to start with because of ignorance, anger, and attachment. And get some courage to just say, "This is ridiculous. There is no reason for me to keep following attachment. There is no reason for me to keep following anger. There is no reason for me to allow myself to continue to be ignorant. Because it doesn't do me any good. If what I want is to be happy, then I've got to use my abilities and create the cause for happiness by correctly discerning what is the cause for happiness and what isn't." So, meditating on the disadvantages of cyclic existence is very beneficial.

5. Being parted from what you like

Another thing in our human existence that is unsatisfactory is that we are parted from what we like. Aren't we? Can you think of things that you had today that you like, that you were separated from? So many things. This is an unsatisfactory condition that goes on continuously day in and day out. We're together with the person we like, and we separate. We are with some kind of food we like, and we separate. And we are with the song that we like, and we separate. We are in bed and we are relaxing, and then we have to get up.

We are constantly separating from things we like. Again and again and again and again. That's just totally indicative of human existence. Again, it doesn't matter whether you are rich or poor; you are going to be separated from things you like. Sometimes you think if you are rich enough, you won't have to be

separated from what you like. But you will. Rich people get separated from what they like too. Again and again, this happens to us.

6. Meeting with what you don't like

And then not only that. We meet with what we don't like.

If we look, just on a personal level, there are so many problems, so many unpleasant situations. Again, look at today. You can probably think of ten things that happened that you didn't like. If you only think of ten, you are doing very well. You'd probably think of more if you sat down and spent more than 30 seconds. Again and again, so many things happening to us that we don't like. From a small sound that we find unpleasant to a small thing that doesn't look right, to an unpleasant odor, to food that isn't quite as good as we wanted or tastes bad, to things that are rough against our skin, or being too cold, or being too hot. So many things happen to us that we just don't like. We meet with people we don't like. We meet with situations we don't like. And so, we have many troubles, personally.

And then our family has many troubles, as a group, as a small unit, whoever we live with, whoever we are close to, again, more problems. The family meeting with problems. Either someone in the family is sick or someone in the family is doing this or that, family problems.

And then you look at our country. The country faces problems, so many undesirable things happen to the country. Now we think of the whole world and so many unwanted things happen to the world.

So, whatever level you think on, whether it is individual or family or small group or country or global, we're always meeting things that we don't like, again and again and again and again. And you can see, that just by taking a body that's under the control of afflictions* and karma, this is going to keep happening again, and again and again and again. Just by getting born, we get this. Think about this. From the time you were born, all the things you met with that you didn't like, or from the time you were born, all the things you liked that you were separated from. So much suffering. Incredible pain.

7. Not obtaining what you like

And then, on top of that, we don't get what we want. And again, how many times, from the time we were born until this very minute, did we not get what we wanted. We want so many things and we don't get all of them.

When you were little, you wanted your teddy bear but couldn't have it. You wanted roller blades, and you couldn't have them. You wanted an "A" on your report card and you didn't get one. You want straight hair, but you were born with curly hair. We just can't get what we want! All the time.

And again, today, how many things we want that we can't get. And how many problems in our life that occur because we can't get what we want. And we think we are adult and we are grown up, but basically if we look at our life, all of our problems are about not getting what we want, or being separated from what we like, or getting what we don't want. It's the same problems kids have. They're in fact the same thing, again and again and again, and again. Our whole life is filled with this.

So, this is the disadvantage of a human life. What we are trying to do here, by thinking of all these disadvantages, is to say...because you see, when we talk about the disadvantages of lower rebirth, then it was easy. Lower rebirth—it really stinks, no way I want to go there. I am going to create good karma and go for a good rebirth. But now we are maturing a bit, and we are beginning to realize that even good rebirths do not create lasting happiness. It is a stop-gap measure that protects us from the suffering of the lower realms. But in and of itself, it's not 100% hunky-dory. I think it is important just to put our feet on the ground.

Again, we are not meditating on this in order to blame other people for all the unsatisfactory things in our lives. We're meditating in this way so we can see that this is the very nature of having a body and mind under the control of the afflictions* and karma. And since this is the very nature of our existence, what use is it blaming other people? It's not other people's fault. It's not the government's fault. It's not anybody else's fault. We are in the situation. This is its nature. And so by thinking like this, we can develop the determination to free ourselves.

Actually, there are eight disadvantages of human existence. I only discussed seven; I'll save the eighth for next week. There is much to say about that one.

I think it's good to sit and do some thinking about this, to think about it in terms of your own experience. Imagine yourself being in the womb, being born, being a baby and all the confusion. Imagine yourself having all these different sicknesses. Imagining yourself being an old person. Imagine yourself on your death bed dying. Go through your life and review all the times when you were separated from what you like, when you got what you didn't like, when you didn't get what you did like. And make sure that you make the proper conclusion, which is, I am going to free myself from this situation. Really important you get the proper conclusion out of it. [Laughter]. Questions?

Q&A

[Audience: Inaudible]

[Laughter] But see, when you think, "Okay, if all this is so bad, then I am going to eke out some pleasure. But what we are coming to is that where you're at right now isn't that pleasurable.

[Audience: Inaudible]

[Laughter] No, because where you are at right now is the cause for all that pain in the future. So, it's not like today is happy and the future is suffering. If you have the cause for it all with you right now, what's so wonderful about it? It's like being in Florida knowing that hurricane Andrew is going to hit in 5 hours. Andrew isn't there right now, so you can sit down and have spaghetti dinner, but you know Andrew is going to hit real soon.

[Audience: Inaudible]

The question is, if taking birth gives rise to being able to hear the Dharma, this present moment is the cause for our future enlightenment, isn't it? That's true. And in that way, we want to look at that and say, "Oh, well, if I have to take rebirth, having a human rebirth is actually a good one in terms of the Dharma. But, I wouldn't need to practice the Dharma if I didn't have afflictions* and karma to start with. In other words, if I had practiced the Dharma in my previous lives, then I wouldn't have to rejoice in having a precious human life this time and being able to practice the Dharma. Because I would have done it already. This whole thing would have been over with.

Of course now, although we are in samsara, we have an incredible opportunity in that we have something to look at and rejoice at and feel very positive about. But the purpose of recognizing that it's positive is to encourage us to practice the Dharma. We're meditating on all these disadvantages so that we will practice the Dharma. And if we had practiced the Dharma in the past, we wouldn't be in this mess to start with. That's the whole thing. It's because in the past lives, we didn't practice. I mean, we did do some kind of practice in the past to be able to meet the Dharma in this life. So, we can rejoice at that. But, although the practice we did in our past lives was wonderful, it was also limited. Because if we had practiced better, we wouldn't be going through what we are going through now.

What we are trying to do is get a very balanced way of looking at this.

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

*'Afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes' and 'delusions'.