

**Order of development of the afflictions and Causes of the afflictions – Part 1 of 3** (lightly edited transcript)

*by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. 7 Dec 92*

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We have been talking about the afflictions [['afflictions'](#) is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of ['disturbing attitudes'](#)] under the subject "Causes of suffering", the second of the Four Noble Truths. In the previous sessions, we talked about the root afflictions\* and the auxiliary or secondary ones.

**Order of development of the afflictions**

We are now on the topic "Order of development of the afflictions". Actually we've had all the afflictions\* since beginningless time. The 'order of development' is not referring to one affliction followed by another and then another. Rather, it is referring to how the afflictions tend to arise and develop in our daily experience.

How do the afflictions arise and develop? On the basis of ignorance, which is the mental dimness, the darkness, the non-comprehension in our mind, we generate the wrong view of the transitory collection which grasps at the self as a solid, concrete person.

The following analogy is being used: there was something coiled and striped in a room and the light in the room was dim. Due to the dimness, the thing that was coiled and striped was mistaken as a snake. Not seeing clearly due to the dim light is like ignorance. Thinking that there is a snake is like the wrong view of the transitory collection. In other words, you completely misapprehend something and think that something is there when it is not.

There is a body and a mind, but we apprehend that somewhere in that body and mind, there is a solid, permanent, unchanging, independent essence that is me. That is a misapprehension which gets us into a whole lot of trouble. When we grasp at a solid 'I' and a solid 'my', then everything becomes very dualistic – there is a self and there is the 'other'. We start distinguishing very sharply between me, who is this solid personality, and everybody else, who are also solid personalities.

Because the 'I' feels so solid and real and different from everybody else, a lot of attachment to this self arises. This attachment causes us to be attached to other things too because the self wants to be happy. We need skis, we need a VCR, we need to take Chinese food, we need a new car and we need so many things. It almost feels like there is an empty hole inside of ourselves and we are trying to feed it.

Not only do we need material things, we also need praise and affirmation. We need people to tell us what to do, to say we are good, and to spread our good reputation. But no matter how much of these we get, we never really feel satisfied and fulfilled. It is like a bottomless pit that we try to fill. It doesn't work.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

In one way you can see how the mindstream of a hungry ghost develops. The hungry ghost mentality is the same as the consumer mentality. The difference is that the hungry ghosts meet constant frustration in their attempt to get what they want. But there is definitely this continual wanting, wanting, wanting.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

Yes, you can see how they flow, one after the other. Due to the ignorance of not seeing clearly, we grasp at a solid, existent self. That enhances the duality between self and others. Then we need to please this self and make it happy, so we get a lot of attachment. From the attachment comes anger and

fear.

The Tibetans don't list fear but you can see very clearly in your own experience how fear comes from attachment. When there is a lot of attachment, you fear not getting what you want or losing what you have. Anger, irritation, or hatred grows out of our attachment because the more we are attached to something, the angrier we become when we don't get it or when we lose it.

Also from the attachment, comes pride – this real sense of “I am”, an over-inflation of the self.

[In response to audience] The mind gets hard and tough when it is angry, so the sense of self gets harder. You know how we are when we are angry – we feel we are right: “Don't tell me what to do!” There is a much inflated view of the self at that point. That stubbornness is definitely a form of pride.

And then after that, we get all the other afflictions. We get all the different kinds of wrong views, because when we are proud nobody can tell us anything. Our mind starts conceptualizing a myriad of afflicted [['afflicted' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'deluded'](#)] views and then we get doubt.

### [Audience: Inaudible]

There are different kinds of hope. There is a positive hope and a negative hope. The negative hope, I think, is basically part of attachment, because it is a mind that is wanting: “I hope tomorrow will be sunny”. Actually what we hope has nothing to do with how tomorrow will be. But my hoping is getting my mind completely fixated in what I want, so that if it snows tomorrow, I am going to be miserable.

## Causes of the afflictions\*

The next point is what we call the causes of the afflictions\*, in other words, things that make the afflictions\* arise. If we can understand what makes the afflictions\* arise – what causes the anger to arise, what causes the attachment to arise, what causes the afflicted<sup>#</sup> doubt to arise, what causes the laziness to arise – then we can try and stop some of those causes. At the least, we can be more sensitive to these afflictions\* when they are functioning, so that we don't get taken in by them.

### 1. Dependent basis

Now the first cause, the technical term for it is “dependent basis”. Some of these terms may be long, but they don't mean a whole lot. This refers to the seed of the disturbing attitude. The Tibetan word is “bak chag” – you have probably heard it before. It is translated as seed or impression or imprint.

So right now, let us say, I am not angry. There is no manifest anger in my mind. In other words, anger – which is a type of consciousness and a mental factor – is not manifest in my mind right now. But we can't say that anger has been totally removed from my mind, because the potential to be angry is still there. The seed of the anger, the impression of the anger is still there, so that as soon as I meet something that does not agree with what I want it to be, the anger is going to become manifest.

The seed of the anger is not a consciousness, because I am not angry right now. There is no mental factor of anger right now. But there is the seed of anger. This seed of the anger is going to manifest as soon as Achala [the cat] bites me [laughter], or as soon as I go outside and it is freezing cold. As soon as these happen, the seed which was not a consciousness, will manifest in my mind as the mental factor of anger (which is a consciousness), and I am going to be upset.

Now this is quite different from the view that is commonly held, as I have understood it. People often talk about the unconscious or the subconscious mind. We talk about repressed anger. It is as if this repressed anger is a solid, real thing that has a definite shape and form and it is there within you but you are blocking it out. You might not be aware of it, but it is there eating away at you. You are being angry all the time. This is a very solid view of the anger.

I think the Buddhist view is quite different. In Buddhism it says: “Wait a minute, there is no manifest anger in the mind at this point. There are the imprints of anger; there is the potential to become angry again. But it is not that you are walking around angry all day and not realizing it.

The seed of anger is just a seed of potential. It is not molecular. There is nothing made of atoms and molecules here. It is just a potential. If you cut open your brain, you wouldn't be able to find it there.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

Yes. This is the reason why it is very important to realize emptiness or selflessness. Realizing emptiness not only gets rid of the manifest anger, but also it has the power to eliminate the seed of the anger that can later give rise to angry moments. Realizing emptiness is a way of uprooting anger from the very root, from the very foundation, so that anger can never manifest again. Then, no matter who you meet and how awfully they treat you, you don't get angry. It is totally impossible for you to get angry. Wouldn't that be nice?

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

Don't see the seed as a solid seed. You can see from this instance how we are grasping at inherent existence. The seed is just the potential. It is something that is merely labeled on that ever-changing potential that can bring forth something else.

This is something good to do: whenever you get into a heavy duty self concept – “I am an angry person” (or “I am an attached person” or “I am a confused person”) – look at the anger. There are actually a few ways to deal with this. Ask: “What is anger?” And remember that anger is not one solid thing. It is just moments of mind that have a common trait which we give the label ‘anger’ to, that's all.

Anger is something that is merely labeled on top of those moments of similar thing. Depression is something that is merely labeled on top of moments of mind – all of which are different, all of which are changing – that have some kind of common characteristic. When we start thinking about this, we begin to understand that this whole rigid concept we have of ourselves, how we frame ourselves, is all wrong. Or we begin to see how we make ourselves suffer by our negative self-image. We make the “I” very concrete and we make the X in “I am X” very concrete. In actual fact, they are things that are merely labeled on similar moments of mind. That is all. When you think about this and something sinks in, then it is like: “Oh yeah!”

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

There are different levels of anger. There is the innate anger and there is what we call ‘artificial anger’. Artificial is not the greatest word but I haven't discovered another one yet. The innate anger is what we have had since beginningless time. You don't have to learn it. The artificial anger is the anger that we learn in this lifetime. For example, we learn that we should be angry when a kid steals our ball or when somebody calls us a name.

[In response to audience:] What we retain from previous lifetimes is the innate. The innate comes with us. The artificial may create imprints, so that in the next life, we think like that again. The artificial creates a certain karmic imprint and then in your next lifetime, you may hear something that triggers that way of thinking again. For example, let's say that somebody has the belief that there is a creator. That is a learned belief. That is an artificial type of wrong view. We didn't have that since beginningless time. We learnt that, and we created a whole pattern of thinking around that. In the next life when we are babies, we don't yet have that, we don't think that way. But all we need is for somebody to say it, and then we say: “Oh yes, that's right.”

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

The artificial ones can sometimes be very deeply rooted.

It is good to ask ourselves: “What is it I really believe?” Instead of having those beliefs and not being aware of them, we become more aware of what it is we believe and then we start to check it out.

I have noticed that what we do sometimes when we listen to teachings is, we hear the teachings through the ears of a four or five-year-old child learning religion from mom and dad. I have seen this in myself and in other people. It is sometimes very difficult for us to listen to Buddhist teachings with a fresh mind. We are filtering it through all these ideas we received when we were little about reward, punishment,

shame and etc. Sometimes it is hard for us to even understand the words the Buddha is saying, because we are hearing a replay of what we heard when we were four or five years old.

For example – you have probably heard me say this before – I'll go some place where there are new people and give a talk about anger. When I talk about anger, I always start talking about the disadvantages of anger. Somebody will raise their hand and say: "You are saying we are not supposed to be angry and anger is bad..." But I have never said that. I would never say that because I don't believe that.

You see, when they hear the disadvantages of anger, the words coming out of the speaker's mouth are about the disadvantages, but the words that they are understanding through their filter, are the words that they hear when they were four or five years old from mommy and daddy: "You shouldn't be angry; you are a bad boy (or a bad girl) if you are angry."

I think we need to become much more aware of these old ways of thinking, those old ways of perceiving, so that then we can start checking up: "Well, is anger really bad? Am I a bad person if I am angry? Am I not supposed to be angry?" Supposed to, what is "supposed to"?

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

We have two big problems. One is we believe everything we think. The second one is we don't always know what we think. We are thinking things, but we don't know what we are thinking.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

Yes, we realize emptiness through a very gradual way. First, we hear the teachings and get some wisdom from that. Then we think about them. If you can just stay single-pointed on the correct conceptual view of emptiness, that can be very powerful. That is not an intellectual word view of emptiness. It is an understanding of emptiness. It is still conceptual but it is at a deeper level; it is not intellectual. Then you get to a certain point where that conceptual understanding of emptiness becomes non-conceptual, and that is when you start eliminating the afflictions. First you start cutting away the artificial layers of the afflictions\*. Then as you familiarize yourself more and more with this mind understanding emptiness, you start cutting away even the innate levels of the afflictions\*.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

Yes, there are different levels of conceptualization. We usually think of conceptualization as academic college blah, blah. Our understanding of emptiness might start out like that. It takes time just to get the vocabulary right. Once you have the vocabulary, you can start looking inside and apply that vocabulary to what is going on in your experience. It is still conceptual at that time, but it is not just intellectual blah, blah, because you are taking it into your heart and looking at your experience. And that gets deeper and deeper gradually. It is not direct perception yet; there is still some concept, but it is not just intellectual jabbering either.

## **2. The object stimulating them to arise**

The second one is the object stimulating them to arise. Pizza, chocolate, cheese, etc – these are the things that make our afflictions\* arise. It can be a person, a place, a thing, an idea, whatever it is. When our senses contact an object, attachment, anger, pride or some other affliction can arise.

This is why they say that at the beginning of the practice for beginners it is good not to be around the things that stimulate our afflictions\* a lot, because we don't have a whole lot of control. It is like zap! We are off.

This is also the rationale behind some of the monastic vows – you stay away from the situations that would lead you to generate a lot of affliction. It is kind of like, if you have a problem with your weight, you don't go to an ice-cream parlor.

This is why it is good to understand which is our strongest affliction\* and what are the external objects that set them off so easily. We then try and stay away from those external objects, not because those things are bad and evil, but because our mind is uncontrolled. You use that space from being away from

it and having your mind slightly calmer, to do the meditation very deeply. In this way your mind becomes more stable and then whether you are near that thing or not near that thing, your mind does not go crazy.

So, it is not about escaping from the things that set you off. Our mind can get attached to anything anyway. Where are we going to go where there is no object of attachment? There is no place; no place that we can go where there are no objects of attachment. So the thing is to stay away from the object that is real disturbing for us for a time till our mind gets stronger. Then we can be near those things and it is okay.

It is like if you have a weight problem, you stay away from the ice-cream parlors. Not only that, but you actively meditate on the disadvantages of ice cream. Or you meditate on the impermanence or the unsatisfactory nature, so that your mind begins to cut through the whole projection you built up of how wonderful ice-cream is. Then when you have become stable in that, you can go to the ice-cream parlor. Your mind will not go bonkers.

This is why the Buddha emphasized the importance of simplifying our lives, to cut down on the number of things that we use for sense stimulation. If we simplify our lives, then there will be fewer things around us that will cause us to generate afflictions [['afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'delusions.'](#)] This, of course, is the opposite to the American way of life. [Laughter]

Again, we are avoiding things not because these things are bad. It is simply because our mind is uncontrolled and we realize that if we let our mind be uncontrolled, we are going to hurt ourselves and others. If you have a mind that very easily gets attached, don't go to the shopping mall when you have nothing to do. Don't go to the shopping mall even when you have something to do! [laughter] Really keep out because the mind will dream up: "Oh, I need this, I need this and I need this!"

Before you even go there to shop, check: "Do I really need that? Do I really need another lamp in the house? Do I really need a chair? Do I really need another file cabinet? Do I really need another widget?" It is good to check like this, because if we don't, then as soon as the mind thinks: "Oh, I need a widget", then automatically we are in the car going to the shopping mall. And we will come out not only with a widget but with ten other things as well.

The whole idea of having a simple life is that we just use what we need, not more than that, and we have what we need, not more than that. Actually I think in America it has become quite a struggle to only have what you need and to get rid of all your other stuff. Somehow we have managed to accumulate so much stuff that when we try and live simply, it takes a whole lot of time and effort to get rid of them.

Look at your house now and look at your house after Christmas. We'll just get more and more stuff. We will use some of the stuff and we'll just put the other stuff in the closet. Our closets just get totally full. You need to move to a bigger house because you need more closets! [laughter] It is like a personal museum, with all my boxes, tin cans and my toaster ovens including my 1983 model of toaster oven.

If there is a person who really sets us off, and if we can avoid being near that person, that is good. But since we can't always avoid being near that person, then we have to definitely develop ways to manage our reactions to them. One time, somebody asked His Holiness a question when he talked about patience: "I have been trying very hard to practice patience so much with this one person at work, but I am still getting angry. What do I do?"

His Holiness said, "Well, you might get another job!" [Laughter] If the situation is really too much for you and you are just creating so much negative karma, then if you can change it, fine. But you see, this is very different from running away from things because we feel insecure.

Let's sit quietly for a few minutes.

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- 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.'

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