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Review

1. The seed of the afflictions*

Last time we started going through the causes of the afflictions [[‘afflictions’](#) is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of ‘disturbing attitudes’]. We talked about the first one being *the impression or the seed of the affliction**. This seed is not a consciousness. It is just a potency, so it is very different from the psychological view of it being a big solid thing in the subconscious. The Buddhist view is that it is just a potency and when it is activated it becomes manifest anger or manifest pride, or something like that.

It is also this seed, this impression that carries this affliction* from one lifetime to the next. When we die, our gross consciousnesses lose their power and dissolve into the subtler consciousnesses, along with these seeds. When we get into another body, the gross consciousnesses appear. The seeds or the potencies are there ready to be activated, so that we get afflictions* in our next life.

From the Buddhist view, suicide is such a tragedy. When people kill themselves they think that they are stopping their suffering. They are usually tormented by their own thoughts, or by their situation or their moods, and they think that by killing themselves, it stops all of those. But from the Buddhist view, the consciousness, the afflictions* and the seeds or impressions continue to the next life. Suicide does not solve anything.

2. Object stimulating them to arise

The second cause of the afflictions* is the *objects that stimulate their arousal*.

Did you notice any objects between Monday and today that stimulated the arousal of your afflictions*? It is good to be aware of the things that set us off and create some kind of space between them and us initially. This is done not to run away or escape from them, but just so that we have the time to do more practice. Then when we come into contact with those things later, they are not going to set us off in the same way.

I want to emphasize that this is not a way of escaping from the difficulties. Some people say to me: "Aren't you escaping life when you become a nun?" Oh, I wish it were that easy! [laughter] I tell them that really, your anger, attachment, etc, all come right into the monastery with you, and you start acting them out right there.

I was talking with one person who used to be a monk and he said he got very attached to his robes, like which robes were made out of nice cloth. I don't have that difficulty quite so much. When I was young, my mother tried to get me to wear good clothes but she didn't succeed very well. Robes are not my object of attachment although I have seen that it is for some people. But your attachment to food just goes right along with you; your attachment to reputation and how people treat you, they all come right along with you. You don't escape from anything!

3. Detrimental influences: wrong friends

The third cause of afflictions* is detrimental influences such as wrong friends, or should we say

inappropriate friends. Hanging out with the wrong crowd, it's like birds of a feather flock together. Pabongka Rinpoche and the Buddha said exactly the same thing, that you become like the people you are with. When we hang around with people of bad ethics, we become like them.

It is interesting. What is the definition of a wrong friend or a bad friend or a bad influence? It is somebody who is attached to the happiness of this life. So then it makes you think: "Well, we are not having many good friends." [laughter]

We might have a lot of attachment and other afflictions*, but if we hang around with people who are Dharma people, that influences us in a very positive direction. At least they have the same kinds of aspirations and they can inspire us to practice.

But when we make people who are completely attached to this life our closest friends, and all they talk about is their ski trips, real estate, how to cheat the IRS, sports, politics, fashion and so on, then we start thinking like that and we start being like that. We adopt their values because we want to fit in. It comes back to the old theme of peer pressure. We thought we have outgrown that. We thought only teenagers are influenced by their peers so you don't want any of your teenage kids to hang around with the wrong crowd. But we are just as susceptible as teenagers are, to what people think of us.

You just watch how attached we are to our reputation and the great lengths we do to be accepted by other people. If the people we hang around with and the people whose opinions we value are people who have no regard for future lives or the altruistic intention, and are just intent on getting as much pleasure as they can and taking care of their own needs and wants, then we are going to become exactly like that. It is going to be difficult to practice Dharma.

I remember Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey said: "Evil friends aren't the ones who come into your house, have "horns" on their heads and say: "Give me everything you have!" He said evil friends are the ones who come over when you are about to sit down and meditate and say: "Gee, there is a real good movie playing at the cinema, let's go!" Those are the people we have to be careful of.

[Audience: Inaudible]

Well, I don't know. Sometimes those people can be very helpful. It depends on what the quality of the discussion is. If it is a discussion where they're asking questions and we realize that we don't know the answers or we don't understand what we are saying, then those people are actually quite kind because they are showing us what we need to brush up on and where we need to do our homework.

If they, with an evil intent, are deliberately trying to make you confused, then their intention is not so good. But then the question is: do we let ourselves be influenced by that?

These people can be evil friends in the sense that we value what they think of us and since they think Buddhism is a bunch of junk, we might say: "I want to be accepted by these people, I want these people to think that I am nice, smart and wonderful. So yeah, maybe I'll just start believing in what they believe and then I can go to the church socials too."

I am saying this because this is how a lot of people get converted in Singapore. The kids didn't get a very good Buddhist education from their parents. People come and say to them: "Oh, Buddhism is just a bunch of superstition! This is all silly. Why do you believe in it? Why do you bow down to and worship idols?" Because they don't understand the religion that they have been professing and they don't understand that Buddhists don't worship idols, they begin to have a lot of doubts. In addition, the churches have these wonderful socials with lots of food and dancing, etc., and so they think: "Oh, this is nice. I want to be accepted and I want these people to like me, so I'll go."

It depends very much how we handle those situations. In cases like the above, we have to be on the lookout for attachment to reputation, because it can make us run around like Achala [the cat] chasing a piece of string. We just go in circles with it. This is why we have to be careful who we create close friendships with and what kind of influence we let ourselves have and how we let ourselves be influenced by other people.

The same goes for the selection of teachers. You want to make sure you pick teachers who have good

qualities, because if your teachers have bad habits then you are going to pick up those bad habits as well. Pabongka Rinpoche was saying: "If you hang around with a teacher who scolds people a lot you become like that. If you hang around a teacher who is very miserly, you become like that."

It is good to examine our friendships and see which people influence us in a positive way – helping us to practice better, generate positive states of mind, let go of our defilements. For example, sometimes when we get angry, we may get ticked off at somebody and we think: "Ok, I am going to go talk to my friend." What we have in mind is: "I am going to go talk to my friend – I am going to dump it all out, how bad Joe was to me. And my friend is going to say: 'You are right, Joe is really an idiot!'" We think a friend is somebody who is going to side with us against Joe, whom we think is an idiot. That is the way we usually think. That is the worldly way of thinking.

From the Buddhist view that is not what a friend will do. That kind of friend who says: "Yes, you are absolutely right. You really have to be mad at him because he is wrong!" They are encouraging your anger. They are telling you it is good to be angry, that you should go and retaliate and get even. That is not a real friend, because that is somebody who is helping you to create negative karma.

Look at how we are influenced by someone we consider a friend in worldly terms. What is the benefit of that kind of friendship? Is a friend somebody who makes us feel good temporarily, right now, but in the process exacerbates our attachment and anger? Or is a friend somebody who may sometimes be a little bit more straightforward with us and says things that we don't particularly like to hear, but in the process, makes us check up what is going on in our mind, and are there to help us when we realize that our minds have gone on the wrong track?

This is something to think about: what is a friend from a Buddhist point of view? What kind of people do we want to cultivate friendships with? What kind of friendships do we want to have? What are the qualities of those friendships?

[Audience:] So is the idea to cut off from friends who aren't Dharma students?

I don't think so. I don't think the point is to cut off from friends who aren't Dharma students, because people can still have very good qualities without knowing anything about Dharma. It is more of watching how they influence us or how we let ourselves be influenced.

Also, in this process of evaluating our friendships, it doesn't mean that we become proud and arrogant and say: "You aren't a Buddhist. You create negative karma, so I am not going to talk to you!" [laughter] It is not that kind of thing because compassion for all beings is definitely the thing to be cultivated. Rather, it is more an acknowledgment of our own internal weaknesses. Because we are weak, not because the other people are bad, we have to watch who we spend time with. It is more of admitting our own weaknesses than of criticizing others. So it is not about dumping people. It is not kind of throwing your old friends in the garbage can.

With me it was different, because I moved out of the country, so I wound up making a whole new circle of friends. But still when I visited the States, I would look up my old friends and some of those friendships still exist. Some of them don't. It really depends. My college roommate lives in San Francisco. When I teach there, she comes over. Another college roommate is a Professor of religion. She is very devout in another faith, but she asked me to come and talk to her classes at the university. So, each friendship will be different and you will grow with some of them. In spite of your differences, you will continue to help each other.

4. Verbal stimuli

The fourth cause for the arousal of afflictions* is verbal stimulus. This can refer to lectures and talks. It can also refer to books, that is, it refers to anything that has to do with words, either oral or written.

At a retreat in North Carolina, we got into a big discussion about plan. Many people say that we are all put here to learn certain lessons. So we got into a big discussion about this. From the Buddhist point of view that is not the case. Suppose you go to talks where people start talking about: "We are all put here to learn a lesson. Your job in life is to learn your lessons and figure out what mission you have in life and

what role God has chosen for you or what role the cosmos has chosen for you". That is going to generate certain thoughts that might not be so conducive for your practice.

We also got into a discussion about karma therapy. You can read about it in the New Age newspapers – you pay I don't know how much money and they make you regress to a past life and do therapy that way. But that isn't necessarily conducive to your practice.

Talks or TV programs that propagate White supremacy or fundamentalist ideas are also not conducive for practice.

The media

As Dharma practitioners, we have to be very careful how we relate to the media in terms of TV, books, magazines, etc. We are very much influenced by them. If you want to know why it is sometimes hard to practice, check how much time you are spending with the media in your life. The media makes it hard to practice. First of all if you spend lot of time with the media then you don't have time for practice.

But even more so, the values and things we learn in the media often excite our anger, belligerence, clinging and miserliness. Very seldom do the media try to generate compassion in the audience. When you go to the movies or when you watch TV, watch the swing in emotions you have. When he kisses her what happens inside you? When the bad guy strikes the good guy what happens inside you? Check up and you will see that we learn so many of our values from the media and so much of the media values are distorted.

We all say this, we all know it up here: "Oh yes, the media places so much emphasis on consumerism." But we don't turn off the TV. We don't say mantra in the car instead of listening to the radio. We don't throw all the junk mail directly in the recycling bin, we kind of skim through it: "Just in case they have something on sale that I need." [laughter]

You could maybe make this a project: for a week, look at how you relate to the media and how it influences you. In many ways it teaches us to buy things. I think the media is one of the chief things that make us feel dissatisfied with our bodies. Most people I know don't feel very happy with their bodies: "Am I in the right clothes?" "My figure is not good enough." "My muscles aren't big enough." Everybody feels: "I should look better." You look at the magazines. You look at the billboards when you drive the car. You look at the TV. Those are the messages we are getting. We are comparing ourselves to other people and of course we always feel we aren't good enough. And this eats away at us on many, many different levels.

So I think one thing we have to do to start feeling better about our own bodies is to stop watching TV, reading billboards and looking at ads in the magazines. I think it has such a great influence on us. It creates so much attachment to the body and so much discomfort because we will never look like the people in the magazines.

[Audience: Inaudible]

I think you are right. It is a good experiment to do. Cut off relating to the media for a week, two weeks or three weeks, and see how that changes how you feel about yourself, how that changes your relationship with other people and your relationship to the practice.

[Audience: Inaudible]

Yes. It is not that the external objects are bad and negative. It is that our mind gets uncontrolled. When we get to a point where our mind does not get uncontrolled, then there is no problem with those things.

Also I think it is not good to completely isolate yourself, so that when the US first dropped bombs on Baghdad and you heard somebody talk about the war, you said: "War, with who?" [laughter] You don't want to become a complete space case.

I have been reading Time magazine. Having lived in other countries I find so much of Time very offensive. It is very much American patriotic "ra, ra" in a way that is downright inaccurate. It is just not accurate and yet this is what people are reading. Since they don't have other experiences to check up

with, this is what they believe in.

It is the same with how we take what the media say as true and how much it influences us and shapes our values.

[Audience: Inaudible]

People feel really uncomfortable with silence. After you get in the car and turn on the engine, what is the next thing you do? You turn on the radio. When you come home, after you take your jacket off, what is the first thing you do? Turn on the TV. Even if you go to another room or you are cooking or doing something else, you want to have some noise in the background. We are addictive in many ways to having noise, and then we wonder why we are exhausted and overloaded! I think when we have a lot of sense stimulation, it makes us exhausted. This is why at night time we are so tired. There is just so much sense stimulation that the system can't handle.

[Audience: Inaudible]

These are compulsive readers. We read everything, even stuff that we see as useless, like the words on the back of boxes, the junk mail, the billboards, the store advertisements, etc.

Books

It is not only the media here we are talking about. We are also talking about books. What books do you read? Do we go home at night and read all the Harold Robbins novels? What do we pick up off the book shelf to read? How much time do we spend reading trashy novels or comic books? What materials do we read? And how does that influence us?

Now again, I am not saying: "Never read a novel", because I think it can be very useful sometimes to read novels; there are very, very good novels around. The thing is we have to be careful when we read a novel or go to a movie, to make sure that we are looking at it with Dharma eyes, because it can be an incredible teaching on karma, on the disadvantages of the afflictions*. You can learn a lot by watching a movie or reading a novel from the Dharma perspective.

But the danger is to get caught up in it and get angry, attached, belligerent, or experience some other negative emotions. We often say we are doing it to relax, but is our mind really relaxing when it is caught in these emotions? So again it has to do with checking up what material we read.

Another area to be mindful of is when we have discussions with other people. What do we talk about with other people? It is interesting, because sometimes you can't control the discussion. People will bring up topics of discussion and you have to respond. But watch how you respond and watch how your mind runs for certain things.

Discussions

Watch what discussions we initiate when we are sitting there waiting with people. Do we feel comfortable with the silence waiting with the people, or do we start talking about the weather, the sales at the shopping center, the Christmas dinner or something else? What conversations do we start? For example, we are in the middle of a conversation, and we see a conversation going towards a particular area. We know whenever this particular subject comes up, our anger just increases. We can see the conversation going that way. Instead of steering it away, we kind of let it go that way so that then, for the fifteenth time, we can tell our story with all our anger. [laughter]

How do we respond to somebody who comes to us and just complains and complains? Do we just keep a compassionate attitude and recognize that they just need to dump their anger and get it out, so we just listen and help smooth things over? Or do we jump in and ask: "Oh, then what did they do? Oh, you're right; this guy is so bad!?" How do we react? This is another thing to be mindful of.

There is a lot in here to think about.

[Audience: Inaudible]

That is okay to do if we are clear in our minds why we are doing it. For example, I sit and chit-chat with

someone because that is a way of letting the person know that I value contact with them. This isn't the time for a heavy philosophical discussion. The purpose of the conversation is just to make contact, especially when you go visit your family. I don't know about you, but I can't walk into my parents' house and say: "OK, mom and dad, did you know that Jeffrey Hopkins' book, *Meditation on Emptiness* on page on 593 mentioned..." Rather, we talk about this relative and that relative, which one is getting married, which one is getting divorced, etc. [laughter]

If we are clear in our mind why we are talking to somebody about something, that is fine. When we are not clear then we just get dispersed. But again, it is not a thing of making ourselves all uptight.

5. Habit

The next cause of the afflictions* is habit. What do we get habituated with? We get into the habit of sleeping late. We get in the habit of turning the radio on. We get in the habit of criticizing a particular person. We get in lots and lots of habits. We get in the habit of eating chocolates [laughter]. Habit is a very strong impetus for the arousal of afflictions*, because we are very much creatures of habit. As soon as we form negative habits it becomes very difficult to get out of them.

There are two things to do. The first is to identify the bad habits we have. The second thing is to be careful that we don't develop new ones. Similarly, it is good to be aware of the positive habits we have and to make sure that they don't deteriorate, while at the same time developing new ones.

This factor of habit influences very much how things go from one life to the next life. Somebody who is very short tempered in this lifetime will probably be very short tempered too in future lifetimes unless they practice some antidotes in this lifetime. There is no other way to make it go away. If we are short tempered we have to practice the antidotes, otherwise it is going to be the exact same thing in the next life, again and again.

Similarly if we cultivate good habits this lifetime – establishing a daily practice for however long a period, or trying to listen to people without responding right away – they also carry on with us to future lives and they can be instrumental in our practice then.

If you observe children, you will see that they already have definite habits and tendencies from the time they are very young. Also, different people have different habits. When people are prone to having a particular affliction* and they act it out or mull it over or whatever, that habit continues. That is why it is important to apply the antidotes to these afflictions*.

[Audience: Inaudible]

That is why the Buddha emphasized the importance of guarding the senses. We take in all the information through our senses, primarily through what we see and hear, and also through what we taste, touch and smell. These things can have a strong impact on us.

[Audience: Inaudible]

The seeds of the afflictions [['afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'delusions.'](#)] are there. We have all 84,000 afflictions*. We have all 84,000 seeds. When we have the habit related to the affliction*, then the seed can arise more easily. With the habit, it becomes much easier for the seed to be activated and becomes the manifest affliction*.

When you read the scriptures, the Buddha is talking continuously about guarding the senses. Try walking down the street about five blocks without looking in any shop windows. It sounds very simple: "Oh yes, sure, I can walk down the street and not look in the windows." But try it and see if you can do it.

I went to Taiwan for my Bhikshuni ordination. They were very strict there. When we were in the meditation room we could not look around. We lined up outside the meditation room, we all filed in, and from the time we lined up, through the whole time we are in the room until the time we filed out at the end of the prayers, we had to keep our eyes down. We were not allowed to look around. It was so hard – I couldn't believe it! The master would be talking and I wanted to look at him. I wanted to look at the

Buddhas there. I wanted to see who is falling asleep and who is paying attention. I wanted to see who is chanting the prayers aloud and who is not.

Just to reign in the senses and not pay attention to all the sense stimuli around us is very difficult. This is true even when you are doing prayers or meditation together. It is difficult to stay completely focused on what you are doing in your little area. Sometimes there may be twenty, thirty, forty people sitting in rows doing the practice together. It is so tempting to look and see who is sitting up straight, who is paying attention, who is drinking tea and who has slouched over, etc. That is what the mind wants to do – it wants to look all around. Just to sit there, keep your eyes down and pay attention to what your own body, speech and mind is doing, is so hard!

In a retreat, the group usually decides to keep silence, but how many people actually keep silence? We may decide together as a group to keep silence but we still hear some talking here and there. [laughter] It is so hard to reign in the senses. So I think it is something to work on. When you stand in the line of a supermarket don't read all the tabloid headlines. Can you do that? [laughter]

[Audience: Inaudible]

We are very conditioned phenomena. That is what the Buddha talked about – we are impermanent, conditioned phenomena. That is what this whole discussion is about. We have the seed of the affliction[#] and then we are conditioned by the verbal stimulus, the books, the media, the discussions we have with people, the objects we contact, the people around us. And then we do actions that make the seeds of our different afflictions* arise. We get more habituated and familiar with them and then this cycle just keeps going like that. And we wonder why it is so difficult to keep on track!

It is so difficult to keep on track because we have been getting a whole lot of past conditioning. It is time now to de-condition ourselves or recondition ourselves. There must be an advertisement for that: "Recondition your mind for \$49.99!" [laughter] That is very much what we need to do, because we are conditioned, dependent phenomena. We are not isolated islands. That is why it is so important to put ourselves in a good environment, with people who stimulate the arousal of our good qualities. Then, within that environment, we try and control the mind. It is hard enough to do this, let alone in an environment where all the things that you are still attached to or are emotionally entangled with, are there. That would be very difficult.

This is why the Buddha talked about simplifying one's life. The simpler we make our life, the less conditioned we are going to be by all those things. This will give us much more mental space to be able to choose what we want to do in our life.

[Audience: Inaudible]

To be aware of the negative habits we have and to try and demolish them; to make sure we don't get any new negative habits; to be aware of our positive habits and try and maintain them; to try and generate new positive ones: this is the process of reconditioning ourselves.

We have some choice over the environment that will condition us, but more importantly, we have more choices over our internal responses. If we slow down, we can get more in touch with our own responses. The whole idea of thought training or thought transformation is to try and recondition our responses. For example, when we get criticized, instead of the conditioned response of: "Who do you think you are talking to me like that!", the conditioned response becomes: "Oh, let us listen to what this person has to say, it might be something that I can benefit from." You try and retrain the mind. You transform your responses.

Let's sit quietly for a couple of minutes.

- 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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