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**Review**

We have been talking about the causes of afflictions [[‘afflictions’](#) is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of [‘disturbing attitudes’](#)]. We went through the first five causes, which are:

1. The seed of the affliction\*

2. Objects which cause the afflictions\* to arise. We will inevitably encounter such objects, but it is possible to not pay attention to them. I don't know if anybody ever does it, but it is possible to go to the store and buy only what you set out to buy.

Since Dharma is very related to daily life, as part of your practice, try doing this: before you go shopping, first ask yourself what it is that you really have to get as opposed to what you feel like getting. Then go to the store to get that, and try and leave the store without getting anything else. I think it is a very good practice. It's a kind of mind training that prevents us from letting our mind get taken away by the objects that we encounter.

Also, where do we go to shop when we need to get something? Do we go to the shopping mall to get the one thing we need, or do we go to the store around the corner where what we need is available? The whole idea of a shopping mall is to make you buy ten times more than what you need, so as soon as you go there, you've almost had it.

I do have compassion for the people who own shopping malls and I do wish them well. I don't want them to be out on the streets because of poverty. [laughter] But this is really something to look at – how we relate to shops and stores and everything else. How often we choose to go shopping, and what we choose to get while we are there. The types of shops we go to. We learn a lot about ourselves by watching these things. We see how conditioned we are.

3. Detrimental influences such as friends who encourage us to do negative actions.

4. Verbal stimuli – books, lectures and in particular, the media. We talked about how on the one hand, we recognize the influence of the media on us, particularly advertising, and yet on the other hand, we don't stop ourselves from becoming engaged in it. In other words, we recognize the influence and we say: "Oh, we are so controlled by Madison Avenue," but we also stop and read the ads and the billboards and look at the junk mail. If we had a little bit of discipline, it is quite possible to not be so involved – to not get the magazines, to not read the ads if we are reading an article in a magazine, to not look at the junk mail and the catalogs. It's possible. [laughter] I hope people had been more mindful of the influence of the media this past week.

5. Habit. The force of habit is a major factor in making our afflictions\* arise. Remember when we talked about the four results of karma, one of them was 'results similar to the cause in terms of your habitual behavior'? In other words, if you get into the habit of lying, in the next life, it becomes easier to lie. If you get into the habit of telling people off in this life, in the next life, it's going to be very easy to do it.

Well, it's the same thing with the afflictions\*. If we get into the habit of being jealous, then we are going to be jealous a lot. If we get into the habit of being angry, then we are going to be angry a lot. With

anger, for example, you can see sometimes how the mind is so restless; it's looking for something to be angry at. The anger energy is there. We are so habituated with it that we got to find something to be angry at. And we will find something. Or, we are habituated with attachment and we find something to be attached to.

## 6. Inappropriate decisive attention

The last cause of the afflictions\* is called inappropriate decisive attention. That's the technical translation. Attention is one mental factor we have that is at work all the time. It is a very powerful mental factor because what happens to us depends very much on what we pay attention to.

We are paying inappropriate attention when we concentrate on objects that make our afflictions\* arise or have wrong thoughts about those objects. What do we pay attention to during the day? Often, we don't pay attention to the hundred good things that go right; we pay attention to the one thing that goes wrong. That's inappropriate attention. It's screened attention. We choose to pay attention to the guy who cut us off on the highway and allow it to ruin our whole day, even though twenty people may have been very nice to us that same day. Because we pay attention to the thing which is an inappropriate object, we generate a lot of afflictions\*.

We not only pay attention to objects like ice-cream or whatever it is, but we also pay attention to our ideas, our interpretations about the objects, and we get into a lot of story telling.

There is another word I am going to bring in here. It is not specifically listed but it's very relevant to this topic of inappropriate attention. The Tibetan term is *nam-tog*. Lama Yeshe used to translate it as 'superstition'. A more polite translation is 'preconception' or 'presupposition'.

'Superstition' in the West means believing in something that doesn't exist and then getting all worked up about it. Lama said that that is exactly what we do, so he translated *nam tog* as superstition. You meet somebody, an ordinary person, and then your mind gets all worked up: "They are so gorgeous! They are so wonderful! They are so talented..." He said this is complete superstition! We believe in something that doesn't exist and it affects us.

Another way of looking at it is, it is just preconception. We form many opinions and preconceptions about things. We make many interpretations about how things are and who people are. And then we constantly use our inappropriate attention to focus on those preconceptions.

We develop a prejudice, which is a kind of preconception, and then we focus on it and we mull over it again and again. The prejudice deepens and becomes very firm and hard in our mind. Even though we have never met them or talked to them before, we are convinced that they are completely awful and we are never going to talk to them!

When we have a conception, we pay attention to it; we dwell on it. And that makes the afflictions\* arise. We are choc-o-block full of these preconceptions. Like I was saying, one of our big problems is that we believe everything that we think. It's true! We are just so full of opinions, ideas, advice and prejudice when we look at anybody and any situation. We pay attention to these preconceptions, believe in them, and look at things through that frame.

Yesterday a very interesting thing came up in Gen Lamrimpa's teaching that relates to this. Somebody told Genla that in the West, it is very common for people to think they have been traumatized from when they were very young, and a lot of therapy is involved in reliving and re-experiencing those early life abuses and traumas, clearing them up and working them out to release the anger or whatever emotion that was associated with them.

I was talking with Leslie this morning and she said since Genla's previous visit, everybody has been trying very much to convince him that we're so messed up because of our childhood experience.

At one conference, I heard somebody say that nowadays, we look at childhood as something we have to recover from. This is the idea in our culture. Everybody is trying to go back to their childhood and to

recall this and that, what their parents said and what happened and how they felt. There is all this emphasis that in order to heal, you have to recall all these things and re-experience them.

In response to this, Genla said: "The past is the past, don't think about it. Forget it!" Of course people were sitting there very politely, but I think inside, everybody was saying: "Wait a minute, Genla! My therapist doesn't say that." [laughter] There was definitely a cultural difference there.

Genla was probably in his teens or early twenties when all of a sudden, he had to leave his country. He had to leave his family behind and go to a strange country. He didn't know the language. He was a refugee and didn't have any money. He didn't know what was happening. He was cut off from everybody and everything. His mother died before he could see her again.

You talk about early traumas. Well, Genla had one. But you look at Genla today. He isn't all stuck in: "Well in 1959, this happened and that happened..." It isn't an object of his daily thoughts. It happened. He recognized it. He didn't go into denial, but he went on with his life.

But in our culture, our *nam-tog*, our preconception is that these things are very serious and important. You don't forget them. No way! So we go back and continually relive them again and again. I don't think Genla goes back and relives 1959 very much. But we will go back and relive our 1959, sometimes on a daily basis. This preconception, together with the inappropriate attention which hooks onto it, make the afflictions\* arise. Also, it is boring just to think about them all the time, so we spice them up, especially when you have a therapist who is encouraging you to.

Now, I am not criticizing therapy. There's a lot of very good things that go on in therapy. But I think sometimes there's also social pressure, and what you experience in therapy is also influenced by the preconceptions of the therapist. What I am trying to say is that it is not a foolproof, infallible, sacred method. I am not saying there is nothing good about it. There are a lot of good things about it.

Similarly, I am not saying that our early childhood experiences didn't affect us. They definitely did affect us. What I am saying is, how much they affect us depends on how much attention we put on them. The more we relive them and go into them, and the more we feel pressured to feel a lot of emotions around them, then the more we will feel the emotions, and they will become quite prominent in our mind.

Geshe Jamyang, who teaches at the center in Olympia and is also a psychologist, counsels both Asians and Westerners. I asked him about early childhood experiences, and I said: "When you counsel Asians, do you go through all these in the same way as people usually do with Westerners?" He said: "No, it's not necessary." He said that the Asians, especially those who have grown up as Buddhists, accept that there is suffering in the world. They accept that there is change. He deals with people who grew up in Cambodia – our childhood traumas are nothing compared to these people's – and it's not always necessary to go back and remember those things.

He thinks that early childhood events affect Westerners so much because Westerners are taught that these events are supposed to affect them a lot. So from the time we are young, we remember the events that happened and then when we are adults, we give them so much emphasis. Just look at the idea of the inner wounded child – everybody's supposed to go back and remember what happened when they were an infant, when they were three and when they were six. Because of this common preconception, and because of paying a lot of attention to it and then paying a lot of attention to the things that we remember, then we make ourselves feel a certain way.

What I am getting at, is that it doesn't have to be this way. If we think that way, it becomes that way. But it doesn't have to be that way because we don't have to think that way. So it depends what our preconceptions are and what preconceptions we pay attention to.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

Exactly. It also depends on how we interpret whatever happened to us in childhood. Two kids may have the same thing happen to them in childhood, but one kid may come out glowing from it and the other may come out wounded. This happens because of the way they look at the situation, and that has a lot to do with their conditioning from previous lives, their karma from previous lives, their habitual way of

thinking. It's not just the situation. A lot of the things that affected us strongly when we were children did so because part of us bought into the idea of them affecting us a lot.

I am sure we can all remember instances where we explained to someone an experience we had, and they responded: "Wow, how did you ever survive that?" and yet to us it was no big deal. We made it through okay. And then there were experiences which were really small things but somehow, they remained so vibrant in our memory. So, it's not an objective reality.

Let me talk a little bit about conditioning. We are conditioned by past lives. We are also conditioned a lot in this lifetime. But different people reacted differently to their conditioning. Ever since I was young, whenever I heard people make hostile statements about different groups of people, about people of another religion or another race, I would feel incredibly sad and repelled by that way of speaking. Yet, there will be other people whom, I am sure, would say upon hearing those words: "Yeah, this is definitely right. This is how I am going to live my life. These are the right values to have."

So, how you react in different situations depends on your previous conditioning. You may have heard something and gotten angry, but somebody else hearing the same thing may have felt satisfied. It is not just the situation, but our previous conditioning, our karma and our present afflictions\*, and how we relate to the experiences, that determine what happens from there.

I think this is very important to understand. We tend to look at things as independent objective realities, but they aren't. They are things that are produced by causes. If you change one of the causes, the result is not going to be the same. It's going to be something different.

Also, things do not just have one cause. Everything is a result of many causes. You change any one of the many causes, and the result changes. So it is not like anything *has* to exist. It exists simply because there were all the causes that made it exist. It is a dependent arising. If you change one of the causes, the result may not happen; the thing will not be there.

It is the same with all of our moods, feelings, internal phenomena that happen to us – they aren't solid objective things; they arise simply because there are causes. You change the causes and those things will not be there. They are not solid stuff.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

I am not saying that Buddhism can do the same thing that therapy can do. I think Buddhism has a very different aim and goal. Therapy is good for some things and Buddhism is good for other things, and there is an overlapping area too.

Also, saying that something happens due to karma isn't a way of shining it off and prepackaging it and shelving it. Of course, somebody can do that and say: "Oh, it's just karma," but then they might not really believe that in their heart. The thing is still going to eat away at them.

I think if somebody really thinks deeply about it and in their heart accepts something as being due to karma, it can have a very different effect. So, I don't think that saying that something is due to karma is a flippant way of dealing with that thing. It may be that it is something that doesn't jive with us, with where we are at right now.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

If we say: "I am an angry person," it makes everything so concrete and unavoidable. If we say: "I have a habit of getting angry," well, a habit is something that is just a sequence of similar events; it is a conditioned phenomena and can be changed. So, there is a subtle difference there. We think they are getting at the same thing, but we are really telling ourselves very different things. One is: "I am this, and everything is solid and concrete and inherently existent. That's my personality. That's my character. It cannot change." The other is: "I am this very fluid thing due to different conditionings, and I want to diminish these and increase the others." It is a very different way of looking at who we are.

As soon as we start looking at our feelings as these concrete things that arose as independent objective entities, then it becomes very difficult to free ourselves from them. We should look at ourselves as fluid people, as accumulations of different kinds of conditioning, instead of as concrete personalities.

There's a Chinese saying that it is easier to change a dynasty than to change a character. If we have the preconception that we cannot change, and we then pay incorrect attention to it, the preconception can prevent us from growing. For example, we could say, "This is my character. This is my personality. What can I do about it?" When we start to recognize the preconceptions and see that they are not necessary at all, we can tell ourselves every morning: "I have the Buddha nature. I can become a Buddha," instead of: "I am so filled with anger. I am so hung up!"

This is the thing about attention – what do we tell ourselves? Which of the many thoughts that pass through our mind do we pay attention to and repeat to ourselves? What are our mantras? "I am lousy." "I am terrible." "I am hopeless." It's just a thing of attention and habit. We have to change the habit, put the attention on something else, and then the whole world will look different. You would think the world changed but it didn't; only the mind changed.

### [Audience: Inaudible]

From a Buddhist viewpoint, what you look for is how those habits are getting played out now. You wouldn't have to trace the cause of that habitual attitude or reaction back to childhood. It is sufficient to see what is the habit as it's playing out in our adult life. If tracing it back to childhood gives you some new information and some understanding, great. But it is not always necessary to do that. Often, you can just deal with the affliction\* as it's coming up right now.

Those are the causes of the afflictions\*. It's interesting. Every time I teach this, I understand different things about it and different things come up. The more you think about this and keep this in mind and look at things in your life in this way, the deeper your understanding will be.

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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.'