

**Disadvantages of the Afflictions* and
How Karma is Accumulated by the Afflictions*** (lightly edited transcript)
by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. 23 Dec 92

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Disadvantages of the afflictions*

We have been going into the Four Noble Truths in more depth here in this middle scope of practice. Remember in the middle scope of the practice, the motivation of the middle level practitioner is to free him- or herself from cyclic existence and attain liberation.

In order to free ourselves from cyclic existence, we have to see its disadvantages, which are the first two noble truths – the truth of undesirable experiences and the truth of their causes. To free ourselves we have to know how to do it and what we are aiming for, and these are the last two noble truths: true cessation and true path. That whole discussion that we have just had on the different afflictions [[‘afflictions’ is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of ‘disturbing attitudes’](#)] was about the true cause – the real cause of all our undesirable experiences.

If you refer to your lamrim outline[#], you will see that under the heading “1. How the afflictions develop”, we have completed the first three points: recognizing the afflictions, order of development of the afflictions and the causes for the arousal of the afflictions. We are now on “d. the disadvantages of the afflictions*.”

Recognize that all the different afflictions* that we had been talking about actually reflect the state of our own mind. It is important to see that and to understand very clearly why it’s important to apply the antidotes to these afflictions*.

Afflictions* are the causes of conflicts

When these afflictions* are active in our mind, our mind gets very cloudy, very confused, and very disoriented. You can see that very clearly. When you’re angry, when you are upset, or when you are proud, the mind is confused. It’s disoriented. It’s not in tune with the situation. As a result, our relationships with other people suffer. If we look at all the times when we had problems with other people, when nations had problems with each other, when groups in society had problems, you can see it is the afflictions* working. They are the chief motivators behind the different conflicts that we find between people or groups of people.

Afflictions* ruin our ethical behavior

The afflictions* ruin our ethical behavior. They motivate us to get involved in the ten destructive actions. They are the cause of our guilt. Whenever we feel guilt or remorse, or we feel psychologically immobilized, or we hate ourselves, if we trace it back, we will find that it often has to do with different things that we have said or done or thought or felt that we feel quite ashamed of. These things are

usually things that have to do with the afflictions*.

I asked some psychologists about this. They see the afflictions* as faults too. By afflictions*, they are referring mostly to anger, resentment, and things like that which are commonly experienced by their clients. But unlike the Buddhists, they don't see the afflictions* as things to be removed completely from the root. They are just basically trying to get their clients to have "normal" levels of attachment and aversion. From a Buddhist viewpoint, any amount of attachment and aversion is abnormal, because to be normal is to have full capability.

The psychologists see some of the disadvantages of the afflictions*, but they don't try to eliminate them completely. I don't think they understand the deep level of the disadvantages, because I asked psychologists whether they talk about ethics with their clients and they replied in the negative. The psychologists helped their clients work with their guilt, but it seems that many of them do not see so clearly the relationship between guilt and afflictions*, and guilt and bad ethics. For example, one kind of guilt is feeling guilty about things that aren't our responsibility. In such cases, the affliction* involved is hatred towards ourselves.

Another kind of guilt that we suffer from is when we beat ourselves up over a mistake we made and we don't forgive ourselves. Here I think it's helpful to see the affliction* that causes us to make mistakes in our actions. If we put some energy into keeping our ethics clear, we would make fewer mistakes and we would have less guilt.

This becomes very clear when I look at how we use our speech. Speech is an incredibly powerful weapon to harm people with. We can do a lot of damage with it and then feel very bad about it afterwards: "Why in the world did I say that to them? My goodness! I can't believe that I said that. How did I make the other person feel?"

If we look back over the years at the different things that we have said to different people, we will find some of them pretty horrific. And we have been carrying this feeling of malaise inside of ourselves due to such speech. Here I think it's very important to recognize that the malaise, the uncomfortable or guilty feeling arises because of our own unethical conduct. If we got our ethics more together, then we wouldn't feel guilty about things. If we were able to discriminate what was our responsibility and what wasn't, we wouldn't feel guilty about things. If we understood purification practices, then we could free ourselves from the guilt that has been accumulating.

I think the ethical practice of any religion has a lot to do with our psychological state, our ability to avoid harming others and our ability to purify harmful actions when we do them. It is very much related to our self-image and our psychological state. Our ethics decline when we aren't careful about our afflictions*. Then it's very easy to start spiraling into judging ourselves, having guilt and all this other garbage that we heap on top of the regular garbage. We kind of invest in our garbage so that we create more [garbage], just like we invest the capital and then accumulate the interest. [laughter] These undesirable consequences are the functioning of various afflictions*. As we come to understand this, then it gives us some energy to note these afflictions* when they arise and to start to apply the antidotes, instead of just being lackadaisical.

Afflictions* harm us and others

Another disadvantage of the afflictions* is that when we are under their influence, we harm ourselves and we harm others. There are times when we inflict physical or mental harm to ourselves motivated by the afflictions*. When we harm other beings, it is often motivated by the afflictions*.

If you study history or sociology or related subjects, you will see the role that the afflictions* have played in creating human experiences. It's just incredible. It takes the afflictions* of one person in a position of power to set the whole world upside down. Look at Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia. When you have pride, resentment, attachment and desire for power, and you have this inconsideration for others and the lack of self-respect, and when you have power, you get other people involved in your whole trip and cause so much harm to others, destroying so many people's lives. You also create so much negative karma for yourself which perpetuates suffering in future lives.

Afflictions* are the chief impediment to our spiritual progress

The afflictions* are a bum deal if you think about it. [laughter] They really are because why is it that we

aren't Buddhas right now? Shakyamuni Buddha started out exactly like us, completely full of confusion and afflictions*. How come Shakyamuni is a Buddha now and we aren't? We used to all hang out on the beach together. How come he became a Buddha and we didn't? Well, we remained hanging out at the beach and he went and meditated. He gave up chocolate and we went out and bought it. [laughter] That's the only difference. The afflictions* are the chief impediment on the path to enlightenment, so if we can gather together all of our resources and our courage to combat them, then we too can become Buddhas without too much difficulty.

If you check, there is no inherent defect in us that prevents us from becoming a Buddha. It's basically the afflictions*, the karma that are the result of them and the subtle stains that they have left on our mind that prevent us from enlightenment. Besides that, there is no other reason why we are not Buddhas. So if we can get rid of these afflictions*, then the whole thing starts to crumble, and then we can finally arrive at some kind of state of real security and lasting peace instead of just spinning around in our confusion.

In addition, certain afflictions* impede us from creating good karma. And when we have created it, they impede it from ripening. They decrease our positive potential, thereby decreasing our happiness now and in the future. They impede the development of our wisdom and are a major block between liberation and us.

Afflictions* destroy our self-confidence

Afflictions* destroy our self-confidence, our self-respect. It's clear, isn't it, that when our mind is confused and full of junk, it's hard for us to feel confident, or to respect ourselves.

Afflictions* are our real enemies

That is why in *Bodhichayavatara* or *Guide to a bodhisattva's way of life* (it's an incredible text), Shantideva, the author, talked a lot about enemies and what the real enemy is in our life. He said that usually we are so terrified of the rapist, the murderer or the assailant. We see them as our real enemy and we will do anything to protect ourselves from their very horrible influence.

Shantideva said that these people, however, only harms us this lifetime. If they kill us, they just kill us once, we give up this body and that's it. That's all the harm they do. Or if they rape you, they just do it and then it's finished. Or if they steal something, they mug you, then it's done and it's finished. There is some harm for a limited amount of time this lifetime, and then it's over. But we regard these sentient beings as so evil and fearful and we want to destroy them.

Shantideva said that the afflictions* actually cause us much more harm. Every single suffering situation we encounter in our life is due to the afflictions*. The outside enemy may harm us one time, but our own afflictions* make us create the karma to be confused and to be in suffering and miserable situations again and again throughout our lives, and even in future lifetimes and past lifetimes.

All the different problems that we have experienced, all the karmas that we have been through, all the horrific things that we could experience in future lives – they all come from the afflictions*. When you look at the afflictions* this way, you see that they are much more of an enemy and a nuisance than anything else could possibly be. They cause us much more harm than any other sentient beings.

When an external enemy or another sentient being harms us, we try to destroy that person because we see how harmful they are. They are just another sentient being and they are going to die anyway, whether or not we harm or kill them. Yet we put so much energy into killing them and stopping them.

On the other hand, our afflictions* cause us much more harm and in greater intensity over a longer period of time. Yet, when they manifest, instead of kicking them out, we welcome them in: "Oh attachment, please, come on in! I feel good when I have attachment." "Oh anger, yes, come in my friend, I get a real adrenaline buzz off of you! I feel very powerful." "Oh pride, come on in, you are a good buddy! I feel really good and in control of things when I am proud." We extend such a warm welcome to all these afflictions* which are the real cause of our pain. It's most peculiar!

Therefore Shantideva said that we have the whole thing totally upside down. There is no reason to retaliate when sentient beings harm us, because they are going to die anyway and the harm they caused us isn't so great compared to that caused by our afflictions*. Our afflictions* cause us much

greater harm and they are not going to die. They even come with us when we die. That's why they are the ones that we should really look at.

If we free ourselves from the afflictions* which are the internal enemies, then we will have no external enemies. Why? This is because all the external enemies come from the negative karma that we created under the influence of our afflictions*. If we didn't have negative karma, nobody would try and hurt us. If we didn't have negative karma, nobody could hurt us. If we didn't have ignorance in our mind, then even if somebody beat us up, we wouldn't feel any pain. The whole reason we feel pain – whether from harm inflicted by others or not, because often we feel pain even when nobody is trying to harm us – is due to our karma, our afflictions* including ignorance. If we are able to free ourselves from these things, then we are totally impermeable to any kind of harm. There will be no external enemies.

When you think about it, it is quite incredible. You can see how the whole thing works psychologically. When we are hung up on something, we project it on somebody else. Whether the person means it or not, they appear to be trying to harm us. Or, we develop difficulties, problems or issues with somebody based on what's going on inside of us. That person is just some poor being who happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I think we have all had the experience where we didn't have a bad intention towards somebody else and yet that person was hurt and harmed by what we did. They had completely taken it in the wrong way. Well, we do the exact same thing, too. Although other people have no intention to hurt us, we receive pain anyway because we are so involved in projecting all our garbage on them.

That's why we say that if there is no inner enemy of the afflictions*, then nobody outside could possibly hurt us, whether they intend to or whether they don't intend to. Even if they intended to, we wouldn't get so upset and bent out of shape because we didn't have attachment, anger and the other afflictions*. Instead compassion will arise in our mind in response to the harm that they are giving us.

Do the checking meditation

This is something to think deeply about and to go over again and again. It's quite effective to do the analytical or checking meditation on this. Think of how terrible a murderer, an assailant, a mugger or a rapist is. Think of how fearful, evil, and awful they are, and yet how the harm they give us is nothing compared to the harm caused by our afflictions*. The external enemies will suffer from their actions and they will die one day; our afflictions* don't experience any harm at all when they harm us. If we think like that, we may experience some strong feeling: "Oh this is serious business. This is not joking stuff. First of all, I have to be attentive when the afflictions* arise in my mind. Second of all, I have to start applying the antidotes and stop being lackadaisical about the whole thing."

Why is our mind not transformed?

This kind of meditation gives us a lot of energy and courage to work with our mind. And of course, as soon as we start doing that, then we change. As soon as we start practicing, we change. I think one of the main reasons why we don't change is because we don't really practice. When you practice, you might not become Buddha by tomorrow. But there will definitely be some change. Something happens at a level that you can feel.

If we say: "Well, I have been going to teachings and listening to all this stuff for so long but I haven't seen any change in myself," then we have to ask ourselves if we have really practiced. In other words, when we get angry, have we tried to apply the antidotes to that? And have we practiced the antidotes to anger when we weren't angry so that we could get familiar with the antidotes?

When we are attached, do we apply the antidotes? Or are we just unaware of our attachment until the situation gets really painful and then we go, "Oh, it's my attachment"? And even then, do we apply the antidotes? I think if we fine tune things a little bit more, recognize the afflictions*, practice the antidotes, apply them and do this checking meditation, then something starts to change. And when I say 'checking meditation', it's nothing more than thinking about what you are hearing now, making examples in your mind, and explaining it to yourself.

More on how to do the checking meditation

I think it's really productive to spend time going over and thinking very clearly about these disadvantages of the afflictions*. I just outlined them, like: it impedes our wisdom. It reduces our self-confidence. It reduces our positive potential. It makes us feel guilty. It makes our mind cloudy. It makes us harm others. It makes our ethics decrease. But when you go home, sit and think about all these points and explain to yourself how it works. How does it make my ethics go down? How does it make me lose respect for myself? Really try and understand through your own life experience how these things work. You are explaining things to yourself when you do the checking meditation. If you can explain it to yourself, then it becomes much easier to explain it to other people when they ask you questions.

One person told me that when he does a checking meditation, he pretends that he is explaining it to his mother. He will try to think about it in simple terms, explaining things in a logical and grounded way.

So you have an internal dialogue with yourself. You can think you are explaining it to your mother, or think that you are explaining it to your friends, or you are explaining it to yourself, or whatever, and then the understanding really grows and deepens, and you get some kind of feeling in the meditation. So it's not an intellectual exercise: "Oh yeah the afflictions*..." It's not like that. Rather, you mull it over and look at your own life. Sometimes incredibly strong experiences can come from it; you experience strong feelings in your heart.

How karma is accumulated by the afflictions*

Two types of karma

We shall go on to the next point about how karma is accumulated by these afflictions*. There are two kinds of karma that we are talking about. One is mental karma or karma of intention. The second one are actions of body and speech derived from this mental karma and are sometimes translated as intended karma or intended actions.

Let me explain a little bit more what these mean.

Karma of intention

The karma of intention or the mental karma refers to the mental factor of intention. (We will go more into this when we study *lorig* or mind and mental factors.) There is a mental factor that accompanies all of our different perceptions. This mental factor is called intention. When this mental factor of intention is conjoined with compassion, it becomes a compassionate intention. If it's conjoined with anger or hatred, it becomes a hateful intention. So that intention is the mental karma. It is the thought that motivates us to do something.

Before we move our body, before we speak, there is this thought or intention that's motivating us to do it. By thought it doesn't have to be: "I am going to move my arm," and we go like this [moves the arm]. It isn't necessarily the case that we issue commands mentally to ourselves [before we do the action physically or verbally]. But the intention is present: the intention to say something, the intention to move your body, etc.

We might be quite aware of some of these intentions and are actively thinking it: "Now I am going to say this to this person." But there are also other intentions or thoughts that are present in our mind but which we do not recognize because our minds are so distracted outwards. We were talking last time about how after waking up and before you knew it, you were in front of the refrigerator. Or you were just sitting reading a book a few minutes ago and now you are in front of the refrigerator. You didn't think you spaced out in between, but you did. There was the intention in the mind to get up, go to the refrigerator and get something, but we weren't very aware of our intention, so we missed it.

Why it is helpful to do the breathing meditation

This is why the breathing meditation is very good, because by watching the breath and slowing down, we begin to become much more aware of our different intentions, the different things that come up. Sometimes you will find yourself off the meditation cushion really quick – you sit down but jump up in five minutes, and it's like: "I didn't mean to end that soon." Well, there was the intention to get off the cushion. We weren't aware of it; we just acted it out.

By setting aside some time to do the breathing meditation, you can watch the intentions come up. Sometimes they come up in a very strong way: “I *have got* to call Aunt Susan!” – an incredibly strong intention that you’re obsessed with throughout your meditation session. Or “I want to get up and have a bagel,” or “I want to go do this or that.” Many, many intentions come through the mind. When you are doing the breathing meditation, it gives you the opportunity to be much more aware of these intentions, and then you discriminate which intentions have good mental factors conjoined with them and which intentions have the afflictions* conjoined with them.

We accumulate a lot of mental karma through our intentions. For example, we have the intention to tell somebody off, or we have the intention to help somebody. We have the intention to have an affair outside of our relationship, or we have the intention to be kind to somebody else. All these different intentions create mental karma. That is why this type of karma is called the karma of intention.

Intended karma

The second type of karma is intended karma. In other words, first we have the intentions, then we act them out physically and verbally. These actions are intended actions or intended karma. For example, I might have the intention to tell somebody off. That’s the mental karma. When I am actually telling them off, that’s the verbal karma, which is intended karma.

Question-and-answer

[Audience: Inaudible]

You have intention all the time, but what are the mental factors that are conjoined with that intention? This is why we were talking about the afflictions* and different constructive mental factors, so that we can learn to be aware of which mental factors are accompanying our different intentions. You might be sitting there watching your breath, and then all of a sudden this thought comes up: “My employee criticized me.” You might have the intention after that of: “Well, this isn’t right. This isn’t fair, so I have to do something about it. I am going to say something to this person.” And then you look at the flavor of that intention and find that there is a lot of this restless energy of retaliation, and you go: “Whoops,” and you work with it.

Why did that thought [“My employee criticized me.”] come up in the mind to start with? Well, sometimes it’s because the person is in front of you, so it reminds you of it. Or it could be due to the different causes of the afflictions*. Sometimes, you will be sitting there watching your breath and the most incredible things will come into your mind and you wonder: “How did that get in there?”

It’s interesting to see how the mind works. You sit down and then all of a sudden you recognize that you are incredibly jealous of somebody. If you are able to trace it back, it may have started because you heard the dog bark outside. That reminded you of another dog you used to know that belonged to somebody, and that person was the one who introduced you to this other person who was the one that you were jealous of. And the mind just goes. [laughter]

[In response to audience:] Or your foot may not be that uncomfortable, but once your mind latches onto the intention of: “I have got to move my foot,” then... Sometimes you can watch it completely surge up and then just disappears again.

[Audience: Inaudible]

Well, what you would do is to step back and look at the emotion itself. Or if you have an intention to act as a result of that emotion, you can look at that intention. But if you are just having the emotion, you can step back for a minute and ask: “What does it feel like to be angry?” I don’t know about you, but my mind gets all caught up in so many stories when I am angry. It’s very interesting to just step back for a minute to see what it feels like to be angry: “What does it feel like in my body? Well, there is some energy here and there is some energy there. And what does it feel like in my mind when I am angry? What is the tone of my mind? So, just feel it. Do that research on what it feels like and that itself will give us a little bit of space so that then the intention to act out of that emotion doesn’t rise so quickly.

[Audience: Inaudible]

At that time you have the intention to apply the antidote to your urge to retaliate, so you start questioning yourself. At that point you have a positive intention, so that's a good mental karma. Both the intention to act negatively and the intention to apply the antidote to it or the intention to abandon that negative action are mental karma or karma of intention. You can see from this instance that karma of intention can be constructive or destructive.

[Audience: Inaudible]

See, we have primary consciousnesses and we have mental factors. Primary consciousnesses perceive the basic nature of the object. We have five primary sense consciousnesses: the visual consciousness, the auditory consciousness, the olfactory consciousness, etc, and we have a mental consciousness. Those are primary consciousnesses and they are the general door through which information is coming in. They perceive the general nature of the object.

And then we have a whole variety of different mental factors which perform various functions to make a complete cognition possible. One mental factor is intention that directs our mind towards that object. Another is attention that puts our attention on that object. And then we have a mental factor of feeling that feels either pleasure or pain or neutral toward that object. Then we may have positive mental factors arising like the wish to abandon a negative one, or the wish to help somebody, a compassionate mental factor, or a loving mental factor, or we might have a deceitful and dishonest one. The mental factors perform all sorts of various functions that give any particular cognition its flavor.

[In response to audience:] Some of them are like steering wheels. Some of them are reactions to things.

[Teachings lost due to change of tape.]

...you get reborn in the formless realm because you have developed that level of concentration before and you have attachment to that. Actually in the formless realms, you just have equanimity and they say that's even better than bliss. The mind is just stuck on equanimity. You can go all the way to what they call the concentration that's the peak of samsara, where the mind is very subtle and concentrated. But if there is no wisdom realizing emptiness, then you just stay at that level as long as you have that karma, and when you die, where you are going to be reborn next depends on which karma is going to ripen.

They say that we have been reborn as everything within samsara. Believe it or not, we have had single-pointed concentration in the past. We have been born in the form realm in the past. We have been born in the formless realm in the past. We have had the deluxe sense pleasure of the god realms, with as much food, boyfriends and everything that we could possibly want, and swimming pools, [laughter] or whatever your favorite thing is. It is wonderful there as desire realm gods until right before you die, when all the pleasure goes away and you become completely miserable.

We have also been born in hellish states of incredible suffering. We have been born as spirits. We have been born as cats, dogs, pigs, gophers and butterflies. You name it, we have been it all. When you think about this, that we have taken body after body in all these realms experiencing all the pain and bliss, and it hasn't gotten us anywhere, then that gives us some energy to say: "With my precious human life right now, let's get off this Ferris wheel, let's get liberated from this; this is really a drag. I just don't want to be involved in cyclic existence anymore, because the good things aren't worth the bad ones. It just doesn't pay off. It's sham deal."

I remember Lama Zopa Rinpoche teaching about this. We used to take the eight Mahayana precepts in the morning at Kopan. Rinpoche would give a talk to help set our motivation. That sometimes would last an hour, an hour and a half, maybe two hours, before he got around to giving precepts. [laughter] And I remember him going so much into all these different births from the top of samsara to the bottom of samsara, from having incredible pleasure, power and wealth to being totally miserable – just these whole changeable situations, up and down, again and again, like a bad movie that doesn't end.

I remember him really trying to get across to us that if we have gone through all these lifetime after lifetime and now we have a precious human life – we have met the Dharma, the teachings, the teacher, the time to practice – we can actually stop this whole thing. It's really powerful to think that we could

actually stop this cycle. That's why our life is so precious, because you can clearly see the potential to do something very valuable instead of staying on the merry-go-round.

This is why the wisdom realizing emptiness is so important because this is what gets us off the merry-go-round. To develop wisdom, we need to be able to concentrate our mind. To develop concentration, we need to have ethical foundation. So we come back to the three higher trainings: ethics, concentration, and wisdom.

[Audience: Inaudible]

You are saying that if we don't remember the pain, then we don't really feel like we have experienced it all in the past, and there will not be the strong wish to get off the Ferris wheel.

Well, at the beginning when we try to have the feeling that we haven't always been who we are now, and to imagine having been different beings, it might sound kind of intellectual. You know how when we were a kid, we used to imagine we were all sorts of things. In class plays, we would pretend that we were lions and tigers and bears. When you act those things out you really get into it. You can kind of feel what it might feel like. So, in your meditation you do that too: "What would it feel like to be born as this?" You try it on and pretend to get more of a feeling of: "Well, I haven't always been who I am." And then they say when we get single-pointed concentration, then we can actually have memories or be aware of specific previous rebirths.

[Audience: Inaudible]

Here, we need to look very much at the intention. We need to see if the intention is to cause harm to an enemy, or if the intention is to stop that person from creating more negative karma and stop other people from experiencing suffering, out of compassion. So I think a lot depends on the intention, the mental karma.

[Audience: Inaudible]

I think *tong-len* can be very effective; it can be very good. Doing *tong-len* is actively putting compassion and love into it. What you can do before you actively put the compassion and love in, is to imagine what it is like to be those other people or those other creatures, in the same way as when you were a kid you used to imagine what it would be like to be this or that. Or how we used to imagine what it would be like to be that person who looks really together. We fantasize all the time, so try and find those different aspects of ourselves in what other people are experiencing and acting. Then we can develop love for those beings, seeing that it would be wonderful if they were happy instead of experiencing all that misery and confusion, and with compassion thinking that it would be wonderful if they were to be free from the misery and confusion. And then we do the *tong-len*, the taking and the giving. Then the *tong-len* becomes very powerful, because you have a much deeper sense for what other people's experiences are.

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.'