

**Fourth Noble Truth: Becoming Convinced of the Nature of the Path to Liberation –
Part 1 of 2** (lightly edited transcript)
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We have finished talking about the Twelve Links and the Four Noble Truths, so that we can generate a very strong determination to be free from cyclic existence and all of its undesirable experiences. So if you look on the outline¹, we're moving on to another major point. Up until here, we've been thinking about the causes of suffering and how they keep us in samsara. And now, we're moving on to "Becoming convinced of the nature of the path to liberation". Here we're concentrating more on the latter two Noble Truths – true cessation and true path.

True cessation is the elimination of true sufferings and true causes, in other words, elimination of having to take rebirth again and again in a contaminated body and mind under the influence of afflictions² and karma. Cessation is the stoppage of that, the lack of that, the absence of that, the extinguishment of all that hassle.

The fourth Noble Truth, the true path, is the way to get there. It covers the things we need to develop in our mind in order to transform our mind into the true cessation.

Distinction between liberation and enlightenment, and the two levels of obscurations

Before I go into that, let me just talk a little bit about the difference between liberation and enlightenment and what we have to remove to attain each one of them. This information sounds technical but if you remember it, it will remove a lot of confusion later when these terms and concepts come up when you hear teachings from His Holiness or other lamas.

There are two levels of obscurations. One is called the afflicted obscurations³. The second is called the cognitive obscurations⁴. We have both of them.

The first level, the afflicted obscurations³, are:

- 1) all the afflictions² – the ignorance, attachment and anger, and the six roots and twenty auxiliary afflictions² that we went over previously, and
- 2) all the contaminated karma that makes us take rebirth in cyclic existence.

Those two together are the afflicted obscurations³. On the basis of the determination to free ourselves from cyclic existence, we realize emptiness. And then through repeated meditation on emptiness, we remove that level of obscurations: the afflicted obscurations³. We become what is called an arhat, or a 'foe destroyer' (English translation). It's called 'foe destroyer' because this kind of being has destroyed the foe of all the suffering or undesirable experiences and their causes.

In terms of the three levels of being, we're onto the middle level now. The first level was to get a good rebirth, and prepare for that. The motivation for the second level was to attain liberation. When you've

removed all the undesirable experiences and their causes and become an arhat, then you stay in nirvana. Nirvana is this completely blissful state where you're meditating on reality all the time, and all the berserkiness in your mind has been eliminated because you've realized how things exist. You've eliminated all those afflictions², all that contaminated karma that makes you take rebirth within the twelve links. That's liberation or arhatship. That's removing the first level of obscurations, the afflicted obscurations³.

The second level of obscurations are the cognitive obscurations⁴, and these are the residual stains of the afflicted obscurations³. It's like the afflicted obscurations³ are the onions in the pot. If you take out the onions, the pot still stinks. The onions aren't in there anymore, but you have the residual smell. The onions are like the afflicted obscurations³. Even if the afflicted obscurations are purified or cleansed from the mindstream, you still have the cognitive obscurations⁴. It's a subtle stain or veil on the mind that is like the imprint of the afflictions². The afflictions² are all eliminated, but there's some kind of veil or stain, something there. That produces a dual appearance, so that when you're not in meditation, you don't have a direct perception of reality. You're still seeing things as if they are inherently existent even though you don't grasp at them as inherently existent anymore.

We have these residual stains because since beginningless time, things have appeared to us to be solid and concrete and existing in and of themselves, and in addition to that appearance, we grasp at that as true. When you remove the afflicted obscurations³, you are taking away the grasping at it as true, but your mind is so habituated with them appearing as truly existent that that appearance still comes when you're not in meditation on emptiness. So you need to meditate on emptiness even more to purify that level of obscuration.

Now, the motivation you need to purify that level of obscuration has to be the bodhicitta, the altruistic intention. No other motivation is going to push you to also remove the cognitive obscurations⁴. If you don't have the bodhicitta and if you're basically doing the spiritual practice so that you can free yourself from cyclic existence, once you free yourself and you become an arhat, you've accomplished what you've wanted to do and you are going to hang out in that blissful nirvana. You still have the cognitive obscurations⁴, but they don't really bother you so much because you are just meditating on emptiness and you are out of cyclic existence, which is what you wanted. You don't have any more suffering. There is no particular motivation to go on and remove the subtle stains from the mind. So the motivation that makes you go on and purify the mind completely is the bodhicitta motivation.

Why is that so? Well, the thing about bodhicitta is that we cherish others even more than we cherish ourselves, or at least as much as we cherish ourselves. We want them to be free of cyclic existence. But there is no way we can possibly free them as long as we have the subtle stains on our mind, the cognitive obscurations⁴. As long as we have the cognitive obscurations⁴, our clairvoyance is incomplete. We can't really know everybody's karma very well. If we don't know people's karma very well, then we can't teach them exactly according to what they need to hear at the time they need to hear it. So it's really important to purify the mind completely so that the compassion is there to stick by everybody when you are trying to help them, and the wisdom is there so that you can completely know where they are at. Also, your skills are fully developed so you know what to do to help them.

In order to have those three things – the compassion, wisdom and skill – completely developed, we need to remove the cognitive obscurations⁴. And we do that with the motivation of bodhicitta. When we do that, we have attained what is called full enlightenment or Buddhahood.

I'm giving you lots of terminology here but if you can remember it, it makes a lot of things clear later on. You see different levels of practice, different levels of motivation, different levels of aspiration, different levels of achievement.

Right here, when we are talking about becoming convinced of the nature of the path to liberation, we are talking about the path to remove the afflicted obscurations³, the first level.

Also, His Holiness said don't think liberation is some place far away. Don't think, "How am I going to get there? The train is late! [laughter]" But to remember that liberation or nirvana is a state of mind. As soon as we recognize emptiness, realize the way things exist and use that realization to purify our mind, then liberation is right here.

The kind of body with which to break out of cyclic existence

The first point under the path to liberation is the kind of body with which we can break out of cyclic existence. We've just finished looking at all the different kinds of life forms there are. What kind is the best kind to break out of this cyclic existence? It's the precious human life. So we got it, folks! – the body with the best capacity to free ourselves of cyclic existence. When you think of cyclic existence with all the infinite number of beings – this universe is enormous! – and you think of all the animals and the insects, the fish, all these other beings and all these different places, you will see that all of these beings want lasting happiness, but it is very difficult in many of these life forms to have the tools that are needed to purify the mind and bring lasting happiness.

The rebirth that gives you all those tools, that gives you that capacity, is the precious human life, which is what we have right now. We have a human body, with human intelligence. We are born in a place where the Buddha has descended and the teachings exist, and the lineages are pure. We have access to teachings and to teachers and pure lineages and we have the material wherewithal and the religious freedom and the health and the sanity and everything else we need to really practice in the easiest and most effective way.

It's like we hit the jackpot. You can't think of anything better! I think this is very important for us to remember, because we tend, in our life, to pick out the one thing that didn't go well today and meditate on that, and get really hooked into that. We forget how fortunate we are just to have this life that we do have, the capabilities that we do have. It's very important to remember that.

The kind of path to follow to break out of cyclic existence

The second point here is the kind of path to follow to break out of cyclic existence.

Once we've got the basis, the precious human life which is the most advantageous of all the different realms and bodies and life forms we've had in infinite, beginningless time, then what path are we going to follow? When you think about this – from infinite beginningless time – and that we have a precious human life right now, it's really quite remarkable. Having got this, what is it that is going to lead us out of our continual habitual confusion and constantly recurring problems? What is it that is going to free us from this? The path is called the Three Higher Trainings. Those are the things that we need to develop in our mindstream in order to free ourselves. These Three Higher Trainings are ethics, concentration and wisdom.

We ask, "Why are ethics, concentration and wisdom the path out of cyclic existence? What's so good about them? How come they're going to work and nothing else is going to work?"

Well, let's go back and remember what's the cause of cyclic existence. What's the cause? Ignorance. Ignorance is having a false sense of self, this grasping on to the false appearance of a truly existent or inherently existent self, a self that is independent from our body and mind, that exists solidly as some kind of essential, unchangeable thing that exists without depending on anything else. This concept of a self that we grasp on to so much causes infinite problems. Not only do we grasp on to ourselves as inherently existent, but we grasp onto everything as inherently existent.

Only wisdom can remove our ignorance

So this ignorance is not only of persons, but it is also of phenomena. Persons meaning the self, phenomena meaning our body, our mind, the flower, your pay check, everything else, all the other things. We grasp on to all of them as being inherently existent, so we look at everything as if it has some kind of inherent quality making it what it is.

Talking about grasping at inherent existence, look at how we deal with problems -- when we have a problem, we have a problem, don't we? Our problem is real and it's solid and it's there and it's made of concrete and it's independent. It's like when we have a problem, we feel like we're encountering this solid block, there's no way we can deal with it at all, because it's this solid, rigid, fixed thing. The way we approach things is, we're grasping at them as being inherently existent. "My problem." Or rather, "My problem is you. You're my problem." Everything just has this incredible solidity.

Similarly, our pain and our pleasure becomes very solid. We don't see these things as dependently arising, as having causes, as changing, as having parts or being dependent on labels. We see them as PAIN, PLEASURE – everything is just really solid.

All the phenomena, we grasp at them as inherently existent. Definitely we grasp on to our body. What happens when you have to jam on your brakes and stop really quickly? What happens? You know that feeling that comes? We're definitely grasping on to the self at that time. More specifically, we have a lot of fear about this body. When you go into a hospital, you are trembling. When you go into the doctor's office or the dentist's office, there's a lot of trembling. We're not only seeing the self as inherently existent, we are also seeing our body as inherently existent. We are so afraid of losing this solid, real thing, this precious bunch of concrete.

This ignorance causes all the problems. It is the source of all the problems. Since this ignorance is grasping at a false way of existence, then the only thing that is going to be able to remove it, is a wisdom that sees that the false thing that you've been grasping at, in fact doesn't even exist. The only way to remove that ignorance, is to see that what it thinks is true, isn't true at all.

That's why the wisdom realizing emptiness is the real antidote to cut off cyclic existence. That's why nothing else can do it. Without this wisdom, nothing else sees things as they are. No other mind state has the ability to remove this grasping at true existence, this grasping at solidity. Nothing else can do it. This is very important to note, because in the spiritual supermarket of America, you will hear many, many paths to enlightenment. You'll have to listen carefully and see what they say is the cause of cyclic existence and what they propose as the antidote to remove that cause. Really check up.

We're analyzing deeply here because if you don't, it's very easy to be swayed by a lot of nice, sweet words, like 'dwell in the infinitude of space'. 'Let your mind rest in the blissful, infinitude of space.' It sounds great, doesn't it? 'Let go of all concepts and just rest in the infinitude of blissful light.' This sounds great, but what is the meaning of all those nice-sounding words? Has that teaching, has that path really isolated what is the cause of cyclic existence? Does it know what needs to be eliminated in order to be free? It's like if you have a whole lot of people in your house, and one of them is a thief, you have to know which one is the thief and how to kick him out. We need something that really pinpoints the problem here. That's very important.

"It's much nicer to rest in the infinitude of bliss," -- I don't know about you, but those words, to me, means having all the space to make up my own path to enlightenment. I make up my own bliss. I make up my own infinitude. And I still continue to make 'me' very, very concrete. Everything is still really concrete. That's why we went through all those teachings in the last weeks talking about the evolution of cyclic existence, the causes, and how ignorance perceives things so that we can be convinced that wisdom is the thing that eliminates it. It is a very specific kind of wisdom. It's not just any old kind of wisdom. It's the wisdom that can see that there's no truly existent person there. We have been having this perception of a solid *me* that's so special, that's so vulnerable, that needs to be protected at all costs, and we grasp on to this so tightly. This wisdom says, "Hey! This thing that you think exists, actually, there's nothing there." "There's nothing there, folks. What are you grasping on to? That thing doesn't even exist." It really pulls the rug out from under your feet.

Concentration is necessary to make the wisdom effective

Wisdom is the thing that cuts the root of cyclic existence. In order to make this wisdom really effective, we have to have concentration. We have to be able to keep our mind stable, to keep it on one point. We have to have this ability to concentrate, because otherwise, we won't be able to keep our attention on reality and we won't be able to go deep in our meditation, because our mind will be all over the place. We can tell that already, can't we? We can see the necessity of concentration.

The importance of ethics in helping to build concentration

Then, to have concentration, what aids in building concentration is ethical conduct. Why is ethics so important for the development of concentration? Why can't we just sit down and do samadhi? Forget about abandoning the ten negative actions. Who wants to stop criticizing people anyway? [laughter] Who wants to stop lying when it's actually quite convenient? Let's just meditate. Get single-pointed concentration. Why do we need ethics? This is very, very important, especially in America. [laughter] I mean all over the world, but especially here.

Why is ethics so important for your meditation practice? They give the example of when you want to chop down a tree, you need a sharp axe. You need to be able to hit the tree in the same place every time, and you need to have a very strong and firm body. If you're missing any of that, you're not going to knock the tree down. The axe is the wisdom realizing emptiness, because that's what cuts the tree. The tree here in this case is ignorance. You need to be able to hit the tree in the same point every time, because if you hit up here and you hit down there, like me trying to do it, it's going to be a disaster, you're never going to chop the tree down. So concentration is the ability to get the axe, the wisdom, in the same place, time after time after time. And in order to be able to do that, your body has to be firm and strong. The firmness and the strength, that is ethics. That comes from good ethics.

Some people who act unethically may think what they do isn't really bad, at one level. But I think when they're home alone, they have a difficult time being alone with themselves, because some kind of remorse and confusion comes up. In addition, by acting unethically, you put all this karmic imprint on your mind. What were the causes of cyclic existence? Disturbing attitudes and karma. Without good ethical behavior, we're putting more negative karmic imprints on the mind. So it just adds more obscuration.

Questions and answers

Q1: Since our human body gives us the best basis with which to break out of cyclic existence, isn't that a reason to grasp onto our body?

I'm sure we can find many reasons to grasp onto our body. But we can realize the importance of our precious human body without grasping on to it, because if our mind gets really tight over our body, that doesn't benefit us. I've seen this happen sometimes -- this is the way I was at the beginning of my Dharma practice. I grasp on to my precious human life, and there was this feeling of, "I've got to use every single minute, exactly perfectly, because otherwise I am going to waste my life!" [laughter] My mind was so tight, not this spacious, relaxed mind. That's not conducive for practice. We should recognize the body's good qualities without making it solid and concrete.

Q2: Shouldn't we be concerned with taking good care of our body and keeping it healthy?

Definitely we should be concerned for our physical survival. But there's a difference between keeping our body healthy with wisdom, and keeping the body healthy with grasping. And you can tell, there are two different mental qualities about that, isn't there? There's a difference when you just want to keep your body healthy because you care about yourself, or when you care about your spiritual practice. When you're doing this because of some sense of self-respect and wanting to keep yourself well to practice the Dharma, versus, "Well, I've got to do aerobics, I've got to go to the beauty shop and I've got to go the gym... and I have to have my special jogging suits and my walkman to jog with. I've got to have skates with pink rolls and green laces..." [laughter]

Q3: Why do some practitioners aim to achieve rebirths in the pure lands to further their practice if the human body is the best vehicle to remove obscurations?

Definitely, rebirth in pure lands is good. But what they say is that some bodhisattvas who are in pure lands want to practice the tantra because it enables them to remove their obscurations very quickly, so they pray to be born with a precious human body (with its physical elements which are conducive for tantric practice).

Q4: Are there Buddhas on this earth, and is there any tangible way to distinguish them from ordinary people?

Don't think that the arhats and Buddhas moved somewhere else. Just remember, Shakyamuni Buddha was on this earth, and thousands of people became Buddhas and arhats under his guidance, and they were here.

If you're asking whether there's any medical way, like if a Tibetan doctor could feel somebody's pulse and see if that person is a Buddha? I don't know. [laughter]

The thing is, you have people like His Holiness whom we regard as a Buddha, and His Holiness gets sick and the doctor comes and treats him. We say that this is a manifestation that he is doing for our benefit, so that he can appear like us. What is really going on in his body, I have no idea. His mental experiences are very different. He gets cold, flu and everything else. But the way people look at it is, if he gets sick, it is a reflection of our karma.

Also, due to the kindness of the Buddhas, they appear in ordinary form so that we can relate to them, because if we can relate to them, then it gives us some kind of inspiration that we can become like that too. Whereas if, say, Chenrezig opened the door and walked in with 1000 arms and a body made of light, [laughter] we may not be able to relate. So we say it's the kindness of the Buddhas to appear in bodies like ours and act like us so that we can have some sense of relationship and we can aspire to become like them. We can see that we are capable of developing extraordinary qualities just like them.

Advantages of observing the higher training in ethics

Next under the path to follow to break out of samsara, we have the advantages of observing the higher training in ethics. You'll find that between now and the end of this outline¹, we're really concentrating on ethics until we get to the bodhicitta, the next major section.

You might ask, "Why are we concentrating on ethics when you said it was ethics, concentration and wisdom?"

Well, it is ethics, concentration and wisdom, but remember that here we are talking about the middle scope, the being who aspires to be free from samsara and attain liberation? Here, what we're doing is in common with the person of middle scope. The middle scope person wants liberation, but what we're doing is only *in common with* that person. We say it's 'in common with', because it's not exactly the same. We don't want to stop at liberation. We want to go on to enlightenment. The higher trainings of concentration and wisdom are taught in the next phase of the path, the trainings on the path for higher capacity or higher motivated person. These are done in-depth there, because it's better for us in the development of our mind, to establish the basis of ethics, then generate bodhicitta and then develop the concentration and wisdom, instead of first developing the ethics, concentration and wisdom, and then go back and generate the bodhicitta. If we do the ethics, concentration and wisdom first, we might wind up in nirvana and then we stay there and we hang out there because we have no motivation to go on any further.

To attain full enlightenment, they say it's quicker if we first generate the bodhicitta and then zero in on the concentration and wisdom. That doesn't mean that you ignore concentration and wisdom while you're developing bodhicitta. You can still meditate on those things, but it means that you're really emphasizing the bodhicitta, keeping that in your mind all the time. In this session, because we're doing the practice in common with the middle level being, we're only talking about ethics. The teachings on concentration and wisdom will come when we talk about the bodhisattva path, and how a bodhisattva is going to generate ethics, concentration and wisdom to become a Buddha.

What is the higher training of ethics? It's principally abandoning the ten destructive actions. The 'pratimoksha' vows or the vows of individual liberation, these are the vows that help us abandon the ten negative actions. 'Pratimoksha' is a Sanskrit word that means individual liberation. The pratimoksha vows are the five vows of a lay person, the eight vows that you take for one day when you do it without bodhicitta. They're the monks and nuns vows, both novice and fully ordained. All those are included in the pratimoksha vows.

The higher training of ethics here then is principally abandoning the ten destructive actions through keeping whatever level of the pratimoksha vows that we are capable of. Even if you don't take any of the pratimoksha vows, it's still about abandoning the ten negative actions.

They say that the higher training of ethics is like the capital with which you can do business. If you spent some time and you've developed your ethical conduct, then it's like you have a very good foundation for the rest of the path. You have the capital to do business. You have a reservoir of good karma and you don't have a bank account full of negative karma, speaking crassly here.

The thing is that, as you keep good ethical conduct, especially if you keep vows of whatever level you're keeping, after a while, you feel the change in yourself, and you feel like you have some support in your

practice from keeping the vows. Many of you have taken the five vows. It's something to reflect on -- what were you like a year or two or three years ago, before you took the five lay vows? How was your spiritual strength then? Compare it to how you are now, and you can begin to see that yes, you have developed some kind of foundation, some sense of confidence.

[Teachings lost due to change of tape.]

Role of the Sangha in determining the existence of the Buddha's doctrine

They say that the Sangha community – the fully ordained monks and nuns in a place – determines the existence of the Buddha's doctrine in that place. Why do they say that? Because when the monks and nuns take vows and keep vows, they are practicing the fundamental basis of the Buddha's teaching. Pure ethics is like step one of the Buddha's teaching. People who have taken vows, who live within that conduct, have that. They're keeping level one of the Buddha's teachings. So that establishes the existence of the Buddha's teachings in a place.

The question may come up, "Why can't lay people do that?" There are lay people who keep the five lay vows. That's very true. The keeping of the five lay precepts is really valuable and very, very special. But you can also see that there's a difference between keeping five lay precepts and the full ordination. There is a difference. As a lay person, you can go to the disco, you can turn on the stereo. You can wear makeup. You can dress up. You have a lot more opportunity to distract yourself. Not that any of these things are bad in and of themselves. They certainly aren't. There is nothing wrong with music. Music is not negative karma. Wearing nice clothes is not negative karma. But it's just that it gives you more opportunity for distractions. True? Not true?

When you're ordained, you don't have to sit and look in your closet every morning thinking, "What do I put on?" [laughter] You just don't have that problem. You don't need to look at all the coupons for the hair cutting places and how to have your hair styled. You don't need to look at the magazines at what the latest fashions are, and the sales that are going on at all the department stores. You don't have to do all that stuff. It's just easier in that way.

So the Sangha in a place determines the existence of the Buddha's doctrine in that place, but this does not establish a power hierarchy. We have to look at this because especially in America, I have read some of the American Buddhist publications and they say, "We have got to stop hierarchy. Who wants hierarchy? Everybody's equal." So somehow in some people's mind, they begin to see a Sangha-lay people hierarchy, like the Sangha is holy and noble and they have special rights and privileges, and everybody else is just supposed to serve them. That is not the way.

It's not a hierarchy like, "All monks and nuns are special and they can impose their will and do a big power trip." It's not like that. It's just seeing that there are different levels of commitment, different levels of practice, and this is something that some people have really committed themselves to, and so that part of them that's committed, we respect. It's not a thing of some Sangha member showing a tag of, "I am a monk or a nun", to legitimize doing all sorts of not very nice things. It's not a hierarchical thing of having a lot of power that you can then abuse. Or at least it shouldn't be like that.

So it's not like the person of the monk or nun is holy or special. The person is just a person like everybody else. They're not inherently existent. It's the vows in that person's mindstream that you show respect to. So when you go to a big Dharma gathering like when His Holiness comes here, then you let the monks and nuns sit in front, not because they're pulling rank or something like that, but just that part of them that has vows, you show respect to.

In a similar way that part of you that keeps vows, that has the five lay precepts, you respect yourself for that. And you respect everybody else in the group for the vows that they keep. It doesn't mean that every behavior that somebody with vows does is wonderful. Monks and nuns certainly aren't Buddhas. We make a lot of mistakes. At least I do. And it's the same with other Dharma practitioners. It's not that somebody is a Buddhist, and therefore everything they do is perfect. It's that part of them that keeps good ethics, that keeps their vows, that is definitely worthy of respect. And that part in ourselves that keeps good ethics, that keeps vows, is worthy of respect. That's why when you take the eight precepts for twenty-four hours, at the end of the day, you look back and you rejoice. You rejoice at what you did because it's something worthy of respect, worthy of rejoicing.

Questions and answers on the ethics of the Sangha

Q1: If there is a monk or a nun who doesn't keep very good ethics, can they still teach and is it wise for us to follow their teachings?

That is something that every individual has to look at. Because the thing is, we never know who is a Buddha and who isn't, and so somebody who looks like they are keeping bad ethics, we may not know exactly what's going on in their mind and what they're doing. So we can never really judge what the person is. But we can say that behavior is not a good role model for us.

You sometimes hear instances of very great masters who are doing things that seem really unethical. You read the stories of the great siddhis in India, and some of them acted pretty weird to ordinary eyes. You had Tilopa who would kill fish and then of course bring them back to life. He would kill them and fry them and eat them and then transfer their consciousness to other bodies. Something like that. It was this really high level of practice.

Then you have this whole thing of high practitioners having sexual contact. The thing is that on very high levels of the tantric path, that is allowed, but there are many vows and things like that governing it. Or sometimes you have people drinking. Again, sometimes, I have heard stories of people getting completely drunk and delivering incredibly accurate teachings. I have no idea how that works! I certainly couldn't do that, and I know if I drank, forget it! So it's like I don't know what that person is doing. I can't comprehend their behavior. But I do know that I can't do that behavior.

The tricky thing in here is trying to figure out whether this is a high level being who is doing these things but their motivation is really pure, or if it's somebody who has a lot of titles but their ethical conduct is really sloppy. It's touchy, and we often don't know. I know for myself personally, I really need the example of teachers who keep very, very good ethical conduct because I don't have the wisdom to be able to discriminate when you can drink and when you can't drink. That's just too high on the level of the path for me. I just need another example for me to follow.

Similarly, while somebody is doing a lot of negative actions, they might be a very great master. I don't know. I don't know their level of achievement. But I do know that living in that kind of situation would make me very, very confused. So the thing is, sometimes we can go and we can hear teachings by these people, but we may not take them as our personal teachers. There is a difference between going and hearing teachings and going and hearing a lecture and saying, "This person is my spiritual teacher." But then you'll find other people who have some of these masters, their external conduct is maybe drinking and womanizing, but they seem to help many people, and many people come to Buddhism in that way. And many people seem to tame their mind in that way. So you can't deny that they have some beneficial effect on others.

Q2: Should we make use of advice or information for our practice, only from the people we respect?

If the information is good and it improves your practice and understanding, use it. It doesn't even matter if a dog or a cat or a drunk says something. Whoever says something that helps you practice, you should practice that. Even other religions. If you go to church on Sundays to make your mother happy, because somebody is taking communion and they give a sermon about keeping good ethics, that's something we should practice. It doesn't matter whose mouth it comes out of.

The advantages of keeping vows

So, we maintain the Buddha's teachings as a living tradition by keeping vows.

The advantage of keeping vows rather than just abandoning negative actions without keeping a vow, is that when you have a vow, every moment you're not violating it, you're accumulating good karma. There're two people sitting in this room. One of them has a vow not to kill. The other one doesn't have a vow not to kill. In terms of their current behavior, both of them are not killing. But the person who doesn't have the vow, they don't have any special motivation not to kill at this particular moment. It's like they've never really thought about it, that situation is not part of them. But the person who has the vow, they've made a very conscious determination, "I'm not going to kill," and so just by sitting here in this room and not killing, they are accumulating that good karma and abandoning that negative karma, purifying the

negative karma. So the advantage of taking vows is that you allow this accumulation of positive potential.

In addition, it helps you clarify a lot of confusing situations in your life. It's like we say to ourselves, "I really don't want to lie," but then the next time a situation comes up where it's much more convenient to lie, then we lie. Well, when you take a vow, what you're doing is you're looking at the situation beforehand, you're making a very strong determination and then when you get in that situation, your strong determination will carry you on, and that rationalizing mind that looks for whatever is convenient to please the ego, it can't rise up as strongly, because you've made a very firm determination where you want to go.

Like if you take the fifth lay precept, which is to avoid intoxicants. If you take that, then it just clarifies a whole bunch of situations. Whenever you go out or you go to a party or whatever, and somebody asks you if you want to drink, you know you'll say "No." You've thought about it beforehand. You know that that is what you are going to do. Somebody offers you a drug, you just make the decision of, "No, thank you." It doesn't throw you into any conflict of, "Oh, maybe I should do it a little bit. This person is my friend and if I don't do it, we won't have anything in common. They're going to think I'm weird. It's just a little bit. It doesn't really matter anyway. I won't do it anymore. It'll make this person happy. Definitely if it makes the other person happy for me to drink something, then I should." Okay? You know the logic? [laughter]

So here, when we take the vow, we're just leaving that stuff behind. It makes the mind a whole lot clearer. There is a lot of benefits in this life and future lives in keeping vows.

Another one that I think is very powerful to think about, is that for example, if we've taken the precept or the vow not to kill, then that means every other sentient being in this whole world is safe around us. That's a tremendous thing to offer sentient beings, this safety. That nobody has to worry about their life when they are around us. Talking about world peace, this is a very substantial commitment and contribution to world peace.

Or we take the precept not to steal. That means every single sentient being doesn't need to worry about their personal belongings when they're around us. Everybody can relax. When we are around, nobody needs to lock their doors. Nobody needs to get paranoid. Nobody needs to worry about loaning their money and not getting it returned. It is a very great contribution to the welfare of sentient beings when we take vows. It's very directly benefiting them.

Similarly, if we stop lying, that means every single sentient being can trust what we say. And trust is a very important thing in creating harmony in a society. When we have that precept not to lie, then we create a bond of trust with every single sentient being, because they can trust us.

Similarly, the vow to abandon unwise sexual behavior. That means everybody in the world can relax around us. Can you imagine being a woman walking down the street, knowing that every single man you walk by had a precept against sexual misconduct? Wouldn't it change how you feel as a woman walking down the street? Sorry men, to point you out [laughter]. But it does make a difference. It makes an incredible difference how much people can just relax and stop worrying.

When we take precepts and live in them, it's a tremendous contribution to harmony in the society and world peace. It's very important to remember this, because sometimes, we forget to rejoice at the good things that we do.

I think I'll continue with the advantages in the next session. Anybody has any more questions?

More questions and answers

Q1: Is there any situation that justifies white lies?

Unless it's something to protect somebody's life.

Q2: Is it alright if we exaggerate or say something untrue as a joke?

You have to be very careful. This is a good question. I notice with Lama Yeshe, whenever he cracked a joke, he always mumbled, "I'm joking" afterwards. And I had always wondered, "That's funny. Why does he do that?" And then I watched, and you know how sometimes one person is joking but the other person doesn't know they're joking? And they get really hurt and offended? Then I begin to go, "Oh, that's why Lama always says 'I'm joking.'" He really made it clear that it was a joke. So it's important to be very clear about that. Especially with kids. Not to lie to kids as a way of teasing them, like, "The boogie man is going to come and get you." Or "There are caterpillars crawling up your back." You watch what adults say to kids.

Q3: What constitutes breaking of the killing precept from the root?

To break the killing precept completely, it's volitionally killing a human being. But included as branches of this killing precept is killing any living being. However, you break it completely from the root when you volitionally kill a human being.

If you go out and kill an animal to eat it, it's killing and it's negative karma. People often say, "Well, what about the Eskimos? What about if you're born in a place where there are no vegetables, what are you going to do?" Samsara aren't fun!

In a situation where people kill for survival, it would be a different kind of karma from that of a hunter going out and shooting a deer in Washington. But it still is taking life. Also, if it's done with a sense of regret, that lightens the karma.

Q4: Are vegetables considered sentient beings? What about trees?

Vegetables aren't considered sentient beings. So you can eat carrots and not worry.

Sometimes they say certain spirits take rebirth inside of trees. But generally, trees aren't sentient beings. But then it's interesting because when they chop trees down or things like that, sometimes they do mantras in case there is a being there.

Let's meditate for a few minutes.

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1. 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>
 2. 'Afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes.'
 3. 'Afflicted obscurations' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'deluded obscurations'.
 4. 'Cognitive obscurations' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'Obscurations to omniscience'.