

Cultivating Bodhicitta through the Seven Points of Cause and Effect – Part 1 of 4

(lightly edited transcript)

by Ven. Thubten Chodron®, at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. 26 Apr 93

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We're on the section on developing bodhicitta. For this, your outline¹ is important. The outline was made for a purpose, so that you'd have all the main points listed. We'd know what they are and be able to meditate on them. The outline will help you follow the teachings, and it'll also help you to remember the order in which to do the meditation when you're at home. All these things that we're talking about in class are for the purpose of meditation. It's not just information gathering, and it's not just knowledge. But they are things that we really have to think about repeatedly, over and over and over again so that it seeps into our mind at some level or another. Whatever you hear in class, try and think about it when you go home, really apply it to your life, and get some taste from it.

We're at "The Actual Stages of How to Cultivate the Altruistic Intention". If you can remember the different steps of the bodhicitta meditation, go over them. Cause and effect works, and if you go over these again and again, you will develop bodhicitta. If you create the cause, you get the result.

It's important also to think of the advantages of bodhicitta, not just the ones listed here in the outline, but also the additional ones I went over about how bodhicitta is our best friend, and how it's a good anti-depressant. It's good for loneliness, and these things. To really think about that in order to get an understanding of how it works in your life. The more we can see the benefit of something, then the more keen we are to practice it.

[Review of equanimity meditation](#)

Last time, we went over the equanimity meditation. That's where we imagine the friend and the enemy, or the friend and the person you don't get along with. Whenever it says "enemy" in the teachings, it doesn't mean arch enemy, it just means whoever it is who bugs you at any particular moment. For that moment, they are a person you don't get along with. A friend, a person you don't get along with, and a stranger – visualize these three, asking ourselves why we're attached to one, have aversion to the other,

and apathy towards the third. Recognize that these feelings come from a very self-centered viewpoint. We create our own friends, people we don't get along with, and strangers. We create them in our mind and we believe what we create.

Incredible, isn't it? We make so many problems for ourselves. A lot of Dharma is just the process of undoing our hallucinations, stopping making problems for ourselves. Allowing ourselves to be a little bit happier. Saying that these are creations of our mind is one way to meditate on it. Also, see that these relationships are not fixed. They continually change. The person who is kind to us today isn't kind to us the next day. The person who is mean to us today is kind to us the next day. And so because everybody has harmed us at some point, and everybody has helped us at some point, then there's no reason to cherish some beings over others, or hate some beings over others. Everybody has done everything to us before. It is very helpful to think like this.

Freeing ourselves of the tendency to help our friends and harm our enemies

If we're able to free ourselves from this attachment, aversion and apathy, then we automatically avoid something that most worldly people consume a whole lot of time in, which is helping their friends and harming their enemies. When you look back at your life, how much time did you spend helping your friends out of attachment, not out of genuine sincere love, but out of attachment to get something back? How much time did we spend harming the people we don't like? We futilely spend so much time doing this! At a certain point we look at that and say, "This is stupid! This is what politicians do. I don't need to do it [laughter]."

This is also what animals do. Look at the animals. This is what they do – help their friends, harm the ones they don't like. There's nothing particularly gracious or noble about being like that. I love teaching this at Tushita. Those of you who were at Tushita -- remember the little dogs and then the monkeys coming? The monkeys would sit up high and the dogs would be underneath barking, "This is our property. You can't come here!" They're exactly like people, except maybe people take out their shotgun, or they scream in a different language. Very similar! When it's lunch time, the dogs would come and sit on your lap. They're nice and friendly. You feed them and they love you. That's the same way people are.

This whole thing of helping friends and harming the ones we don't like, even animals do this. This whole mind of attachment and aversion just makes us waste our life that way. It's good to look back at your past and see how much time has been spent like that, and really make a determination to try and develop this equal feeling towards everybody so that we don't have to waste time in that way. Remember that this equal feeling is an equal openness. It's an equal concern. It's not a withdrawal or detachment from sentient beings.

Equanimity does not mean withdrawal from sentient beings

And this is something, I think, that we Westerners often go to the extreme of, when we get into Dharma. It's that we become so aware of our attachments and all the problems that come with our attachments, that we then go to the extreme of, "Well, I'm just going to withdraw from everybody, because all the contact I have is out of attachment." We eliminate any kind of positive feelings for others, confusing positive feelings with attachment.

It is true. Sometimes, especially when our mind isn't real astute, it's very hard to discriminate between these things. As soon as we have positive feelings, we very easily generate attachment. But the way to combat that isn't to withdraw from society. It's to become aware of how the attachment works, and the futility and the un-reality of the attachment, and then to let that go. But to remember that care and concern for other people is very much a part of Buddhist practice.

Especially at the beginning, a lot of our relationships might be really mixed with both love and attachment. Some might be definitely more towards the attachment side, and some mixed with love and attachment. What we need to do is work at freeing ourselves from the attachment, and developing the love. Remember that that love can be not just for that one person, but for everybody, so that when you walk into a room, you can feel that same affection you feel for one person that's really close to you, for everybody in the room. That would be really nice, wouldn't it? Wouldn't it be nice to walk into work and just feel the same love for everybody there that you felt for the person you were in love with, except without all the clinging? It would be very nice, wouldn't it? Work would be great! This is what we're aiming for.

One technique to develop this is the seven points of cause and effect, which helps us to develop not just love and compassion, but also the altruistic intention to become a Buddha for the benefit of others. Another technique is through equalizing and exchanging self and others.

Seven points of cause and effect

Tonight we'll start the technique of the seven points of cause and effect. Out of these seven points, the first six are the cause:

- 1) Recognizing that each sentient being has been one's mother
- 2) Remembering their kindness to you as your mother
- 3) Wishing to reciprocate that kindness
- 4) Heart-warming love—seeing others as lovable
- 5) Great compassion
- 6) Great determination

With these six as the cause, then the result is (7) the altruistic intention, the bodhicitta.

1) Recognizing that each sentient being has been one's mother

Developing a feeling for rebirth and multiple lives

The first of the seven points is recognizing that everybody has been our mother. This is a very difficult point, because understanding this point means having some feeling for rebirth and for multiple lives. We come right back to the issue that we talked about at the beginning – this whole idea of rebirth and the fact that we aren't just who we are in this life. We aren't just this body. We try to get a feeling for this, that our body and mind are two separate things.

The body has its causes. Our consciousness has its causes.

The causes for the body, we trace back to the sperm and egg of our parents, and then of our grandparents, and great-grandparents.

When we look at the cause for any moment of mind, we can say it's the previous moment, and we trace back that continuum to the time we were an infant, to the time we were in the womb, to the time of conception. Where does the mindstream at the time of conception come from? Nothing starts without causes, it had to have a previous cause. So we say the cause of the mind at the time of conception is the previous life, the mindstream in the previous life. We get a feeling for that, that who we are isn't just this body.

I think one of our biggest difficulties in understanding this is the grasping at an identity of who we think we are, and identifying especially with our adult body. To start to loosen that, it's very helpful to try and imagine what you felt like when you were a kid. What it felt like to be four years old. What it must have felt like to be a month old. Try to remember that this was our past, it is part of our history, even though we can't remember it. Sometimes even in the process of remembering some of these things, we recognize that there was a sense of "I" then, but who we felt we were isn't exactly the same person we are now. We're different people then and now. We've changed, and our body certainly has changed. Remember that this change is happening all the time: we aren't just this person with our present personality in this body. We were once a child with a different personality in a different body. We can be somebody in another life with a different personality in a different body. And it's all on the same continuum.

When we get some kind of feeling about that, or some kind of space in the mind about that, then who we are takes on a whole different feeling. When we say "I", we don't just think of *me* this very moment, but to remember that I have a history, and that I have a future. It's not going to end with death.

Even though we may not have a direct perception of our past and future lives, and even though this whole issue might be a little foggy for us, if we can allow just some space to say, "Well, let's try this on and see how it feels, see what it can explain," then there might come some understanding at some point.

I personally find this idea of a number line very, very useful. Just think about the number line. Here I am today, and each way I look at the number line, there is another number, as if each number were like a cause or something. Remember that there is no end to the number line either way. It can't have any number on the number line without having the other ones that are on either side of it. Similarly, we can't be here today unless there was a cause for us, which is something that you trace infinitely back in the past, and also unless there's going to be a future of our mindstream. Hopefully, it will not remain a samsaric mindstream, but will eventually become an Enlightened mindstream.

If your mind says, "But there has to be a beginning!", remember you are not a four-year-old in Sunday school. Look at that mind that says there has to be a beginning. Who says there has to be a beginning? Why is it that there has to be a beginning? Why? When you look at any particular object, e.g. a glass, we could say in one way there is a beginning to the glass, in the sense that at one point, this glass didn't exist. But if we look at all the parts of the glass, and the atoms and molecules that make up this glass, can we ever find any beginning to them? I mean you start tracing atoms and molecules back and back and back and you just have this perpetual, continuous transformation of energy. How are you ever going to have a beginning?

If our mind still insists, "But there *has* to be a beginning!", then put yourself at that beginning point. Let's say there's a beginning. Now, how did the beginning start? If there's a beginning, it had to start. If the beginning started, that means something caused it. This means the beginning wasn't the beginning, because something else was around before it. If the beginning didn't start, or if it's started without a cause, how can anything exist in this universe without a cause? What exists without a cause? Nothing can exist without a cause. There has to be something that caused it. If we get really stuck in: "There has to be a beginning," then try and prove to ourselves how there can be a beginning. Soon you get really confused and then you decide, "Well, maybe there doesn't have to be a beginning after all."

Having this feeling of beginninglessness can be disorientating at first. We like to think of "1993" as if it's solid. But 1993 is just a conceptual construction. It's just some number we decided to assign. There is nothing solid about this. If we start looking back and we think, "OK, before this life, I had another life. And I had another life before that, and another one before that, and another one before that...ad infinitum. I've been born everywhere in this entire universe, and even before this universe began. And I've been born everywhere in all different sorts of universes. I've done every possible thing there is to do in samsara." All your wildest dreams, everything that you've always wanted to do in samsara, you've done it millions of times. We've done it all! We've done everything except practice the Dharma. In samsara, we've done everything else. We've had millions of dollars. We've had ten million boyfriends and girlfriends. We've done it all.

Realizing that our bodies and relationships change constantly; and the possibility that every being has been our mother

If there's just this unending regression of previous lives, then we have to think, "Well, in a lot of those previous lives, I had mothers. At least when I was born as an animal, when I was born as a hungry ghost, when I was born as a human being, I had a mother. My present-life mother hasn't always been my mother. In previous lives, in these different rebirths, other beings have been my mother. When you think of infinite lifetimes, then there's plenty of time for all the countless number of sentient beings to have been our parents. Once, twice, ten times, a million times, infinite times. It's like you can't count the number of times we've been related to other sentient beings in terms of their being our parents.

Here, the image of mother is chosen because in most cultures, the mother is the one that people feel closest to. That isn't necessarily true in our culture. But I still think it is useful to think of other beings as having been our mother (we'll get into this in a minute), to use the mother as an illustration of that close connection that we've had with others. If you don't feel comfortable saying all beings have been my mother, you can say father or caregiver, or whoever you want, but somebody who has been close to us, who has helped us, who has taken care of us. To see that everybody has been close to us in that way, having cared for us when we were helpless, having taken care of us when we couldn't do things for ourselves. Allow this to seep into the mind.

One difficulty we have in allowing this to seep into our mind, is again that it is hard for us to imagine other beings as having been in different relationships to us than what they are now. Every time we look at somebody, we think that all they ever are, all they ever have been and will be, is who they are now.

Can you look around the room and try and imagine what everybody here looked like when they were a baby? It's hard to imagine, isn't it? Try and think of everybody here, what we all look like a few decades ago. It's hard, because everybody seems so real and so solid that to think of them not being who they are now and being an infant is hard. And yet, we know it's true.

In the same way, it's hard for us to believe that other beings may have been our parents. We'll stick with the image of the mother here. Remember, though, it could mean anybody who has been a caregiver to you. Everybody has been our parent. Everybody has had different bodies. They haven't always been who they are now. They haven't always looked like what they look like now. They had different bodies. We had been related in different ways. They have all been our parents in that way. Not just once, but an incredible number of times.

It's interesting to train your mind in this. When you're driving on the freeway, when you're sitting in the bus, when you're walking down the street, to look at all the different people and animals, and think, "That person or that being hasn't always been who they appear to be right now. One time they've been my parent." It's an interesting thing to play with, even though you may not believe it immediately. Play with that idea in your mind. It's a very interesting one. It really makes you look at people differently and say, "Well, why not? Why couldn't they have been my mother before?"

I may have told you the story before, but it's a good story. One of my friends, Alex Berzin, told me this story. For those of you who know him, he is an old Buddhist practitioner. He had this uncle whom he was very, very close to. There's a lot of affection between him and this uncle. His uncle died and he was grieving about that, quite upset, missing his uncle. After the funeral, he went back to Dharamsala, India because he was living in India at that time. And in Dharamsala during the monsoons, we get these really big spiders. Really nice, big ones. Alex didn't like spiders. Sometimes in your room, you get nice, big spiders, more of them in the room than you.

There was one spider on the wall one time, and his instant feeling was disgust, "Get this thing out of here!" It's like, "I want to kill it but I can't because I've taken the first precept." [laughter] And then all of a sudden, he thought, "Wow, that could be my uncle!" And it's like why not, it could be. We don't know. [laughter] It sounds strange to think of Uncle Joe being born like that, but it is a possibility. It's definitely a possibility. And he said after he thought of that, he didn't want to kill this spider anymore. His whole relationship with spiders changed. He began to see that this being who is living inside this body hasn't always been living inside that body.

It's really interesting too when you see people and when you see animals, to think, "This is a mindstream living in a body." That's all. It's a mindstream in a body, and that mindstream has lived in other bodies before. Not always in this one. And so, if that mindstream has lived in other bodies, and we've lived in other bodies, and we've all had infinite previous lives, then there's plenty of time when all those other beings have been our mother. Again, we loosen the mind and play around with this. It's very interesting.

[In response to audience:] You ask if animals can accumulate good karma by themselves. I think it's quite difficult for them to have deliberately positive thoughts. Achala [the cat] might come to teachings, but I don't think he gets more than a warm lap out of it. The way for an animal to accumulate good karma would be basically through hearing prayers and mantras, and having contact with holy objects, and by the power of the holy objects, by the power of the mantras, then there're good seeds planted in his mind. But it's difficult to accumulate good karma as an animal. That's one reason why they say a human life is very precious.

[In response to audience:] Exactly. And that's why when we meditate on precious human life, we think, "I could have been born as a cat. In fact, I have been a cat in previous lives. And now I don't have that obstruction this lifetime." We realize, "Wow, that's incredible. That's amazing!" We begin to get a feeling of how big that obstruction is. We always complain we don't get to see His Holiness very much. Or we don't get to see Rinpoche very much. You could be born as His Holiness' pet dog and see him a lot, but would you rather be His Holiness' pet dog or a human being? You really see the advantage of a human life. A human life is very, very precious. Particularly our kind of human life where we come into contact with the Dharma – we are very special that way.

OK. The first step is to get this feeling that we haven't always been who we are now. We've been other

people and other beings have also been other people, and we've had different relationships with them. They've all at some time or another, been our principal care-giver and life-giver, somebody like our mother. When you start looking at others in this way: "Well, it could be," then your vision of others changes. They stop seeming distant, cut-off and unrelated. Remember that, "The mindstream that's in that body, I was very close with that person before in a different life, in a very loving relationship. They've changed bodies. I've changed bodies. The relationship is changed, but there is still that remnant of affection or understanding." Automatically, just by this first step, how we look at other people changes a little bit. We start feeling closer to them. Not so cut off.

2) Remembering their kindness to you as your mother

The second step in this meditation is remembering the kindness that others show to us when they were our mother.

Again, the mother is used as an example because in most cultures, the mother is the one that people feel closest to. But it could be anybody. It could be your father, or babysitter. You choose whoever it was who was kindest to you as a child. By using the example of how that person was kind to us, remember that they were kind to us like that in previous lives, and not only were they kind to us in that way, but all these other beings who at one time or another have been in that same role with us, have been kind to us in that exact same way. You might do this meditation using a care-giver, whoever was kindest to you when you were a child.

Meditating specifically in terms of our parents of this life

But I still think, and this is my personal opinion, that at some stage it is very helpful to do this meditation specifically with reference to our parents of this life. Initially, we might do it in terms of a care-giver, or somebody else because it's easier when we remember somebody who is really kind to us and then think others have been kind to us in that way, to get the feeling of this meditation. But my personal experience is, it's still very useful to later return to this meditation and look at the kindness of our parents in this life, precisely because we often have so many problems in our relationships with them. A lot of the problems in our relationships with our parents is because any relationship has some help and it has some harm. We focus on the harm, we develop unflinching memory and single-pointed concentration on the harm, [laughter] and we forget some of the other things that they have done for us.

Now, go back and do this meditation specifically in terms of the parents of this life. Personally, I found it very healing though incredibly difficult. I haven't had an easy relationship with my parents. I won't tell you my whole story now. [laughter] But I haven't had an easy time with them, and they haven't had a particularly easy time with me either! We got along great until I turned about seventeen. Actually, we didn't always get along great before that, but it got worse at seventeen. [laughter] I found it very helpful personally, to go back and think through many of those things in childhood, to recognize the positive things that my parents *did* do for me. In our culture we are brought up to remember what our parents didn't do.

When you were a kid, when you were a teenager, what do you do? You complain about your parents. That's what everybody does. If you don't complain about your parents to your friends, your friends will think you're weird, that you're too dependent or something. You have to complain about your parents. We've gotten into that habit, and it has left a lot of scars inside of us.

When I'm talking here about the benefit we've received from our parents, and their kindness, I'm not trying to whitewash any kind of abuse. There are abuses in childhood situations, and we're not pretending that those don't exist. They do exist. But we're also trying to have a more complete picture of all of those things. Instead of just taking the abuse and putting the abuse under the magnifying glass, and putting the benefit under a stack of books so we don't see it, we're going to try and look at both the abuse and the benefit with a more realistic attitude.

Try taking some of the drama out of the abuse, and opening ourselves up to see the benefit that we have received in our life. It can take some time. One meditation on this isn't going to do it. In fact, one meditation initially might make you more confused. That's OK. There's nothing wrong with getting confused. I know we don't like being confused. But sometimes confusion is the step to understanding. Especially when we meditate, all these other questions come up, and things you haven't looked at come up, and doubts come up. Don't be afraid of them. Just write them down. We can talk about them. When confusion comes, it's also indicating that you're ready for a deeper understanding than you were

before. I don't think we need to be afraid of our confusion.

Kindness of our mothers

Talking about the kindness, and I'll say 'of the mother' here. But again, you can adapt it for your situation and you can come back and look at it in terms of your mother.

Giving birth, and welcoming us into their lives

First of all, our mothers gave birth to us. I think it'll be nice to have some of the mothers in the room talk about what it's like to give birth. From the very time before we were born, somebody was aware of our presence, and changed their whole life because we were entering it. Before you have a baby, you can do a whole lot of things, and once you have a baby, your lifestyle changes. Our parents were very, very happy to change their lifestyles to accommodate us.

[In response to audience:] You may not have wanted to change your lifestyle. But you did it and why did you do it? There's some underlying care and affection for that being. Somehow that underlying care and affection overwrote your own personal preferences, whatever you wanted to do at that moment. If there were no underlying care and affection, you wouldn't have changed your lifestyle at all. There was something there.

They always say, how would we react if somebody showed up at our door and tapped on the door to say, "Hey, can I move in with you for the rest of my life?" [laughter] We wouldn't welcome a total stranger into our life who's going to move in with us for the next twenty years. But when a woman gets pregnant, she and her partner welcome a total stranger into their life for the next however many years. The baby is a total stranger: you don't know who they were in their previous life. But somehow, in spite of being a total stranger, the baby is completely welcomed. Our parents welcomed us. They did. We were born. We are here.

They adjusted their lifestyle because of some underlying care for us. Just the whole process of carrying the child, and I think here, you guys know more than me [laughter], but I can imagine at some point it must be quite uncomfortable, I don't know – the morning sickness at the beginning, having the belly out to here at the end, or the birth process. But again, our parents, specifically our mother, went through all these different changes within her body, the discomfort in her body, the birth process, the whole thing. They went through it for our benefit, so that we could be born. They went through a lot, but it's done with a feeling of love for the child. Even though you don't know who this child is, even though it might be inconvenient, or whatever, there is that basic kind of love.

Taking care of us when we were infants

It's important for us to remember that, and to remember that we came into this world with that basic kind of love and support system. We do tend to forget. For example, the whole time when we were infants, we couldn't take care of ourselves at all. We were totally helpless. We couldn't feed ourselves. We couldn't clothe ourselves. We couldn't keep ourselves warm, or keep ourselves cool. We couldn't tell others what we wanted. And now we're so proud of ourselves because we're so independent, self-sufficient! If it hadn't been for the kindness of the people who took care of us when we were infants, we couldn't have stayed alive. We didn't have the ability to keep ourselves alive. It's that simple: that our whole life is due to the kindness of other people. If other people hadn't taken care of us when we were little, we would have died. Very easily.

For all that time when we were little, they fed us, even in the middle of the night. We cried, and we howled and we carried on. Our mother was exhausted and hadn't slept, but she fed us and she took care of us. This wasn't just one night. It was many nights. It was year after year, feeding us and taking care of us. Putting clothes on us and changing our diapers. Have all of you changed diapers before? Changing our diapers with so much love. Taking care of us. Putting us to bed. Waking us up. Taking us to the doctor. Giving us polio vaccines.

And then all the times when we were young when we could have so easily killed ourselves. We were always getting into all sorts of mischief: going towards the edge of the bed, putting things into our mouths. When we were little, our mother is always looking after us, because it was easy for us to get hurt. Incredibly easy.

I remember one incident. It was right at the time when they were recognizing Lama Osel. Lama Osel

and his mother were at Tushita in India. He was just a toddler at that time, a little over a year. He had something in his mouth and he was choking and beginning to turn blue. Nobody knew what to do. His mother ran up and swung him up by the feet, upside down, and whacked him until it came out. She knew exactly what to do! If it hadn't been for her, he would have gotten just bluer and bluer and bluer!

How many times when we were children did we put things in our mouth and start to choke, or get dangerously near a step, or the edge of the bed, or slip in the bathtub? We probably all have lots of stories that our parents have told us or that we remembered of how we were hurt when we were young? People always took care of us when we got hurt. Also, all the times when we didn't get hurt because they were able to catch us before we did, because we didn't know any better. How many times did they intervene so that we didn't accidentally harm ourselves?

Educating us

Once we got older, they had to educate us. Our whole education came from the kindness of our parents. Here particularly think of the mother in the sense that she spends more time with the child, talking to the child, etc. I don't want to diminish fatherhood, don't get me wrong. But usually it's the mother who spends a lot of time talking to the child, even though the child doesn't understand anything. That's how we learn language. Our whole ability to be able to speak, to communicate, to verbalize and conceptualize, to use language, came from our parents who taught us how to speak.

Then the whole time in school, the kindness from our teachers, but also the kindness of our parents, making sure we went to school. How many times did you try and get out of going to school? Our parents made sure we went to school, even if we didn't want to. They made sure we did our homework, even if we didn't want to. We might remember being a kid and having all sorts of conflict with our parents over homework, or going to school, doing all these things, and yet at the end, as an adult, we say, "I'm really glad that my parents made me go to school and made me do my homework, because if they hadn't done that, I wouldn't have had the education that I have. I wouldn't have the skills that I have now. I wouldn't be able to function in the world. Even though they had to sometimes do things that we didn't like at that time, they did it basically for our own good."

That is why I say it's really good to look at the example of our parents in this life. For me, when I started to do this, I began to see that a lot of the things that I didn't like about my parents, were things that from their perspective, they were doing for my own good. From my perspective, I didn't see it at that time.

I remember very often, there would be different activities or something and I wouldn't want to go, and my parents would really push me and say, "Just go and try it. Go one time. We know you don't know anybody there. We know you're afraid. But just go and try it." They pushed me and I hated it. Now, I'm so glad they did it. I'm so glad, because actually I learned many things that I wouldn't have learned if I hadn't done those things, if they hadn't pushed me. Also, it gave me some ability to try new things even when I was feeling a little bit shaky about it. This was a habit I had from childhood.

Looking back also, many of the things that I got disciplined for as a child, I thought were tremendously unfair. In high school, I always had the earliest curfew of anybody. It was a drag. It was horrible when you're the one with the earliest curfew. But I realized now why my parents did it. I see that there was some reason for it, even though I didn't particularly like it at that time. There were many things like that. Many of the things that I got disciplined about as a child, I hated it then, and I thought my parents were wrong. Maybe some things they disciplined me about, they were wrong. They didn't understand the situation. I remember those quite well too. [laughter] Looking back at many of them when they did discipline me, I didn't like it, but actually, I'm very glad they did it because they taught me some basic manners. If they hadn't disciplined me, I would have been worse. [laughter]

Providing us with food and material comforts

They had to put up with a lot, to do that kind of disciplining with somebody who is very independent and strong-willed. When we go back and look at all these things, what our parents did to make us into a reasonable human being, I think about my dad who went to work, year after year after year. He was a dentist. He spent his whole life looking in other people's mouths, so that I could eat. If you think about it, year after year of filling teeth and making dentures and bridges, and things like that, and I didn't appreciate it as a kid. I wanted this toy and that toy and the other thing. I didn't ever think about how hard my folks worked to get the money. As adults, when we look back and really think what our parents went through to get the money to support us, it's quite amazing. They did a lot of work. All the worry

about not having enough money, wishing that they had more money to buy us more things. We were hardly ever in tune to what their situation was, and the worry they had about being good parents or being able to provide for us.

Think about all the time your mother spent cooking dinner for you. Who cooked dinner for you when you were little? How many dinners did they cook for you? How many times did they go to the supermarket to shop for you? Year after year of doing these things. I don't know about you, but I don't particularly enjoy cooking. That's why I don't invite anybody over to lunch. I don't subject them to it. [laughter] When you eat with me, everything is in one pot.

You think about the person who cooked for you all those times when you were little, or whoever it was who bought you TV dinners, when you ate TV dinners. Or whoever it was who gave you the money to buy your own TV dinners. The dependence we had on the people who took care of us. Without that, where would we be?

And then all the different things that our parents encouraged us to do. Either to play some kind of sports, some kind of musical instrument or who knows what. All the many activities they pushed us to do. They tried to help us broaden what we know.

And then also many times, our parents couldn't spend as much time with us as they wanted to. Maybe they had their own problems. Health problems of some sort. Or they had some financial problems. Or they had who-knows-what, and they wanted to spend more time with us, but they couldn't. That's also a possibility.

Just to look at all these different things, how we benefited from our parents over the years. Even with the difficulties that we've had with our parents – very often we can look back and see that we've grown a lot through these difficulties. Having the problems as a youngster, for example, gave us some kind of compassion for other people who had similar problems.

It's important to think about these things, and to let ourselves feel loved. Because I think often, we don't let ourselves feel loved. We don't let ourselves feel supported. We feel quite lonely, quite cut off. It's quite interesting. I was just doing this yesterday, looking back. I was looking back at some difficult situations in the past. In those difficult situations, at that time, I felt like I had no support, but looking back upon it then, I had tons of support. I couldn't see it. I couldn't appreciate it. So to look not only at our adult life, but in our childhood life, too. Of course some things were missing. Our parents weren't perfect. But to recognize the support and the care that we *were* the recipients of.

Seeing our parents' harmful actions as stemming from their confusion

When we do notice the harmful things that happened in our childhood, understand that it wasn't that our parents deliberately inflicted harm upon us. It wasn't that they thought, "I can't stand this child. I'm going to beat him up." If our parents were angry, or even if they did hit us, it was because of their own confusion, because of their own emotional turbulence and their own distress at that time. It wasn't that they really wished to harm us. Their minds were out of control. We know how that is, because we know how our mind can get out of control. We all have the capacity to hurt the people we love very much when anger overtakes us, when confusion overtakes us. We can look at whatever happened in our childhood that was harmful and say that's because of other people's confusion.

Within the scope of what our parents were capable of doing, they did the best they could. Of course they weren't perfect. Neither are we. But within the scope of what they were capable of, given their own upbringing, their own psychology, sociology and economic circumstances, they did what they were capable of at that particular time.

One person just told me recently he had quite a difficult childhood. One thing that helped him was to hear his father's story. He had always seen his father as harmful and bad. He said one time he went out with his father and just started asking him questions. Over the weekend, his father started telling him his story, how the situation appeared from his father's eyes. He said all of a sudden, he was able to see his father as a human being who suffered and was confused. By understanding the past, a lot of the hatred or the grudges just naturally faded away, because compassion was there for somebody who was confused.

It's very helpful to try to understand others; to recognize that our parents weren't perfect. One of the things in this whole wounded, inner-child syndrome that's very popular nowadays, which I have some questions about, is going back and saying, "Oh, I didn't get that one when I was a baby. I didn't get that and my parents weren't there for me then..." We are trying to find fault in our parents, as if they should have been perfect. As if our parents should have clairvoyant and omnipotent powers, who should have been able to fulfill our every wish. It's very helpful for us to realize that we are in samsara. The very nature of cyclic existence is dissatisfaction. Not all our wishes can get fulfilled. The fact that our every little wish doesn't get fulfilled isn't the fault of our parents.

How did we get born here? It was our own ignorance. We're the responsible ones for being born here in the first place. If we hadn't spent so much time playing volleyball on the beach in our previous lives and had done some Dharma practice, we may not be here. We might have had some realizations by now. To expect our parents to be perfect, to expect a perfect childhood, what's that about? Why do we expect that? That's not realistic. We can expect it if we want to, but we're setting ourselves up for a lot of disappointment. If we can let go of some of those expectations, or that feeling that things shouldn't have been the way they were, as if the universe owes us something – "It should have been different!" – then it's very helpful. Accept life the way it is. We learn from life.

Answers to Questions

Dealing with painful experiences in childhood

There're many ways of looking at our childhood. As I said, we're not trying to ignore the pain that's there. By acknowledging the pain, if we can deal with it, the suffering can be a strong impetus for us not to play so much bingo in this lifetime and actually get some realizations instead. We can see that pain is the nature of samsara, being caused by afflictions [Note: 'afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes'] and karma.

Acknowledge negative experiences as the results of past karma; this allows us to act to create a better future

One way is to say, "This happened to me because of my own karma. That doesn't mean I'm guilty. It doesn't mean I'm bad. It doesn't mean I'm evil. It just means that in previous lives, I made some mistakes."

Everybody makes mistakes. We've made mistakes this lifetime, too. When we can see, "I must have harmed somebody else in my previous life. Do I want to continue to do that this lifetime? If in a present harmful situation, I again generate anger and want to retaliate, I'm again creating more negative karma to find myself again in this same unpleasant situation. I'm perpetuating this cycle." You can see it working in families in this very lifetime. If you've been abused as a child, if you don't get your act together, chances are you're going to abuse your own children. At some point we have to say, "This is going to stop with me!"

I know for myself personally, when I have problems, if I can actually say to myself, "This is the result of my own negative actions," then that gives me some feeling that I can do something about the situation, that I don't have to be a victim to the situation anymore. It's not saying I deserve the harm. It's not saying I brought it on myself. It's saying if this is a result of my own negative actions, then I want to clean things up because I want to do something better for the future. I have the ability and the power to be able to do something. I don't have to be victimized by the situation.

If I bear a grudge and I'm resentful, and I blame other people, I become a victim of that situation. My own way of thinking won't let me be happy. But if I can change my way of thinking, then there's a possibility to be happy. If you look at it, in an abusive situation, there was the unpleasant feeling that we experienced in that very moment, and then there's all the conceptual thoughts that we have about it afterwards. The situation happened when it happened. It is no longer happening at this moment. Whatever horrendous thing happened in your childhood, it is not happening at this very moment. But if we sit there, not allowing ourselves to grow up, and we keep saying, "That happened to me. That person did that to me..." We make it so solid that we relive the situation everyday in our own minds. We torment ourselves more than that other person who originally tormented us. That's a function of an affliction*. That's how afflictions* work. They disturb our peace of mind. They won't let us be happy.

When we encounter a painful situation, we must be careful not to say, "It was my fault." We can say "I created the cause for this to happen to me." But the word "fault," to blame ourselves, is unnecessary. When we say, "It's my fault," what are we getting into? "I'm going to hate myself. I'm going to beat myself." That isn't what karma is talking about. We don't have to blame anybody for a bad situation. We don't have to blame ourselves because we created the mistake in a previous life that got us to where we are. We don't have to blame the people who harmed us, because they're under the influence of afflictions*.

But rather, we can have compassion for the people who harmed us. They are under the influence of their afflictions*. We can have compassion for ourselves, because under the influence of our afflictions*, we did something negative in previous lives. Maybe we don't know specifically what negative thing we did. When things happen to me that cause me a lot of pain, I usually try and think of the opposite thing. For example, if it is a situation where I feel really hurt by somebody else, then I just think, "I've hurt other people in the past. Forget about previous lives, this life, if I think of how I've behaved with other people, I've hurt a lot of people this lifetime. I've done it in this lifetime, who knows what I did in previous lives?"

The point is, whatever mistake I made, what I'm experiencing right now is the fruition of my mistaken actions. Now that karma is done. By that karma ripening, now it's done. It's brought its fruit. The point is, what do I want to do in the future? Do I want to continue to create this kind of karma, or do I want to get my act together? And that's the question. The past is over. It's like whatever I did in the past that was harmful, who knows whatever it was, I know that I now need to purify all my negative actions, especially the ones in this lifetime that I can remember. I need to put some energy into not repeating that behavior, and instead put some energy into creating some good karma. Clinging to memories all the time is the wrong kind of visualization.

To accept the reasoning that I have just described, you have to have some space in the mind for the idea of karma and rebirth and purification and Buddhahood. The fact that there is an end to all these. If you don't have this world view, then this kind of approach isn't going to work for you.

Acknowledge the pain

For somebody who doesn't have this world view, what I would try and get them to do is first acknowledge the pain. At the beginning, our pain needs to be acknowledged. Before the pain is acknowledged, it's very difficult to hear anything. It's a funny thing the way we are. It's like we have to feel hurt and accept that "OK, I'm in the middle of the pits, but if somebody can hear and accept me, then maybe I can get myself out of it." The last thing we want to hear is, "You shouldn't feel that way." You have to start out with acknowledging your own pain. But we have to grow out of that, too.

Recognize the confusion of the people who inflicted harm; and develop compassion for them

Think about what the mind of the person who perpetuated the pain was like. What their life was like. What that person's life story is. What was going on in their mind? We get in touch with that confusion that must have existed in their mind for them to inflict the harm.

Sometimes the confusion is immense. For example, I was reading in the newspaper about the Holocaust museum. They just opened it in Washington D.C. As a kid, I used to read a lot about the holocaust. I used to read this and say, "How can this happen? How can human beings do this?" You can look at Bosnia right now and say, "How can this happen? How can people actually do this?" What is going on in somebody's mind that they can go into a village in Bosnia and murder people?

When you look at it, you can see that they have incredible confusion, pain and affliction [Note: 'affliction' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'delusion']. It's almost as if people are crazy. It is. When we're under the influence of our afflictions*, we are, in fact, mad. We know that this has happened to us too. We can all look at our lives during the times we've been under the influence of our own afflictions*. We've gone berserk. Thank goodness we haven't harmed anybody that much. But you can see other people, with that same situation accentuated, the stress, the pressure in their own mind, and the force of the society telling them to act in a certain way, they do unbelievable things. When you try and think of that kind of person, what their mind must have been like, I find it hard to hate somebody like that.

When I went to Tibet, I saw these monasteries, totally, unbelievably destroyed. Ganden monastery is up

on top of a hill. To get up there, we took a bus. It was difficult for the bus to get up. During the Cultural Revolution, they didn't have buses. They walked up there. This is like 14,000 feet. You're panting. The effort they put in to walk to the top of the hill, to smash buildings made out of stone – that takes a lot of energy. The whole monastery (there were like three or four thousand people living there at that time), the whole structure except for one building was totally knocked apart. I was thinking about that when we were going up, "What would it be like to have been either a Chinese soldier or a young Tibetan during the Cultural Revolution to do that?" I couldn't hate them. I couldn't hate them because their minds must have been overwhelmed by afflictions*. They went crazy.

When we truly try to relate to others in this way, then there's a possibility for some compassion to come in. You begin to identify the afflictions* as the enemy. Sentient beings aren't the enemy. The afflictions* are.

OK. Let's just sit quietly for a few minutes.

This teaching is based on the *Lamrim* or *The Gradual Path to Enlightenment*. Please refer to the following web-page for its outline and other transcripts or to listen to the audio recording of these talks: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/GradualPathToEnlightenment/outline.html>

*'Afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes' or 'delusions'.