

Cultivating Bodhicitta through Equalizing and Exchanging Self and Others – Part 1

(lightly edited transcript)

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Sometimes we have some understanding of the preciousness of the bodhicitta teachings, and how difficult it is to have the opportunity to hear these kinds of teachings.

When we really listen, we can feel the impact they have on our mind, and then we realize how revolutionary these bodhicitta teachings are compared to the way we spend most of our life.

When you think of how little time we have and how brief this lifetime is, and how precious these teachings are, it seems almost a miracle that we have the opportunity to experience these teachings in this lifetime.

This gives us a special aspiration to really try and put the teachings into practice because we don't have the opportunity to come into these teachings often, and usually spend our precious time idling away.

Human life is precious and it's difficult to create the causes for it. What are the causes for a precious human life? There are three of them:

- a) Pure ethics
- b) Prayers and dedication
- c) Practicing generosity and the other perfections. Generosity helps to create the cooperative conditions which give us the wealth, the opportunities and the ability to meet teachers, etc.

Ethics is the principal thing that is going to get us a human rebirth. That's why it's listed specially first. It's the state of our ethical conduct that determines where we are reborn. Ethics or non-ethics means either the accumulation of good karma or accumulation of bad karma through our conduct. Ethics is the chief thing that's going to influence which realm we're born into. This isn't theoretical, intellectual stuff. If you value your life and think you have a good deal compared to the worms and the crickets, then it's helpful to know what to do to get this opportunity again.

We have some sense of how difficult it is to get this opportunity. It's hard to create good ethics, isn't it? It's hard to stop lying. It's hard to stop ticking people off. It's hard to stop speaking cruelly to them. It's hard to be generous. We would much rather keep things for ourselves. It's hard to make prayers to have a good human life because we usually don't pray for future lives, but for the happiness of this life. Accumulating the causes to get a precious human life is incredibly difficult, and then on top of that, to create the cause to hear the teachings on bodhicitta is even more difficult. You get a sense of the impact these teachings have on your mind, and you see how special they really are. When you're drowning in the ocean of your own self-involvement, you want to cling to the lifeline of the bodhicitta teachings like flies to fly-paper – it's that hard to find the teachings.

Cultivating bodhicitta through equalizing and exchanging self and others

There are two ways to develop bodhicitta. One way is the seven points of cause and effect. The second is Shantideva's method, called equalizing and exchanging self and others.

Shantideva is the author of the "Guide to the bodhisattva's way of life". He was a great Indian pundit who completely blew everybody's mind. When Shantideva lived in the monastery, they said he only did three things: he ate, he slept, and he went to the toilet. That was all they saw, and they criticized him a lot.

Although he was an incredible practitioner, they wanted to kick him out of the monastery because they thought he was just a drag in the monastery. They tried to humiliate him and asked him to give teachings, thinking that he wouldn't be able to say anything. They wanted an excuse to say, "Oh look, this guy is just an idiot in the monastery who does nothing but eat. Let's kick him out!" So they set up this really high throne without any stairs so he couldn't possibly get on, and asked him to give teachings. Shantideva put his hand on top of the throne, brought it down, stepped on it and went back up again.

And then he proceeded to give the teaching which was the "Guide to the bodhisattva's way of life." When he reached the ninth chapter on "Emptiness", he disappeared into the sky and all they heard was his voice. They decided to keep him after all. They thought, "Well, maybe this guy knows what he's talking about."

a. Equalizing self and others

When we talk about equalizing self and others, it can include equalizing friend, enemy, and stranger, but it also includes equalizing ourselves and others: how we ourselves and others are equal. When I had teachings on this from Serkong Rinpoche, he taught it in nine points. It's a unique method which is quite powerful.

Looking from the viewpoint of others on the conventional level:

1. Serkong Rinpoche said the first step in equalizing ourselves and others (the first part of equalizing and exchanging self and others) is to remember that everybody wants happiness and nobody wants suffering with equal intensity. When you really sit and think about it, you realize that as intensely as you want happiness, so does everybody else. Similarly, as intensely as you do not want pain, so does everybody else.

What's the difference between me and everybody else? How can I go around and say, "me, me, me," when in fact we are all exactly equal in wanting happiness and not wanting pain? This is again something that's very obvious, but when we let it sink in our mind, it's really profound.

When you apply it to situations when you have a conflict with somebody – you want to do this and the other person wants to do that – it helps if you reflect deeper and ask yourself, "What's the difference between me and this person? We both want happiness, we both want to avoid pain." And then our own thought of having to get our own way evaporates, because what do we back it with? I want to have it my way because "It's my way!" That's the only reason, but obviously invalid.

That's not to say that we always give up our way. If we have a reasonable position that can be explained to others, that is something beneficial, that's one thing. But here we are talking about the kind of mind that just gets into, "I want it my way because I want it that way!" This is where we really think about self and others wanting happiness. But it's hard to maintain that view. For example, you get on a crowded bus, you feel tired and you want to sit down. Then you think about it and say, "Oh but the other guy wants to have the seat as much as I do." You start applying this to many areas of your life.

2. A good way to illustrate the second step is to imagine ten beggars on the street. All of them might want something different, but they're all the same in that they need something. There's no real difference between the beggars. All of them need something even though what they need might be something different. But their state of neediness is the same. And so in the same way, we, our friends, our enemies, strangers, all sentient beings equally are in that state of needing happiness, needing something, feeling unfulfilled. We realize again that there's no difference between ourselves and others. There's no difference between friends, people we don't get along with and strangers in feeling unfulfilled, insufficient, in need of things, and wanting happiness.

3. To understand the third step, imagine if you have ten sick people and all of them want to be free of their suffering. Although they might have different illnesses, that feeling of wanting to be free of the misery of sickness is exactly the same. And so again, just like the example of the beggars, we realize how our dear ones, strangers and people we don't get along with, are not any different from us in that they are all in this state of just wanting to be free of their pain.

These are things that you should really allow to sink in your mind. Don't just keep them on the fuzzy intellectual level with words, but take out specific examples of people and reflect deeply about them.

4. The fourth step is to remember that others have been kind to us and how all of our happiness comes from others.

When we were talking before about the kindness of sentient beings, we used the kindness of our mother or caregiver when we were little as an example. Here, we are not limiting it just to other sentient beings when they were in the role of being a caregiver, but to other sentient beings at this very moment; how all of our happiness depends on them.

Here you have the meditation of looking at your food and looking at one grain of rice, and thinking how many different beings are involved in your having that one grain of rice: the person who cooked it; the person who bought it at the store and who carried it to the store, who harvested it, who grew it, who planted it, who tilled the ground, who developed the machines for tilling the ground, etc. All these different implications come up when we start thinking of one grain of rice and all the different beings who put effort into our having that one grain of rice.

When you think about the broccoli and the carrots and the tofu, the amount of effort that other people put in for us to get one meal is quite remarkable. We hardly ever really think about that. It's like the food is there, and we finish it like a vacuum cleaner. But when we think again, how many beings went into the production of this food, it's really tremendous.

Think about the clothes you have on. You think of all the people who bought you clothes, who gave you money to buy the clothes, who gave you the job, who gave you the education to get the job. Where did your clothes come from if you're wearing cotton? Who sewed the cloth? Who designed the cloth? Who dyed it? Who cut it out? Who packaged it? Who grew the cotton? Who designed and made the machines that harvested the cotton? Who made the thread? You keep going on and on, and see so many sentient beings are involved in just the clothes that you wear.

Go on to the house that we live in. All the sentient beings involved in building our house, from the people who designed it, the plumbers, the electricians, the architect, the engineers, and just how everything we have, all the things that we use so naturally, came because of the kindness of others, because of the effort they put in. How everything we know, our whole education, again, comes from the kindness of others.

All the knowledge we have, the know-how, just being able to read – it all came due to others. Sometimes I think we take the ability to read for granted. Once when I was in Tibet and way out in the middle of nowhere, we stopped in one small village and stayed at someone's house. The son of that house owner was twenty-three years old and he wanted us desperately to take him to Nepal because he wanted a better life. He didn't know how to read.

I thought, "What would it be like to be twenty-three years old, and not know how to read?" What can you do? What can you learn? How limited your life is by not knowing how to read. This made me reflect on all those teachers who spent so many hours teaching me how to read. And all those people who wrote the SRAs that I hated so much. Remember SRA? But it was because of all those people who designed the SRA that we learned how to read. And all the people who wrote the spelling books. Remember those obnoxious spelling books? But again, it's due to their kindness. We look at them as if they were obnoxious, but it was really due to the people who spent hours and years writing, designing and teaching us all that, that we know how to read. They have made our life so much more complete and gave us hope and potential.

When you start to really think of all the things we know and all the people that were involved in giving us an education, it's totally mind-blowing! We begin to really sense how, if it weren't for the efforts of others, we wouldn't be able to do anything. Zilch! All the things that we think, "Oh, I'm talented. I'm so good at this. I'm such an expert in this." This really comes from the people who taught us. Let that sink in your mind.

When you get in the car to drive home, think about all the people who made your car. All the people who worked at Toyota, or who worked at GM, or wherever your car is from; all those people working in the factories, hour after hour after hour, building those parts, or working in the mines, getting the raw materials to make the car.

And all the people who made the roads. It's horrendous making roads. When you're in India, you go on some of these roads in the mountains, where the cliff is here and the cliff goes down there, and the road is right in the middle; there are actually people working with hammers to build the roads. Forget about machinery, they are out there with hammers, hammering the rocks. They take the rocks down, mix all the tar, build the fire and then mix the tar and the asphalt right along the side of the road. It really stinks, and they breathe that in all day. They make a fire on the side of the road and put all the stuff in this cut-out garbage can and stir it around. They then pour it over the side of the road. Some of the people even die making the roads that you drive on.

We are totally dependent on others for the many things that you and I use all the time but take so much for granted. Really let that sink in the mind. We could go on and on and on about this. Take any little thing. You can take the clock or the glass of water and you start thinking about all the people behind it. How kind others have been to us. How much we have received from them.

5. And then a question comes. "Yes, but they've also harmed me." They did this and they did that: "They made the roads but they screwed up. They stole the taxpayers' money and the roads don't last very long. They put the 'Stop' sign at the wrong place and they put these obnoxious speed bumps in. They put circles in the middle so you don't know whether to go this way or around them." "They harmed me so much. I've been abused. I have been led into this. This is unfair and this is untrue. These people lie about me. They destroy my reputation. They talk behind my back. They blame me for things I didn't do. They don't appreciate the things I do."

When we talk about the things that people do wrong, the incidents come to our mind effortlessly. But when we talk about how others have been very kind, we have to slow down because they don't come easily to our mind. [laughter]

But the doubt comes, "They've also harmed me." When we start thinking about it, in reality, the harm we've received is nothing compared to the benefit we've received. We're not whitewashing the harm, but the benefits just totally outshine the harm. Just think of anything you have that you enjoy and any kind of harm that you've also received, and you realize that you've received much more help than harm from others in this life.

I was talking with my sister-in-law over the weekend. She was telling me that my brother took my two nieces skiing in Colorado just before that. She said that when they grow up, they'll remember, "Dad took us here. Dad took us there. He was real kind to us." But they won't remember all the loads of laundry she did and all the lunches she packed. All the times she picked them up and gave them a ride to school; all the times she cleaned up the mess on the floor. I told her that it was through Buddhism that made me really start appreciating what my mother had done, because I started thinking of all the meals she must have cooked her whole life for me. And I started thinking about that: 365 days a year, multiplied by how many meals each day and packed lunches, and the many years she cooked – it's a phenomenal number of meals that she had cooked!

And then I think of going shopping in the supermarkets. I hate shopping, but she likes it, thank heavens. Still, I thought about all the hours she spent shopping for the kids and doing housework. So I told my sister-in-law that it took me a while, but eventually I began to appreciate it – how many loads of laundry she did, and things like that.

When you really start thinking about how much help you've received from others compared to the amount of harm you've received, the harm really pales. Truly, it pales. What makes the harm stand out so vividly in our mind is simply this factor of inappropriate attention. Remember we talked previously about the causes for the arising of the afflictions, and the last one was inappropriate attention or unreasonable thinking? That's this one. The harm becomes so noticeable and well-remembered simply because we put our attention on it. If we put that same faculty of attention on a more appropriate subject and we start remembering all the help and benefit we have received, then all the harm would appear to be small in comparison. All of this really has to do with how much attention we put on things.

When you look at a drawing of an optical illusion, what you pick out of the background depends on how you look at it. You might see a box or a square, an old crow or a beautiful woman. But it's actually the same drawing. How we look at things determines how they appear to us: what we perceive and what we

remember.

We should remember the kindness of everybody, not just those who are related to us. Then upon deeper reflection, we realize the harm that we have received is nothing compared to all the benefits we have reaped.

6. From there, we move on to the sixth step, which is another part of our mind saying, "Yes, compared to the amount of benefits they've given me, they haven't harmed me much. But when they've harmed me, shouldn't I get my revenge?"

Our mind comes up with lots of things. "OK. Sure, they've helped me more than they harmed me. But still, I want my revenge for the harm they've given me." And then the question comes up: is revenge worthwhile? Someone gave this example, which I find quite effective: imagine if somebody was on death row and they were going to get executed tomorrow morning. That person spends the night thinking about how to harm their enemies or the people who have harmed them. For someone who doesn't have very long to live, it would be foolish to spend that short amount of life left plotting how to harm somebody and how to get revenge.

If you were with someone who was dying, and they were telling you how much they wanted to harm somebody before they die, it would seem so stupid. What do you get out of it? Zero. You're going to die! And compared to oneself dying, who cares about getting revenge? Anyway, after we die, we won't even be there to enjoy the revenge. And even if we're there, what's there to rejoice about harming somebody else?

We begin to see that wanting revenge is a completely ridiculous attitude. It's really good to search our own minds, because we may not overtly think that we want to avenge something harmful that has been done. But look at the different grudges we hold. Look at the residual thing of, "I'm not going to forget that." Look at the bad feelings that we hold year after year after year inside of us because of things that happened in the past. What use is it? What benefit does it do? We don't know how long we're going to live. What use is it to spend the time that we have and the preciousness of this life holding on to grudges?

In thinking about all these points, it makes us look at our relationships with people from a really different perspective. It also helps us recognize their kindness while letting go of the grudges and the wish for revenge. In the process, we learn to appreciate that others and ourselves are exactly equal in wanting happiness and not wanting pain. In fact, when you think deeply about these points, it transforms the way you relate to other people and the way you think of yourself. And we realize that somehow, we can't continue in our same old ways.

But then you might find there's part of you inside that says "Yes, but..." There's always resistance. If I look at people in a different way, if I let into my heart how much kindness people have shown me, if I let go of my grudges, who am I going to be? I won't be *me* anymore. I won't know who I am. I won't have my identity. I won't have my life purpose. Then you can really start to see how we create our concept of self, and how we solidify it and cling on to it out of fear. Even though it causes us so much trauma and misery, we continue to hold on to it because we are afraid that if we don't have it, who are we going to be? If I actually forgive this person who harmed me, who am I going to be? If I actually stop feeling like this isolated island, who am I going to be? If I let myself look at other people and strangers with an eye of kindness, who am I going to be? You can start to see ego shake. That's okay, let it shake. That's a good kind of earthquake.

We can look at the whole issue of self and others from a different perspective. The points we just looked at examines the relationship between self and others from the relative point of view. We recognize that although we see ourselves as very separate entities in society, in actual fact our functioning and our ability to function as a person in society is interdependent with others. These six points deal in a relative way about how we aren't separate, isolated islands. Even if we wanted to be, there's no way that we could possibly be. We know everything that we are, in a relative functioning way, is interdependent with other sentient beings.

Looking from ultimate level:

Then the last three points here, are seeing how the self and others, in terms of ultimate truth, aren't completely separate independent categories. Looking in a relative way, we aren't completely isolated and independent. Looking in an ultimate way, we aren't either. Why not?

7. One reason is that if friends and enemies and strangers were well-defined categories that inherently existed, and somebody was always one of them, then nobody would ever change places. If somebody was a friend, we couldn't quarrel with them, and somebody we quarrel with couldn't become a friend; then no one could become a stranger.

In other words, we would always relate to everybody in exactly the same way. There are these solid, fixed categories of friend, enemy and stranger. Remember 'enemy' doesn't mean Saddam Hussein. It means anybody whom we don't happen to like at any particular moment.

But these aren't inherently existent, solid categories. They're categories that are fluid and dependent. One moment somebody is in one category and one moment they're in the next, and then they go to the next, and then they go to the next.

What we're getting at, is that friends, enemies and strangers aren't independent inherent categories that somebody always belongs to. They're things that arise dependently. And if there were inherent friends, enemies and strangers, if there was an inherent me and an inherent other, then the Buddha will see it. The Buddha has an omniscient mind that knows all of reality, he'd definitely be able to see that there are these fixed categories. But for the Buddha, there aren't fixed categories like this.

They tell the story: one side of the Buddha, there's somebody coming and offering him things, praising him and saying everything good we fantasized about that we wish somebody would tell us, "You're so wonderful. You're so good."

On the other side: somebody is beating him up. They're antagonistic. They're harmful. They're trying to harm the Buddha. From the Buddha's side, he has equal feelings towards both these people. Whether somebody loves him and praises him or somebody hates him and tries to destroy him, from the Buddha's side, there is equal feeling for both these people.

Again, if they were inherently good or bad people, inherently existent friends, enemies and strangers, then the Buddha would definitely see it because of his omniscient mind. But the Buddha doesn't see that. Buddha looks at these two different people as totally equal. This is another reason, why there aren't independent categories. This might seem difficult for us to understand: "Obviously something must be wrong with the Buddha, if he looks at the person who praises him and the person who harms him with equally kind eyes. How could anybody in their right mind do that?"

8. The Buddha could do that because of his ability to look beyond the superficial appearances. He recognizes that the person who praises you today but harms you tomorrow, and the person who harms you today but praises you tomorrow, are both the same in praising you and harming you. Why discriminate between them?

If you can remember that the person who is threatening you, has at some time in the past benefited you and saved your life, then you can recognize you don't have a fixed relationship with this person. Nor does that person have a fixed character where every interaction is harmful to you. But the person who is threatening you now has saved your life before, and that person who's saving your life now has assaulted you before. You should not just stick to what's happening to you at this very moment, but get a bigger picture of who is helping and who is harming.

We can see how easy it is to look at somebody, and think that the relationship with them are very fixed and cast in concrete. But they aren't. Maybe some of your friends are now your enemies after just one week. Some of your enemies are now your friends. And strangers are now friends. It's strange, isn't it? Just one week. And yet last week, we were so sure that things would stay the way they were.

9. The last reason why self and others aren't isolated, independent units, is because they arise completely in dependence on each other, like this side of the street and the other side of the street. I'm here, and I look and I say, "*That* side of the street." And "*This* side of the street." And it looks like a

completely inherent thing. *This* side of the street is *this* side of the street. It's not *that* side of the street. And *that* side is *that* side. It's not *this* side. But all I have to do is cross the street. And *that* side of the street becomes *this* side of the street. And *this* side of the street becomes *that* side of the street. *This* and *that*, close and distant, completely arise and depend on each other. One side of the street isn't inherently *this* side, and the other isn't inherently *that* side. It's only labeled *this* or *that*, depending on where you have to be.

Similarly, I always feel like I am inherently *me*, and you are inherently *you*. But this again arises in total dependence because if I were inherently *me*, then you would look at me and say "me". And you would call yourself "other", because I'm inherently *me*.

If I'm inherently *me*, completely independent of other things, then everybody should see this body of mine as "me". That means, when you look at me, you should say, "me". Since you are inherently *other*, when you look at yourself, you should say "other". We're looking at it from *my* point of view and I'm right [laughter].

But "me" and "you" don't exist as those hard and separate categories. Depending on which side you identify a person from, it can be "me" or "you." This whole feeling we have of "me," "I'm so important," "My needs. My wants. My wishes. My concerns. How I fit in. My neuroses." From somebody else's point of view, it's like looking at "other." It just depends upon which side of things you're looking at it from.

It's like the streets. Depending upon which side of the street you are on, it becomes "me" or it becomes "other" – *this* side of the street or *that* side of the street. Whether something is "me" or "other" is completely dependent on labeling. It's not inherent. We look at this and we feel like inherently *me*, especially with our bodies. "My body is me. This is me. *That's* you. *This* is me."

But if you look, when you sit there and you feel all the different parts of your body, and you say, "What is inherently *me* about this body?" You begin to recognize that this thing that feels so strongly like "me" is actually an accumulation of broccoli and carrots and cauliflower and noodles. And if you eat meat, your body is an accumulation of fish and lamb. All these other sentient beings who are "other," have become "me." What was "other" is now my body. What was somebody else's body, that we ate, now became my body.

We begin to see that the object of our strong attachment – our body, '*me*,' – is something that's totally dependent on where you happen to be standing. And what you look at, because there's nothing particularly *me* about this body.

Here's something real interesting: Next time you cook for somebody, dish out two plates of food. You think, "If I eat this plate, this plate is going to become me. And that plate is going to become my friend. If I eat that plate, that plate is going to become me, and this plate is going to become my friend." And then you begin to get this weird feeling of, "What is my body?" This could become me or that could become me. That could become my friend or this could become my friend, depending on which one I eat.

Similarly, when we look at our body and somebody else's body, what is it that causes us to be attached to our body? Why do we cling to this body as *me* and not to the other body as *me*? Kind of weird, isn't it? We begin to see that self and others do not have hard and fast distinctions. When we begin to loosen that up, it becomes much more possible to feel the equality between self and others. It just depends on which plate of broccoli you eat. The broccoli is the same, isn't it? So why do I cling on to this body – it could have been this plate of broccoli or that one – and make such a big deal out of it? Why don't I have nearly as much concern with somebody else's body? It gives us some kind of insight how our mind identifies things and makes things really solid and quite separate.

A pregnant lady probably doesn't have much of a sense of the baby and her being real different. It's like your belly is out to here, but the whole thing is me. At one point, it's me, and then five minutes later, when the baby is born, "Oh, there's you!"

You can really see how labeling 'I' and "other" is very relative. When we look at our body to start with, we feel like, "My body is *me*." But actually, our body belongs to our parents. Our body is our dad's sperm and our mom's egg. There's nothing particularly "me" about this body. I didn't create it. It isn't mine. It actually belongs to them. It's funny – all the different ways you can look at your body. It isn't mine at all.

It belongs to others. Totally.

Questions and Answers

[Audience:] If I'm not me, why do I have to get enlightened as opposed to the other?

You aren't inherently you, but you are relatively you. The river isn't an inherent river. It's this changing, continuation of things. You have special karmic connections with certain people simply due to all your history in cyclic existence. Because of that previous connection, the easiest way for some sentient beings to become enlightened is by listening to you and your guidance. So you have to get enlightened to help them.

There's no difference in terms of your wanting happiness and, say, a plumber wanting happiness. There's no inherent you and there's no inherent plumber, but on a relative level, you exist. The plumber exist. Both of your happiness and suffering exist and he is a sentient being who has benefited us and who wants to be happy. On a relative level, all these things exist.

But if the plumber rips me off, it won't be an act of compassion if I don't do anything about it because there's no real difference between me and him. It's like how you would deal with your child if he misbehaves. If I think that just because there's no difference between me and my child, I can patiently allow him to do anything he wants, he's going to grow up like an animal. He won't have any discipline. Out of compassion for him, you have to guide him properly.

Similarly, out of compassion for the plumber, we will have to say or do something to stop him from creating negative karma in future lifetimes. But what it takes is re-training our mind to think in this different way. It takes time to get there.

I remember once, I was on the phone with somebody. Although this person got so mad, I was able to think about it and remain calm. I saw that the person was under a lot of stress. From my side, I didn't take it personally.

And then I thought, "Well, should I have gone back to this person and really talk it through and say, 'Hey, is everything okay? What's going on with you?'" At that moment I realized that I actually wasn't that compassionate by assuming that it was sufficient that I did not get angry. I didn't care enough about the other person to ask, "Hey, what's happening with you? Is everything alright?"

It was interesting because I said, "OK, at least I didn't get angry." That's something in a good direction. But it would have been nice if I was really able to have the compassion to go back to that person and ask what's happening. The right motivation would be what is good for them, and not because I'll get anything out of it. It requires making new habits.

[Audience:] How much can we really change given that so much of what constitutes 'me' is unconscious stuff that we have no control over?

I think that depends very much on the individual because what we call unconscious, from a Buddhist point of view, can become fully conscious. Buddhism doesn't have this view of the mind as all those things that are perpetually unconscious, and which can never become conscious. From the Buddhist viewpoint, it's just a matter of our mindfulness and our awareness. If we really work at it slowly, like peeling layers of the onion away, all these things can come out.

We are actually very conditioned phenomena. We're conditioned by so many things in the past. But the more we recognize our conditioning, the more it gives us the ability to accept it. And in the process of accepting it, we can also start to change the conditioning.

Let's say I have a real negative self-image, and I begin to see that this negative self-image isn't me. I realize that this is a conditioned phenomena. When I was a kid, my teachers told me I was stupid because I could never kick the softball. That could have led to my bungling up in P.E. and to the negative self-image I have.

I couldn't play musical instruments. I wasn't an artist. I realized that this negative self-image is just a conditioned phenomena that's dependent on statements that I've heard at various times in my life. But that negative self-image isn't me. It's just conditioned, part depending on the outside and part depending on what's coming from me.

In other words, because it's conditioned, it doesn't have inherent existence. It isn't some solid, unchanging phenomena. If something exists due to causes and conditions, then as soon as any of those causes and conditions disappear, that phenomena disappears. There's a feeling of, "Well, all these negative self-image is just a conditioned phenomena. If I begin to change this conditioning, then this thing is going to disappear."

It doesn't have the ability to stand up on its own energy because it didn't self-create. It's simply something that arose due to other factors. Change the other factors and this thing naturally is going to change.

We have a lot of potential for change. It's not easy or quick, but there's a lot of potential. If you examine yourself closely, you'll realize that you've changed from what you were a year, or five years ago. You'll see that you've changed. Change is going to happen whether we want to or not. The practice of Dharma gives us the power to make the change go in a positive direction instead of just letting it go in any way.

[Audience:] Where do our thoughts come from? How do they come into existence?

Imagine looking at a still pond and then all of a sudden, this fish jumps up. Then you wonder, "Hey, where did this fish come from?" And then as soon as it goes, you wonder, "Where did it go to?"

It's the same for our thoughts. When a thought appears, we wonder where in the world it came from. And when it vanishes, we wonder where it went. Again, it's all about conditioning. Somehow at that particular moment, the causes and conditions were there, and it popped up into existence.

Thoughts are interesting in that it's a little like the fish which simply pops up from under the water. But unlike the fish which was already in existence, thoughts are different.

This is where Buddhism differs from psychology. Psychology would say your anger is there, whether you're angry or not right now. It's like the fish that's under the water. The fish is there. You just don't see the fish.

From the Buddhist viewpoint, you'd say that the seed for the anger is there, but the anger is not there right now. When the anger comes up, then that seed becomes a plant. Then it goes down into the seed again. But it's not like it's there as a solid thing, haunting you, trapping you, eating away at you. The potential is there. The whole full-blown plant isn't. It's as though there's a lot of potential for all these thoughts, and as soon as the conditions come together, the seed sprouts into a full-grown plant.

[Audience:] What about our feelings? Where do they come from?

It's our thinking which creates feelings. It's not like the feeling was there all this while, and your thinking about it took the cloth off and revealed it.

It isn't as if your jealousy for somebody is there, but you're not seeing your jealousy because you're looking at the pizza right now. It's not like that. Rather, there's the potential for jealousy. The seed of the jealousy is there, but the feeling of jealousy isn't there. When you start thinking, "This person says this to that person and that person says this," and so on, then what you're doing is adding water and fertilizer to the seed and making it grow into a plant.

The mind creates everything

[In response to audience:] It's amazing how we piece together the different things that happen outside and how we interpret the information.

This came so clear to me during the second retreat I did which was a Vajrasattva retreat. I was sitting there in India, Tushita, during the monsoon season, trying to think about Vajrasattva. Instead I was

thinking about the place where I used to live in LA. I was thinking about grammar school and college, among other things. As I thought about these things, I would feel these intense powerful emotions. And then all of a sudden it would dawn on me that none of these things is here right now. These incredibly strong emotions and those things which caused them, aren't here in that room then. Where were those emotions coming from? That's because I happened to be thinking about something. I had looked at it in a certain way, and I developed this whole thing out of a conception in my head. It's incredible how when you meditate, it becomes really clear.

I got this great letter from one friend in India, who was at a course I had taught a few years ago. He was at a retreat. He said the morning sessions were wonderful. He felt like doing retreats forever. He just loved everybody. He loved the retreat. Everything was going well. And then about an hour after lunch, he would start getting so depressed. He hated himself. He missed his girlfriend terribly. He hated the retreat. He couldn't meditate. But by the evening, he was alright again. And he said he really began to get a sense of how much the mind creates everything: the external circumstances are basically the same – sitting in the same room, doing the same meditation. But the mind just creates two different dramas.

[Audience:] I can see that it's possible to believe in these thoughts and that it's also possible not to believe in them. But how do you handle that part of your mind that doesn't believe?

Sometimes I think it's just a matter of what karma is ripening at what time, but also we don't want to leave it just to karma. I think if we actually begin to – and this is where meditation helps – recognize thoughts as thoughts, and not as reality, then that automatically gives us a little bit of space. Because the thing is that very often, we're not even aware of what we're thinking. When you start to slow down and meditate, you start to become more aware of the thoughts that are going on, and then you start to be able to discriminate which thoughts are accurate and which thoughts aren't. The more you can develop that discriminating mind, and the more you can develop the mindfulness to catch the thoughts, then the less they're going to control you.

Two things we need to do: developing the mindfulness to be able to recognize the thoughts, and the discrimination to be able to know a realistic one from a ridiculous one. It's a practice in training. That's why you try and catch the things when they're small.

Sometimes as we go through the old patterns, because they're so familiar, we forget that they're patterns. Again, we begin to think that the thoughts are reality. It's just recognizing this again and again. And I think this is where I can recognize, "This is a video. Here, I put in this video again. That's all it is, it's a habitual video."

There're some things that I can't just say right away, "Oh, this is a video." I have to completely convince myself that I'm not perceiving the situation accurately. In other words, it's not always sufficient for me to say, "Oh, this is an anger video. Let's change it." When the mind is going, "But they did this and they did that!" I have to really sit and say, "Well, yes, and then?" It's kind of like having to prove to myself again and again, why anger is unrealistic and not the only natural response to a situation. Again and again I find I have to convince myself that being angry isn't seeing the situation properly. The more and more I convince myself of that, then the easier it is to say, "Oh, it's a video and I'm not going to play it again."

But I think we do have to convince ourselves again and again that this is an affliction because we have spent a long time convincing ourselves that the same thought is reality.

Dealing with anger

[In response to audience:] It depends a lot on the particular situation. Sometimes just getting ourselves to deal with our own emotions takes all of our own energy completely. And so at that point, we really can't expect ourselves to reach out and try and deal with the other person's stuff, because at that point, just trying to remain calm is our foremost job.

Let's say somebody said something, and I start to build up this incredible story of anger in my mind. I start to say, "They said this and they said that!" And then I might say to myself, "What was really going on? What do they really mean? Why did they say that?"

And then I might realize, “Well, actually, I don’t really understand why they said that. Actually I don’t understand what they meant by this comment. I thought I understood, but I actually don’t. What I need is more information. My anger comes about because I jump to conclusions, thinking I’ve understood the other person’s mind. But in actual fact, when I asked myself, there’s a lack of information here. I don’t understand what they really mean. I don’t understand why they said that.”

This is when I need to go back to that person and ask for information. And then very often, we realize that they were saying something for a totally different reason than we thought they were. The process of going and talking with the other person gives us the information that automatically releases the anger.

[Audience:] Is it better to help ourselves before we start helping others?

At times, before we can care about the other person, we have to get ourselves to a balanced state of mind. It helps if we get ourselves to a balanced state of mind before we help the other person with what’s going on within them.

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>