

Cultivating Bodhicitta through Equalizing and Exchanging Self and Others – Part 2

(lightly edited transcript)

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There are two different ways for generating the altruistic intention. One method is the seven points of cause and effect. The other is equalizing and exchanging self and others which was elaborated upon by the Indian master Shantideva. They say the advantages of equalizing and exchanging self and others, is that if you do this, you don't need health insurance, you don't need divinations, and you don't need pujas when you're sick, because you have a capacity within yourself to transform everything into the practice.

This process of equalizing and exchanging self and others and the *lojong* or the thought transformation practice which follows it, isn't about stopping external problems. It's about stopping the mind that dislikes the problems. Whenever we have an external problem, we also have a mind that dislikes it. The mind that dislikes it labels that thing as a problem, and then exacerbates both the external thing and our internal experience of it. When you do this kind of practice, you may or may not affect what other people are doing towards you, but you're definitely affecting your perception of it and your own dislike of it, which really gives you some ability to control your experience. They say that this equalizing and exchanging self for others is for students of higher capacity, for the more intelligent students, so that's us, right? [laughter] OK, let's go for it.

a) Equalizing Self and Others

We talked last time about equalizing self and others. We went through how friend, enemy, and stranger are equal, and how we and others are equal. We are equal because we all want happiness and we all want to avoid pain equally. We're also equal because the whole discrimination of self and others is an arbitrary one. It depends upon which side you're looking at it from. Remember last time I was saying, this is *me* and that's *you*, but from your side, this is *you* and that's *me*? So it's a very arbitrary discrimination. And it's only by the force of familiarity that we've gotten really attached to our own side and made it really solid and inherent and independent in our own vision.

In actual fact, self and others are very dependent. They're not two inherently independent things. Self and others are dependent. First, all of our happiness comes from others. We're very dependent on others; we're not isolated, independent units. And second, we become self simply because there's a discrimination of others, and others become others simply because there is a discrimination of self. So this whole division is something that depends on each other. You can't have self without others or others without self. Although we have this feeling of “me” existing independently, it isn't so independent; it's dependent on the discrimination of there being others.

In the eighth chapter of Shantideva's text, “Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life”, there is a huge chapter about equalizing and exchanging self with others. Shantideva's text is so great because within the text, he responds to all the ‘but's’. In the text there's always this one little voice that says, “Yes, *but* I still can't do it because...” And then Shantideva proceeds to demolish that objection. It's very effective because these are the same kinds of objections that our mind comes up with.

What it means to equalize and exchange self and others

I'll go through some of those objections. But first, I want to clarify that when we equalize and exchange

self and others, we're not saying, "I become you and you become me." And we're not saying that we switch bodies, or something like that. What we're really trying to equalize, and then later exchange, is who we consider to be the most important. Right now, it's not very equal. "I'm most important. It's very clear. And I'm attached to my own position." What we're trying to do, is first equalize the importance of self and others so that they become equal in importance. Later we exchange who we hold as most dear and who we cherish. Currently we cherish ourselves, but we want to exchange it so that it becomes others. We very naturally and easily begin to cherish others and want their happiness with the same kind of intensity that we now cherish ourselves and want our own happiness.

This whole feeling we have of 'I', the solidity of the 'I', and the inability of 'I' to become anything else, is solely due to familiarity, due to habit. In other words, we have a body and a mind neither of which are independently or inherently existent, and on top of that, we have posited an 'I'. Which is okay, but then we make the 'I' or the self too solid. We identify the 'I' or the self with the body and with the mind and make everything terribly solid. What we're trying to do is lessen that feeling of attachment, lessen the feeling of the solidity of 'I', and lessen the attachment of that 'I' to this body and mind, recognizing that this all comes about because of familiarity. Then we begin to recognize that because of the way labeling works, we can actually begin to label others' bodies and minds 'I', and cherish them with the same intensity that we would cherish our own present happiness and the welfare of our own body and mind. This is a way to develop very deep and strong love and compassion. Actually, the love and compassion and altruism you develop through this method is much stronger than from the other method, the seven points of cause and effect.

The great bodhisattvas who practice this method identify themselves so closely with others that they can act on the behalf of others without any ulterior motivation. In other words, it doesn't become, "I'm helping you." But it just becomes helping. It becomes a very pure action on the behalf of others without ulterior motivations or expectations, without co-dependence and dysfunction.

We take care of our own body and mind, because we feel it's appropriate. We don't do so with any great expectation on our body and mind. We don't see them as separate from us. That happens again, because of familiarity. What we want to do is to develop that same kind of attitude towards others so that we can help others, simply because it's appropriate, and without any grandiose expectations of being approved of, rewarded, or getting something in return. With the same naturalness that we help ourselves, we want to train ourselves to help others by identifying with them, by shifting the emphasis from this label 'I' to others, so that the object that we cherish becomes others instead of 'I'.

Understanding these teachings is not easy. It was very interesting for me preparing for these talks because I started learning this method many years ago and now I'm able to see over the years how something is sinking in and how it's making much more sense. The teaching on exchanging self and others can initially be quite shocking because it approaches things in a very different way. To really understand it is going to take time. It's going to take purification, collection of positive potential, and study under a teacher. And it's going to take much perseverance on our own part.

So equalizing self and others means that we seek the happiness of others and to separate them from their suffering to the same degree that we seek our own happiness and to separate ourselves from suffering. Exchanging means that we do it more for them than for us.

Yes, but...

1. At this point, one of the "Yes, but" minds comes and says, "Yes, but other people's suffering doesn't affect me. So why should I work to get rid of it? When somebody else gets smashed in a car accident, I'm fine. I'm walking down the street. Their suffering doesn't affect me. Why should I do anything about it? People are starving somewhere else in the world. People are starving in our own country, but their starvation is their problem. It's not my problem. Why should I do anything about it? My friend is completely miserable and crazy, but that's her problem, not my problem, so why do I need to get involved?" This is the kind of mind we have.

Yes, it's true that somebody else's suffering doesn't affect us the same way as it affects them. However, their suffering is no different from our own. In other words, suffering is suffering, it doesn't really matter who it belongs to. When we look at somebody else's suffering, that suffering so easily could be our own. It's not like it's a different kind of suffering that only they are liable to, but I'm not. Because we cherish

our own body, we can't bear to see it harmed. And it's only because we don't cherish other peoples' bodies that we feel apathetic towards their suffering.

But again, it is just a really superficial discrimination that we're labeling 'I' on this body and not 'I' on another body. Remember, from the other person's view 'I' is labeled on their body. Our biggest obstruction to understanding this is our own grasping at 'I' and then identifying 'I' or the self with our own body. Self and others aren't two distinct categories like a chair and a table, or like the color yellow and the color blue. Yellow can't be blue, and blue can't be yellow. A chair can't be a table and a table can't be a chair. But the discrimination of self and others isn't like that, because this discrimination is made just depending on viewpoint. From one viewpoint, this is 'I' and that's 'others'. This one's happiness is most important and that one's happiness isn't. But from the other viewpoint, you say 'I' and your happiness is more important than my happiness. 'I' becomes 'you' and therefore less important.

So you see the discrimination of self and others isn't a hard and fast thing like the discrimination between yellow and blue or the discrimination between chair and table. Discrimination between self and others is just dependent on where you are in the situation, just dependent on your viewpoint. The difference between self and others is like this side of the street and that side of the street. It just depends on which side of the street you're standing on, which side becomes 'this' and which side becomes 'that'. If you cross to the other side, then that side of the street becomes 'this side', and this side becomes 'that side'. It's very dependent, it's not hard and fast categories. It's only because we've identified overly strongly with our side that we feel that others' suffering is less important than our own. It's an erroneous perception.

2. But then our doubting mind isn't happy yet. It says, "Yes, but really, others' suffering doesn't harm me. So really, why should I do anything about it?"

Shantideva said, if we're only concerned with our own present happiness now, and what we identify as 'I' right now in this present moment, our present body and mind, why then should we take care to eliminate our own future sickness or our own future suffering? In other words, if we're only concerned with 'me' and this present moment, why should we care about what happens to our own self in the future because it isn't the same 'I' as we're experiencing now.

In other words, if we're thinking, "I'm just working for 'I' and 'me', whoever is me right now. You're not me, so why should I bother about you?" Shantideva says, but yourself tomorrow isn't you right now, so why should you care about what happens to yourself tomorrow? Get it? If you're only concerned about your own benefit, then why do you care about what happens to yourself tomorrow? Why do anything for yourself tomorrow? Tomorrow's discomforts, tomorrow's sicknesses, none of them harm you right now, so why do anything about it? The self today doesn't experience the suffering of tomorrow's self.

In a similar way, the hand helps the foot without making a big deal out of it. The hand just helps the foot. The hand doesn't say, "Look, your suffering isn't my suffering, so I'm not going to help you. Tough it out, old foot, pull out your own thorn! I'm not going to help you. [laughter] It's not my suffering. It's not my problem. Don't get me involved."

In both of these cases, Shantideva is saying we shouldn't take care of the suffering our own future self will experience, and the hand shouldn't take care of the foot's suffering, because it's not its own.

But we do help. The hand helps the foot, and we help our own future self, because we consider ourselves part of the same thing. In other words, who I am today and who I am tomorrow, they're part of the same continuum. They aren't exactly the same, but they're part of the same continuum. Similarly, the hand and the foot aren't exactly the same, but they are part of the same collection. That's why we tend to help them.

But neither of these things are inherently existent. In other words, if we attach 'I' onto this continuum of moments of self and grasp it as an inherently solid thing, then that's a mistaken notion on our part, because this continuum is only a bunch of moments of self. We associate tomorrow's suffering and the day after tomorrow's suffering with the self that experiences tomorrow's suffering and the day after tomorrow's suffering and the self that experiences today's suffering. We associate them simply because they're all moments of the same continuum, but that continuum isn't one solid, inherent, independent unit. It's just the collection of parts of different moments. Anything that's a continuum isn't a solid thing.

It's just a collection of parts like an hour. An hour isn't one solid thing. It's a collection of minutes, it's a collection of seconds. Similarly, the self now, the self tomorrow, and the self in five years, we take care of them all, but none of them are inherently existent. It's just a dependent continuum, upon which we merely label 'I'. There's no inherent 'I' in any of that. That's looking at it from the point of view of continuum.

From the point of view of collection, the hand and the foot are part of the same collection. On top of all the different parts of the body and mind, we label 'I', but again that collection isn't a solid, independent, single collection. The collection is simply a group of different parts. So to make the 'I' that's labeled on top of that collection too solid is a misperception. We're trying to chip away at the solidity of the 'I' because it's by making the 'I' very solid that we feel, "This is me, independent here, and that's you. So your problem is your problem and my problem is my problem. Mine is most important." What we're trying to do by thinking this way, is to chip away at how we view the 'I' as a really solid thing. In this way we're integrating the teachings on emptiness into the development of bodhicitta, which is why this method becomes very profound.

There's no independent suffering. There's no independent 'I' which is the possessor of the suffering. There's no independent 'I' which owns the suffering. So what are we getting so hung up about? How can we claim that my suffering is more important than anybody else's if there's no independent person that is possessing that? If the person that is experiencing that suffering, is something that exists just by being merely labeled on top of that collection, or on top of that continuum of moments, how can we hold on so strongly to that 'I' and the position of that 'I', if it's something that's merely labeled?

So the suffering of self and the suffering of others, both exist by being merely labeled. They both equally exist by being merely labeled. They must both be equally dispelled simply because they're painful. In other words, pain is pain. Since there's no solid person that is possessing the pain, then it doesn't matter whose pain it is, it's pain to be eliminated. Similarly, it doesn't matter whose happiness it is, it's happiness to be developed. There's no independent 'I' there that's going to cling on to this happiness anyway. It's just something that's merely labeled. Both the happiness and the 'I' or the self who's the possessor of the happiness, exist by being merely labeled.

3. Then the doubting mind says, "Yes, but it's really too much of a burden to cherish others more than myself, and I have enough suffering already, why should I get involved in others'?"

The answer to that is that when we develop the compassion that cherishes others more than self, that compassion actually serves to protect ourselves from suffering. In other words, it doesn't become a burden to take care of others, work for their happiness and eliminate their suffering. When you do it with a mind of love and compassion, you do it with a happy, joyful mind. It doesn't become suffering for you. It's not like you're taking on more burden or more suffering than you have already. You're doing it with a joyful mind, so actually your mind is happier than before.

There is a big difference between caring for other people in a co-dependent, dysfunctional way, and caring for people in a bodhisattva way. When we care for people in this sticky gooey codependent way, it seems ostensibly that, "Oh, I'm working so hard for the benefit of others," but when you really look deeper, one is working for one's own benefit. It's like I get something out of this relationship, so I'm going to perpetuate it. The way I perpetuate it is by doing all these things that look like I'm taking care of others, but basically I'm trying to protect my own interest. I'm not taking care of others because I really care about them. I'm doing it because I feel guilty; I feel obliged; I feel afraid of what's going to happen if I don't do this. That's what's going on in an unhealthy relationship. It seems like we really care for others but that's not the case.

I think this is where a lot of the recovery movement has gone slightly askew, in that they get everybody saying, "I've taken care of others my whole life. Now I'm going to take care of myself." When the actual fact is, they haven't really taken care of others their whole life, because there's been a lot of expectations and impure motivations. All they're really doing is exchanging one selfish motivation for another, and neither frees the mind from the pain. When you think, "I'm taking care of myself now because I'm tired of taking care of others. I'm tired of sacrificing for them my whole life," there's so much anger in that, how can one possibly be happy?

Then there is the whole thing of setting limits and setting boundaries. In the recovery movement they

often say, "I'm setting a limit. I'm setting a boundary. You can't do this!" And as soon as you start setting boundaries, telling people what they can't do, then you get into this really solid 'me' versus 'them' position. It just produces a lot of pain and discomfort because you get so defensive thinking, "Somebody's walking on *my* territories. Somebody's on *my* turf. I've got to stand up for *myself*. I've got to put them in *their* place." It develops all these hostilities.

I do believe in setting limits and boundaries, but in my view, setting limits and boundaries is not a question of telling other people what they can and can't do. We can't control what other people do, can we? It's not possible. We can tell other people what they can and can't do until we're blue in the face, but that doesn't change anything. They're still going to do what they want. To me, setting limits and setting boundaries is talking to ourselves and saying, if somebody does this, this is how I'm going to respond. So we're trying to limit our own behavior, put a boundary on our own unhealthy response. We're trying to limit our own guilt, our own feeling of unhealthy obligation, our own expectations, our own ulterior motivations. To me, that's what setting limits and setting boundaries is. It's working on the self, not working on others.

When you cherish others from a bodhisattva perspective, it's not done out of guilt, obligation, ulterior motivations, or getting something out of it for oneself. It's done just because suffering is suffering, it doesn't matter whose it is. And happiness is happiness, it doesn't matter whose it is. There's no strong 'I' in this whole thing. So because there is no strong 'I', there's not going to be a lot of suffering. And because one's compassion and love for others is very genuine, then we're going to do that with a happy mind, and taking care of others isn't a form of sacrifice making us feel miserable.

The Martyr syndrome

In our Western culture, we often think that taking care of others means I have to be miserable. In other words, I'm not really taking care of others unless I'm really suffering. We get into a whole martyr syndrome. In the case of a bodhisattva, taking care of others is done with tremendous joy. Although we say we take on the burden of caring for others, the assumption of the burden is done with incredible joy. You can get an inkling of how this is possible when you think about how sometimes there's been people that you really care about, and how you will go out of your way and do things that are very inconvenient for you or even sometimes physically painful for you, but you don't really mind it. You don't think about it, because your attention is so focused on wanting them to be happy. Once in a blue moon, this actually happens.

I think this is why the example of the mother is used so often. A mother makes huge sacrifices - especially the pain of childbirth - but it's done so happily, so joyfully for the infant. It's a real happy kind of thing. And we do it too, when we care deeply about other people. The fact that we can do this with one or two people means that it's actually possible to do it with everybody. We just have to become familiar with it and develop that kind of attitude.

4. Then the doubting mind says, "Yes, but how can I think of another's body as my own? And how can I think of somebody else' suffering as my own? How is that possible? You're telling me to help others the same way I help myself. How can I do this?"

And to this, Shantideva has an answer that to me, is so profound. Shantideva said to look at your own body. We hang on to this body and identify with it so strongly. This is 'me'. But what is it? This body belongs to our parents. It's not our body! It came from the sperm and egg of our parents. It's not ours. When you think about it, this body arose because two other people's bodies came together. The sperm and the egg didn't belong to us. They came together and then all the subdivision happened after that. Why should we grasp so strongly on to 'I' as being 'I' when it's not our body, it's actually the body of other people?"

It's real interesting to sit and contemplate this. Just think of your own body and how it really is your parents' body. Half the genes are from your dad, the other half are from your mom. All the other atoms and molecules are from all the muesli and milk, oranges and broccoli, and whatever else you ate your whole life. So how is this body *me*? Or how is this body *mine*? It really isn't. When you really sit there and examine, you see it belongs to other sentient beings! It's very clear. Genetically it belongs to others. And the materials of which it is composed - all the food we ate - belongs to others. All that food - the broccoli and cauliflower, cheese, pizza, yogurt, and chocolate cake - didn't belong to me. They all belong to others. Other people gave those things to me and I ate them.

It's really weird when you think about it, because we identify so much with this body. But when you examine it with your reasonable rational mind, there's absolutely no basis to identify 'I' with this body. It falls apart. It becomes like air. The reason for identifying 'I' so strongly with this body can't hold water. We see this whole identification happens simply because of familiarity. We can then begin to see that it is equally possible to identify the 'I' with other people's bodies. And we can associate the concept of 'I' wanting happiness with other people instead of with this one. It's just a matter of habit, just a matter of familiarization. It's really quite amazing when you think about it.

5. Then the doubting mind says, "Yes, it would be good to exchange myself and others, but it's too hard to do."

Shantideva replied that actually, it just depends on familiarity. He says there might have been somebody whom we really hated, but subsequently the relationship changed and now we love that person with a passion. And that whole incredible change of feeling came about simply because of familiarity, simply due to concept and familiarity. You can change the intense hatred into intense love. Shantideva said if you can do that by the power of familiarity, then what you identify as 'I' and 'others' can equally be changed by the power of familiarity. So when we say 'I', or when we say, "What is most important?" instead of attaching it to this body and mind, it becomes attached to others' bodies and minds. And it actually makes much more sense, doesn't it, because there's only one person here and infinite others there. If we're really going to be democratic about who deserves happiness and suffering, then it really makes sense to take care of others' problems and others' welfare, because there are more of them than us. It makes sense to reassign where the importance belongs - with others.

b) The Disadvantages of Cherishing Ourselves

To really develop this kind of exchange of self and others, we have to very clearly see the disadvantages of cherishing ourselves and the advantages of cherishing others. So we're moving on to another heading here: the disadvantages of self-cherishing. Self-cherishing, self-centeredness, and selfishness – I'm using them all synonymously – refer to cherishing ourselves, way up and beyond everybody else. Lama Zopa says that if you start listing the disadvantages of self-cherishing, you'll never come to the end of the list. [laughter] In other words, you can go on and on and on.

What we're trying to see here, clearly, is how the self-centered attitude is the cause of our problems. This is dramatically opposed to how we usually look at it. Because we usually have the view that if I don't take care of myself, who will? In other words, I've got to look out for myself. The part of my mind that says, "I am so important," is a very precious part of my mind, because without considering myself most important, I won't take care of myself, and if I don't take care of myself, nobody else will. If nobody takes care of me, I'm going to be miserable. That's how our usual "logic" goes. What we're starting to question here, is this whole logic.

We're starting to question whether what we call 'I' and the self-centeredness, are one and the same. We're also questioning whether the self-centeredness is really necessary in order to make ourselves happy. We're questioning both of these things.

Are "I" and selfishness one and the same thing?

First, are 'I' and selfishness one and the same thing? This has been the debate. In high school, we had this big discussion on "Are human beings inherently selfish?" Is it ever possible to get rid of our selfishness? Have you ever thought about that? From a Buddhist viewpoint, we say, "No, we aren't inherently selfish." We are selfish because of familiarity, because of habit, over a long time. But, this part of our mind, this attitude of cherishing ourselves, is not an inherent part of ourselves.

That takes us back to the analogy between the wide open sky and the clouds that obstruct the sky. In other words, the pure nature of our mind is wide, open and spacious, and the clouds – one of the clouds being the self-centeredness or the selfishness – are something that obscure the sky and can be separated from the sky. So we have the pure nature of our mind, and we have covering it, obscuring it, the self-centeredness. They are not one and the same thing. The clouds and the sky aren't the same thing. The selfishness and the pure nature of the mind, the selfishness and the merely labeled 'I', they are not the same thing. They can be separated out.

Selfishness is not an inherent part of ourselves. And when we blame our selfishness for our problems, we are not blaming ourselves for our problems. Because 'I' and selfishness are two different things. This is real important. So when we're trying to see the disadvantages of the self-cherishing and blaming the self-cherishing for all the hassles it causes us, we're not blaming ourselves. Because the self or the 'I' is just a merely imputed thing on top of this accumulation of aggregates. It is not the same thing as this self-centeredness which is one of these cloud-like mental factors, or cloud-like attitudes that is obscuring the nature of the mind.

[Audience:] Can you explain the difference between blaming our selfishness and blaming ourselves?

Blaming ourselves? For example, I look at a situation where I really dumped on somebody because I was very self-absorbed and self-concerned. I recognize that the problem in this relationship arises due to my self-concern and self-absorption, and I blame that selfishness for the problem. But I'm not saying I'm bad. So we're separating ourselves from the selfishness, recognizing that the selfishness can be dropped and gotten rid of, but the self continues. We can blame the selfishness for the problems but it doesn't mean we're blaming ourselves. This is a subtle distinction. Although it seems subtle at the beginning, after a while, you can really begin to see it quite clearly. But it's a very important distinction. Because if we don't see this, we get into a blaming-the-victim mentality - and blaming ourselves and feeling guilty are not what Dharma is about.

Does self-cherishing bring happiness?

So we're seeing that the self and selfishness are two different things. They can be separated. Our self is okay, but our selfishness is the enemy. And we're also questioning the logic that we need to be selfish in order to be happy. When we start to look at ourselves and look at our life experience, it becomes very clear that rather than being the cause of our happiness, our selfishness and self-centeredness are the cause of our misery. And we can look at this through many different ways.

Causes us to create negative karma

One way to look at it is that I have a problem. My life is falling apart right now. I feel completely miserable. What is the source of this problem? Maybe there's nothing specifically happening externally, but I just feel totally miserable in my life right now, confused, depressed, upset, out of touch with myself. From a karmic viewpoint, all this upset is due to our self-cherishing in the past lives. Because we got involved with just cherishing ourselves in past lives, we created negative karma. That karma ripens into our own mental unhappiness this lifetime, even if there's nothing specifically happening outside for us to be so unhappy about.

Or maybe there is something externally for us to be unhappy about: the mortgage on your house is going to come up, you're going to have to move out of your house, or your marriage is splitting up. Even if there is something external that is causing problems, still, why is that problem happening? Because of karma. When we look in our past lives, whenever we created negative karma, there was self-centeredness and selfishness involved. So whether our present unhappiness is due to an external situation or whether it's purely an internal unhappiness, in both ways, they can be attributed to our own self-centered behavior in previous lives through which we created negative karma.

Again, this does not mean that we're blaming ourselves. It does not mean saying, "I'm the source of all my problems. Look, I'm my own worst enemy. I hate myself. I did it again!" We're not doing that. Remember, we're separating the self-centeredness from the self and we're pointing the finger at the self-centeredness and saying, "This thing is the cause of my problems. I want to free myself from it. It makes itself out to be my friend, but in actual fact, it destroys all my happiness."

When we look at the conflicts and turmoil we have in this life, even if we don't look at them from a karmic viewpoint, we can very clearly see how self-centeredness is involved...

[Teachings lost due to change of tape.]

...We get into this whole thing of positioning and bargaining with other people. "I want this. I want this. I want that." Instead of expressing needs and concerns, instead of being willing to listen, we get into, "I want this and I want that," making demands on other people. And as soon as we start making demands

on other people, communication becomes quite difficult. So when we have conflicts this lifetime, we can step back and see that so often, our inappropriate styles of communication and conflict resolution are coming from over-identification with the self. It's like knocking your head against the wall because we're creating more and more conflict even though we're trying to be happy. We become completely involved in our own position, our own needs, our own wants, how the situation is appearing to me, what I want out of it. We get very, very narrow, and it creates conflicts and problems.

It's really good to look over your life and look at your problems to see how the selfishness is operating in the present to cause you problems. Look at your own unhappiness as a result of past karma and how self-centeredness acted as the cause of the problems that made you create negative karma in past lives. You can really point the finger at the self-centeredness as the cause of the problems instead of feeling guilty ourselves, or pointing the finger at the other person or at society at large. We're going to identify the proper cause of the problem here.

Whenever we created negative karma in this life or past lives, which has the result of bringing us problems, we can very clearly see that the negative karma was created because we were under the influence of our self-centeredness. Why do we kill other beings? Why do we go out hunting and fishing? Why do we smash insects? Why do people kill other people? It's not out of affection and altruism, it's out of self-centeredness! Why do we take things that don't belong to us? Why do we cheat other people and steal their property or disrespect their property? Again, it's out of self-centeredness, not out of compassion. Why do we have multiple relationships and aren't faithful to our partner, or intervene in other people's relationships? Why do we have unwise sexual conduct that harms other people? Again, it's not done out of compassion. It's done out of our own grasping for pleasure.

Why do we lie to other people? Self-centeredness. Why do we speak harshly to them? Why do we slander them? Why do we cause conflict in other people's relationship with divisive speech? Again, because of our own self-interest. Why do we engage in idle talk? Self-interest. Why do we covet other people's possessions? Self-interest. Why do we spend time plotting how to harm other people and get revenge? Self-interest. Why do we have so many wrong views? Self-interest.

Reflecting on the ten destructive actions is a real interesting meditation to do. Go through all ten of the destructive actions and look at real examples in your life. See how self-interest, selfishness, self-concern are behind all of them. Then remember how every time we engage in these actions, we are creating negative karma and the cause for our own misery in the future. It's totally unproductive behavior. You can see how at the very moment, although the self-centered attitude is passing itself off as our friend, in actual fact, the self-centeredness is deceiving us. The self-cherishing attitude is saying, "Lie to this person; it will be better for you." However, if we lie to that person, we may get a little bit of benefit for five minutes, but in the long term, it causes us problem upon problem upon problem.

So we can begin to see the self-centeredness as the thing that really betrays us. It pretends to be our friend but it actually just makes us get involved in so much craziness that makes us miserable. In this way, we're pointing out that the real enemy - if we're going to have an enemy at all - is the self-centeredness, not the other people.

You should remember that the self-centeredness is not who we are. We're not getting into a guilt trip and blaming ourselves. We're separating out the self-centeredness and blaming it. Because the point is, that as long as we have self-centeredness, we will have external enemies. And the way to get rid of external enemies is not by destroying them, it's by destroying the self-centeredness. As long as we have self-centeredness, we're going to get involved in negative actions and other people are going to harm us back. And when other people harm us, we call them enemies. But the principal cause is the self-centeredness. Even if we try and demolish all the external enemies, it doesn't work because by the power of our own self-centeredness, we're going to keep creating more. You can look at this in terms of politics. The government has one enemy after another, but even if it bombs every country in the world, it will still find another enemy to bomb.

Killing other people doesn't solve the basic problem because as long as there's selfishness, karmically, we're going to create the causes for our own problems. In addition, because of selfishness, we're going to interpret situations so that they appear harmful to us. So the selfishness harms us in two ways: by making us create the negative karma, and by making us interpret the situation in a faulty way. If we recognize this, we will see that the real enemy isn't external people. Harming other people, getting

revenge doesn't solve the problem at all. In addition, the self-centeredness makes us create negative karma which makes us get reborn in the lower realms. So if we don't like the lower rebirths, we should do something about the self-centeredness.

Prevents us from achieving our goals

Self-centeredness also prevents us from achieving any of our goals, any of our temporal goals within samsara, and any of our ultimate goals. We haven't found happiness within samsara yet, because we have created so much negative karma by the force of our selfishness. Why is it that we haven't become arhats or Buddhas yet? Because of our selfishness. Buddha started out exactly like us, confused and self-centered. But Buddha wanted to subdue his selfishness so he practiced the path, whereas we just welcome our selfishness into the house, let it run the show, and spend our time feeling sorry for ourselves. We spent our time grasping after one diverting distraction and sensual pleasure after the other, and we're still here, where we are. So the whole reason that we don't have the happiness of a Buddha, is because we haven't been able to let go of the self-centeredness. When we start looking at it this way, it becomes clear what the real problem is and what are the disadvantages of the self-centeredness.

Makes us extremely sensitive and easily offended

Our self-centeredness makes us extremely sensitive and easily offended. You know that part of you that's so sensitive. People look at you cross-eyed, people speak to you in a slightly wrong tone of voice, people don't do exactly what you want, people slip up in the slightest little way that doesn't meet your criteria, and we get so offended and so upset. That's all a function of self-centeredness. All that sensitivity and being offended is not coming from the other person. We've set out this radar of how people should treat us and we're just looking for somebody to make us feel offended. It's like those days when you wake up and you're in a bad mood and you're just kind of looking for somebody to get angry at. Have you had those days? It's like I can't wait to find somebody who doesn't smile at me, so I can finally legitimize why I'm angry. [laughter]

Again, all of our dissatisfaction comes from self-centeredness. We're so dissatisfied because we're constantly all wrapped up in ourselves. We make such a big deal out of 'I' that it becomes totally impossible to satisfy ourselves. There's no bottom to this pit of grasping at pleasure for ourselves. And we can see in our whole life, how we run after and grasp at one distraction and another sense pleasure and another thing and another thing. There's no end to it. We just spend our whole life running around in circles looking for something, totally dissatisfied, never finding any kind of satisfaction or peace of mind, because of our self-centeredness.

Makes us feel guilty or engage in self-pity

All the stinginess, the tightness in our heart, the inability to share, the sense of loss when we have to give something, it's all a function of self-centeredness. And we get so involved in guilt. "I'm so terrible. I botched up everything." That's a function of self-centeredness. All the self-pity, "Poor me. Poor me." It's all a function of self-centeredness. And it's real interesting when we can begin to recognize those feelings of guilt and self-pity that we usually identify with so much. We can see that they arise in our mind and we completely hold on to them, embrace them, and say, "This is me, this is how I feel." When we begin to do this meditation on the disadvantages of self-centeredness, it becomes real clear that we don't have to feel sorry for ourselves, we don't have to feel guilty, and we don't have to jump on the bandwagon when these thoughts arise in our mind. We don't need to believe them or follow after them. We can see that they're just another joke of the self-centered mind!

Self-centeredness will think of one thing after another to make us terribly unhappy. It will think, "I can be unhappy because this person did this; I can be unhappy because that person doesn't appreciate me; I can be unhappy because this person makes me feel like I don't belong; and I can feel unhappy because this person insulted me. I don't belong with any of these people. I botched it up again. Poor me. Nobody loves me. This is terrible. My whole life has been like this!" [laughter] This is all a function of the self-centeredness. We don't need to think this way. And whatever thoughts arise in our mind, we don't need to grasp at them as reality. It's in our power to look at those thoughts and say, "That is not reality. That is not what is happening. I don't need to think like this. That is self-centeredness throwing its temper tantrum making me miserable again, and I can identify that enemy of the self-centeredness and say, "Get out of here!"

Causes fear

All of our fear - and think of how much fear we have - comes from self-centeredness. When you think of the things you fear the most, you can see an incredible degree of self-centeredness and self-grasping involved in them. "I'm afraid that nobody is going to like me." Look at the self-centeredness. Me, me, me, me. Or, "I'm afraid of death. I'm afraid of losing this body." We're so involved in clinging on to this body as if it were me. We're so attached to this body. If clinging on to this body isn't being selfish, isn't being self-centered, what is? All that fear of death, all that fear of not being accepted, not being approved of, all that fear of being hurt, all that fear of our friends leaving us, all that fear of losing our job is due to self-centeredness. We have ten million fears!

In your meditation, take out all your different fears and look at them. Recognize how the fears function in correspondence to the self-centeredness, and how as soon as you can let go of the attachment to yourself, as soon as you can let go of all the different attachments that self-centeredness supports, then automatically all your fears go away. We have fear basically because we're attached. We're attached because we're all wrapped up in ourselves.

When you start to look at this, you begin to see some light at the end of the tunnel, how it's actually possible to get rid of fear just by changing our attitude. All these things that we suffer so much from, in this life, future lives, all of our past suffering, the finger can be pointed at self-centeredness and all the blame laid there. And when we can really do that, then automatically our interest in being so self-centered drastically decreases. Because we realize that it's not going to make us happy. Instead it's going to make us miserable. So if we can clearly identify it as the source of the problem, as the real enemy, then automatically, it decreases.

The next thing to talk about is the advantages of cherishing others, but I think we'll wait until next time for that.

Questions and Answers

Why should we help?

[In response to audience:] It seems that you brought up many different points there. One of them was you said if people's suffering is due to their self-centeredness, then why should we try and help them? Why shouldn't we just say, "Well, too bad, your problem is due to your own selfishness?" That goes back to what we talked about at the beginning part of the class – that suffering is suffering, it doesn't matter whose it is. So we shouldn't just say to somebody, "Well, too bad, you caused it yourself," and avoid getting involved.

The Tibet situation

In terms of Tibet's problem, you can look at the tragedy that has occurred as a result of collective karma which was created due to self-centeredness. It doesn't mean that all the people who experienced this result now, in this life, were Tibetans when they created the cause. It doesn't mean that.

[In response to audience:] It's real interesting because when you look at any action, you can see that any action can be done for a variety of motivations. You could stay in Tibet because you're attached to it; you may stay in Tibet because you want to stay and help the other people who are there suffering. You can leave because you're afraid and you're attached to your own safety; or you can leave because you want to preserve the religion in another country where it's safe. So it's like you can't look at only the action and say whether the action was self-centered or not, because any action can be done with very diametrically opposed motivations.

[In response to audience:] It does. In the long run it pays off to take care of others. I'm not sure that's necessarily genetic, but there could be a genetic component. I think sometimes we go too much to a reductionist position, and try to say everything is genetic, and negate the existence of mind.

Also along that line, it's important to realize that your mind did not come from your parents.

[Audience:] Then where does it come from?

It comes from previous continuity of mind. In other words, previous lives.

[In response to audience:] The non-inherently existent self, the merely labeled self, nothing wrong with that. It's minding its own business. We don't blame that one. [laughter] It's that attitude that says, "Me!" that makes that non-inherently existent self into the most important one in the universe. That attitude, is what we blame.

Let's just sit quietly for a few minutes. There's a lot to think about here. Please think about them in relationship to your life.

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>