

**The Far-reaching Attitude of Joyous Effort – Part 4 of 5**  
(lightly edited transcript)  
*by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. 24 Jan 94*

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**Compassion as an antidote to low self-esteem**

Last week we talked specifically about the laziness of discouragement, the laziness of putting ourselves down, the laziness of thinking that we are not worthwhile. Yesterday I was listening to a tape by His Holiness. He was talking about the importance of having self-confidence in ourselves. He prescribed compassion as an antidote to putting ourselves down. I've heard him do this many times before, but each time you hear it, something more sinks in.

Isn't it interesting that he prescribed compassion as an antidote to low self-esteem? He was saying that when your mind has a lot of compassion for others, it becomes stronger and more courageous. There is a real sense of purpose and courage. When our mind has this strength and courage, it doesn't get discouraged as easily. And when we are not discouraged, we don't suffer from low self-esteem or lack of self-confidence. Interesting, isn't it? You can see how it actually works.

He was saying that compassion is the source of inner strength, because it gives rise to a higher determination in our life, a higher purpose. Therefore we have access to much more energy and we have much more confidence in ourselves. And that, in itself, brings a greater chance of success. In other words, when the mind is buoyant and the mind is confident, we are much more likely to succeed. On the other hand, when we have a lot of anxiety and fear, when we put ourselves down, then we are putting ourselves in a very negative mental state and we are automatically preprogramming ourselves to fail in whatever endeavor that we undertake.

I believe I told you about Tyrone last week – the boy who thinks he can never read? I always find it interesting that just when you are right in the middle of thinking about something, His Holiness answers that exact question. That happens to me so many times. I will be thinking about something or talking about something with my friends, and then when I go to teachings, that's exactly what my teacher talks about. I keep having this eerie feeling that they have been eavesdropping. [laughter] But this was on a tape so I don't know how he was eavesdropping. [laughter]

**Four aspects of joyous effort**

In the practice of joyous effort, there are four qualities that are important to generate:

1. Aspiration
2. Stability or steadfastness
3. Joy
4. Rest

Let's go right to the fourth one. [laughter] These four qualities are aspects of joyous effort. They are the ways to develop joyous effort and the ways to practice it.

## 1. Aspiration

Aspiration means aspiring to practice the path. It is that wish or strong yearning in your heart to practice the path. Right now we do have many aspirations, but our aspirations are often leaning towards making more money or meeting the right person or something like that. Here we are talking about the deliberate cultivation of the aspiration for the path. Without aspiration, we can't actualize anything.

It is very clear, isn't it? When we don't aspire, when we don't have the motivation, we don't get anywhere. And so in our life, we encounter one difficulty after another. Our whole life is just the story of a string of problems and things not going right. This happens because we have allowed ourselves to be distracted from practicing the path and we have been distracted by many meaningless pursuits. When we don't have a strong aspiration [to practice the path], our mind is very easily taken away by the glitter of all sorts of worldly things. We engage in the eight worldly concerns which in turn brings so many problems into our lives.

Also when we lack aspiration for the Dharma, we don't create the causes to meet the Dharma. This is very clear. Sometimes we feel: "I don't have enough Dharma. I don't have the right causes and conditions to practice. Things aren't going right for me and my practice." This comes because in previous lives we didn't create the causes to have good circumstances for practice today. We didn't create those causes in previous lives. We didn't have the aspiration. We wind up being poor in the Dharma to some extent now because we didn't have the aspiration for it before. So what they are doing is pointing out to us how important it is not to take the Dharma for granted, but to have the strong aspiration which motivates us to act and create the cause for us to be able to practice in good conditions in the future.

### How to develop aspiration

#### Contemplate the advantages of having aspiration

To develop this aspiration, there are two things to do. One is to contemplate the advantages of having aspiration. You will find this similar point all through the path. How do you develop a particular quality? Contemplate its advantages. It's very much a sales pitch, isn't it? When they sell you a new car, they will highlight the benefits of having this car so that you will want to buy it.

Well, the Buddha is like that. [laughter] He is saying: "Look at the advantages of having an aspiring mind." Then the mind gets excited and we want to develop this kind of aspiration. When we get in touch with our human potential, when we think of the value of our human life and what we can actualize based on this life, then the aspiration develops quite easily. We see all the things that we can gain by having the aspiration, especially the qualities of enlightenment, the qualities of the bodhisattvas, or even just something basic like how wonderful it would be to be peaceful and calm instead of neurotic and frantic. When we think of what that would be like, and that we have the methods and tools here to do it, then the aspiration comes to develop that. That's one way to develop the aspiration – by thinking of its advantages and by thinking of our potential on the path.

#### Contemplate the law of cause and effect

A second way to develop the aspiration to practice is by doing some serious contemplation about karma, recognizing that the cause of happiness is constructive action and the cause of unhappiness is destructive action. The cause of a happy rebirth is ethical conduct. The cause of an unhappy rebirth is unethical conduct. Really sit and stew with this for a while. Let this sink in. When it does, we begin to see so clearly how we hold our whole future in our hands.

The present is in our hands and it is really up to us, through our aspiration, to direct our energy one way or the other. Nobody else puts us in the pure land. Nobody else puts us in the hellish realms. They are created by our own mind. If we aspire to practice the path and we practice it, this environment becomes a pure land. If we don't aspire for the path and the mind's continually distracted by all its usual attachment to worldly happiness, it becomes a hellish realm.

Really sit a long time and think about how our happiness and our misery stem from our own mind. It is so amazing that although this is a fundamental premise in Buddhism, we forget it too easily. We do all the study about mind training and thought transformation, but as soon as we have a problem, what is our instantaneous perception? Our instantaneous reaction is that the problem is out there. The outside circumstance has to change.

It is the same with happiness. We learn that our happiness is dependent on how we view the situation. But when we look at how we live day in and day out, we see that we often fall back to our old attitude, which is: “The happiness is inside the chocolate cake and I want it!”

Please spend a lot of time contemplating how the mind is the source of happiness and pain and how the mind creates karma which in turn creates our environment and experience. That will help us to develop a very strong aspiration to practice the path as we come to see how important it is to practice. We see that we have the potential to actually transform our experience into practice.

Developing this aspiration also involves thinking of the disadvantages of the first two of the Four Noble Truths – the undesirable experiences and their causes – and doing some serious contemplation on the advantages of the last two Noble Truths – practicing the path and attaining the cessation of all the difficulties. We come back to the basic teaching of the Buddha – the Four Noble Truths, which is a very profound teaching. Go over that again and again. As we do them, the aspiration for the path gets much stronger.

### **When there is aspiration, practice becomes a joyful thing to do**

When we talk about the aspiration to practice, we are talking about something coming from here [pointing to the heart]. We are not talking about the mindset that says “should” and “ought to” and “supposed to.” Remember this is called ‘joyous effort’, it’s not called ‘feeling obligated and guilty to be good’. [laughter] We are talking about an internal transformation. When there is a deep aspiration within, it becomes much, much easier to practice. Practice doesn’t become a drudgery. It becomes something we are happy to do because we aspire for it.

It’s like when you aspire to go skiing, you will not be bothered by all the hassle of buying the skis, packing your car, getting the right equipment and putting the chains on your car, and getting stuck in the snow. All that hassle doesn’t bother you. You have a joyful mind. The mind knows where it is going: to the mountains. Here, we are going to the mountain of enlightenment. [laughter]

## **2. Steadfastness**

The second aspect of joyous effort is stability or steadfastness. This is an important quality, especially now, when things are so unstable in our society. We change everything. We have so much choice to make. Our minds are always bouncing around with “I want this” and “I want that”, and “Give me this” and “Give me that”. We want the highest and the best. It becomes difficult sometimes to be stable in our practice. We will practice well for a week but not practice for another two weeks. We will go on a retreat and get inspired but not do anything the very next day.

### **How to develop steadfastness**

I taught a course for the Chapman University students and they have to do a report at the end of it. One woman sent in her report. It’s really lovely. I am going to seek her permission to share it with you. She wrote her diary, and a lot of it is talking about the different conflicts in her mind. You can see as the days passed, how much the course affected her. She began to question things and started to understand things deeply. At the end of the course, she went away with a very strong aspiration to continue with the practice and what she learned at the course.

The second last entry in the diary was written on the day that she left the course with that aspiration. The next entry (the last entry in the diary) was dated a week later – the day of the earthquake (Chapman University is in Southern California). She said: “I woke up and everything is shaking. My friend said everything is going to be okay, but what if everything isn’t okay?” She made this comment about how she had very much intended to keep on with what she had learned in the course, but when she got back to her old environment, it was just so natural and easy to slip back into the same old habits. And she said: “I haven’t meditated the whole time I have been back, but tomorrow I will.” [laughter]

Developing steadfastness in the practice can be quite difficult sometimes, and sometimes it takes that earthquake to get us to be a little more firm, doesn’t it? [laughter]

### Having self-confidence

They say in the scriptures that the cause for developing steadfastness or stability is having self-confidence. We develop self-confidence by first checking if we can do the job, and having determined that we can do it, then actually doing and completing the job. It’s quite interesting. You develop self-

confidence by making realistic goals and by sticking to the job and completing your goals.

#### *Examining well before we make a commitment*

Before we commit to things, instead of just saying: "Oh that sounds good. Yes, I want it," and commit, to sit and think: "Can I do this? Do I have the resources now? Do I have the time? Is it something I really want to do? Can I carry it through to the end? If there are difficulties that are likely to arise, how can I overcome those difficulties?"

Think well before we commit ourselves to doing something. This is incredibly wise advice not only for our practice, but also for our life in general. Very often we commit to do something, but after doing a little bit, we pull back. Doing this reduces our confidence, because we didn't finish what we started. Also, it can often be very inconvenient for other people. We have committed to doing something and they are counting on us and trusting us to do it, but halfway through, they are left holding the bag because we go into a crisis and say: "Sorry, I can't do it. Bye!"

I think it's a very wise advice that we think well before we commit to do things. This doesn't mean that we have to hesitate all the time and be fearful of commitment. I don't think that is especially healthy either. Also, it doesn't mean that we should let a difficulty that might happen stop us from committing ourselves. Rather, think about the difficulties that can arise and think before hand about the resources that we have access to – both within ourselves and in the community – that can help us overcome those difficulties. With that awareness, we can then commit to various things. That makes things clearer in our life.

Also in our practice, think well before we commit ourselves to certain practices or retreats or other things. In this way, we will be much more stable when we are doing something.

When His Holiness talks about marriage and relationships, he often says that people need to think well before they get married. They should develop some kind of stable feeling from understanding the other person and having true concern for them before making the commitment, instead of just plunging into it out of a rush of excitement. When you look at the state of the family in our society or the state of the non-family, it's pointing again to think well before we get engaged in things.

It is important to check things out before we start to engage in them. It helps us set up a good habit. If we are always starting and stopping, starting and stopping, what that does, especially in Dharma practice, is it creates the cause in future lives not to be able to practice consistently, where we are always having to start and stop and start and stop, either due to our habit and/or due to the external circumstance. Beware of this.

#### *Contemplating the advantages of having self-confidence and the disadvantages of not having it*

Another way to develop self-confidence is to think of the advantages of having it and the disadvantages of not having it.

If we lack self-confidence, our negative mind chips in very easily. If we don't have self-confidence, we start lying. We start messing around. We start cheating people. Our ethical behavior goes down. We become discouraged. We separate ourselves from the path. We separate ourselves from our Dharma friends. We separate ourselves from the methods that can help us put ourselves back together again. All these happen when we lack self-confidence.

On the other hand, when we have self-confidence, there is clarity and energy regarding our direction in life. Things become much easier as we can evaluate things better – what is beneficial, what is not beneficial – and just go for it. (I am not referring to pushing ourselves.)

#### *Ego vs self-confidence*

His Holiness talks about two different senses of self. There is one sense of self that is very detrimental for the practice. This refers to our ego, that hard concrete personality that we defend and protect. Ego is the chief source of all of our problems, and that's the one that we want to eliminate. Such a self does not exist, even though we believe it does. There is no real basis for it.

The other sense of self is the very strong sense of self-confidence. We do need this for the practice. To have self-confidence, we don't need to have the strong sense of a concrete self that is an inherently

existent personality. But to eliminate that false conception of the self, we do need this strong, clear self-confidence – the mind that can really go ahead and do something. If you look at the bodhisattva practices or read the biographies of the bodhisattvas, you will find that they are not wishy-washy people who don't believe in themselves. They are people who have a lot of confidence – not pride, but confidence and humility.

### *Self-confidence is not pride*

Sometimes we confuse self-confidence with pride. We are afraid that if we are self-confident, we will appear very arrogant and proud in front of other people. I think in our culture, although it also depends a lot on gender and family, often, you are taught not to show your good qualities and just be meek and reserved. But we confuse that with having no self-confidence and we confuse having self-confidence with boasting. They are very different ball games.

I think when we don't have self-confidence, we mask it in pride and arrogance. When we don't feel good about ourselves, then we come on as: "Look at me! I am so fantastic. Look at my list of qualifications," "I am the big boss in charge," and "I have to dominate the situation and control it." I think a lot of that comes when we feel insecure. I don't think proud people have self-confidence. I think it's quite often the opposite. I have noticed that for me, when there is pride involved, it's usually because I don't feel very secure about whatever it is. The mind uses pride to mask it.

Whereas self-confidence is a very different ball game. Self-confidence is being able to see our abilities, our potentials, our value and our talents. Knowing that they are there and rejoicing in them. We also recognize that they come due to the kindness of other people who have taught us and encouraged us. Therefore there is no reason to think we are so great. There is also nothing to be ashamed of or to hide. There is no need to pretend we don't have those abilities and qualities. It is perfectly okay to recognize our abilities and our qualities. In fact, that's an essential part of the bodhisattva practice, because how can we benefit others if we can't even recognize what our talents and abilities to benefit them are? Really, part of the bodhisattva practice is to be able to recognize the abilities and potentials we have that need to be developed. But that doesn't mean that we need to get proud about them.

I think that self-confidence actually goes along with humility, while pride and insecurity go together. When we have self-confidence, it's completely okay to be humble. We aren't all insecure about: "How am I appearing?" and things like that. Our mind is open to learning from other people, and this is what humility is. It's the ability to learn from other people, the ability to show respect to other people, which comes through feeling secure and stable and confident ourselves.

You see that in the Dalai Lama. I have told you many times, that on one occasion, he said he didn't know the answer to a question that somebody asked, and he was the expert on the panel. The humility of saying "I don't know" in front of an audience of 1200 people. He was able to say it because he has self-confidence. Humility and self-confidence go very closely together.

Watch that in our lives. See if there are instances in our life where self-confidence and humility go together. Look at the other times when we mask our lack of self-confidence in pride. In this way, we will become very clear in our own mind about the importance and the okayness of self-confidence.

### Not running away from problems

Also, when problems arise, try and seek resources to overcome them as much as we possibly can. We tend to chuck the whole thing when the first difficulty comes up, not just in relationships, but also in our career and Dharma practice. We get all excited about Dharma but as soon as our knees hurt, we chuck the practice and leave the retreat.

### Postpone things that are too difficult

When we see that there is something in our practice or in our life in general that is too difficult for us to do right now, we can postpone doing it. We don't need to negate it and say that it is not worthwhile. We don't need to feel inferior and discouraged. Recognize that our progress as a human being and our progress on the path is something gradual. We might look at a certain Dharma practice and say: "Wow, that sounds incredible but truthfully speaking it's a bit too high for me right now. I don't think I can actually commit myself to this and be steadfast in this. It confuses me."

We just choose; we don't criticize it. We don't feel insufficient ourselves but we just say: "I will do this

later when I have more resources at hand.” We do not have to feel guilty and incapable. Recognize that our growth and our progress is going on, but it’s something that happens gradually. Doing that allows us to be steadfast and firm on the path.

### Not being erratic

It’s also important not to be erratic, like jumping from one meditation practice to another, or from one tradition to another. This is something that is quite difficult to do now-a-days. There is so much available to us and we always feel: “I want to sample everything. I want to try everything. The next thing that I am going to try might turn out to be the perfect simple practice for me.” [laughter]

I have seen this sometimes. People will start one retreat and then in the middle of that, they will say: “Oh no, I don’t want to do this” and give it up. Or they will start one practice and in the middle of that, say: “No, I don’t want to do this,” and they will give it up. Or they start one course of teachings and then say: “Oh no, there is something better.” That kind of mind that is like a jumping bean.

That is why I always joke about people going for crystal class on Monday night, holistic healing on Tuesday night, Lamrim class on Wednesday night, Vipassana meditation on Thursday night, yoga on Friday night, channeling on Saturday night and something else on Sunday night. [laughter] We don’t get anywhere on the path when our mind is like a jumping bean.

### Being consistent

This is why I encourage people to come consistently for this class. When there is consistency, you will get something out of it. It is like filling a bucket with drops. When there is consistency and the drops are falling in, the bucket definitely gets filled. But when there is one drop here and one drop there but lots of time it’s missed, then it doesn’t get filled.

From our side, consistency is very important, not only in attending teachings, but also in our daily practice. I know this is difficult for people. I am just like you, but somehow at the beginning, I managed to get myself out of bed in Nepal when it was real cold. It is much easier getting out of bed here in the West. I remember it was so cold in Nepal and there was meditation at 5:30 in the morning. I just wanted to stay in the warm sleeping bag. I had to think about death to get myself out of bed and into the meditation hall. [laughter]

This set up some kind of good habit and I really feel the benefit of that good habit now because even when I am sick, even when I am on an airplane, no matter what is going on, I always do my morning meditation. It’s not difficult now. It’s just part of what I do. Even when you are going across time zones and you have less or more time to do your prayers depending on which way your plane is flying, you still do them. There is the consistency. Getting in that habit is extremely beneficial. This in itself gives you self-confidence. You can see: “Oh yeah, look, I wasn’t able to do it before but now, I am able to do it, and I feel good about this.”

### Shantideva’s advice

Shantideva has a way to generate this mind that is steadfast. He said we should think very strongly: “I will practice what is wholesome. Worldly people are unable to make their lives meaningful. They are totally under the control of afflictions [[‘afflictions’ is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of ‘disturbing attitudes’](#)] and karma. They are totally pushed around by the eight worldly concerns, running here and there due to the ‘jumping bean’ mind. For this brief moment, I have the ability to discriminate between what to practice and what to abandon. I have the ability to be clear about the path. Therefore for the sake of all these other beings who don’t have that clarity at this moment, I am determined to undertake the path and do it in a stable, steadfast way.” Think in that way.

Again, this is linking back to the first meditation on the precious human life. When we see the advantages of our precious human life, the difficulty of getting such a rebirth and how so many other people on the planet don’t have the same kind of opportunities to practice as we do, then that helps us generate the joyous effort to start the practice and continue with it. We are also motivated very much by compassion to do it for other people who don’t have the facilities to do it right now.

### *Not taking religious freedom for granted*

As I told you, when I came back from China, I came back with a whole new awareness of the value of religious freedom. Religious freedom is something that we take very much for granted. For us, to have

Dharma classes on Monday and Wednesday nights is no big deal. But over there, you wouldn't be able to do this, unless you get all the government permission and stamps, etc. They might send representatives to see what you are doing. It is very difficult for people to get systematic teachings, to get teachings on a text from beginning to end with a good teacher.

Even in the monasteries, it is the government that decides who can and cannot ordain. For many of the monks and nuns, their job is basically to issue tickets to the tourists or ring bells and ring gongs when people come to bow at the temple. When you see that, you feel: "Wow! Our circumstance here is so precious! What did I do to deserve this? It would have been so easy for me to be born in that other circumstance. So easy! Why am I born in this one and not that one?" Then some kind of feeling comes: "Well, here are all these other people who don't have the fortune that I have. I want to practice so that I can do something beneficial for them. I really want to take advantage of the opportunity that I have right now.

I told you I will be going to Eastern Europe and the ex-Soviet Union countries to teach. It is the same situation there. It is very difficult to get teachings there. It is a little bit easier now, but still not very easy. Alex, my friend who arranged for me to go on this trip, was there before the Berlin Wall fell. He said in Czechoslovakia, everybody had to go to the house where the teachings were held at a different time. They could not all come at the same time. They would have the teachings in an inner room and in the outer room where the table was, they would set up cards like they were having a card game...

[Teachings lost due to change of tape.]

...that's what they had – aspiration. I asked them: "What was it that gave you the ability to do that?" They said: "Faith in the Triple Gem. Faith in the efficacy of the Dharma." We can learn a lot from them.

### **When Dharma intrudes on our sacred ego territory**

[In response to audience:] I think that's a very good observation. You are right. The Dharma pushes our buttons and the Dharma points out all of our stuff. We are all at different levels, and up to a certain point, we are still fine with that. But beyond that point, it's like: "Wait, this is sacred ego territory! [laughter] Dharma is not allowed in my sacred ego territory!" We start setting up all our defenses, and the defenses can be many.

They can be pride: "I know this already. I am already together. I don't do this." It can be anger: "This teacher doesn't know what they are talking about and the people at the center are dysfunctional and co-dependent." [laughter] "This Dharma practice doesn't bring me any wisdom. I should go listen to the spirit at the channeling session."

That is the hardest part in the practice. This is the time when we are so convinced that something is wrong with the teachings and the teacher and everything else outside. That is the time when it is so easy to just quit the whole thing, and let's go watch TV. It's much easier to curl up with some frozen yogurt in front of the TV. [laughter]

We must have the courage to go through the rough times in our practice. We will hit rough times. This is normal. We hit rough times in everything else we do in our life. Why shouldn't we hit rough times in our practice? When it happens, have the space to recognize: "Oh, this is a rough time." And even if you recognize it only afterwards, it is still good. That's recognizing it. It definitely pushes our buttons. Definitely. And that's the purpose.

[In response to audience:] The joyous effort gives you the courage to not take whatever you are experiencing so seriously at any particular moment, but to just keep on practicing.

I think I will stop here for now. We can save joy and rest for next time. [laughter] Do some contemplation on aspiration and steadfastness. Stability. Self-confidence. Think about these things.

Let's sit quietly for a few minutes.

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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>