

**The Eightfold Noble Path: Introduction, Right Speech and Right Action**  
(lightly edited transcript)  
*by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. 20 Jun 94*

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The Eightfold Noble Path is one of the essential teachings of the Buddha. How does this topic fit into the schema of things?

The Buddha first gave the teachings on the Four Noble Truths, in other words, the four facts that are seen as true by the Noble Ones. The Noble Ones are beings who have direct perception of reality.

The First Noble Truth is that we have undesirable experiences in our life. The second is that these have causes, the causes being internal – our own ignorance, anger and attachment. The third Noble Truth is the cessation of both these undesirable experiences and their causes, in other words, there exists a state of liberation from these. And the fourth is that there is a path to follow to actualize that cessation. This path is the Eightfold Noble Path. The Eightfold Noble Path fits into the fourth of the Four Noble Truths.

Let me list these eight and talk a little bit about how they fit together into different things and then we'll start discussing each of them in more detail.

### **The Three Higher Trainings and the Eightfold Noble Path**

This is a great teaching for people who like lists, because the Eightfold Noble Path can also be listed under the Three Higher Trainings. Those of you who have been here before know about the Three Higher Trainings – ethics, concentration and wisdom.

The higher training in ethics, which is the foundation of the path, has three of the Eightfold Noble Path: perfect speech (or right speech or correct speech – there are different translations), perfect action and perfect livelihood.

Under the higher training of concentration, we have perfect mindfulness, perfect effort and perfect concentration or single-pointedness.

Under the higher training of wisdom, we have perfect view or understanding and perfect thought or realization.

To summarize, we have the Four Noble Truths. The fourth Noble Truth has three subheadings – ethics, concentration and wisdom. Three of the Eightfold Noble Path go under ethics, three of them go under concentration, and two of them go under wisdom.

### **Higher Training in Ethics**

Now, let's start with the first one, the higher training in ethics. We're going to be talking under the broad category of ethics, which is basically how to put our life together. Ethics isn't a list of moral codes. It's not

a list of “Do this” and “Don’t do that” and rewards and punishments. Ethics is basically how to put our life together so that we can live in harmony with ourselves, so that we don’t have a lot of guilt, regret, confusion and turmoil. It helps us to make wise decisions. Ethics is also how to live in harmony with other people so that we abandon things that disturb others, upset the balance and create disharmony.

Here, we’re going to talk about how to use our speech in a proper way, how to use our physical actions in a proper way, and how to earn our livelihood in a proper way.

### **Right Speech**

Let’s start with speech, because speech is something that we do a lot. Even though we have two ears and one mouth, we use our mouth much more than our ears. [laughter] Speech doesn’t mean just oral speech. It can be written speech too, and any kind of verbal communication.

The Buddha, when he referred to his own speech, said that his speech was truthful. It was useful. It was spoken at the right time, and spoken with a compassionate motivation. These four qualities of perfect speech or good speech, are very important. Let’s look at them in a more systematic way. What does it mean to be truthful? What does it mean to speak in a useful way? What does it mean to speak at the right time? What does it mean to speak with a good motivation?

### **Truthful Speech**

Truthfulness. Obviously, this means abandoning lying and deliberately saying things that we know are not true. This doesn’t mean being a fanatic about telling the truth. And it also doesn’t mean being a fanatic and using truth in a harmful way. Sometimes we can say things that are true, but we say them with a mind that wants to cause harm and we actually do inflict harm. Even though the speech is truthful, it is not really falling under what we mean by ‘truthful’ here. Being ‘truthful’ is not just saying the facts as best as we understand them, but it means not using the truth to harm others.

An example. People who are just getting into Buddhism often ask, “This precept about not lying. What happens if somebody comes up and says ‘I want to shoot this guy.’ Do you tell them where to go to shoot him? Should I tell him or shouldn’t I?” [laughter] Clearly, in that kind of situation, you do what is beneficial. What truthfulness is calling on us to examine, is to see if we do speak the truth as we know it. How many times when we tell a story, do we exaggerate a point to make it more in our favor?

I got a letter from one of my students in another country. She has a lot of problem with anger. She has been working with this for a number of years. She was telling me about a fight she had with her husband. She got so mad at him and she was really telling him off. She said that the Buddha statue was right opposite to her in the room where they were having the fight. She was seeing the Buddha statue and at the same time, knowing that what she was saying to him wasn’t completely the truth, that she was exaggerating it. You know how when you get into a fight...[laughter] So she was seeing that happen at the same time she was saying it. And then at one point, something broke inside of her. She just broke down and really apologized to him, said the truth, and they were able to discuss it and let go.

That was quite a major breakthrough for her. I think that was quite a good understanding she had, to see how we say we are telling the truth but it is not really the truth. How we pick out certain details and something to prove our point and omit the other details that would help us to understand the other person’s viewpoint.

Sometimes also, we exaggerate when we talk. In particular, we don’t tell the truth to ourselves. We say statements to ourselves like, “*Nobody* likes me!” “I make *all* the mistakes!” “*Everything* I do is wrong!” We make these kinds of statements to ourselves. They are clearly lies, aren’t they? How can we say to ourselves that everything we do is wrong? It’s not true. Not everything we do is wrong. Or saying to ourselves that nobody likes us. That also isn’t true. But we say these kinds of statements to ourselves. Sometimes when we’re complaining and feeling sorry about ourselves, we kind of prove our point to other people, “My boss always gets on my case.” Always? Lots of times we don’t even tell the truth to ourselves when we’re looking at the situation. We exaggerate things.

We also do a lot of double-talking, explaining a situation this way to one person and that way to another person, saying it this way one time and that way another time. We get quite tangled up in our lies sometimes, in our exaggerations. We forget what we told who, so the next time, we don’t know what to say because we don’t know which version of the story this person has. When people find out that we

have been lying to them, that destroys the trust. If we want to destroy our relationships, the best way is to lie. It really is. As soon as we start lying, the trust goes. Very easily. We spend a long time building up trust with our colleagues, with our family, with our partner. But when we lie, even over small things, it knocks away a lot of the trust that has been built up.

The thing is how to tell the truth in an appropriate way, how to tell it in a kind way. Also, telling the truth doesn't mean giving all the ugly details that might be painful to somebody. Maybe just giving what they need to know at a certain time. People who work in the medical profession, if you have somebody who is terminal, you don't sit them down right after they have been through this barrage of tests and give them the whole truth for an hour. The person will be overwhelmed. Just give them a little bit of the truth about the diagnosis. Then slowly, as time goes on, fill it in. Lots of time, it is a thing of how to tell the truth in a graceful way.

### **Useful Speech**

The second quality of speech is how to make it useful. Usefulness can be talked about in two ways – things that are useful in the long run, that is, useful for our ultimate goals like attaining liberation and enlightenment; and things that are useful temporally or in our day-to-day life.

#### Making our speech useful for the long term goals

How do we use our speech in a useful way for the ultimate purpose of liberation and enlightenment? By speaking the Dharma to others, by teaching the Dharma to others. That is why it says in the teachings, that the gift of the Dharma is the highest gift. By explaining the teachings, you give people the tools with which they can free their own minds.

That doesn't mean that we all have to aspire to be Dharma teachers. It doesn't mean that you have to organize classes and sit on cushions. Explaining the Dharma can happen just in your day-to-day life. You might meet people and they ask, "Oh, what did you do on your summer holiday?" "I went to retreat." "What's that?" And you start talking to them about what retreat means. Or people ask you what do you do on Monday and Wednesday nights, and you tell them, "Well, I gave up playing poker [laughter] and now I'm going to a Dharma class." "What's that?" And you describe to them what it is.

Teaching the Dharma or sharing the Dharma doesn't mean using lots of fancy terms, complicated concepts and Buddhist jargon and being impressive. It basically means speaking from your heart about your own spiritual path as you see it, as you're practicing it. What is refuge to you? Why did you take refuge? What did you get out of the teachings? How do you benefit from meditation? How do you use the practices on patience in your daily life? These are things that very often we can share with our colleagues, friends and family.

Many people who are just getting into Buddhism ask me, "What do I tell my friends? What do I tell my parents? If I tell them I went on a week retreat instead of going to the beach, they're going to think I'm weird!" [laughter] Generally, when you explain Buddhism to people, tell the aspects of Buddhism that already agree with what that person believes in. Take the example of His Holiness. When he comes to town, what does he talk about in the big public talks? He doesn't start talking about samsara, nirvana and Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, and karma. He doesn't start throwing Sanskrit and Pali words out. He talks about loving-kindness, compassion, patience, harmony. Things like that.

This is the best way. Start people off talking about these things, and as they become interested, they will want to know about other things. Slowly, you can fill them in. Or you can bring them to teachings, bring them to the retreats, introduce them to teachers. That's also another way of sharing the Dharma, giving the Dharma, using our speech to spread the Dharma. Spreading the Dharma doesn't mean going out on street corners [laughter] or going door to door.

It can also be encouraging them in the spiritual path that they're already on. If somebody is a devout Christian and they find it beneficial to them, encourage them in that. Many of Jesus' teachings on loving-kindness, patience – these are very good for people to practice. We are not doing a hard sell on Buddhism. We're not trying to sell our product or root for our football team here. [laughter]

## Making our speech useful for the temporal goals

### *Helping to avoid conflicts*

Making our speech useful in an instrumental way, a day-to-day way, is especially to help avoid conflicts. In other words, giving people the information that they need. A lot of time, conflicts arise because people don't have the information they need, so they invent something in their head. They don't know what's really going on, so they say, "Well, this happens. It must be due to x, y, z dah dah dah." And then they have the whole story and there is a misunderstanding. So sometimes making our speech useful is giving people the kind of information that they need, like what time you're going to be home, where you're going, what they can expect from you and what they can't expect from you. Instead of promising big lavish grand things, let people know what they can expect and then try and live up to it.

### *Helping to soothe conflicts*

Also, try and use our speech to soothe conflicts, to take away tension when there is tension. It might mean doing some mediation between people who are in conflict, if you have those skills. It might mean just listening to a friend who needs to get something off the chest and talk something out. There are many ways of trying to soothe over things.

### *Giving up slandering and back-biting*

Also, making our speech useful means giving up slandering other people and back-biting. It is not useful when we go around using speech that is intentionally divisive. We often do this when we are jealous. Somebody is getting an advantage over us. Somebody is friends with somebody else whom we want to be friends with. Out of jealousy, we use our speech in a divisive way to make people a little bit suspicious of each other, to create a little bit of friction between people, to somehow do something so that we can wedge in there and get what we want. When we do that, we are abusing our own capacity for speech.

### *Giving up blaming*

Making a speech useful means giving up blaming people, including blaming ourselves. Get rid of this concept of blame to start with. Whenever there is something wrong, whenever there is a difficulty, it is not necessary to blame somebody and attribute all the causes for a situation to one person, be it somebody else or ourselves. Give up blaming with our speech. And with our mind, give up this attitude of trying to find one person to blame, whether it is dumping it on somebody else or dumping it on ourselves. Use our intelligence to look at a situation multilaterally to see all the different things that are going on in it, so that we give up using divisive speech. We give up blaming. We give up slandering.

### *Giving up idle talk*

We also give up idle talk. Idle talk is also something that is not very useful. We can idle talk a lot. [laughter] Idle talk is just talk that is without any purpose, without any sense. Now, this doesn't necessarily have to do with the subject. Whether our speech is idle talk or not has a lot to do with the motivation and with the mind. For example, if you're talking about sports to a colleague at work just to make yourself look good, to show off how much you know about the different sports, or just to waste time, or just to blah blah blah and occupy the floor, that would be idle talk.

On the other hand, let's say you're going to visit some relatives whom you don't have a whole lot in common with. But you know they are interested in sports. You feel it's very valuable to maintain a relationship with them, and you really want to create harmony and find something in common to talk with them about. For that reason, to keep the doors of communication open with those people, you talk about sports. In that context, it's quite useful.

What we're getting at here is, we're trying to do some introspection on what is useful speech. What are the times when our speech has been useful? What are the times when it is not productive?

Now of course, talking about Dharma is very useful, but it doesn't mean every time you talk about Dharma, it's useful. If you are on an ego trip talking about the Dharma to somebody who isn't interested and imposing on them, then that's idle talk. It is a call for us to look in and ask ourselves, when are we using our speech in a meaningful way?

Sometimes, silence can be the best way of using our speech. It can be the most useful way. We'll talk a little bit more about this later. Lots of times too, we idle talk because we feel we need to fill up the space.

If we don't say something, then what are we going to do? But sometimes, just being silent gives the other person the opportunity to say what they need to say. Sometimes it's better not to fill the space. To just be quiet. See what comes forth from the other person. Let the other person lead the discussion instead of us always leading it. Also, especially on phone calls, check out with people. See if it's a good time to talk with them or not. Very often when we call people, we assume they have all the time in the world, but they could be in a hurry. We know what it's like. We've all been in that situation – we're at the door, the phone rings, the caller wants to talk for half an hour and you can't get a word in it [laughter]. It is good to be sensitive ourselves and not do that to other people. Ask people if it is a good time to talk, whether they have time to talk. Use our speech in a wise way.

## **Speaking at the Right Time**

### Giving negative feedback at the right time

Certain things need to be spoken at the right time. If spoken at the right time, they fit in great. But if you speak them at another time, it might not be appropriate. The timing is wrong. It is the wrong thing to say at that time. Again, it is not just what you say that matters, but also when you say it and how you say it. This is very important.

For example, when do we give people feedback? If we have some negative feedback to give to somebody, do we give it in front of a whole group of other people? Do you remember when you were a kid, your parents chose to discipline you in front of your friends? That was so humiliating. Do you remember what that was like? Again, remember that when you are handling your own children.

Don't humiliate other people in front of their colleagues or in front of their peers. It is not the time to discipline them. It may not be the time, even in a work situation, to give negative feedback if it will make the person lose their self-confidence or lose their image. Take care to choose the right time if we have some negative feedback to give somebody.

When we give the feedback, do not blame the other person. Just state the situation as we see it, without interpolating meaning and purpose to it.

Also, do not give negative feedback when our tempers are on edge, when we're in a bad mood, when our button just got pushed. When we are flustered and stressed out, that is not the time to give somebody feedback. We need to do it when it is quiet, when we are in a more private situation, and when we're calm. Giving feedback isn't just telling the other person what our perception is, it is also having the capacity to be able to really listen to them. When we give criticism or negative feedback, we have to check our own mind first if we are in the mood to listen.

Often when we give negative feedback, we think it's just a thing of "Am I in the mood to say it?" We do not consider if the other person is in the mood to listen. [laughter] But when we raise something for discussion, we should automatically check as well, "Am I willing to listen at this moment to what the other person says? When I give them this feedback, am I willing to listen to what their viewpoint is and how they perceive it? If this isn't a time when I'm willing to listen, if I don't have the time, if I'm stressed out, then maybe this isn't the time to bring this subject up. I've to wait until another time."

### Not giving negative feedback continuously

Also, not giving negative feedback continuously. [laughter] "You did this. You did that..." We can watch sometimes how our mind gets into this incredible nit-picking thing. Can you see that? I can see it in myself. It's like once we get a negative image of somebody, then every single thing they do is wrong! They can't walk right. They can't close the door right. They can't sneeze right. They can't do anything right because our mind has gotten so locked into this negative image that everything they do is wrong. We do this especially with the people we live with. The people we live with, the people whom we're closest to, the people we love the most – we often feel that they are part of us, so we can treat them in the same discourteous, rude, obnoxious way that we treat ourselves. [laughter]

### Observing manners

It is true. Look at the way we talk to ourselves. That is the same way we talk to the people whom we're closest to – completely without respect. It's also a call to look at the way we talk to ourselves. When we talk with ourselves, when we talk with our family, to not transgress the basic societal norms of being polite.

I remember when I was a teenager, I hated it when my parents told me to mind my manners. I thought manners was stupid! Politeness was awful! And then when I went to Taiwan and I took the Bhikshuni ordination, so much of the instruction they gave us was about manners and being polite. I remember after lunch, they would always give us instructions like remembering to push our chairs in when we get up from lunch. How to greet old friends. How to greet people. At first I thought, "Why are they telling us this?" And then I realize, "Well, they're telling me this because I still don't do it." [laughter]

I began to think a lot about these different small things to do with manners, and I began to see how much conflict in relationships occur just because of being impolite. It's incredible! For example, being impolite with the tone of voice we use, impolite at the time we talk to somebody, calling them too late, calling them too early, not saying 'please', not saying 'thank you'. Just simple things like saying 'Thank you', to use our speech in that way. How many times have we gotten gifts but did not write back to the people to say 'thank you'? They're sitting there wondering whether it even arrived. It's not that they so much want "thank you's" and appreciation. They just want to know that it arrived safely. But we don't even take the time to write and say "Yes, it arrived. Thank you very much."

Observing manners is very important, especially with the people we live with and work with. It is good to start checking up on our own speech, how we use our speech, if we do this. We can see how small things can make very significant differences in relationships with other people.

#### Giving praise at the right time

We not only give negative feedback at a proper time, but we also give praise at the proper time. And make sure that we give praise, because we often take things for granted. Again, this happens most with the people we live with. We don't thank our partner for taking out the garbage. We just assume that they will. We don't thank our kids for cleaning up. We don't appreciate the child when they do their homework. Or appreciate our partner when they wash the car.

Giving praise doesn't mean always saying, "You're marvelous. You're wonderful." That doesn't tell the person very much. But if you tell them some things they did that you really appreciate, that lets them know what it is you appreciate about them. When we give praise, be specific. Don't just heap on the adjectives. "When you did xyz, I really appreciate it. It made me feel good. It helped me out in a difficult situation." Being specific gives the person information that they can use about what they did that is helpful.

Also, make sure that we give the praise near the time when the person did the behavior. Don't wait six months before you send the thank-you letter. Don't wait six months before you tell your kid that you were really glad about something they did. Give the praise in a timely way.

Often, when people are successful, or when they've had some joy in their lives, they want us to share in it and give them some positive feedback. But we just kind of shine it off. We don't praise it. We don't comment. We don't share in it. And they feel let down. They feel kind of flat.

If we look in our own life, we see lots of times when these situations have happened to us. The thing is, instead of looking at the times when they have happened to us, look at the times when they have happened to other people. We can then use our speech to remedy them. That's the thing to look out for.

#### Knowing when to be silent

Speaking at the right time also means knowing when to speak and when to be silent. Sometimes, silence is a much better way of expressing ourselves and a much better way of sharing something with somebody. We all know this. Sometimes being with somebody in silence is a much greater way of feeling close than having to fill the space all the time. Treasure the silent times with other people. Learn to be silent. Learn to be with other people in a peaceful way, in a silent way.

When people first come to retreat and they hear they have to observe silence, they've told me afterwards, "Oh my God, I'm here in a group of twenty, thirty people and we're silent. In my family, silence meant somebody was going to explode. How am I going to live a week in retreat not speaking? It reminds me too much of the silent dinners in the family!" [laughter] Here, we are learning to be silent with a good energy flow. We are not identifying silence with rejection, or silence with lack of connection.

Especially in Dharma situations, silence can be a wonderful way of sharing something very deep with other people.

For example, we as a group meet and do the Chenrezig practice together. I have noticed at times that after the dedication, nobody gets up. Everybody sits in silence for another fifteen, thirty minutes. Just because the silence is very nice to share, being able to go into yourself and yet have a community that you share that with.

### **Speech Motivated by Compassion**

The fourth quality of speech is speech motivated by compassion. This is one of the most important qualities about speech – why we speak. To really look at our motivation. Things don't come out of the mouth unless the mind moves first. So look at the mind. What's the mind's motivation? Sometimes we may speak truthfully, but the intention is to harm somebody with the truth. Sometimes we may praise people, but the intention is to harm them with the praise. If we praise but our motivation isn't good, our praise becomes flattery. Or our praise becomes coercion.

Also, out of compassion, trying to console others with compassionate speech. Doesn't mean that compassionate speech is always consoling and nurturing. Sometimes compassionate speech can also be quite direct and quite straightforward. Compassionate speech can be speaking out against injustice. Speaking out against prejudice. But these are done with compassion, not with anger.

Compassionate speech can be used to urge others to reconsider their decisions, to urge others to look at more sides of a situation. There are many ways to use our speech in a compassionate way. But the key thing is to always check the mind beforehand.

Compassionate speech isn't, "I know how you should solve your problem. I'm compassionate, so I'm going to tell you how to solve it." Lots of times, that is what is going on in our mind, though we don't say it like that. We know what we want the outcome to be, and we want to manipulate the other person to come around and follow our advice, because our advice is very good. We know how they should live their life, how they should put their life together. We are so compassionate. We help them. We tell them because they're too blind to see it themselves. [laughter] If we have that kind of motivation for speaking, even if what we speak is true and right, it's not going to come across well. Or if the person puts up some resistance, we're going to get defensive, angry and upset. "I'm only trying to help you. Why are you getting so mad at me?! I was speaking to you out of compassion!" [laughter] We need to really check the motivation and try to make it compassionate. Sometimes it might mean not speaking until we can change our motivation.

### **[Audience: Inaudible]**

We can still say what in our judgment we perceive to be the best. That's fine. The extra added element in what I was talking about that is undesirable, is "Therefore you should do it." So the thing is to be able to give advice without imposing any obligation on the other person. Allow them to make their own decision. When you're speaking to adults especially, it's much better that you get them to make their own decision. If we just enforce our view onto the other person, then they're likely to come back to us afterwards and be quite resentful. Or if something goes wrong, they'll blame us for what went wrong. If people ask for advice, it is much better to say, "Well, it seems like dah, dah, dah to me, but this is just my opinion. You know more about the situation. You have to make the decision." And then just leave it completely to them. With a child, it's obviously different.

### **[Audience: Inaudible]**

You want this person to get more functional because it reflects on your integrity, your feeling of confidence and your reputation in the office.

### **[Audience: Inaudible]**

You mean if you don't give advice, are you really caring? And if you do give advice, are you really caring?

Yes it is very hard. I find that too, because people often come to me for advice and I feel it's incredibly important for people to make their own decisions. Try and ask them lots of questions to get more information and maybe pose a few different things for them to think about or do. But really, insist that they make their own decisions. Otherwise it is easy for people to just say, "Oh, I did what you told me to do and it didn't work out 100% hunky dory. It's all *your* fault! I'm not taking any responsibility for my actions, because it's your fault. You told me to do this." [laughter]

But you're right. It is difficult to help and yet make sure that we're caring without being vested in the outcome. Sometimes that may mean giving people the space to make mistakes.

### [Audience: Inaudible]

The basic thing is, that in any situation, we act with as much compassion and integrity as we can bring to that situation. We cannot see what the result is, because results come about through a mix of so many different conditions that we can't determine. So the basic thing about caring is what our motivation is at that moment. Do not think that caring means we get a particular result from the other person. Do not think that helping somebody means we get a particular result. Helping them is the attitude of helping. Otherwise, we will drive ourselves nuts. ....

[Teachings lost due to change of tape.]

### Right Action

#### Abandoning Killing and Protecting Life

[Front part not recorded.] Included in the abandoning of harming others physically or abandoning killing, is to protect life. To protect lives in all ways that we possibly can. To create a safe environment. To eliminate threats to health. That means disposing of our toxic things properly, not putting our paint in the garbage can. Just small day-to-day things. What do we do with the paint with lead in it? What do we do with toxic things around the house? How do we dispose of them? Using our physical action in a proper way means to dispose of them in a safe way that doesn't endanger the environment. To try and create healthy environments. To give shelter to others. Create a place that's safe for other people to live in. It could get as fine-tuned as not driving when we don't need to. It can get as fine-tuned as carpooling when we possibly can in an attempt to create a safe environment for other people. Not putting out pellets to kill the slugs in the garden. Offer your vegetable to them. [laughter]

#### The practice of releasing animals

Promoting life. Here, we get into the Buddhist practice of releasing animals. This is done a lot in the Chinese culture. It's a very lovely practice. I did it a lot when I lived in Singapore. We can organize it some time here too, if people would like. In Singapore, it was very easy to get the animals. At the marketplace, they would have animals that were ready to be slaughtered. There are all sorts of sea creatures, turtles, eels, grasshoppers (that you feed to your birds), birds in captivity. There is a special practice for you to liberate living beings that are going to be slaughtered or imprisoned.

Last year when I was in Mexico, we did this too. We did it with the children. The families all went out in the morning and got different animals. Somebody even got a hawk! They had some interesting animals, like an owl. Then we gathered in the park and we said prayers to imprint the Dharma seeds on the animals' minds, and then we set them free. [Audience speaks.] You buy them and then you liberate them. Don't steal. [laughter]

#### Taking care of the sick and distressed

Creating a safe environment. Liberating those who are in physical distress. Also, taking care of the sick. The complement of avoiding harming others physically is also to help them when they are in physical distress. If you see an accident on the streets, stop and help. If Aunt Ethel is sick, go over and help her. If somebody is in the hospital, visit them, call them or send them a card. This again, is something that we tend to neglect, often because of our own fear. We don't like to see people who are dying. We don't like to see people who are sick. We're too busy. We have so many important things to do in our life. "Can't you have your surgery another week when I'm not so busy?" "Can't you die some other time?" [laughter]

Taking care of others especially when they are sick, because we know how we feel when we're sick. Some people are hermits when they're sick. Let them be hermits. Don't impose ourselves on them. But

there are other people who, when they're sick, want somebody to bring them a glass of orange juice, or vegetarian chicken soup. Whatever it is. We like to be taken care of when we're sick. It is the same with other people. Take that opportunity when it's there, either with neighbors or relatives. And do it with a happy mind, not with a mind that is really rushed, "I have so many other things to do. Okay, here it is. You got it. Now I'll go do my things because it's really inconvenient for me to take care of you when you are sick." Rather, to take care of the sick with a lot of love, a lot of care.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

It's hard. We definitely live in an imperfect world. A lot of these things, it's not like there's going to be one simple solution that's good for everybody. We do the best we can. But I think especially causing direct harm, as much as we can abandon that, it's better.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

It's true. In many situations, we do the best we can. We do it with as much good heart as we can. That's why they say that keeping just one precept now is much weightier karmically than keeping many precepts at the time of the Buddha, because it's much more difficult to keep precepts now. If you have taken the five precepts, feel proud of yourself. Not that kind of 'proud', but a sense of rejoice and satisfaction.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

What you brought out is a very important point. Part of the purpose of this is for the effect it has on others, but the big purpose is the effect it has on ourselves. How we are when we try and become more aware of what we do with the slugs and the ants, where and when we walk, and how much we drive. It's not just the effect on the society but how it makes us slow down, look at what we're doing and our motivation, and recognize our interdependence with others.

Also, when we help other people physically, when we help the sick, do not do it out of guilt or obligation. As much as we can, do it with a kind attitude that wants to give, not so that others will owe us a favor. Especially when we take care of the sick, it really means developing our own equanimity. When people are sick, sometimes they're very irritable, sometimes they tune us out, sometimes they talk too much. They aren't always in control of their body, speech and mind when they're sick. We have to have some equanimity. Also, when people are sick, we have to be able to deal with saliva, excrement and things like that.

To really help people when they need it. Help them talk about the things they need talking about, especially if you're with somebody who's terminal. They may want to talk about different spiritual issues, or emotional issues, or whatever it is. Give them the space to do that. Helping them in that way as much as we can.

It's developing some tact. How to nurse. How to help somebody. How to give medicine. Lots of times, we leave that up to professionals. I saw the difference between Asia and here when I lived in Singapore. One student of mind was dying there. He was at home and his family was doing a lot of the care for him. I was thinking that here, we would probably just keep somebody in a hospital or in a hospice and have a stranger do that. But there, the sister helped carry him into the bathroom. She helped him with all these personal things that we often don't do with people in our family. We feel embarrassed and let strangers do that. Sometimes our family member may feel better if a stranger does that. That's fine. But sometimes, they may feel better if somebody in the family helps them. Not just giving more and more tasks over to the professionals to do, but to be involved in the care ourselves too.

### **Abandoning Stealing and Practicing Giving**

Another aspect of bringing to fruition our capacity for action is to abandon stealing or taking things that haven't been given to us. Using things that weren't for our personal use, that aren't ours. Borrowing things and not returning them. Borrowing money and not paying it back. These kinds of things. Instead of always taking, taking, taking, we try and practice giving. To give material things when we possibly can. But do not think that giving material things is enough. I think we have a bare tendency now to think that if we just write out a check, then our obligation is over. If we just give a check to a charity, if we just

give a check to a friend, if we just give a gift, then our obligation is fulfilled. Don't use giving as a way to buy ourselves out of our feeling of guilt.

Another kind of giving is to offer service. Sometimes we're better equipped to offer money. If we offer service, we might make a mess. But we shouldn't think offering money is the way for us to get out of offering service. When we can, help people physically in the things that they need help with. If they're moving, or if they're building something, or if they're planting, or whatever it is, offer service to them.

In terms of practicing giving to the Dharma group, don't just think, "Okay. I gave something in the dana basket. I paid my due." First of all, dana isn't paying. Dana means gift. It means generosity. It's not paying for the teachings. It's not getting rid of the feeling of obligation. It's a freely offered gift in the same way that the teachings are freely offered. In the same way, we want to offer service to the group. We want to offer service to the Triple Gem and to help the Dharma spread. Try and use our energy in that way instead of expecting everybody else to do all the work in the group. Otherwise it is always the same group of people doing the work again and again. They need some help and some rest. So try and offer service.

Also, to try and protect people when they're in danger. This is a type of generosity. It is also a way of protecting life. But really, it is to evoke the spirit of giving within ourselves. Not always keeping tabs of whose turn it is to pay when we go out to eat. Or looking at how much I spent on their gift last Christmas and how much they spent on mine in order to decide what to do for them this year. Try and cultivate the spirit of generosity that really wants to give.

When we give, give in a kind way, not in a disrespectful way. If you give to somebody, for example, a beggar in India or a homeless person, give in a respectful way. Look at the person in the eye. Give the nice things that we have instead of keeping them for ourselves and giving the bad ones to others.

I read about somebody who said that every two weeks she tried to make it a practice to give away something in the house that she liked. Making that a practice, developing that spirit of generosity, giving away something we like because we want the other person to be happy. We give without fear. We do not fear losing the thing. We're giving because there's some kind of pleasure.

It is no good to give just because people flatter us. Or when people flatter us, then we give a lot. When people are nice and kind, when they say nice sweet things, we give them lots and lots. When they are mean to us, we don't give them anything at all. Sometimes we can be very proud and arrogant, going around thinking, "Who is so good that they can be the recipient of *my* gift?" We give because we want recognition. We want other people to know how generous and how philanthropic we are. So we need to check the mind. Check the motivation. Develop a good heart.

There is actually another aspect to this, but I think I'm going to hold on and do it later. Any closing questions?

**[Audience:] Somebody comes to me asking for information. I know the information is going to hurt them. Should I give them the information?**

I think it's going to depend a lot on the situation, who the person is, what the information is, and what your relationship with them is. The information might be painful at first but it could eventually lead to a good result. If you feel that is the case, and it would be better to tell them now than withhold the information, then you may want to do that. If you have a close relationship with them, then even though it's going to be painful for them, you will be there to help them through that. You have to look at the many aspects in the situation.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

Yes, it is very easy to lie. Sometimes it's very uncaring to do that. "I don't want to get involved in somebody else's problems and heartaches. I'll just feign ignorance."

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

It might be painful at first to say this to the person, but you feel it might be able to help them in the end. For example, somebody is having difficulty at work and they do not know why. You know the reasons. They come to you saying, "I got a very bad grade on the rating and I don't understand why. Do you know why?" You know it is because of the work they did on a particular project. You know that it's not going to be pleasant saying that to them, but maybe if you could give them the feedback and spell it out, then they could come to see how they can improve what they're doing. So you're telling them not because you want to hurt them, cause them harm, or make them lose self-confidence, but because you want to give them information so that they can improve and do things in a different way later on.

Okay. Let's spend a few minutes contemplating.

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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>