

## The Eightfold Noble Path – Right Effort (part two), Right View and Right Thought (lightly edited transcript)

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### Right Effort

#### Review - 4 kinds of Effort

We were saying that there are four kinds of effort:

1. To prevent negative states that have not arisen from arising and to purify those that have been generated in the past.
2. To abandon negative states that have already arisen and to prevent them from arising again in the future.
3. From the positive side, we generate positive states that have not already been generated and rejoice in those that we have created in the past.
4. To maintain the positive states that we have generated and to try and create more in the future.

Doing all of this requires effort. Remember effort isn't pushing nor is effort grinding our teeth and going "Urghhh!" Effort means taking delight. It's a mind that takes delight in doing these things.

#### Factors that help us generate Right Effort

##### Contemplating constructive and destructive factors

In order to have this kind of effort, and especially those four kinds that we described, there are a few things that are helpful. One is to spend some time contemplating what is constructive and what is destructive. If we are able to know the difference between positive and negative actions, constructive and destructive mental states, then we can apply these four efforts. We are able to discriminate, "Well, what did I do in the past that needs purifying? What did I do in the past that I can rejoice about? What am I going to generate in the future? What do I want to generate? What am I generating now? What can I generate in the future?" It is to have some kind of discrimination about what are constructive and what are destructive actions and constructive and destructive mental states. This is one thing that will help us to generate that kind of effort, so spend some time thinking about that.

##### Awareness of our behavior

The second factor is to become aware of our behavior. It's not just having some intellectual idea about constructive and destructive actions, but also actually becoming more aware of our behavior. We talked about this a bit in the section on mindfulness of our body language. We mentioned it when we talked about Right Speech, Livelihood and Action. All these things have to do with our awareness and becoming mindful of what we're doing, becoming aware of our behavior and not just being on automatic all of the time.

##### Having a positive aspiration

Another thing to help us generate effort is to have a positive aspiration and an ideal that we want to go towards. This requires that we have the goal of our life, the purpose, the meaning of our life, very clear. If our goal is clear and we have that aspiration for liberation and enlightenment, then delight in practicing the path becomes very easy. It's like when you have the aspiration to earn money, going to work isn't so

bad. When you think of the benefits of earning money, then you're kind of anxious to go to work. If you have an ideal in your life and you think of the benefits of enlightenment, then you take delight in doing the practice. It's important when we're practicing to have this mind of delight, and to really try and deliberately cultivate it.

We Westerners sometimes have a hard time with that because we tend to get effort confused with pushing. We go from the extreme of pushing to the other extreme of just being lackadaisical, lazy and apathetic. We don't seem to get this middle way of taking delight. Both the laziness and the pushing, neither of them has much delight in them. When we're lazy, we're not taking delight in the Dharma; we're just going "Ughhh!" When we're pushing, we're into our Protestant work ethic culture – we've got to achieve, attain and "Let's go for it!". That doesn't bring about this relaxed mental state that we need for practice. It's working with our mind and having this positive aspiration so that the practice really becomes a delight. It's very important.

### **Knowing what to do when we're stuck in our practice**

Our practice isn't always going to be a delight. We go up and down quite a lot. Sometimes it seems like it's going well and sometimes we feel quite lost. We feel very bewildered like "I'm sitting doing this meditation, I don't know what I'm doing and my mind hasn't changed." All sorts of stuff comes up.

Expect that. If you know that this is going to happen, then when it happens you're not going to fly into chaos thinking, "I'm doing something wrong, I'm abnormal. Everybody else is blissful and I'm abnormal." But you'll know that this is actually part of the practice and part of what you go through and you'll have some tools prepared.

Very often, what happens is when our practice hits a low point, what do we do? We stop practicing. Don't we? The very time when we have some personal difficulty, when we're a little depressed, when something is wrong in our life – that's the time when we really need the Dharma the most, when the Dharma can help us. But what do we do often? We just drop it. We get overwhelmed by our problem.

Sometimes we have some difficulty with our practice, we feel stuck, like we're not going anywhere. That's the very time when we need to go talk to our teacher, but what do we do? Instead of talking to our teacher we say "Oh, if my teacher knows what a lousy student I am and how bad my practice is, they'll never talk to me anyway." We don't talk to our teacher and we withdraw. It's interesting that the times when we have these resources available to us to help with our practice – the community of Dharma friends to talk with and who understand the same problems, our teachers, time available to meditate – we don't use them. So often when we run into a glitch, we just drop the whole cat and caboodle.

At one retreat at Cloud Mountain, during the evaluation session, for those of you who know Phil, he was saying, "Sometimes in the middle of a retreat, I just felt so awful, my practice just wasn't going anywhere and I was going to go back and be a Presbyterian again". [Laughter] He said, "At least there's John, Luke, Mark and those are names that I can pronounce." This is just part of what happens. But you see he had paid for the whole retreat so he stuck it out. [Laughter] This is the disadvantage of doing Dharma on dana basis! When you pay, then you stick it out because you want to get your money's worth. When it's on dana, you say, "Well I didn't pay anything anyway. Let's just drop it." It's very strange how our mind works in the West.

Just remember when your energy's low, that's the time really to seek out the resources that are available. I just got a letter from somebody who was saying that she felt that her practice was kind of stuck and her Dharma energy is low. She went to Geshela's teachings over the weekend. It was like "Oh, wow, he put it all in perspective, what we've been doing in the Lamrim class and it all kind of came together". This is the advantage sometimes of just renewing your involvement with the group, the teacher and the Dharma and everything going around. You often get the thing that you really need at that moment.

Now I very often had the experience when I was living in India, especially studying with Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey, that I'd be talking with Dharma friends about something. We would be stuck and wondering about something and how does this work and how does that work. The next day we'll go into class and Geshela answers the question. It's just remarkable. If you keep making that effort and don't take all your mental states so seriously, then when you get stuck, you can really keep going. Being stuck is

impermanent, too. This will help you renew that sense of purpose and the delight in practicing the Dharma. Lama Zopa used to say that the Dharma isn't difficult. It's just our mind that makes it that way. It's our mind that can make it easy also. It's our mind that takes delight and feels inspired.

### **Reading biographies of the past practitioners**

Other times when you lack effort, it might be good to read some of the biographies of the past practitioners. Read Milarepa's biography during the times when we feel, "Oh, I can't possibly get anywhere. My practice, my mind's just so awful, my life is so awful." Milarepa killed thirty-something people before he came to the Dharma. At least we didn't do that. He became a Buddha in that lifetime.

When you get depressed: "Oh my relationship with my teacher isn't working well and I can't stand this group and blah, blah, blah," then you look at Milarepa. He went to Marpa and Marpa made him build buildings with these huge enormous rocks. He built a nine-story building with rocks and then Marpa would come along and say "I don't like that one at the bottom. Take it out". Milarepa had to do it. Then he would go and he would request teachings from Marpa and Marpa would kick him out. Or Marpa would be teaching other disciples and Milarepa would go sit in the back and Marpa would say "What are you doing here? Get out of here."

But you see, he had that noble aspiration. He had that long-term purpose. He knew his teacher well. He knew the path. He knew where he wanted to go. Milarepa just saw all of those kinds of things as purification and he just went through the difficulties. It is helpful to think Milarepa built and tore down these nine-story buildings so many times with a lot of effort, faith and devotion. If we run into a glitch in our practice, let's realize that maybe our glitch isn't nearly as bad as his was and find our inner resources and our delight so that we can continue.

### **Balance in practice**

An important thing in not getting yourself to the point where your practice is stuck is this whole thing of taking care to be very, very balanced and not push yourself. Don't get into one of these Dharma frenzies of "I'm going to become a Buddha before next month" and "I'm going to do all of the hundred-thousand prostrations in one month and here I go" and set yourself up with these grandiose expectations. If you set grandiose, very high expectations in a short period of time, then you're not going to have the patience to continue. Change happens slowly and you're not going to be able to fulfill your expectations and then you're going to go "Well, it didn't work" and give it up, when it wasn't designed to work in one month. It's something that takes time. In a similar way, avoid high expectations and really avoid burn-out. Avoid this mind that just pushes and pushes and pushes. Just take it easy so that we can be consistent.

Taking it easy doesn't mean being lazy. It just means being relaxed, having a relaxed mind, doing something in an even, consistent pace instead of with this Protestant work ethic mentality. It's very important, very important.

### **Remembering that we are healthy**

When we do feel our energy going or even when we don't feel our energy going, it's helpful to reflect on some other things to keep it up. One is to reflect on the fact that we're healthy. Often we take our health for granted and we think "Well I don't feel like doing Dharma now. I'll do it later." But if we really think "Wow, I'm healthy and Dharma practice is so much easier when I'm healthy. I'll use that time when I'm healthy now. Later on I'll lose my health and get sick, but I'll have this Dharma practice behind me, I won't regret having wasted my time. I'll have all the enrichment that comes from practicing, that will sustain me when I'm sick." Remember this when we're healthy.

### **Remembering that we are young**

Remember that we're young. This is a relative thing. The definition of young changes every year. Forty used to be old, but now forty is young. Remember that we are young and Dharma practice again is much easier when we're young, when we're healthy, when our body moves well. Take advantage of this time, instead of saying, "Well I'll just live my life in pleasure and then when I'm sixty or seventy and I can't move and there's nothing else to do, then I'll do Dharma." Instead of that attitude, practice now with really this sense of appreciation for our youth. Then when we get old, there will be no regret and there will also be this whole store of positive energy that sustains us in our old age.

You look at Geshe Sopa. He's seventy-something, but he doesn't seem that old, does he? Physically

he doesn't look his age and mentally, he's definitely not in his seventies. This is accomplished through the force of his practice. Or for those of you who know Grace McCloud, she lives not too far from here. She's an old Buddhist in the area. She's eighty-four, eighty-five now? She's a really wonderful person. She's been practicing many years. You go over and talk to her and her mind is really alert, happy and cheerful and it comes as a benefit of her Dharma practice.

Remember this, the practice that we do now will really sustain us when we're older. It helps us take delight in doing the practice.

### **Remembering that we have enough physical resources**

Another factor to remember is that we have enough money to practice right now. Again this is a situation that can change. Who knows what will happen to the world economy? There could be a time later on in our life when we don't have the physical resources to be able to practice. But right now we actually have the resources that make it possible to practice and so again take advantage of this opportunity instead of taking it for granted or instead of being blasé. But really looking, "Yes, I have the health, with all the money, the resources to be able to practice. I'm not living out on the streets. The American economy isn't in shambles. I can go on retreat. I can do this and that." This is taking advantage of our resources.

### **Remembering that we have religious freedom**

It's also important to remember that we have religious freedom. Especially when you think of those young men in China (I told you the story). We don't know how long we're going to have this opportunity. When I sat down and thought about their dilemma, I just saw how much I take our freedom here for granted. I'm just so blasé about having the freedom to practice Dharma, to be able to travel, to be able to invite teachers, to be able to meet in a group like this. We don't know how long we're going to have this opportunity.

I think I told you before about my friend Alex, who went to Czechoslovakia before the revolution, before the Communist regime fell. When he went to teach Dharma in someone's home, everybody had to come at a different time. In the outer room they arranged cards and beer like everybody was playing cards and then they went in the inner room to do the Dharma teaching. They had the whole show of the card game in case the police came. Just remember that we don't have to do that. We have that freedom to practice. Really appreciate your freedom and take advantage of it.

When we think about these things, then it gives us much more energy and delight in doing our practice. We see that comparatively we have very few obstacles. It's really quite easy for us to practice.

### **Remembering we have been fortunate to encounter the Dharma**

Remember, too, that we've been able to encounter the Dharma. It's quite possible to have been born in a country where there are no Buddhist teachings, where you cannot encounter the Dharma. You might have the same spiritual thirst that you have now but no way to satisfy it because you're born in a country where there's no access to spiritual teachings. Really appreciate what we have going for us, the easy access we have to Dharma and the opportunities to practice. This realization of the Dharma gives us the energy to do the practice.

## **The Higher Training of Wisdom**

Let's go on to the higher training of wisdom. There are two parts of the Eightfold Noble Path that are listed under the higher training of wisdom. One is called view or understanding. These are two different translations. The second one is called thought or realization. Again these are two different translations for the same word.

In terms of the higher training of wisdom in general, there are actually four different kinds of wisdom. Three we cultivate and one is carried with us from previous lives. Dependent upon what we did in previous lives, what imprints we set in our mindstream from previous lives, then in this lifetime we're born with a certain degree of Dharma understanding.

Wisdom in the Buddhist sense is completely different from worldly intelligence or worldly knowledge, worldly wisdom. You've heard stories of some of the great sages of the past who were illiterate but they

had great Dharma wisdom. You meet many people who have incredible worldly wisdom but when it comes to Dharma, they are totally dumb. Really, it's like they cannot understand anything. Again, according to the imprints from our practice in previous lifetimes, we have some understanding, some wisdom right now.

### **Three kinds of wisdom that can be cultivated**

#### **1. Wisdom from hearing the teachings**

There are three kinds of wisdom that we can deliberately cultivate in this life. One is the wisdom from hearing the teachings. This is the first wisdom to cultivate in this life. We need to hear teachings and we need to study the teachings. This is very, very important because often we think that we can just make up our own path, we don't need to listen to anybody else. But we've been making up our own path from beginningless time and we're still stuck. This lifetime we might actually try listening to the Buddha's teachings. It might be helpful to us. Listening and studying, we might get the Dharma.

Listening isn't just about getting information. The whole time when you're listening to teachings, or when you're reading, you're actually actively thinking about the teachings at the same time. A certain amount of wisdom arises during the time that you're listening to the teachings. This is the first wisdom that we cultivate.

#### **2. Wisdom from contemplating the teachings**

From there we go on to contemplating the teachings. First, we listen and then we think about what we've heard. We contemplate. We reflect on the teachings. Sometimes when we're at home, we might sit in meditation position or we might just lean back in our chair and just think about the teachings. Just really think about what we have heard. Think about what we have read. Apply it to our lives and check it to see if it is logical. See if it fits what we've seen in our lives. Work with it a little bit in terms of our own life to make sure we have the correct understanding.

Also included in contemplating the teaching are discussions with other people. This is a very, very important item. My teachers used to say that you learn 25% from your teacher and 75% from your classmates and your fellow Dharma students, from talking and discussing with them. In the Tibetan tradition, they would all go out in the debate courtyard and yell and scream, which is very good if you're an adolescent male. [Laughter] It's a skillful use of that energy, isn't it? We don't need to all go do that – to yell and scream and clap our hands – but just discussing with our Dharma friends. I found I often thought I understood a teaching but when I discussed it with my friends, I realized I didn't. Or the teacher was talking about something and I got some of the points, but I missed the others and then my friends helped me fill in my notes. Or they see relationships that I never saw? It's very, very helpful talking with Dharma friends.

It's very helpful in the process of applying the teachings to our own life, to discuss with our Dharma friends how we're applying them and how we fit them into situations that we encounter. We'll probably find that our friends have had the same situations and that they're struggling with the same things. It lessens the sense of isolation, to actually open up and talk about those things. Sometimes that's difficult to do because we have this image of "I have to be this great Dharma practitioner and if I tell my friends about how I try to practice in life and how it didn't work when I tried, they're going to see what a lousy practitioner I am"? That's the wrong way to think. We often think that way but that's completely the wrong way. But instead, recognizing that our Dharma friends are dealing with the same things as we are and we can learn a lot from them, how they apply it in their life and share how we're applying it or trying to apply it in our life. Contemplating and discussing is the second wisdom that we can develop in this life.

#### **3. Wisdom from meditating on the teachings**

The third wisdom is of actual meditation where we are trying to integrate and unify our mind with the Dharma. We go through that process of hearing and then contemplating before we can actually meditate and integrate and make our mind one with the Dharma. That's what the word 'yoga' means. 'Yoga' means union. We're trying to unite our mind with the Dharma. That comes through meditation, repetition, applying it again and again and again, until the teachings become very familiar. It's like making a new habit in your mind.

So these are the three kinds of wisdom in general that we want to try and develop. I think it's helpful to know about this. There's this kind of progression. Before you can actually meditate, you have to think about the teachings and make sure you understand them because you cannot meditate on something that you do not understand. Before you can think about them, you have to learn them by hearing and reading.

**[Audience:] After meditating on patience, I find that I am still not very patient.**

What are you doing when you meditate?

[In response to audience:] Kind of like you're just sitting there and saying "patience, patience" and no patience is coming?

Geshela said very often, "Don't just say patience, patience". And His Holiness is consistently saying, "We need to sit down and think about these deeply". It's finally begun to sink in that that's what we're doing when we're meditating. We're taking the material that we had in class and sitting down and thinking about it deeply. Not making this distinction between "Well my meditation is to visualize or to breathe and then class information is just information that I hear". But to actually take the stuff that we hear in class, sit down and really think about it deeply so that you're not saying "patience, patience." You have, like in the back of "What Color Is Your Mind?" that whole section about anger and how to develop patience. Well, there's this whole thing. We'll think like this, and think like that. You sit down and you try actually thinking like that. You take one of the points on how to develop patience and you actually think about that.

### **Integrating teachings with meditation**

Here we just had this whole talk about effort. You go home and you sit down and think, "Well, I am healthy. What significance is it to me to be healthy? What does it do for me? How am I going to feel later when I am not healthy? Will I be able to practice Dharma then?" You think about just the whole advantage of being healthy. Then when you're done with that, you think about being young. "What does it feel like to be young? What's it going to feel like to be old? What advantage do I have now? How can I use it?" There's also the fact that we have religious freedom. And you think about that.

You actually have points and you're thinking about them deeply. In this way, as you think, sometimes you can have an incredibly strong experience. You might have this experience at some point, of just even one of the points of, "Oh my goodness, I'm healthy! This is incredible! Absolutely incredible!" "Here's this woman I visited who's dying of cancer, and cannot speak without blocking the trachea. I don't have that and this is absolutely incredible." You get this very strong feeling. Just hold your mind on that feeling, let your mind really experience it.

This is why it is very helpful if you have the Lamrim outline\*, or if you take notes in class, to write down the points so that you can remember them. When you get home, you really think deeply, and while you're thinking, then the experience comes. Also the more deeply you think about the material we cover in class, then when you do other meditations like the breath or the visualization, you'll be able to integrate the understanding you have from these kinds of meditation into the visualization.

For example, in the Lamrim class, we did the six far-reaching attitudes, the three kinds of generosity, the three kinds of ethics, the three kinds of patience and all these different things. When you go home, think very deeply about each one of those and get a grasp and understanding, "Well what does generosity mean? What does it mean to give material possessions? What are the circumstances that are good to give in and what aren't? What blocks me from giving? What does it mean to give protection and how can I do that? And what does it mean to give Dharma?"

### **Integrating teachings with visualization practice**

You think about that deeply and then in another meditation session, maybe you're doing a visualization, and you're imagining Chenrezig radiating out light. Well, as that light is getting sent out, you can think of the generosity of Chenrezig. For those of you who have the Chenrezig empowerment, when you visualize yourself as Chenrezig and you send out the light, then you can practice those three kinds of generosity with yourself as Chenrezig sending out those different things in the form of light to others. Or you can practice the three kinds of ethics, sending those out as Chenrezig to other people. The more you understand the teachings we go through in class, the richer these meditations are going to become

as well.

### [Audience:] How do you differentiate meditation from contemplation?

You're still reflecting about it. Only it's deeper, more integrated. It's repeated again and again. Sometimes when we actually sit in meditation position, we might still be at the second one, just only at the contemplating level, because we're still trying to get a handle on what it was that was said and how it fits together, and that's fine. Sometimes as you do that kind of contemplation, more questions come up and that's good. When you have questions, that's good. Write them down, talk about them.

### **The American consumer mentality**

[In response to audience:] Very often we approach the Dharma with a consumer mind. [Laughter] Seriously we do. We approach Dharma groups and Dharma teachers as consumers. "What's high quality?" "What teacher's entertaining? Doesn't matter if what they say is true or not, as long as they're entertaining, then I'll go. I'm bored with this teacher." It's like "Well, I'll go to another movie, go to another teacher." Or "I'm bored with this practice. Well I'll go do another practice."

This is the American consumer mentality. Wanting to check out, window-shop. Make sure we're getting the best bargain, the best deal? Most for our money? Most Dharma for our money? We approach our meditation like consumers. "OK, look I've paid my time, I've meditated for half an hour, I want to attain this and such. I went to school for four years, I deserve my diploma. I meditated for four months, I deserve a certain realization." We very much have this consumer mind.

This attitude makes a huge problem for us. A huge problem. If you watch consumerism, what is it about? It's about dissatisfaction, isn't it? The whole thing, we're taught to be dissatisfied, to want more, to want better. We come to the Dharma practice with that same dissatisfaction. "I don't like this meditation cushion, I want that one." "I don't like this retreat center, I want that one." "I don't like this schedule, I want that one." "I don't like this teaching, I want that one." The dissatisfactions are very much the same.

### [Audience:] How can we tell whether we are approaching the Dharma with a consumer mind?

One way is just to see the energy in your own mind. If your energy is this dissatisfied, complaining energy, then it's a different energy than if it's, "Well gee, I need more information" or "Gee, I need to understand this better" or "Gee, if I heard this teaching it would really complement my practice" or "Gee, this teacher might be able to give me a different slant on it". It's a very different kind of energy in your mind between when you're dissatisfied and when you're just gathering more resources. It's the same kind of difference in energy between, "Huh gee, I don't like this apple-pie. I better go out and buy something else" and "Oh, I'm hungry and I need to eat something". There's a difference in your own internal energy there.

### **Right View**

The right or perfect or brought-to-fruit view or understanding, which is the seventh of the eight, involves understanding the Four Noble Truths. This is having a deep understanding of the Four Noble Truths. The more I learn the Four Noble Truths, the more I find them incredible. His Holiness has said many times that for Westerners, in the Lamrim teachings, instead of starting with the topics as laid out by Lama Tsong Khapa, it's better to start with the Four Noble Truths. They give us a whole overview of the Buddha's teachings. They really speak to our heart in a very direct way. The first 2 Truths talk about our present condition and they're the things to be abandoned. The last 2 Truths talk about our potential and they're the things to be actualized.

The first 2 Truths talk about cyclic existence and how it is brought about. How we create cyclic existence. The last 2 talk about Nirvana, liberation and how we create that. When we think about undesirable experiences and their causes, then we get a real good understanding of our life and what causes our life, what causes our problems, and why we are here. How is our mind working? We get a real familiar awareness, a good understanding of our present situation and how cyclic existence evolves. Then when we study the Path and the result of the Path, the cessation of undesirable circumstances and their causes, then we can really tap into our potential and get a very clear direction about how to use our potential and what direction we want to go in our life and what we can do to actualize that.

The understanding of the Four Noble Truths is very, very important here. If you go over it again and again, you'll find that it just completely describes everything in the world. It's just amazing, the more I go into it; it just describes everything. It's right there, in the Four Noble Truths. You really start to see how the Buddha really knew what he was talking about.

### **The Three Characteristics**

Right view or understanding also involves understanding the Three Characteristics.

#### 1. Impermanence

The first characteristic is reflecting on impermanence. This particularly falls under the first Truth, the Truth of undesirable experiences. To recognize impermanence, to really do some reflection on impermanence and see how our mental states are impermanent. Our moods are impermanent, our body is impermanent, everything we like is impermanent, everything we don't like is also impermanent—thank heavens! We get some feeling for impermanence and what factors impermanence has, and what meaning this has for how I live my life. The fact that things are impermanent, then is it worthwhile getting attached to things? What is really meaningful if things are impermanent?

#### 2. Unsatisfactoriness

The second characteristic is reflecting on unsatisfactoriness. The fact that our mind is perpetually unsatisfied, always wanting more, always wanting better. No matter what we have, it's not good enough. You see this. It's rampant.

I remember when I was first getting introduced to the Dharma, when Lama Zopa talked about this, when he talked just about this discontent and this feeling of constant dissatisfaction, I looked at my mind and I saw, "Wow, that's really what's going on here".

Recognize that none of the things we grab on to externally has the ability to solve that feeling of dissatisfaction. Why? Because all of those things are changeable. And why? Because our own moods, our own dissatisfaction is changeable. How many times have we been dissatisfied? We get what we want and then we get dissatisfied about something else. This is really our life, isn't it? I want this. I want that. I bellyache. I complain. As soon as we get it, "Oh, I want this other thing, I want this other thing".

Just recognize, "Yes, this is how samsara works, this is the state of samsaric existence". As we understand this, this is what gives us the determination to be free, the impetus to really practice the Path. We see how getting stuck in our constant dissatisfaction doesn't get us anywhere. But there actually is a way out. The way out is developing that sense of inner contentment through recognizing impermanence, through recognizing dissatisfaction.

#### 3. Selflessness

And then the third characteristic is to recognize selflessness...

[Teachings lost due to change of tape during recording]

... One woman brought up a question about selflessness. She said she had been reading the part in "Open Heart, Clear Mind" about selflessness which is about how you look at a flower and how it has petals and stamens and pistils. How there's just this collection of things that has the name "flower" but there's no real flower there. She said, "And then I looked at my children and I thought there's no real Rosie and there's no real Jenny. That felt really weird." She was a little bit shaky about that. Kind of like "I really love my kids. I'm freaking out. Are you going to tell me there are no real Rosie and no real Jenny? What am I going to do?"

We talked about that for a while. Is there some kind of permanent essence about your child that is everlasting? What in our own mind is some kind of permanent essence that isn't changing? We're different now from the time we walked into the room. It's all changing like that.

Our problems don't have any essence either. Sometimes when we think about selflessness in terms of the things we like, we say "Oh, there's no essence". But then when we think about our problems not having any essence, it's a real relief. This thing that I'm labeling as this huge enormous problem – what is it? Where is it? Can I lay my fingers on it? No. It's just a bunch of different circumstances and I give

it the label “problem”. Besides that it’s not a problem.

That’s why Lama Zopa in “Transforming Problems” says, “The first thing you have to do is to be happy about your problems and say they’re good”. Give them another label. Why do we give them another label? Because they’re empty. If they had an essence we couldn’t give them this other label, we could never see them as good. Read that chapter in the book. He really hammers it in. You cannot see your problems as bad. You’ve got to see them as good. What sense is there in seeing your problems as bad? They’re good. Bodhisattvas want more problems.

It is this kind of understanding of the Four Noble Truths, the 3 characteristics, that is creating that perfect or fruitional view or understanding which gives us an incredible perspective on life and grounding on life, a way to understand our life. When you understand the Four Noble Truths, your mind doesn’t go into existential crisis anymore.

Remember existential crisis? [Laughter] Remember the one you had when you were a teenager, you thought you’ve finished with it when you were a teenager, but then you got to middle age and you realized it hadn’t changed at all. It’s like falling in love when you are a teenager and you think, “Oh, that’s just infatuation”. You do it when you’re twenty and thirty and forty and sixty and seventy. You realize that you’re still a teenager and infatuated. Nothing much has changed. I don’t want to discourage you. [Laughter] We never really grow out of teenagership, do we? We just kind of ignore it for a while but it’s still the same questions our whole life. Our whole life, the same questions.

Anyway, as you understand the Four Noble Truths, then what happens is that we don’t go into the same kind of crisis as before because we have a framework to understand why we’re at where we are, what causes brought it about, what we can do about it, what our potential is, why things happen in the world the way they do. It really helps to avoid this incredible cynicism and despair about the state of the world because we begin to understand the state of the world as the first two Noble Truths. Buddha talked about it twenty-five hundred years ago. There it is. This has been going on for a long time. This is the state of samsara.

But there’s also a whole lot of other potential. There’s the last two Truths that can help to pull us out of it. When we understand this is samsara then we don’t fall into the same despair that we did before when we were thinking, “Why is the world like this? It should be perfect”. We realize “Well, this arises because of ignorance, anger and attachment. And yes, I have all three of them. And so does everybody else”. It’s no surprise that things are the way they are. It points a direction how to change as well. The Four Noble Truths really ground us, really ground us very much.

### **Right Thought**

The last one is perfect thought or realization. This can include the understanding of emptiness. This also falls under the Four Noble Truths and it also falls in here. You begin to understand that by practicing the Eightfold Path you can eliminate the grasping at inherent existence. Therefore, eliminate all these afflictions [Note: ‘afflictions’ is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of ‘disturbing attitudes’] that create the karma that bring about the undesirable experiences. You begin to be able to see a way out of it.

We also see in the Eightfold Noble Path and the Four Noble Truths, that these things also exist by being merely labeled. There isn’t any kind of absolutely existing, inherent, independent things. They’re also empty of inherent existence.

Somebody asked Geshela, “You gave these teachings on emptiness and now I’m wondering if I should drastically re-align my whole practice and just meditate on emptiness.” Geshela said, “No, what you do is you bring emptiness into your whole practice, so that whatever you’re practicing, whatever you’re doing – perfect action, perfect livelihood, perfect speech, perfect mindfulness – that you recognize that all those are also empty of inherent existence. They exist by depending on labels and by depending on the parts. They are collections of different qualities and characteristics and items and they exist by being merely labeled. They don’t exist as some outside ultimate but rather as things that we create by practicing in our own mind.

This Eightfold Noble Path are like mindstreams. They are conscious realizations. They are not an external thing to grab on to and possess. They are not an external ultimate that we squeeze ourselves

into. What is perfect action? It is my action if I act in an ethical way. We realize that these aren't external things. They're internal things. They exist by depending on causes and conditions, by depending on parts, by depending on labels.

### **Three thoughts that are important to have**

Also under right thought are three other kinds of thoughts or realizations that are important to have.

#### 1. Giving up

One of these is dispassion or renunciation (there are various translations). I don't like either of those words very much. I think it's better to translate this kind of thought as giving up.

What this is, is giving up conditions that block our spiritual practice. Giving up the things that make us dissatisfied. Giving up the dissatisfied mind that creates our problems. It's kind of nice to think about a lot of the practice as just giving up things. It's not so much things you need to do and squeeze yourself into as just things you need to relax about and let go of. We just give up our obsessive thinking. We give up our attachment to reputation. We give up seeking approval from other people. We just relax about all those things. There's a real nice quality when you think about that. Let's just let that one go, let that one go, let that one go. All those things that are counter-productive to our own spiritual practice, you're able to just leave them.

[In response to audience:] It is just that natural process of, "Hey I don't need to do this anymore". It is also what you said about giving up the fear because I think sometimes there's the fear of, "If I don't take care of myself, what's going to happen? If I'm compassionate, maybe I'm going to get overwhelmed". We have this kind of fear and doubt. When you just let that go, then it becomes very easy to change. One way I find helpful to deal with that fear is I say to my mind, "Let's try doing it this way as an experiment". Instead of saying to my mind "I've got to change. I've got to do it this way", let's just try this as an experiment. Try it this one time and see how it works." I really advice that if you have a mind that's like my mind, which I wouldn't wish on anybody else.

#### 2. Benevolence

The second part here is one of benevolence. Cultivating an attitude of benevolence, of kindness, of love, some kind of warmth and affection, some kind of softness or roundness, or just a benevolent attitude towards ourselves and towards life in general, and towards other beings, and towards our practice. It is a kind of benevolence that has patience, affection, warmth and tolerance in it. Really take some time to cultivate benevolence and to remember it. Try and let ourselves be benevolent instead of forcing ourselves, "I've got to create benevolence, I've got to make myself benevolent." Again it's this thing of letting go of some of the rough edges and letting ourselves be benevolent. It's letting ourselves feel warmth towards other people, giving up the fear of that warmth, giving up the fear of being involved.

#### 3. Ahimsa

The third one here is ahimsa and His Holiness talks about this one a lot. This is Gandhi's one. Non-violence. Non-harmfulness. Giving up the wish to injure others. Ahimsa is the thing that really propelled Gandhi. It's just so inspiring to think about his life. His Holiness admires Gandhi so much. It's that total giving up of any kind of wish to injure anybody else, that complete attitude of non-harming, that gives us then the space to actually be helpful in a very gentle way. Giving up that wish for revenge. Giving up the need to prove ourselves, to retaliate, to strike back, to let our anger out. Non-harming is really about giving up anger, isn't it? It is being very patient with the process of change.

These three - the giving up, the benevolence and the non-harmfulness or non-violence - are included in right thought or right realization. Again these are things we can go home and think about. You can go home and do a whole checking meditation, thinking about them. "What is giving up? What would I like to be able to give up? How can I give these things up? How have other people been able to give these things up?" I find Helen Keller's story quite inspiring. Giving up a lot of attachment to reputation and things like that, giving up discouragement. But how have other people been able to give up these blocks to progressing on the path?

Or benevolence – what is benevolence? What does benevolence feel like in me? Who can I be benevolent towards?

And the same with non-harming. Think about Gandhi's life. Think about how he handled problems and generate that same admiration. Then think of how we can use that thing of ahimsa, non-harming, in our own life and stop harming. Be helpful.

You do a checking meditation. You think about these things and then later on, if you do a visualization, either with the Buddha, Chenrezig or whatever, they or you as the deity could be radiating out energies of benevolence, non-harming and giving up. The more you understand these things, the more you're also going to understand what it's like to be a Buddha, what Chenrezig's qualities are, what Buddha's qualities are. The checking meditation and the daily practice, they really help each other. They go hand in hand.

How about if we just do some meditation now? There are many different things we talked about this evening. Reflect on them.

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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>