

Disadvantages of Not Thinking about Death (including 8 Worldly Concerns)
by Ven. Thubten Chodron ©, at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle, 1991/92.

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Summary of Previous Session

So, we talked about the preciousness of our human life. How to give our life meaning in terms of seeking temporal goals like dying peacefully and having a good rebirth, ultimate goals such as liberation and enlightenment and how to make our lives meaningful moment to moment by transforming all the actions we do to a way of generating love and compassion. And we talked about how rare this life was, difficult to get because it's hard to create the causes for it, difficult to get because there're so few human beings. And then according to the analogy of the turtle, we see how difficult it is to get a precious human rebirth.

And so that persuades us to take the essence of our life because we see it is precious, it's rare and can do incredible things. And then the way to take the essence of our life is divided into 3 major parts. First, the path that's in common with a person of the lowest level of motivation or the initial motivation. And that person is somebody who is seeking a happy death and a good rebirth because they want to be free of confusion at the time of death and a painful rebirth, get a good rebirth, and they practice ethics to do that.

The second level is that in common with a person of the intermediate level of motivation where we seek to be free of all the confusions of any rebirth whatsoever. We want to get off

the Ferris wheel. We want to attain liberation, so we generate the determination to be free from all of our confusion. And then we practice the method of the 3 higher trainings – ethics, concentration and wisdom.

And then the highest level of motivation which is developed gradually through these 3 levels but which we should have in our mind as the final goal even when we are on the initial level of motivation. In actual fact we always have this aspiration to get to the final one. That person wants to free others from all of their confusion. They're being trapped in this yo-yo of existence and so that person wants to attain full enlightenment in order to have all the capabilities and talents necessary to help others most effectively. And then the method, they practice the 6 far-reaching attitudes and then the tantric path, to develop the altruistic intention to become a Buddha for the benefit of others. So that's what we did last session. Hope people have been thinking about it since then...please...

Remembering Death to Motivate Our Practice

So now we're going to go back to the initial level of practice, that initial motivation and go through that more in depth. We see in that one, that the first topic is remembering death. And then we talk about another favorite topic of ours – lower realms. These are the 2 hotspots of the Lam Rim that everybody wants to hear about. And by thinking about those, it makes us more concerned about dying and being reborn. And that makes us take an interest in getting some guides. In other words, in taking refuge in the triple gem as a guide through all this mess. And then the general guidance of the triple gem right off the bat is about karma. So in this initial level of motivation, those are the 4 principle topics – death and the lower realms being a way to activate our interest in making, in doing something and then refuge and observing karma, the way to do something to solve the problem. I'm trying to give you kind of the general scope, and then slowly narrow it in so that you know where we are and how the topics fit together. This will really help you understand.

So when we start talking about death the first thing we talk about is the disadvantages of not thinking about death and the advantages of thinking about it, and then we talk about it. Now you can guess why first we talk about the disadvantages of not thinking about it and the advantages of thinking about it because our usual reaction is "Death? I don't want to think about it!" Isn't it? We go through our lives and this is the thing that we least want to talk about, least want to think about and yet it is the one certain thing that we definitely will do. And so this one certain thing that we have to go through is the thing we least want to face. Very interesting, isn't it? -- how our mind works. How we really want to ignore reality. And so by not facing death and facing our own mortality, we are creating fear in our own mind and we are festering this fear. It's like the little kid who is afraid that there is an elephant in the room. So rather than turn on the light to check and see if there is an elephant, they just sit at the door and whimper and cry. That's kind of the way our society often handles death. Rather than take it out of the secret -- "Let's shine some light on it, let's look at it, let's look at what's going on here" -- we just keep it all in the dark and then remain terrified of it.

Death need not be a terrifying thing but we make it very fearful by refusing to think about it. So here is why it's very important to think about the disadvantages of not thinking about it and the advantages of thinking about it because it needn't be so terrible. We always think that if we think about death, it may happen. Well even if we don't think about it, it is still going to happen. And I remember, and I suppose you all have had similar experiences when you drive by a cemetery as a little kid and you say, "Mommy, Daddy what's this?" And they say, "What's what?" (laughter) And when you finally convince them that there's something unusual there, they go, "That's where people die. That's where people are when they die." "Well, what is dying?" "Oh, we have to make a right turn here ..." (laughter) And then finally the most answer we get out of them is that people go to sleep for a long time.

And so just from the time we're kids, we definitely get the idea death is something you don't ask about and you don't think about. And so it just kind of sits there, and it makes for a lot of anxiety, a lot of tension. And then our society, when we do look at it, we try and cover it up. We embalm people to make them beautiful when they're dead, so that we don't even have to think that they're dead. We can actually think that they are sleeping for a long time because they look so beautiful. And I remember when one of my friend's mother died. She had Hodgkin's and so she was really wasted when she finally died. And they embalmed her and everything. And when people went up to see the body they said, "I haven't seen her look that good in a long time." I couldn't believe it. That's how we treat death! And people are very concerned about it. They make good plans, who their makeup artist is going to be when they're dead. They want to look beautiful in their casket. This is just indicative of our whole closed-mindedness towards the issue of death. And also indicative of all the anxiety that goes on about it.

And then you look at the cemeteries. I don't even remember driving by a cemetery in Seattle. You have them very well hidden here. In Los Angeles, what they do is they make memorial parks out of them. And Forest Lawn now has an art museum at the cemetery with copies of the Pieta and all these very famous artwork, so on Sunday afternoons you can go to the cemetery, Mom and Dad and the kids, and look at the artwork. Just completely blocking out death again. You go to see the artwork in the museum.

And then I remember a few years ago, I read a newspaper article. And there was one man who didn't have enough money. His mother was dying, he didn't have enough money to freeze all of her. So they took off her head with the idea that you freeze her head and then later you can defrost her head, attach it to another body and she'll still be there. She'll be able to come back to life. Well the difficulty was, what happened was that they did it and then they lost her head. It's just so incredible! So this is just indicative of the extent to which we deny death and yet it is a very regular natural process that happens to everybody.

Now here, in thinking about death, the dharma way of doing it, is we're going to face it honestly. We're going to take out all that fear and instead of letting it fester in the closet, we're going to take it out and look at it. It probably won't be as bad as you think it's going to be, once you take it out and look at it. And the purpose of doing this is to get us in touch with reality. And by doing that, it makes us have more energy to do our dharma practice. Because understanding death gives us a framework with which to look at our life and again really appreciate it and take full advantage of the opportunities that we have in this life.

One very simple way, just from my own experience of this. I was studying one text in India once and it had 8 chapters in it, all about impermanence. And so every afternoon Geshela was teaching us about death and impermanence, I don't think actually all eight chapters of this one section were about death, but a good number. We spent a long time on it. And so he'd talk about death for 2 hours, I'd listen to death for 2 hours, go back to my room and meditate on it. And I tell you those months when we were doing that, my mind was so peaceful and calm. It was just amazing. Why? Because when we really remember our own mortality, it helps us figure out what is important in our life and what is not important.

So it's a very, very good yardstick to take out when we get confused. Because you know how we get confused and anxious and we don't know what to do. And if we just think, "Well, at the time I'm dying and leaving this life and going on to my next rebirth, looking back at this, what would have been the best thing to do?" And so, this is especially good when you're really getting angry at somebody. Somebody is really bugging you and you're angry at them. And then you think, "Well, when I die and I look back on this, do I want to be thinking about how I got so angry and irritated at this thing this person did? Is this really going to be important to me at the time I die? Or is this small insult or whatever it was, really

kind of a trivial thing? Why put so much mental energy into it, if at the time of death it's not going to have any relevance to me at all?" And so likewise all these things that we worry about so much, if we really think, "Well, at the time of death, is all this worry going to have done me any good?" And then we really see, "No! Who needs this worry? Who needs to be so concerned about all this stuff?" So you see all of the things that usually make us so anxious, when we think about our life from the perspective of death, all those things cease to be important, so automatically our mind gets more peaceful. So, this is one of the ways that we can really use death to enrich the quality of our life. And that's the whole purpose when the Buddha talked about death, transience and impermanence.

6 Disadvantages of Not Remembering Death

1. If we don't think about death, we don't remember the dharma

Now we're going to go into the 6 disadvantages of not remembering death here. And this is really a very, very interesting section. We get into lots of juicy little things here because we start to sidetrack a little bit. If we look at the disadvantages of not remembering death, the first one is that we don't remember the dharma. In other words, we are not mindful of the dharma if we don't think of death. And you can really see this. When we don't remember our own death, who needs the dharma? Let's go out and have a good time. Right? Look how most of our society lives. Nobody thinks about death. People pretend it doesn't exist. So the whole purpose of life becomes to have as much pleasure as you can possibly have. And so people live just running from one pleasure to the other in the attempt to be happy because they don't think about death. Now in terms of us personally, when we don't think about death, we don't even think about the dharma at all because we're too busy running around looking for our worldly pleasures, for our happiness right now. Sometimes people come to me and they say, "You know, I just can't get myself to sit down on the meditation cushion," or "My dharma practice isn't going well." Well, one of the reasons is that we don't think about the fact that we're going to leave this life. Without thinking about that fact, we don't think about the necessity of the dharma, so of course we don't sit down and practice.

2. Even if we're mindful of the dharma, we won't practice it

Then, even if we do remember dharma, but we don't think about death, the second disadvantage comes -- that even if we're mindful of the dharma, we won't practice it. We procrastinate. Now we know this mind very well. "Oh, I'll do dharma later. I have my career to think about. I have my kids to think about. I have to earn a certain amount of money and get some money in the bank for my old age. And I have all these other things I have to do, so dharma will come later. First, I want to get my career, my family, get everything going. Then when I'm old and I have nothing to do, then I'll practice the dharma." Or "Gee, I don't know. I don't feel like doing anything. I'll do it next time. I don't feel like going to teachings. I'll go to teachings next time. I don't want to go to this retreat. I'll go to the next retreat." I mean that mind, the *mañana* mind. *Mañana, mañana...* I'll do it later. And this is the way we very often are about our dharma practice. The alarm clock rings in the morning. Because you finally, after I sit here and nag you and pester you so much about doing your practice, that you kind of go, "Well, OK, I'll try and get up tomorrow morning." And then the alarm clock goes off and you think, "Oh, I'll just go back to sleep, I'll do my practice in the evening." So we just procrastinate. And this is because we don't remember our own transience. We don't remember that our life ends and that once this time is under the bridge, like water under the bridge, it is no more. We don't feel any urgency about our practice. So, for those of you that have this kind of procrastinating mind, and you find it disturbing, one of the antidotes is just spend more time thinking about transience. It invigorates you to practice.

3. Even if we practice, we don't do it purely

The next disadvantage is even if we practice, we don't do it purely because our mind is concerned with worldly things. I'm going to come back to this one, because this has a bunch of other materials. So I'm just mentioning it right now. I'm going to go through all 6 and then come back and explain this one in depth.

4. Even if we remember the dharma, we don't practice it consistently

And then the fourth one is that even if we remember the dharma, we'll lose determination to practice it earnestly at all times. So our practice lacks intensity, strength and consistency. So this explains why we rationalize so much. "Well, I meditated yesterday and I really don't want to push myself too much. I think this morning I'll take it easy." This explains why we have this on-off mind about dharma. Kind of we'll do it for a while and then we get carried away and we start doing other things, and we lose interest. Then we come back to it and then we lose interest again. And so you might have this feeling sometimes that you get somewhere and you never get beyond that in your practice. And that's usually because we don't practice consistently. We're on again, off again. Because we don't think about death, so we don't do something everyday. And even if we do sit down to practice, we don't have much "oomph" in our practice. It's more like "Well, I'll do theseNamo Gurubhya, Namo Buddhaya, ... Well, I'll say these prayers because I've got to say them and get them done." But, saying the prayers like that is better than not saying them at all. I'm not saying don't say them if you don't do them perfectly. Say them, but if we sometimes feel like we're not being completely honest when we're doing all the prayers, it is often because we haven't really been thinking enough about our own mortality, so we don't have that "oomph" and that interest that thinking about death gives to our practice.

And this, not thinking about death, this is also, when we actually get ourselves to sit down, we start to meditate, we do the prayers, and then, "Oh my knees hurt; my back hurts; well, I'll get up and I'll go watch TV instead." Kind of like once we get ourselves to the cushion, how we can't stay there. All this interruption, again it comes because we're not thinking about death. If we really think about it, these kinds of thoughts won't torment us so much.

5. By not remembering death, we get involved in a lot of negative actions

Another disadvantage to not remembering death is that we just get really involved with negative actions. Because again if we don't think about death and we don't think about future lives, then we also don't think about the causes that we're creating by the actions that we're doing now. We just tend to act whatever way that seems to be the best way to do now, without thinking of the long-term consequences. So, if it is convenient to lie, we lie because we're not thinking about death, we're not thinking about karma, we're not thinking about the problems that lying now will bring us in the future. By not thinking about death, we just get involved in a lot of negative actions. And then of course, as we get more involved in negative actions, our mind gets more obscured, it becomes harder to practice and we get more confused. So it really becomes like a vicious circle.

6. At the time of death, we die with a lot of regret

And then another disadvantage is that when we actually reach the time of death, we die with a lot of regret. And I think this must be incredibly painful, to go through your whole life doing whatever you're doing to get happiness. Then you get to the time you're dying and you look back on your life and you say, "What have I done? How has my life been meaningful?" Let's say you're dying of cancer or heart disease or whatever it is. You know you don't have long but you look back on your life and how you've spent it. "Well, I've spent it putting on big fancy airs to make people think I'm important. I've spent it running around, playing sports, to get more trophies so that I can believe that I'm worthwhile. I spent it lying to get more

money and to cover up all the devious things I've done." And I think it must be incredibly painful to get to that point, right before one dies and look at death, look at one's life and just say, "Well, I've spent my whole life getting angry at people, I've held grudges, and haven't talked to people in years and years." And the mind gets so tight, there is so little time to actually relax it and make it peaceful before one dies. I think it must be terrifying to get to that point. By remembering death and keeping this in mind, it always, I think it really makes us keep a very clear slate. Because if we remember death, we remember that it might come any time. Then we want to have our emotional life in order. We don't want to have all these "yucked-up" relationships with hard feelings and belligerence and grudges. We don't want to have all the remorse and regret and guilt. So all these things that often we sit with for decades in our life that just lead to so much confusion at death, if we really maintain an awareness of death, we can help clean out a lot of this emotional baggage. So that actually our lives become more peaceful now.

Elaboration of 3rd Disadvantage: our practice gets very mixed in with worldly things

Now let's go back to this third point. That even if we practice, we won't do so purely. This means that even if we practice dharma, if we don't think about death, then our practice gets very mixed in with worldly things. So we start practicing dharma because we want to be famous. Maybe you don't want to have your name in the Seattle Times but you want everybody to look and say, "Wow! That person's such a good meditator, done so much retreat, they sit in perfect position, immovable." So, we get some big ego thrill from that. Or we practice dharma because we want offerings, we want reputation, we want people to admire us and think that we're special. Our mind gets mixed up in all sorts of very mucky motivations all in the name of dharma practice. And we can see this so often, that all our usual trips, once we get into dharma, we take our trips and we practice them, but in the dharma circles instead of in our office. So instead of competing with our colleagues for a promotion, we compete with the other dharma students -- who can sit the longest, who can talk to His Holiness first, who can be the "in" person in the dharma group and have the most power. And we get jealous of each other. And we get attached. I want a big fancy altar. And here're my dharma books. And here's a list of all the initiations I've taken and all the great Lamas I know. Our attachment, our desire to be special, to be renowned, comes up all over the dharma scene.

And then anger in the same way. We get really angry at our dharma brothers and sisters. Oh, that guy's just out for power. That guy's really on a control trip. (grumble, grumble) And we sit and quarrel and fight. You go to any meeting of a dharma centre and you'll see. (laughter) This all comes,..I'm joking -- half (lot's of laughter) -- and this all comes because we're trying to practice dharma but we're not doing it purely because all of our worldly motivations are getting mixed in. Because we aren't thinking about our own mortality. So we've lost the purity of our practice. And in specific, there're 8 worldly concerns that really, really detract us from our practice. And these 8 worldly concerns are the demarcation line between what is worldly action and what is dharma action. So this is an incredibly important point. Dharma action is not saying prayers and looking holy and all this kind of stuff. Dharma action is what our mind is doing, if our mind is free of these 8 worldly concerns or not.

There's one story that the Tibetans tell that I love in this regard. Some of you may have heard me tell it. Now you'll have to hear it again. There's one man who has decided that he was going to practice the dharma. The Tibetans have all these stupas, all these relic monuments and everybody walks around these relic monuments. And grandpa and grandma go for their daily walk around the relic monuments and they say, "Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum ...". Then they talk to each other, they gossip about the neighbours. Then "Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum ...". And then gossip a

little bit more. And a few more “Om Mani Padme Hum’s.” They stop at a certain point on the path and bow to His Holiness in deep reverence and then continue on the way. So there was one man doing his circumambulations. And his teacher came by and said, “Oh, it’s very good you’re circumambulating the stupa but it would be better if you practice the dharma.” So the next day he was out there and he was prostrating. He figured, “I’ll prostrate to the stupa.” And so he was prostrating up and down, and up and down, and sweating. And his teacher came by and he said, “Oh, it’s very good you’re prostrating, but it’ll be better if you practice the dharma.” Hmmm? So, he thought, “Well, ok, I’ll try something else.” So, the next day he was out there with his dharma text and he was reading this text. We Westerners do it silently because we don’t want to disturb the neighbours, but the Tibetans do it out loud, reading the dharma text, reading the Sutras. He was doing something holy. So his teacher came by again and said, “Oh, it’s very good you’re reading the Sutras but it’ll be better if you’d practice the dharma.” So by this time, the guy was at his complete wit’s end. “What do you mean? I am practicing the dharma. I’m circumambulating, I’m prostrating, I’m reading the Buddha’s words. What do you mean practice the dharma?” And his teacher said, “Transform your mind.”

In other words, it is not the external things. It’s the mind, it’s the mental state that’s doing them. So we can never judge whether an action is dharma or not dharma from the action itself. We always have to look at the mind that’s doing it. And this is why Buddhism over and over and over again emphasizes the motivation. Because in this way we cut out all the hypocrisy. Because if we’re not mindful of our motivation and we think being religious means doing all these external things, then we get really, really lost. Because we have the same old mind, but we’re doing something else externally. And we’re still not transforming. And this is really a very, very important point to look at. And to always be very aware and question ourselves, “Why am I practicing? Why am I doing this?” It’s like I said, we have so much of our old behavior patterns that we just bring into the dharma and if we’re not aware of our motivation, it all comes up. “I’m doing all this great studying because I want to be a very famous scholar. I’m doing all this meditation because I want to be able to sit at the front of the room and have everybody look up to me and praise me and think I’m holy. I’m doing, whatever it is, I’m doing all this service in the dharma community, I’m doing all this service in hospices and food banks and this, that and the other things because I want approval. Because I want people to think I’m good, because I want some praise.” So we really can’t look at the external thing we’re doing, we have to look at the internal mind that’s doing it.

I remember one time doing Nyung Nay and thinking that just doing the Nyung Nay practice itself wasn’t necessarily dharma because somebody could do Nyung Nay in order to get out of doing all the work at the monastery. I was living in Nepal at the monastery at that time, and to get food, it was a whole day affair to go grocery shopping. You had to walk down, take a minibus, fight your way through the cows and garbage in Kathmandu, get your groceries, bring them back on the minibus where you’re packed in like sardines, and walk up the hill for 45 minutes. So, if you want to get out of doing all your work for the monastery, do Nyung Nay. And I was thinking doing Nyung Nay for some people could be an incredible escape from doing work.

For other people, not doing Nyung Nay could be an incredible escape from doing dharma. Like “What?! Go a whole day without eating? Oh, oh, no way am I going to do that. Do all these prostrations. Get so exhausted. Uh, uh, I might get tired out. I’d better do my work in the monastery. I’ll do all my work and chores in the monastery. I’ll let all these other people do Nyung Nay.” So I was thinking about it. That doing Nyung Nay or not doing it, that’s not the question. It’s why someone does it or doesn’t do it. Because it can be an excuse doing it, it can be an excuse not doing it. We don’t know looking at anybody else. But we can look at our own mind. And this is really the importance of the whole thing. Always asking ourselves, “Why am I doing what I’m doing? What is it I’m really seeking to get from what

I'm doing?" And so, like I said, this is what really makes the difference between a dharma action and a worldly action.

A worldly action is concerned with the happiness of this life -- the motivation that is looking out for the happiness of this life. My happiness now. My pleasure now. This life's happiness. That's a worldly motivation. Now we might say, "What's wrong with a worldly motivation?" Well, nothing's particularly wrong with it. We'll get into a little bit talking about the disadvantages of it but having a worldly motivation is not a particularly human characteristic. Animals also care about "My happiness now." Animals are also looking out for their food and their shelter and their happiness. So if we spend our whole life as human beings, just looking out for the happiness of this life, without thinking beyond our own welfare, we're actually thinking very similarly to animals. Of course, we might think about cars and sirloin steaks and VCRs, and animals just think about a good dog bone and a piece of cardboard to sleep on. The object isn't important; the attitude is very similar because most people, most animals, want "My happiness now, my pleasure now." And so just having that attitude, being concerned with our own worldly gain and comfort isn't a distinctively human attitude.

8 Worldly Concerns

Now, when we talk about these 8 worldly concerns, it goes into talking about more specifically this attitude of the happiness of this life and our attachment to the happiness of this life. And more specifically, 8 categories of how this attachment to the happiness of this life manifests. So this is a really good framework with which to look at our own life and our own motivations and to constantly check up why we're doing things, and if any of these 8 worldly concerns are involved in it.

When Lama Zopa Rinpoche, one of my teachers, speaks about the 8 worldly concerns, he'll go on and on, day after day after day after day. In a one-month meditation course, day after day, talking about the 8 worldly concerns. Because they're really important. So there're 4 pairs and each pair involves an attachment and an aversion to a specific thing. The first one is attachment to receiving material things. And the second one of that pair is aversion to not receiving material things or losing what we have. Then the next one is attachment to praise and aversion to blame, followed by attachment to having a good reputation and aversion to having a bad one. And then the last set is attachment to pleasures that come through our 5 senses and aversion to unpleasant things that we experience through our 5 senses. So let's go back and look at these a little bit more in depth and the purpose as you're doing these is to think about which ones we have. Ask ourselves are there any advantages to these attitudes? Or are there disadvantages and if so, what are the disadvantages? And then also what are some antidotes to do about them, what techniques can we apply? So think within the framework of those 3 questions -- Which ones do we have? Are there advantages? Or what are the disadvantages and then what can we do about them?

1st pair: attachment to receiving material things; aversion to not receiving material things or losing what we have

And so the first one -- attachment to material things. We like to possess stuff. We want material things. We want more things. No matter how many clothes we have, we'd always go out and buy more clothes. No matter how many shoes, we'd go out and buy more. We have one house, then we want to get another house. Or then we want to go on vacation. So, we're very attached to getting money and getting material things. The material things, in and of themselves, are not the problem. There's nothing wrong with having material things. It's the mind of attachment to them, the mind of clinging. That I've got to have these things to be happy. I've got to have these things to consider myself worthwhile or consider myself

successful. Or I've got to have these things to be able to face the world and present myself to the world. Or I've got to have these things just to feel happy. So we always want more and we always want better, no matter how much we have. Our society, the economy is built around this first worldly dharma. We're encouraged to have it with the advertising. We're encouraged to want and to crave and to get attached to things. Now, we all have different things that we're attached to. Our mind can get attached to anything and everything. You give it the opportunity, it will stick to something.

And then the opposite, the couple with that attachment is the aversion to separating from the material things or aversion to not getting things. We're encouraged to be very miserly and not want to give our things away and not want to share them. Being very tight with our stuff. And you know how it is, sometimes when we think of getting rid of things. It's so painful to separate ourselves from things. It's like pulling out teeth. Look how hard it is for us to give things away, to throw things out. And we just feel like we're losing something. And so, even just to give a dollar away to a charity, it's like "If I give it away I won't have it". We get very tight and it just creates so much anxiety in us.

Or aversion to not getting things. Just think of how many people you're going to get mad at if they don't give you Christmas presents. Some people get very, very upset. "So and so didn't send me Christmas cards. So and so didn't give me Christmas present. My husband, my wife forgot the anniversary! He didn't give me a present! This is terrible!" And so we get very upset when we don't get things -- we don't get the raise, we don't get the extra money, the economy goes bad and our money isn't worth as much, the stock market goes down. And some people even kill themselves when the stock market goes down. It's all because of this clinging to material things and aversion to not having it.

[(In response to audience question) So you're saying this attachment and aversion -- you're asking is this due to culture? Well the Buddha gave these teachings twenty-five hundred years ago in ancient India, so it's not just the society. We can't get out of it that easily by blaming the society. Our society definitely develops and aggravates this tendency, but this basic thing is there in all societies. It's the mind. The society is a reflection of our different minds but the basic problem is in the mind because if it's just the society, then you should say, "Well, these third world countries, they don't have this attachment to material things and aversion to not getting it." I tell you they have just as much attachment. But they're attached to different things. They're not attached to sirloin steaks, they're attached to a bowl of rice. Or they're not attached to a new Mercedes, they're attached to a plot of land or an ox-cart. So, it isn't so much the object, it's the mind that gets stuck on the object. And like I said, we can get attached to anything. Though definitely our culture encourages this, we can't blame it on the culture.

I'm trying to give examples that people here can identify with. Like I say, the economy is based on it but the attachment is in our own individual mind. And to say, "Well, I'm only attached because the society says so," that's giving our responsibility to somebody else. We don't have to be attached. The society can tell you to buy a certain laundry soap but that doesn't mean you have to in order to be a successful person. You still have a choice. So the whole thing is, we have a choice in what we value in our life. Now, if we don't take the choice and if we get so overwhelmed by the peer pressure and the advertising and the societal pressure, then actually we're very involved with another worldly dharma, which is attachment to having a good reputation. So I need all these material things so that people think well of me. I need these things so that I fit in. Otherwise I'm going to be ostracized, or otherwise people might think I'm a creep. So, again it's just our mind which gets so tangled up from the craving for material things, for praise, for reputation and for sense pleasure that we can't see our way through it sometimes. But it's not the fault of the society. We have to look for all these things as they function in our own mind. Because we don't have to think in that way just because the society does.]

So we have attachment to material things and aversion to not getting material things, and you can see what tremendous confusion that creates in our lives. Now don't get me wrong, this does not mean that we now have to give all our material possessions away. The problem is not with material things. The material possessions are not the problem. They're just sitting there. This Christmas tree is just sitting here. It's not a problem. If I'm attached to it, my attachment is a problem. The Christmas tree is not a problem. A hundred dollar bill isn't the problem. My attachment to it is the problem. So, you can be completely broke and have no material possessions and have a lot of attachment for them. You can be very rich and have a lot of things and have no attachment for them. It all depends on your mind. And of course how our mind is, is going to be reflected in how we relate to material things. If we have a lot of things and we hold on to them, there's a lot of attachment. If we have a lot of things and we give them away, nothing wrong with having a lot of things, there's no attachment in the mind. It's not saying that we all have to go out and be ascetics. That's pretty extreme. I remember one time when I was living in Nepal, after one of the courses when Lama Zopa Rinpoche was going on and on about the 8 worldly dharmas. Then one of the monks thought, "I'm so attached to my bed", so he took the bed out of his room. And we had stone floors, so he was sleeping on a mat on the stone floor. Lama Yeshe walked in and said, "Where's your bed?" "I gave it away." "What are you? You're on some kind of Milarepa trip or something? Go get yourself a bed! Don't be extreme." So, the idea isn't just to give everything away and pretend you're Milarepa. The bed isn't the problem. The house isn't the problem. And if Milarepa ate nettles, we might eat nettles and be very attached to them. So it doesn't matter whether you're eating nettles or eating pizza. The problem is the attachment. So this is what we have to look at.

On the other hand, there're things that we see really give us a lot of problems because we're so attached to them. You know how we save so many things. These little mementos of this and that. I remember when I was a kid, I saved my toothbrush from when I was 4 years old. All the sentimental things. All the knick knacks and family heirlooms. I mean we can be attached to any kind of junk we want to. So this mind of clinging and attachment. That's the difficulty. And this is why whenever you give things to your teacher, it's really a challenge to give them with a pure motivation. Because often we make gifts to other people with a very impure motivation. Like I'm giving you a gift so that you'll like me. I'm giving you a gift so that every time you use this, you'll think about me. I'm giving you this so you'll think how generous I am. So whenever you give a gift to your spiritual teacher, you have to be really mindful of why you're giving it. Lama Zopa Rinpoche's really great. For example, with Rinpoche, almost everything he gets he turns around and gives away. And so you go in for your appointment and you give him something and the next person goes in and takes it out, because Rinpoche has given it away. And I remember one time I spent weeks making him some book covers for his Tibetan text. I got some brocade. There's no sewing machine, so I hand-sewed and stitched these beautiful book covers. I was so proud of myself. And I went in and gave him the set of book covers and another Geshe came in and visited him and he gave them away and the Geshe walked out with them. So I had to really check up. Well, why did I give this? Because very often even when we give people gifts, it's not with a completely pure motivation. You know we give somebody something and they give it away and we get very offended. Isn't it incredible? As if they don't value us because they gave that thing away. I mean if we've really given it, it no longer belongs to us. It belongs to the other person. They can do whatever they want. So we have to really check up our motivation for giving. So that's the first thing about attachment and aversion in regards to getting or not getting material things.

2nd pair: attachment to praise; aversion to blame

Then the second one is attachment to praise. This is the mind that loves to hear ourselves complimented. "You look so good. You look so nice. You have such a good figure. You're

so handsome. You're so talented. You're so sensitive. You're so kind. You're so brilliant. You're really creative." Whatever it is the things that we want to be identified with, we love it when other people tell us that that's what we are. And we feed off the nice words about ourselves. And if we don't get enough praise, we manipulate things in certain ways to make sure that we get the praise we want to hear. Like we'll come in and say, "Gee, I really messed up on that job." Hint, hint ... you're supposed to tell me it's really good. Or, "I really feel like I look terrible today." Hint, hint, hint ... you're supposed to compliment me. We'll just do that kind of thing, kind of criticize ourselves in an attempt to get somebody else to say, "No, no, no, you're not like that ..."

Or sometimes, especially with people that we're very close to, if they don't praise us enough and tell us nice sweet words enough, we get angry at them. And we get demanding with them. "You haven't told me you love me this week. And I have a wedding ring to prove it. You owe me some 'I love you's'." And we demand that people tell us that they love us. And so we get very attached to this kind of praise. And then again we get involved in all sorts of manipulative things to get the nice sweet words that we crave. And then conversely, we have a very strong phobia about any kind of criticism. "Criticism? Me? Are you kidding? I'm perfect. Criticism belongs to the other fellow." And when people tell us about something, even if they tell us about a mistake that we actually made, we get mad at them. Even if we did the thing, we made the mistake, the other person's bad and wrong because they saw it. And we get angry at them. Or we didn't make a mistake and they think we did, we get angry at them. We are so sensitive. We don't want to hear one slight word that might indicate that we're not God's gift to the world.

And you can see in our interpersonal relationships how complicated relationships get because of this craving for sweet words and praise and compliments and encouragement; because of our aversion to hearing any kind of unpleasant words. Any kind of feedback we don't want to hear, any blame, criticism. We can make so many examples in our life, and see how much problem we get into. Somebody criticizes us, then we get angry and we speak harshly to them. Or we go and we divide their relationship with somebody else. We bad-mouth them to somebody else, to split them up. Or we make up some lies just to get even at this person who harmed us. We sit and gossip for hours and hours about all these horrible people who don't see how wonderful we are. And we just get so tremendously confused and create so much negative karma because of this very strong attachment to praise and aversion to blame.

I think the real underlying thing that this rests on is that we don't have the ability to evaluate ourselves. We have completely given up, we have completely refused to look at our own behavior and evaluate ourselves with a clear mind. As a result, we get so attached to hearing nice words about ourselves. Because if we don't evaluate ourselves with a clear mind and see our good qualities and see what we need to improve on, then we usually go through life with this kind of feeling of "I'm not very worthwhile", low self-esteem. And then because we don't believe in ourselves and we don't have any confidence, we really need other people's praises and kind words to build up our own confidence because we can't look at our own behavior and our own mind and our own talents and recognize what they are. So we just need other people to tell us what those things are. And we think that if other people tell us we have those qualities, well we must, and then we must be good people. Conversely, if they tell us that we have bungled something, that we're awful, then we must really be awful. So we completely believe what other people tell us about ourselves and that's why we get so mad when they tell us unpleasant things. If we didn't really believe what they told, what they said about us, why get mad at them? If we had the ability to evaluate ourselves correctly, and we knew our own reality, then why get mad if somebody else sees a fault that we know we have. We know we have it, what's wrong with admitting that we have it? Everybody else sees it. It's like somebody coming up and saying you have a nose on your face. It's there. Everybody sees it. Yeah, I made that mistake. Why get so

mad when other people say it? We get so mad because we don't do that kind of internal evaluation to look at our own weaknesses.

Similarly if somebody blames us for something we didn't do or they exaggerate what we did do, we get really upset and belligerent. They accuse me of dah, dah, dah, and I didn't do it. Why be upset if we didn't do it? Again if we were really able to look at ourselves, and we knew our own reality, if somebody's accusing us of something that isn't our problem, then why be upset about it? It's only because we're attached to what other people say, we're attached to what they think. It's only because we're out of touch with ourselves, that we completely give all this power to other people's words. So the real antidote I think, to this thing of attachment and aversion, to praise and blame, is to spend some time, what I recommended, in evening meditation, looking at the day, what went well, what needs to be improved. And really look at our own lives in a very honest way without being overly critical, without our judgmental "I'm a piece of garbage" mind, and without our proud, arrogant mind. But just look -- What went well today? What did I do well? -- and feel happy about it. Not proud, but let's rejoice and acknowledge that the quality's there.

And conversely, when we messed up, let's acknowledge it. It's not so bad. It's not such a catastrophe. It can be purified. It can be amended in some way. So, if we do that, then we're not going to give the power of our self-respect and self-confidence to other people. We're going to retain it for ourselves because we'll be able to look at our own selves accurately. That would solve a whole lot of problems. Because really if we constantly rely upon what other people say about us and think it's true, we're going to get awfully confused. I don't know about you, but I had a few very clear incidents in my life where within a very short period of time, I've gotten completely opposite feedback from different people. And if I believed everything both people told me, I wouldn't know who I was anymore. I remember one time one person came up to me and said, "You're such a horrible nun. You keep your vows really loose and lax and you're just letting everything go. You're a very bad example." And then just fifteen minutes later, somebody else came up and said, "You're so strict. Why don't you relax? You're so uptight about every little detail in your vows, it's driving me nuts." If I were to completely believe whatever anybody else said, I'd be totally confused. But I was so glad that incident happened, because it really pointed out to me how other peoples' opinions of me are simply that -- opinions. Whether I'm too strict, whether I'm too loose, only I can determine that. Now if I don't look at myself and evaluate it, no way to be in touch. And then all this attachment and aversion, depending upon what other people say. But if we really can look at ourselves, then if somebody comes along and tells us we made this mistake, we can check up and say, "You're right, I did. Thank you for pointing that out." And we don't feel like we're losing any of our ego territory because we admit our mistakes. So what if we made a mistake? As long as we have the Buddha nature, underneath we have this very firm foundation for confidence. So what's so wrong about admitting our mistakes? So, this is something we really need to do some in-depth meditation on, folks. Repeatedly, because this one of praise and fame is a very deep-rooted one.

3rd pair: attachment to having a good reputation; aversion to having a bad one

Then the next pair, attachment to reputation and aversion to a bad one. This one -- reputation -- is slightly different from praise and blame. Praise and blame is like the nice, ego-pleasing, pleasant words said directly to us. Reputation is the idea of us that a large group of people hold in their mind. So whatever field of work we're in, we want everybody in our field to think that we're good. We want to be known as competent, as reliable, as talented, as marvelous. Whatever it is, our career, our hobbies, we're all attached to different reputations. One person wants to have a reputation as a good guitar player. Another person as a good skier. And then another person as a good fence builder. So again it's not the thing but it's this attachment that we want everybody in a big group to know how good we are. We want to have a good reputation in our family. We want the family to

know that we're successful. We want to prove ourselves to the family. Or we can be in a dharma group -- we want everybody to think we're really wonderful. I want to be known as the best dharma teacher, so be sure and tell everybody! Just this clinging, attachment to our reputation in general.

And then conversely, whenever we hear that a bunch of people are talking behind our backs and spreading bad rumors about us, we completely go berserk. "My reputation! They're criticizing me! The whole bunch of people. Nobody will respect me. Nobody will listen to me. Nobody will come to me for business. What's going to happen to me?" So, you can see the kind of turmoil that creates in our life. Attachment to reputation. This is why when we go into a room, we have a very difficult time listening to other people because we're too busy presenting them with the image of who we want them to think we are.

So we have this reputation, this image that we want to create in the public eye. So when we go to meet strangers, we pull out our business card. "Here I am, Director of this, Chairperson of this, Head this, da, da, dah. And I do these hobbies. Especially when we meet new people -- we almost try and package ourselves and sell ourselves. Here's my personality. Here's how you're supposed to think of me. Don't you like me?" So, we're very attached to this kind of reputation. And then as a result, if the person is completely blasé about all of our great qualities, we're very offended. If they cut us off and are bored by our exposé, we're very offended. And we also are completely uninterested in what they have to say. We can't listen to them -- too busy creating our own good reputation.

4th pair: attachment to sensual pleasures; aversion to unpleasant things

And then the last set -- attachment to pleasures, to our senses and aversion to unpleasant things. So this is attachment to any kind of pleasure that comes to our senses. For example with seeing, we always want to see beautiful things. We want to have beautiful paintings in our household. We want to have a beautiful house. When we go on vacation, we want to stay in a beautiful place. We like to see beautiful things. We want to have clothes with beautiful colors. We want to have a car with a beautiful color. We want beautiful things to see. We don't want to see ugly things. We get very upset when we have to see ugly things. Don't like it at all. So we spend all of our time trying to see beautiful things and get away from all of the ugly things that we don't want to see.

Then we're attached to sounds. We want to hear beautiful music. We want to hear lots of beautiful music. Beautiful sounds. Anything beautiful to the ear. And we don't want to hear anything awful to the ear, like screeching of the brakes, or nails on the blackboard, or the news at 6 o'clock. And so again, we spend our time running around, trying to get beautiful sounds and trying to get away from the ugly ones.

Smells. We want to smell beautiful things. Perfume, or good food, or whatever it is you want to smell; and bad things we don't want to smell. So we have sprays. We want to have nice things to eat. Very attached to food. This is one of our big ones. I remember being way up in the Himalayas in Lawudo, at 14,000 feet and this one Italian guy was talking about pizza and all there were, were potatoes and tsampas and he was day-dreaming about pizza! Have you ever stopped to consider how much time we spend talking about food? This is really indicative of the amount of attachment we have for it. We talk about all these good places to eat. And about good recipes and what we ate at certain places. And we talk about what we want to eat and we go out to a restaurant and spend a half an hour discussing everything on the menu so we make sure that we get exactly the best thing to eat on the whole menu. And then of course when it comes and it isn't as good as we want, we get very upset. And "Waiter, waiter, come here, come here!" And we talk in a loud voice and everybody in the restaurant turns around to stare. "This is overcooked! This is not what it's supposed to be!" And we get very offensive. "Take it back! Make me something else!" Or

somebody or whoever we live with cooked us dinner. “What? This stuff again! Why don’t you cook something else, Mabel?” (laughter) We’re so attached to food. All the time. We eat and then we want to go have ice-cream and chocolate or whatever it is that we’re attached to. So attached to good things to eat. And aversion to bad things to eat.

You really see all these things when you go to India. When you go to India, these attachments become very, very clear. Because instead of nice clean streets, there’re dirty streets and there’re beggars and then there’s pollution in the air and the smell of pee pee and excrement on the streets. And all this stuff in your hotel room, it’s this dull, green, cracked paint color. And everything’s old and rotten and falling apart. And you can’t get the good food you want. People really freak out when they go to India, and they come running back to America and go straight to McDonald’s! But it becomes really evident. We get incredibly hostile and anxious when we don’t have the sense pleasures that we like, things we’re attached to and things we cling to.

Touches. We want nice soft touches. Beautiful things to touch. We want to be warm enough. We don’t want to be cold but we want to be cool enough, we don’t want to be hot. So much attachment and time spent just taking care that our body experiences everything that is most marvelous. So you’re in this hot tub or that sauna, or some swimming pool. We spend our precious human life that we can use to attain liberation and enlightenment, running after sense pleasures.

Disadvantages of 8 Worldly Concerns

One of the chief disadvantages of these 8 worldly concerns is that we totally waste our time. We can really be using this life to get in touch with our Buddha potential and make it grow and develop our internal peace and develop loving-kindness and openness and receptivity and compassion. Instead of using our time to develop those qualities, we use it getting material things, making sure we get enough praise, protecting our reputation, looking for nice things to eat, looking to buy more things to see or new records. We just completely waste our time. And then in addition, by seeking all these things, or seeking to get away from things we don’t like, we create a lot of negative karma. You look at all the 10 destructive actions. The reason for doing them all relates to these 8 worldly concerns. So why do we steal things? Attachment to material stuff or attachment to reputation. Why is there unwise sexual behavior? Attachment to tactile sensation. Or attachment to reputation, attachment to praise. Why do we speak harsh words? Because somebody offended our reputation or somebody didn’t give us the material we need or somebody stole from us or somebody doesn’t appreciate us. Or somebody burnt the food. Whatever it is.

And so, you look at all 10 of the destructive actions and why we create negative karma. It all has to do with these 8 worldly concerns. So it becomes very clear the disadvantages of these things from the dharma point of view. Not only do they make us very confused and unhappy this lifetime, they make us create the negative karma to wind up with more problems in future life and they completely obscure us from utilizing our beautiful, inner human potential and beauty. So, whether an action is done motivated by one of these 8 worldly dharmas or 8 worldly concerns or not, this is the demarcation line between a worldly action and a dharma action. OK? Let’s just review and then we’ll have some questions.

Review of Talk

We did all this discussion under the topic of thinking about death because by thinking about death, it will give us a way of looking at our own life so that we can live more peacefully now and prepare for future life and use our own potential. If we don’t think about death, we don’t think about dharma, so we don’t think about using our potential or planning for future lives or

doing anything spiritual. Or even if we think about it, we have the *mañana* mentality, we procrastinate, we do it later. Or even we remember it, we don't do it purely because our mind gets all confused with the 8 worldly concerns. And we start being generous in order to get a reputation, for example. Or if we don't think about death, even if we practice dharma, our practice isn't consistent, it isn't intense, it isn't energetic. We're on again, off again. All our excuses and rationalizations overpower us. And then we create a lot of negative karma by acting destructively. And then this leads us of course to, at the time of death, having a lot of regret. Because at death, we look back on our whole life and we ask ourselves, "What was the meaning of my life? What was the purpose? What do I have that I can take with me?"

It depends on how we acted during our life, if we have been very involved, especially with attachment to the happiness of this life, and seeking material things, and praise, and reputation, and sense pleasure, and spending all of our time to get away from losing our material possessions, or being criticized, or having a bad reputation, or experiencing anything unpleasant sensually. As long as we spend our time like that, then at the time we die, we're going to have a lot of regret because what have we done with our human potential? Nothing. We've gotten all these pleasures. We may or may not have got all the pleasures we wanted but anyway it's all over. When we die, all these pleasures from the 8 worldly concerns, all these pleasures from the happinesses that we get in this life are all like last night's dream. When you wake up this morning, it doesn't really matter what you dreamt about last night, because it's over. So, similarly yesterday we might have been completely obsessed with somebody criticizing me -- "How can they do this to me?" We just get so upset because of this criticism. Or you might have gotten so entranced when somebody saying "I love you" and "You're so beautiful" and "You're so talented and creative." But today, whatever that was that happened yesterday is gone. No longer existed. So even that pleasure, that pain and aversion, it's like sand through your fingers. There's nothing to show for it at the end of the day. So why get so upset and so anxious and neurotic about all these attachments and aversions. Better to use our energy to transform our mind, i.e. to practice the Dharma.

Answers to Questions

1. Acquiring a good reputation to serve others

So you're saying to be a Bodhisattva, to practice well and serve others, it is beneficial if others have a good opinion of you and think you're reliable and trustworthy and you can't really act as a good Bodhisattva and help others if they don't trust you. Or it'll be more difficult. That's very true. But there's a difference between having a good reputation and being attached to having one. There's a difference between having a bad reputation and finding it very disagreeable having one. So the thing is that we want to act well. We want to act well first of all for our own karma. Second of all if you're practicing the Bodhisattva path, definitely if you really, sincerely care for others, you do want them to have a good opinion of you. Not because you're attached to them having a good opinion of you. But because it helps them if they do. It is completely your motivation. So you can have a good reputation and you can seek to act in a way in which other people will think well of you but not because you're attached to it.

2. Using meditation to check on our motivation

Our meditation is really that time to shine that mirror and ask ourselves why am I doing what I'm doing. And sometimes it's not real clear. And sometimes we'll get very mixed motivations. We'll have a good motivation and a lousy one at the same time. Or we'll flip back and forth between the good one and the bad one. And so at that time, it's really

beneficial to notice that. When we're flipping back and forth, or when we're combining it. And then really try and apply the techniques to free ourselves of the bad motivation and develop the beneficial one. And sometimes it won't even happen. It'll happen that we won't even be able to look at our own behavior and know our motivation till years later. Sometimes we're doing something and we think we're doing it for a certain reason, next year we look back on it and say, "I was really pulling the wool over my own eyes." But that's OK. We don't need to get down on ourselves when that happens. But it is good to keep shining that mirror.

3. Importance of continually reflecting on death

What you're saying is that you were very aware of death at this time when a dear family member could have died. And it really helped you to tune in very much more to that person, to your whole family, to your life. And yet when the crisis subsides, so does your awareness and you're kind of back to the old habits. So the antidote to that is to continually reflect on transience and death. And that we're going to get into, it's called the 9-round death meditation, the 9-point death meditation and that's a very, very good way of maintaining that vividness to the feeling of the preciousness of our life.

4. Dealing with criticisms

-- how to be open to some criticism and be able to put it in its place and how not to get overwhelmed by criticism which is not beneficial.

This is what I think, from the time that we're very young, it'll be helpful to teach kids and adults, every time we're criticized, let's just stop and reflect on our own behavior -- did I do that? And if I did it, maybe I have to say, "Yes, I did it," -- but is it all that horrible of a thing that I did it?

So we have to look, my punctuation is terrible, but does that mean I am a horrible person? Does that mean I am a hopeless writer because my punctuation is terrible? No, it just means I need to do more work on my punctuation. You see, what we do is we get this much criticism and we generalize it, and start telling ourselves a whole other story, and create a whole self-identity on the basis of that much criticism. And I think this is really where this ability to evaluate things realistically comes in. So our punctuation is terrible, so our sentence structure is terrible, so our essays get all marked up with red pen -- you should have seen what Steve did to "Open Heart, Clear Mind" -- there was more red pen than black ink on the paper when it got done -- but does that mean I'm a lousy writer? Does that mean that we're horrible people? Does that mean that we're beyond hope? Does that mean that we're a failure and our family is never going to be pleased with us and that we can't do anything right and that we're a total catastrophe and that there's no basis for any kind of self-respect, simply because our punctuation is wrong?

Sometimes, when people give criticism, they give it with this whole extra thing, but do we have to believe it?

(i) Importance of dealing with criticisms internally: listen, learn from valid criticism and dismiss unhelpful criticism

There are two things that are going on: first of all, we have to know what to do with the criticism internally; then we have to know how to deal with the person who is criticizing externally. You need both those factors, because if you don't deal with the effect of the criticism internally, but just try and stop the person who's criticizing you, you're still believing what they're saying. You're still internalizing it, only you're letting all your anger out on them, or somewhere else -- it's all the world's fault, it's all these people's fault, because they're telling me and they're criticizing me, ... The real issue is I'm believing what they're saying. So

the big thing is first, we have to work with that part of us that hates ourselves. And then we need to think about how to deal with the other person who is doing whatever they're doing. But if we don't look at that part of ourselves that beats up on ourselves, then even if the other person stops criticizing us, we'll take over.

It isn't a thing of "Do I internalize the criticism or do I throw it away?" It's "Let's look at the information that the person is sharing. And let's see if there's anything I can learn from it." So, if one person is sitting there and telling me that I'm a completely horrible nun and I keep my vows poorly and I'm a very bad example. Then I sit there and I look at my own behavior and I go through my list of vows and I think, "Well, I keep them moderately well. Not perfectly. But I kind of do well within the boundaries and I can look at my behavior and there's room for improvement but I'm not a total catastrophe." That's what's important, not what this person says about me.

We need to evaluate ourselves. If this criticism can be useful to ourselves, if it describes something we're doing, then use it to improve ourselves. If it doesn't help us at all, then we don't need to take it to heart and just leave it by the way. But you can't do that unless you first look and see if what they said have any relevance. If we just blank it, dismiss any criticism, then we've fallen into this thing of aversion to blame, aversion to criticism, and we become completely close-minded, and nobody can give us any negative feedback at all, because we're so sensitive and easily offended. And we don't listen to anybody.

I mean it's very interesting. I find when people start criticizing me, my instant reaction is "Uuh!" And then I kind of go, "OK, I'm going to sit here and listen to them. I'm just going to open the doorway and let them criticize. Let them give me some information, and they might tell me something that's interesting and that's useful for me. And they're also telling me a lot about themselves and how they're seeing things. And that will help me know how to relate to them better." So that's what I try and do. Our usual thing is, when we hear criticism, walk around, turn away, throw it back on the other person, yell, shut it out, anything but hear it. And I find that it's easier if I just say, "Well, I'm just going to try and listen and see if there's something that I can learn from in here. And even if there's nothing I can learn from in here, this person is another living being and what they're saying is giving me information about the problem that they're having right now, which is something I do need to take into consideration." Somebody might be blaming me for bungling something .., or blaming me because they think I'm arrogant and proud, and I might look and say, "Well, I didn't bungle that and I don't really feel that I'm being arrogant and proud, but, I still have to pay attention to this person who feels I'm arrogant and proud. So how can I talk to this person to help them understand that maybe they were looking at this situation and interpreting in this way, when actually I was meaning something else." So still, it's worthwhile to listen because if our relationship with that person is important, what they say is something that we listen to. It Doesn't mean we have to believe all of it.

(ii) Aversion to criticism & attachment to praise: two sides of a coin

Somebody else's criticism can't hurt you. Their criticism is only words. Our internalization of the criticism, our believing it, is what harms us, not their criticism. And the more sensitive we are to criticism, it's indicative of the more attached we are to praise. So, [referring to audience example] these people [who believe easily anything negative that somebody tells them and spend hours examining it] that are internalizing all those bad stuff they're getting, when the same person then comes along and say, "Oh dear, you're so ravishing tonight!" and they're on Cloud Nine! Then it's a thing of attachment and aversion -- these two opposites really go very much together. You can't say, "Let's get rid of the aversion to criticism, but let's hang on to the attachment to praise." Because as long as you have one, you're going to have the other.

(iii) Getting in touch with our human dignity

[In response to question on battered women and efforts to build up their self-confidence – is it attachment to praise if she listens to words like “we consider you important and you deserve better than being beaten up” and says, "Yes, I am a good person, and I deserve better..."]

I don't think that's attachment to praise. If she starts thinking, "I'm a good person. I deserve better. Who're these people thinking they're doing?" Then, she's just going on another extreme. But if you look, and you get in touch with your basic human dignity, and you say, "Yes, I'm a human being like every other human being, and I don't need to beat up on myself, and I don't need to let other people beat up on me because I beat up on myself," that's positive -- because we won't let other people beat up on ourselves if we don't beat up on ourselves. So it's a thing of not just getting whoever it is who's beating the woman to stop, it's getting her to stop hating herself at the same time. So developing a balanced sense of self-confidence, that's what it's all about. And to get that balanced sense of self-confidence, you need to get rid of the attachment to the praise and the aversion to the blame, saying, "I am a valuable human being. I'm alive. I have the Buddha nature. I have inner qualities. I have a precious human life. I have a basis to have a happy life and to do something useful for society." That's completely in tune with reality. Saying, "I am wonderful. I am fantastic. I have to have the best of everything. I have to be treated like royalty. And everybody has to appreciate me and tell me how wonderful I am," that kind of attitude is poison.

Human dignity is very important. Being attached to an over-inflated sense of who we are, is poison. But you see, we're not going to get the dignity from the society. We have to get it from in here. Because if we keep looking for other people to give us our dignity, we're giving our power away. And we're not going to get it. Because face it, if we don't believe in ourselves, the whole world could praise us and tell us how wonderful we are, and we still beat up on ourselves. So it isn't the society.. of course we're influenced by society. But what I'm saying is if we want to do something with our life, we have to take the responsibility.

It's not an easy thing. This requires years of going over and breaking old habitual thought patterns. Because we're all very well trained to beat up on ourselves. But the way to change that habit is not by getting praise from the outside and getting attached to it. The way to change that habit is by looking inside and getting in touch with that very valid sense of human dignity. That immovable sense of human dignity that is there because we're a living being.

(iv) Assessing ourselves: having a balanced, reliable sense of self-confidence

So it's a thing of looking in our own mind and being sensitive: what is our attitude about ourselves? Do we have a balanced, reliable sense of self-confidence which won't be disturbed by other people's criticism? Or do we have an unreliable sense of self-confidence that is based on being attached to nice words that people say to us, and consequently being overwhelmed when we get blamed for something. And that's why I keep coming back to this -- that we have to be able to look at ourselves and know ourselves, and be able to assess ourselves. And then if we do that, we can listen to all the feedback we get from others, we can listen to praise, and we can check up -- "Does that praise apply to me? Do I have those qualities?" And, "Oh yes, I have those qualities, I'll rejoice." That's very good. That's very different than getting attached to the praise and feeling so wonderful because I have these qualities. OK? Is that coming across?

(v) Ways to develop our innate sense of human dignity

Now there're a few different ways of doing it. One way is, at the beginning when we take refuge and generate the altruistic intention, we visualize the Buddha, who's a reflection of the Buddha we're going to become -- he comes on top of our head, dissolves into light, and that light flows into us and we feel that our mind has merged with the Buddha's mind. We can sit there with that light in our heart, and try to feel that, "The future Buddha I'm going to become, I'm going to bring that into the present right now, and be that. Let me feel this loving-kindness for others. Let me try on a feeling of generosity." And you concentrate on that light at your heart, you let go of all your notions of who you are -- I am this, I am that, ... I can't do this, I can't do that, I'm so horrible, I'm so wonderful -- you let go of all of that. And then your wisdom mind appears in the physical form of the Buddha with the body of light, and your own loving-kindness, you're letting it be in its fully ripened form, and you're radiating this light out to all living beings. And I think it's an incredible way, through this kind of visualization and meditation, to really get in touch with, "Hey! Actually, yeah, I can feel this way. And there is something good about me."

Another way, I think, is just to sit down and to think about what Buddha nature means, and there's a chapter in "Open Heart, Clear Mind" about that. And to think, what does it mean that I have the potential to become a Buddha? What does that mean? What is this clear and knowing nature of my mind? And what are these good qualities that I have? I'm not completely awful. We can look inside -- there're a lot of good qualities there -- and to notice those and pick them out. They may only be this big right now, but the whole thing is, whenever you have a sprout, the sprout has the potential to become a tree. So we don't need to put down the sprout because it's a sprout. We need to look at the sprout and say, "Wow! You can become a tree." So we can look at our own good qualities now and say, "Wow! Look! Sure I might get angry and blow my top and bad mouth other people, but I can also talk nicely to people and I do have some kind of a kind heart, and if I put the spotlight on that, and stop beating up on myself so much, that might actually grow."

(vi) Learning not to get entrapped in our negative image of ourselves

Well, the wisdom side is recognizing that this whole awful image we have of ourselves is a hallucination; and that we have, through the process of all of our conceptualization, put ourselves in this tiny little room, and feel entrapped by the world. But it's actually our image of ourselves that has entrapped us, so we should say, "This is just an image. I don't need to hang on to that. Ok, I did bungle something as a kid, and I did get scolded. But I'm forty years old now and I don't need to act like a three-year-old. I'm not a three-year-old. I don't need to hold on to whatever it was that happened." Whether it happened when you were three, or twenty-three, or forty-three or eighty-three, you don't need to hold on to that, because that was one event in your whole life, and it's not the defining character of who you are. But we just kind of highlight certain things and then cast them in mental concrete, and then fight against the walls that we've put around ourselves. Recognize that we don't need to do that. When you start to see this judgmental mind coming, "Why can't you do this right? Why can't you do that right? Why don't you do this? You should do this. You ought to do this. Somebody else is doing this. Why can't you be like them?" Like when you're doing the breathing meditation, the mind goes, "Why can't you concentrate better? Why can't you ..." Just look at it and say, "Be quiet." Or just look at it and say, "It's chattering away but I don't need to believe it. I don't need to think like this. This thought is not me. This is just a thought going through my mind. It's not me. It's not even realistic." Learn to identify which of our thoughts and feelings are based on reality, and which are based on hallucination.

Well, the thought is an existent thing, but the object of the thought, what the thought is thinking, is not necessarily realistic. I can think about purple elephants. My thought about purple elephants exist; purple elephants don't.

5. Non-attachment to money

Well, if you take the example, let's say, of somebody who's practicing to be a Bodhisattva. They may have inherited five million dollars, that doesn't mean that in the very next week, they're going to give all five million away. They may want to spend some time and check out how best to give it so that it really becomes beneficial to other people. So they may want to take some of that money and invest it, and use the interest to support a Dharma center. And they may take another amount of the money and just give it away to make a shelter for homeless people, or to give it to a Children's Home, or something like that. So just because you're unattached to it doesn't mean you get rid of it all of a sudden. Or that you just throw it away recklessly.

Meditate on the Issues!

A lot to think about. Let's just sit quietly for a few minutes. I really encourage people to think about these things in your morning meditation, or your evening meditation. Put a note on your alarm clock that says, "Meditate."