

**General Characteristics of Karma** (lightly edited transcript)  
*by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. 25 May 92*

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When we look at our precious opportunity, see how rare it is and how much we can do with it, but that it won't last forever, then we get a little concerned about what's going to happen if we continue on with our same old craziness. We start to look for some guides to show us a positive direction to take in life. Here we turn to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha for guidance, for refuge. The first teaching that they give us is the teaching on 'karma', or the functioning of cause and effect. It is actually at this point that our Dharma practice really begins. In other words, it is with the observance of cause and effect that we begin to practice. Cause and effect permeates everything we do; it permeates all of our daily activities.

### Science and Karma

Science investigates cause and effect on a physical plain. You mix certain chemicals together and it produces a certain result, or you look at certain stars in the sky and you try to trace back their causes. 'Karma' is talking about causality on a mental level, and 'karma' refers to actions. Karma refers to the things that we say, do, think and feel, and the karma creates imprints on our mindstreams which then bring the results in terms of what we experience later on.

With science, you can see or you can try and see causality. However, we can't see electrons and protons and we can't see individual molecules of things, yet we still believe in how they function. Well, with karma, we can often see what we do, we can hear what we say, and we recognize what we think and feel. We can't see the imprints that are left on our mindstream though. Those aren't made of atomic things. We can't measure them. Even if they were, as I said, you wouldn't be able to see individual atoms. What I'm getting at is, just because we can't see something, we shouldn't say it doesn't exist. We can't see atoms yet we know they exist. Karmic imprints left on our mind from our actions equally exist even though we can't see them.

One of my teachers said that we shouldn't be like nomads who don't believe in airplanes simply because they haven't seen them. There are people who say "I haven't see it, therefore I don't believe it!" They do that in terms of airplanes; in terms of people landing on the moon. We look at that and say, "That's dumb!", and yet with other things that we haven't been able to see with our eyes, we're completely convinced that they don't exist. You see, we are not completely consistent in our way of discriminating 'existent' and 'non-existent' here. What I'm getting at is we need to have an open mind to recognize how causality works on the mental plain. It's not something that is atomic which could be measured by microscopes or telescopes or other measuring instruments.

### Karma is Not Retribution

It is very important when we talk about karma, to understand that it is quite different from the Judeo-Christian idea of retribution. I have found this to be a very common misconception. We may be listening to teachings on karma but we hear them through Christian ears, and we get completely confused. We are not hearing what the Buddha said, we are hearing what we were told when we were five years old in Sunday school. It is important that as we listen to this, to try and listen with a fresh attitude. That is why I

start out saying that our actions bringing results has nothing to do with reward and punishment. There is no idea of reward and punishment in Buddhism. Having a system of reward and punishment assumes that there is somebody there running the universe, deciding who gets the rewards and who gets the punishment. This is not the case in Buddhism.

According to Buddhism, nobody is running the universe, nobody is pulling the puppet strings. Nobody is sending you here or there. Our life is completely created by the force of our own mind. Nobody is dishing out rewards and punishments. When we create a cause, it naturally brings a result that corresponds to that causal energy. We have all been busy planting flowers in the spring. When the flowers grow, they are the results of the seeds that you planted, but they are not the punishment of the seeds and they are not the reward of the seeds. They are just the results of the seeds.

This is important to understand because as we start discriminating different kinds of actions and the different kinds of results that they bring, it is tempting to think “Oh.. Somebody did a destructive action. They are getting punished because they are a bad person.” That is totally out of the ballpark from Buddhist theory!

First of all, in Buddhism our actions may be harmful but that doesn't mean we are bad people. There is a difference between the action and the person who does the action. All the people have Buddha potential but their minds may be overwhelmed by garbage so they act in a harmful way. It doesn't mean they are harmful, evil, bad, sinful people. This is a big difference. Second of all, just because somebody made a mistake, it doesn't mean that they are getting punished. It's just that if you plant a certain seed, it brings a certain kind of flower or fruit or vegetable. It's not a reward and not a punishment.

I've tried talking about karma to Jewish groups. It is very difficult to talk about karma to Holocaust survivors. They go completely bananas, hearing it through Judeo-Christian ears. Karma has nothing to do with deserving suffering. There is no such idea whatsoever in Buddhism.

### Everything Comes from the Mind

In Buddhism we talk about how everything comes from the mind. Remember mind doesn't mean brain; it doesn't mean intellect. Mind refers to all of our conscious processes – our feelings, our perceptions. There are several meanings when we say everything comes from the mind. In particular, one of the meanings is that the source of our experiences in life is our own consciousness, in the sense that if I experience happiness, it comes from my own actions. My actions are motivated by my mind. If I experience pain, that too comes principally, though not solely, from my own actions. Once again, the source of my actions comes down to my motivation, my consciousness. This is one of the meanings when we refer to the mind as the source of everything. There is nobody outside to blame or accuse. We can't blame or praise God, because according to Buddhism, there is nobody running the universe.

Buddha did not invent causality. Causality is just the natural functioning of the way things exist. Buddha merely described how it works. This again is important to understand. Buddha did not invent positive and negative actions. Buddha didn't say, “This is a negative action because I said so. If you don't do what I say you had it!” Buddha just described things in the same way that a doctor describes, “You are sick because there is such a virus.” The doctor didn't create the virus. The doctor didn't create the link between the virus and the illness. The doctor just describes it. Once you know the description then you can try to avoid that kind of virus. You don't want to get that kind of sickness again. There isn't all this heavy value judgment attached to the Buddha's notion of causality. We need to spend some time thinking about this.

Now, if you have your Lamrim outline\*, look at it. You will see that there are three major sub-divisions of the topic of karma:

1. Thinking about the general aspects of karma.
2. Thinking about the specific aspects of karma.
3. Having considered cause and effect, how to engage in positive actions and avoid the destructive ones.

We will first talk about the actual way to consider the general aspects of karma. There are four general aspects.

### **1. Karma is definite.**

The first general aspect is that 'karma is definite'. What this means is that if somebody experiences happiness, it is definite that it came from a constructive action. If they experience pain, it is definite that it came from a destructive action. It is never the case that you experience pain as a karmic result of acting constructively. In other words, what we are getting at here is that there is a very definite relationship between the cause and the result. If you plant plums you'll get plums. If you plant peaches, you get peaches. You can't plant plums and get peaches. And peaches do not come from chili seeds. There is a definite relationship in cause and effect here. In terms of karma, this is also the case.

This is really quite profound. Whenever we're happy, it's helpful to sit and think, "Oh this is coming from my own constructive actions. That's the principal cause. There are cooperative conditions (I just won a lottery) but the principal cause is the karma. The cooperative conditions are these nice people who give me the money and, of course, my treasured lottery ticket. But there is a definite link between the happiness and the principal cause (the karma) which is some action that I did previously.

Similarly every time we experience pain, it's helpful to understand that it comes from our own harmful actions. Other people may be cooperative conditions, they may yell or scream or beat us, but the real principal cause for being in that situation to start with, comes from our own action. There is nothing outside to blame or praise. This is quite profound. When we understand this, it gives us a tremendous feeling of being able to do something about our situation. Instead of being at the mercy of someone or something, or just attributing it to 'nature' over which we have no control, we come to realize that the source of our own experience of happiness and pain is our own mind. We realize that we can do something about it – create positive causes, abandon the harmful ones and purify harmful ones. There is a tremendous sense of empowerment that comes from understanding karma in this way.

Because Buddha had clairvoyant power, he was able to see what kind of causes produce what effects. Whenever sentient beings experience pain, he was able to see what actions caused them, and these actions are called 'destructive' actions. Whenever others experience happiness, he was able to see what actions caused them, and these actions are called 'positive' or 'constructive' actions. The breakdown into constructive, destructive and neutral actions arose in relationship to the kind of results they bring. This is what I meant previously when I said the Buddha didn't say, "This is a negative action because I said so." He only described what was actually happening.

### **2. Results of an action increase.**

The second quality of karma is that the results of actions increase. The results are expandable. Karma, again, means intentional action, things that we say, do, think and feel. We might do one small action but the result of that might be quite large, in the same way that you plant one small apple seed and you get an entire apple tree. Many results coming from one simple cause. This is important to remember because sometimes we say, "Well, it is only a little white lie. It won't hurt anything." We rationalize and make excuses. If we understand karma, we'll understand that a little white lie might leave a small imprint but that imprint can get nourished. It can increase. It can expand and bring many results.

Or sometimes we might say, "Oh, I can only sit and meditate for five minutes. Oh I'm so lousy!" Here again, it is important to remember that five minutes is a small cause but it might bring a very, very big result because of the expandable nature of karma. The point is, as much as possible, we want to refrain even from small destructive actions. As much as possible, we want to put our energy into even small constructive ones, because of the expanding nature of an action.

### **3. If an action is not done, one will not meet with its results.**

The third quality is that if the cause hasn't been created, the result will not be experienced. If you don't plant the seeds, you don't get any flowers. The seeds aren't there, you also don't get any weeds. You hear, for example, of a freak accident, a plane crash or a train crash. Some people get killed while some people don't. Why is this so? Well, some have created the cause, let's say, to be wounded, and some actually have created the cause to be killed. If you don't create the cause, you don't get the result. Or people may be doing very similar kinds of businesses, and some will be successful and some won't be

successful. Again this has to do with karma – some people have created the cause for their business to be successful; other people haven't.

In our practice, too, if we don't create the cause to have realizations and insights, we are not going to get them. It is not enough just to pray, "Buddha please, make my mind this and make my mind that," because if we don't create the causes we don't get the results.

I used to tease the people in Singapore. Many of them (those who don't know very much about Buddhism) go to the temples and pray to win the lottery. This is a big thing in Singapore. "May I win a lottery. May my son and daughter get good jobs and give me money. May the family be wealthy." They pray so much but when somebody comes along and asks for a donation for some charity, their answer is "No. We want the money for our family." This is a good example of if you don't create the cause you don't get the result. The karmic cause of being wealthy is being generous. If you aren't generous, then all these prayers to be wealthy are like talking to outer space because the principal cause isn't there to begin with.

If we want realizations, we have to put some energy into creating the cause for it. I think we want to try to be as consistent as we can in creating the causes for understanding, progress and improvement in our mind, but we shouldn't get impatient for the results to come. If the causes are created, the results will come. When you plant the seeds in the ground and you add water and fertilizer and there is ample sunshine, you know that the seeds are going to grow. You don't have to stand over them and say "Come on.. grow!" or "Why aren't you growing?" or "I planted you a whole week ago [laughter], now where are you?" We know that if we put all the causes there, the flowers are going to come.

Similarly, with our practice. If we are content to create the causes, to try and avoid the negative actions, to work out a kind and gentle motivation, to try and take care of others as much as we can, then these kinds of actions will automatically bring results. We don't need to get impatient, "How come I am not a Buddha yet?!" Just create the cause. The result will come when all the causes are there assembled.

#### **4. Actions don't go to waste without yielding a result.**

The last of the general qualities of karma is that the actions we do leave imprints on our minds and these imprints don't get lost. We might do certain actions, but the results may not come about instantaneously. It might take some time for the results to come, but they will definitely come. There are many things we do in our life that we know won't bring result for many years, but we do them anyway. We know that eventually, the result will come. You might make some kind of investment but you don't collect the interest for another thirty years. But the result is going to come. It is not going to get lost, unless the economy goes real bad. On a material level, things can still be very uncertain, but karma is never uncertain [laughter]. In other words, if the actions are created, the karma will never go to waste. The action eventually brings fruition. This is important to remember.

That doesn't mean, however, that karma is cast in concrete. There is a lot of flexibility in karma. Let's say you steal something. That will bring a harmful result some time in the future unless we purify it. A seed will eventually bear fruit unless you take away the water or the fertilizer, or burn the seed or take it out of the ground. In other words you can interfere in some way.

Similarly, we can interfere with the karmic imprints on our mindstream. This is where the process of purification comes up. We learned the practice of Confession to the Thirty-Five Buddhas. Doing this is like taking away the water and the fertilizer so that our negative karmic imprints won't ripen so well. They're going to ripen later, or when they ripen they won't ripen as strongly or they won't last very long. In other words we are interfering with the ripening process of it. As we purify more and more, and as we begin to understand emptiness, we will actually be able to burn the karmic seeds so that they can't bear fruit. Eventually, we will be able to pull them out completely and eliminate them. This is the real value of purification. It helps to stop the ripening so that we don't receive the kind of results that we don't want.

Similarly, our constructive actions can be interfered with. We might be very kind and go out of our way to act constructively. Those imprints are on our mind and we may even dedicate them. But then if we ...

[Teachings lost due to change of tape.]

...it is like taking away the water and fertilizer of our constructive actions so that they can't ripen. Anger and wrong views also do this. When we generate very obstinate wrong views, we're interfering with the ripening of our positive karma. This is why it is important not only to put effort into acting constructively and to dedicate it so it goes in the direction we want, but also to avoid anger and wrong views. These negative attitudes run counter to the effort we've been putting in.

## Karma is Not Linear

Karma as we talk about it, might sound very linear in some ways. You do this and you get this; you do that and you get that. But really, there is an incredible amount of flexibility within karma making it not fated and predetermined. We might act destructively. This leaves an imprint on the mind which might bring rebirth as a cow, or a donkey, or a horse, or a frog, or a pigeon, or others – there is a whole variety there. It is not cast in concrete. It is not “You step on a worm deliberately therefore you're going to be reborn as a worm – this particular kind of worm!”

For a seed to ripen, you need to have the principal cause – the seed, and you need to have the cooperative conditions that affect how the seed grows. If you provide lots of water, fertilizer and sunshine, it grows huge. If you use a certain kind of fertilizer, it may grow in one way. With another kind of fertilizer, it may grow in another way. Or it may grow a little bit and then fizzles out. There is lot of flexibility. You have the potency in the seed, but you can't predict exactly how big the apples are going to be, because it depends on a lot of other factors too: the cooperative conditions.

Similarly, the karmic seeds in our mindstream has a certain potency, a certain energy that produces a certain kind of result. But exactly what that result is and how it works, is going to be influenced by many other factors. Things are not predetermined; they are not fated to happen. We can't control the results. According to the situations we put ourselves in, we encourage either the ripening of our constructive or destructive karma. If we put ourselves in situations where we're around a lot of people who really don't have much ethical grounding or aren't very responsible and are reckless, we're setting the stage for our own negative karma to ripen. If we put ourselves in other situations we're setting the stage for our positive karma to ripen.

That doesn't necessarily mean that if you go on a certain environment, for sure your negative karma is going to ripen and if you go on another one, for sure your positive karma will ripen. It doesn't mean that. But it does mean that there are other conditions that work that are going to affect how things ripen, when they ripen, and how big or small the results are going to be.

Although things are not fated and predetermined, we cannot go beyond the scope of causality. It is not all that fixed and rigid, but on the other hand, things don't happen out of chance for no reason at all. Even on a scientific level, nothing happens by chance; things all have causes. In terms of our lives, too, what happens to us, who we are, the situation we're born in, what we experience – they don't just happen out of clear blue sky. It doesn't happen just by chance. If there were no cause and effect and there were just chance, then you could plant daisy seeds and grow corn. If you plant daisies, it is just chance what you will get. That doesn't make much sense. Things are not beyond the scope of cause and effect. On the other hand, it isn't so rigid that things are fixed and cast in concrete.

## Questions and Answers

Before I go on, let's see if there are any questions so far.

**[Audience:] What about things that happen that affect a whole group of people – how does it relate to karma?**

There is what we call collective karma and individual karma. Collective karma is an action that we do together with a group of people. And because we've done it together with a group of people, we experience the result as a group. For example, we're all sitting here as a group. This is a result of some kind of karmic action that we did together in the past, that was obviously something positive, constructive, virtuous, because we find ourselves in good circumstances where we have the ability to listen to teachings again.

Yet within that, each one of us sitting here is experiencing something slightly different. This is our individual karma. What we are doing now is a result of something we did together in the past, yet it is also a result of individual things we did in the past. We're each experiencing something slightly different. Somebody might have a stomachache. Somebody might be encouraged hearing the teachings. Somebody else might be really restless. That's an individual thing.

From the point of view of creating a cause, we're gathered here for a constructive purpose, and this is going to create a collective karma for us to experience a similar situation again in the future. In addition, we are also creating our individual karma. People are thinking different things, we are acting in different ways, and that is going to bring individual results that we each will experience as an individual.

We experience things together as a group because we've created the cause together as a group. This is why it is important to be careful what groups we put ourselves in. If we are in a certain group without any choice, we should decide whether we agree with the purpose of that group or not. For example, you are drafted into the army or somebody comes to your house and makes you go to the army. You don't have any choice. You don't have any choice about whether you are going to go into the army, but you do have a choice about whether you agree with the purpose of it or not. If you go in and you say, "Yeah, yeah, rah rah, I want to kill the enemy!", it creates that kind of imprint on the mind. If we are in the army but we're saying, "I don't want to be here! I don't want to kill anybody", then you don't get that collective karma from being in that group of people that's designed for that specific purpose.

You brought up racism. It applies equally to genocide or other things. Let's say you're in a concentration camp, be it at Auschwitz or the ones that we made in Arizona during World War II. You are there with the others because of a collective karma. You are experiencing the result together as a group from having created the cause together as a group.

Now, it could be that the people who are the victims in this life were the perpetrators of the harm in a previous life. In the context of the middle-east, the Palestinians could have been Jews before and the Jews could have been Germans before. Or consider that the blacks in America could have been white slave-owners before, or that the whites could have been blacks before. When you think about these, it is silly to cling on to our identity even as groups. Groups change too.

### [Audience: Inaudible]

What you're saying is that your own thinking in relationship to the group is going to determine what karma you create. That is very true. If you agree with the purpose of the group, you get the karma of the actions that the group does according to its purpose. If the Americans go to war and you say, "Ra Ra America, I'm all for the Americans!" and you rejoice at all the people that the Americans killed, you get the karma that is related to killing. You are rejoicing at the actions that fulfill the purpose of this group.

If, in your mind, you're very clear, "I do not agree with taking other lives. I am not for this at all," then you don't get the karma of those people killing even though you might have an American passport. In fact, you probably get a lot of good karma because of taking a non-violent stand and being very opposed to killing.

There are a few things to take note here. First is that when we are in groups, to be aware of whether we agree with the purpose of the group or not. Also, to be aware of how we rejoice. We also accumulate karma from the things we rejoice at. If you read the newspapers and you say, "WOW! So and so just got his reputation completely smashed. I'm so glad this jerk got it!" [laughter] Even though you didn't do it, you created the karma of destroying somebody else's livelihood. If we rejoice at other people's negative actions, we create the karma that is similar to doing that. We have to be careful what we rejoice at.

In a more positive vein, a Dharma group is formed for the purpose of attaining enlightenment for the benefit of sentient beings. When we are here doing something together, again because of collective karma, we are sharing in each other's positive potential. In the same way as the soldiers all share in each other's negative karma, we share in each other's positive karma. We agree with the purpose of the group. If we see other people doing constructive actions, even though we haven't done them or can't do them, if we rejoice and have a sense of happiness and gladness, then we create a lot of positive potential simply by rejoicing in that.

**[Audience:] What is fate? How is it different from what we're talking about here on karma?**

Fate..it's a hard thing. I imagine it is one of those things that everybody you ask is going to have a different definition of. Some people might see fate as something coming from outside. It is fated. It is God's will or it is preplanned. Here, with karma, we are not talking about something that is outside; we are talking about our own actions bringing the results. Also, fate has the implication of something fixed and rigid, where there is no leniency, there is no way to get around it. Whereas with karma and its results, there are ways to affect it. Like I was saying, you can purify negative karma. Also the ripening of positive karma can be interfered with by anger and wrong views. It isn't so fixed and rigid. Maybe these are two ways in which they are different.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

How fixed are our negative actions? You see, we are again talking about very fine points here. Only the Buddha is going to be able to answer this question, so my excuse is ignorance [Laughter]. But what I can tell you is that some things may be influenced by the culture and some things may not be. You gave the example of animal sacrifice. From the Buddhist viewpoint, that would be something where the motivation was ignorance, not understanding that taking lives is harmful and causes pain to others. The people may have thought that what they are doing was good. But because of the ignorance involved in it, they are still creating negative action, in the same way that you will die if you mistake poison for maple syrup and drink it.

Actions like killing are what they call naturally harmful actions. In other words, there is something about taking the lives of others that makes it very difficult for anything good to come out of it. There are other actions that are called declared prohibitions. These are actions that are not naturally negative. They are negative because the Buddha said to avoid them. For example, on the days when you take the eight precepts, then singing, dancing and playing music become declared prohibitions. They are not naturally negative – there is nothing evil in singing, dancing and playing music, but on those days when you've taken a vow not to do it, that becomes a provision to respect. Therefore whether an action is negative or not may also depend on whether you've taken vows or not.

In terms of sexual misconduct, I would really like to clarify it with some of my teachers but it is so difficult to talk about the details of this topic with them. They spell it out, they don't even say it. [laughter] When the teacher is teaching this, they would say "When you do s-e-x [spelling it out] misconduct, then..." [laughter] I have a question about having multiple spouses. To me (this is only my personal opinion based on my ignorance), it seems like this is something that would be culturally defined. On the other hand, maybe the lamas have a good reason why that has nothing to do with culture.

Other actions under 'unwise sexual behavior' may not have to do with culture. For example, going outside one's committed relationship. Or if you know you have Aids and yet deliberately sleep with somebody without letting them know – such action definitely causes harm to somebody. To me that has nothing to do with culture. That to me seems like it would be a naturally harmful act. There are probably other actions which are negative due to the culture of the people, but I can't state that as a fact.

**[Audience:] Is there a tendency to be reborn in similar circumstances again and again, like white people being reborn white, or black people being reborn black?**

With the scenario of white people being reborn white and black people being reborn black, I don't think so. Whereas in other scenarios, there is a possibility. For example, if you have practiced the Dharma diligently in one lifetime, I think it increases the probability of being reborn in a place where you can encounter the Dharma again by the force of that habit. Why? Because your mind was busy during your life thinking about the Dharma, directing your mind in a certain way; it's forming a habit. Therefore you are likely to encounter that environment again. Whereas you are not putting a lot of energy into creating the cause to be reborn white or black. You are not putting mental energy into perpetuating being white or perpetuating being black.

**[Audience:] Would somebody be reborn in a culture that is very different?**

Again it is hard to say because I think if somebody creates a lot of karma with a particular group of people... it depends also how they have been dedicating their prayers. If you dedicated your prayers "May I be reborn as an American," [laughter] it increases the livelihood of that. On the other hand they say that we have been born as everything there is in cyclic existence – every possible kind of rebirth, every possible kind of experience, we have had it all. There is nothing new in samsara. Something out of samsara is quite new to us, but within samsara we've done it all, highest to lowest, many times. I think it depends a lot on the individual.

[In response to audience:] There are certain stories implying that but I think they tell those stories because it is convenient and it makes sense; it is easier for people to link up with. But then there are also some far-out stories in the scriptures of people going from a human rebirth to one as a sea monster with eighteen heads. There are a lot of disparate things too.

**[Audience:] What is the relationship between the action and the imprint on the mind?**

First comes the action, and then as the action ceases, it leaves an imprint on the mind.

[In response to audience:] Yes, we do. One of the results of our actions is that it forms a habitual imprint to do it again and again. That is one of the results of an action. Actions have many different kinds of results (we will be getting into that later on). There is the action that leaves an imprint which becomes the cause for other kinds of actions, which then leaves other imprints on the mind. There are different kinds of results that a particular action produces – it has to do with our rebirth, with the environment, with what happens to us, and with how we behave or our habitual behavior pattern. This is actually the most serious of all the results, because by creating this pattern, this imprint to be a certain way, it becomes a habit. If we do it in a positive way, it is very good. We're forming a good habit. If we do it in a negative way, it becomes quite serious.

Again, the imprints aren't things we can see and touch. It is not like our mindstream is something physical and bam! There's your thumb print in it. [laughter] Our mindstream is formless, not made of atoms and molecules and so definitely the imprints associated with it aren't things that can be seen. But they definitely bring results.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

What about at the time of death? Now, during our lifetime, we are putting all sorts of imprints on our mind. We are acting all the time. Even in one day we have many constructive thoughts, we have many destructive thoughts, many positive actions, many negative actions. All these are getting imprinted on the consciousness. Now at the time of death, what ripens?

First of all if we created a truly heavy negative or positive karma, that one is going to be the most likely to ripen at the time simply because it is so heavy and so dominant. (We will be talking about what makes an action heavy or light later on.) It is like opening your refrigerator and there is a big pineapple there that grabs your attention right away [laughter].

In the absence of some dominant positive or negative karma, then it is the action that we have done frequently, that we are very habituated with. Maybe it is not such a big thing but we've done it a lot, like eating chocolate. It creates a powerful imprint on the mindstream.

Also what we are thinking about and feeling at the time of death is creating the cooperative conditions for the ripening of either the positive or negative actions. This is why it is really important when we die, as much as possible, to try and be in a calm and peaceful environment. If you are in a calm and peaceful environment, it helps the mind to be calm and peaceful, which then creates the conditions for constructive imprints to ripen. If we are in a really chaotic state of mind, then chaotic imprints ripen and influence us.

It is not like things are predetermined. It is not that at the time of death, this one imprint is definitely going to ripen. Again we have this whole system of inter-play. This is what we are referring to when we talk about dependent arising. Things arise out of many causes and conditions. You look at any situation in

your life, and you will see that there is a whole array of factors that go into creating that one unique situation. And if you change any of those factors, you would change the situation in either a subtle way or a very gross way.

It is helpful to think about this. Think about the whole array of different causes and conditions for your getting here tonight – it depends on your job; it depends on your car; it depends on what you ate because maybe if you ate something different for breakfast, you would be sick and you wouldn't be able to come. It depends on all the people you met in the past who got you linked up with the group, and that, in turn, depends on other factors. Many things! There is definitely a principal cause in these, but then so many other things will have to come together. It is mind-boggling, when you think about it.

It is helpful to think about this. Take something physical like a clock. Think of all the different parts of the clock and the causes of all those different parts. Where did each part come from? Who invented the plastic? Who invented the digital thing? What did they have for breakfast? Where did the little red knob come from? If they had had a fight with their spouse, they might have used a blue knob instead of a red knob. [laughter] If we start thinking of the different things that go into the making of one small physical thing, we get this feeling of dependency and how things can be altered. Small things you do can make substantial changes.

### **[Audience:] How does purification interfere?**

It is interesting that you bring this up because I was just writing a letter to this man. He had come to some teachings I gave in India, and we've kept contact over the years. He is going back to India to do Vajrasattva retreat (this is a very strong purification practice). I was writing him a letter telling him about my Vajrasattva retreat.

I was then at Tushita Retreat Center [in India] and the conditions were much worse than now. The mice were running around on the concrete floor, everything was musty, and the scorpions were falling from the ceiling. I would go into the session and all I saw was this incredible re-run video of my life. I had no difficulty at all visualizing it all in my meditation – looking at all my possessions, re-arranging them and throwing them out, and buying some new ones. I had no difficulty remembering all the people who had ever harmed me and generated lots of regret for all the missed opportunities that I had to retaliate. [laughter] Very clear concentration on all of these. And once in a while I got distracted and actually thought about Vajrasattva [laughter].

This was going on for three months. And during the whole process I kept wondering how purification worked, [laughter] because it felt like my mind was going from bad to worse, not better! [laughter] “So what is going on here? What is this purification?” And then right after the retreat, I went to Kopan for teachings by Lama Zopa Rinpoche. I was so surprised because I was listening to the teachings and saying, “Is this what Rinpoche has been teaching the last year? I didn't hear this before. It didn't mean this the last time I heard it.” Everything sounded completely different to me. Something went in on a deeper level. Something clicked; something made more sense.

In retrospect, I was thinking, “What is this purification that is supposedly happening?” A lot of it has to do with the power of our regret and our wish to purify. This wish to purify, this wish to change, this wish to let go of our garbage energy, it impedes with the previous energy. You can see that. If you create a pattern and you have your energy going like this and then you start thinking the exact opposite, it's going to put up some interference. This is very much the way the purification works, by the power of our determination not to do that kind of action again. That cuts the karma to habitually act in that way. By the power of our refuge and our altruism, that cuts others' negative energy towards us, because we are interfering with the negative energy of our motivation that we projected towards them. All these different things in the purification process have a way of interfering with the different steps of our negative actions.

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

For example, when we get sick, we can say “This is the result of my own harmful actions in the past.” Now, given that I'm sick, I can either get angry, depressed and belligerent about it, in which case I'm creating more negative imprint and increasing my present suffering. Or I can say “I'm sick. Wow! This is

how other people feel when they're sick", and generate compassion. This then makes us feel better now, and it has a way of cutting that continuity of negative energy in our mind.

There is a really good book called "The Wheel of Sharp Weapons", otherwise called "The Boomerang Effect" [laughter]. I would actually like to teach it some time. This book is great because it talks about if you are experiencing a particular result, it's because of having created a particular cause. It's an incredible book for meditation because in all the results, we see all the different things we experience in our lives. When we start looking at their causes, we start seeing how we've acted and how we've created more karma to have that experience again. This wakes us up to the effects our actions are going to have. It also helps give us some sense of why things happen the way they do, so we can learn from our mistakes.

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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>