

How Karma Plays Out In Our Mind and Life

Ven. Robina Courtin

KARMA: FUNDAMENTAL TO BUDDHISM

If we're saying we're a Buddhist and we're attempting to practice Buddhism, if we're not applying the laws of karma, if we're not taking that as our hypothesis, if we're not applying that in our daily life, we're not really being a Buddhist. This is fundamental to Buddhist teachings – his view about the world, how it comes into being, what our mind is, what causes happiness, what causes suffering, etc..

So, this law applies – runs – in the mind. So the mind, for the Buddha, is where things happen. The mind is where the workshop is. The mind is where everything happens. The mind is where the source of suffering is. The mind is where the source of happiness is. The mind is the point.

WHERE DO I COME FROM?

The question of course, is demanded, "If I'm not created by somebody else, where do I come from?" Well, in a simple sense, you could say you come from previous moments of yourself. Think of your mind as a river of mental moments – your thoughts and feelings of *now*, in the simplest linear sense of cause and effect, your thoughts and feelings of *now* come from the previous moment of your thoughts and feelings. And your thoughts and feelings of the previous moment come from – guess what? – the previous moment of your thoughts and feelings. You track it back to ten years ago, twenty years ago, in your mothers' womb. "Well, maybe I began a month before conception." Well, no. If my mind existed then, it must have come from a previous moment of my mind. Then clearly you get back to the first moment of conception, when we all assume we began. If you're Christian, God put a soul there, in the egg and sperm;

and if you're a materialist, you are only the egg and sperm.

Well, the Buddha has this third option. Your egg and sperm are there. Yep, the parents worked hard to get them to stay together, and not go down the toilet with the rest. But what *causes* them to stay together is the entry of consciousness, your consciousness. So you can track your consciousness right in this continuity of mental moments going right back to that first moment of conception. "Well, I must have begun then." Well, yes, relatively speaking, this package called "Robina" began then, but where did the body come from? Mummy and Daddy. Where did your mind come from? Previous moment of itself. So your mind is its own continuity of mental moments.

It's a very simple concept, actually. Not difficult for us to intellectualize, to theorize about. Your mind is its own continuity. And obviously, to assume this, you have to assume it's not physical. Because, clearly, if you think your mind is your brain, then you did come from your parents, which is the materialist view, that they "made" you, you know?

YOUR MIND IS YOURS

And so the experiential implication of this is that your mind is *yours*. And that means the contents of it are yours. And so what are the contents of your mind? All the love and the kindness and compassion and wisdom and contentment and anger and jealousy and fear and paranoia and rage – all of this. This is the contents of your mind. So all of these, being contents of your mind, they too come from previous moments of that particular quality in your mind.

So this is a simple idea that implies reincarnation, isn't it? It's a simple concept. Not a difficult concept intellectually. But we're so familiar with the view that I come from mother and father and my anger comes from mother and father and my jealousy and my depression and my all the rest come from the DNA and the egg and the sperm and all the rest, you know. They play a role, no argument. But they're not the main thing. For the Buddha, the main things are your mind,

your thoughts, your feelings, your emotions, your unconscious. Your tendencies, your feelings. All of this. This is yours. This is *yours*.

We come into this life fully programmed with all of our tendencies, with all of our characteristics. It's a big surprise to us. I mean, we accept we come fully programmed, but we think the programming comes from mother and father. It doesn't, Buddha says. Tendencies in the mind are mental and mind is not physical and it comes from previous moments of itself, not from the external condition, which is called the brain.

One can see indicators in the brain of certain things, no argument with this. So this fundamental point of Buddhism is that your mind is yours. And whatever's in it is simply from you having put it there in the past. Hardly surprising concept – cause and effect.

KARMA MEANS INTENTION

This is the essential idea of karma. Karma is a Sanskrit word, that is translated as "action," really simply. Which implies reaction. Action-reaction, in this meaning: cause and effect. Seed-fruit, you know.

It's also, more fundamentally, translated as intention, will, volition. Every microsecond of everything we say, everything we think and feel, and indeed do and say, with our body and speech on the basis of what's in the mind, is a karma. An intentional action that necessarily will leave an imprint, or a tendency or a seed in your consciousness and will ripen in the future in that consciousness as your experiences.

What goes on in our mind, in other words, is the main cause of our future experiences. This is what Buddha says.

This is a simple concept. Not a difficult idea. It's just a question of being able to say it and get our heads around it. It isn't complicated. We think it's complicated, but it's just because we haven't got the right words, you know. It's not a complicated concept at all.

Of course, it's not evident to us. So we take it as our working hypothesis. Buddha's saying basically: we are the creators of ourselves. It's a very simple point.

Whatever's in your mind is there because you put it there, not because Mummy and Daddy did something to you. This flies in the face of the assumption that we all have that's the basis of our lives, and is, as Buddha would say, a misconception. That, you know, I am angry because my father was angry. I am jealous because my mother was jealous. I am depressed because I have certain hormones. We always put an external reason to it, you know. Which sort of, for us, is a way of saying, "It's not my fault."

We've got this dualistic view. We assume we're made by mother and father. We assume the anger and the jealousy and the depression are either there because of the genes or the DNA or they're there because I've got a mean boyfriend, or because I had a lousy mother or a horrible husband or a bad kid or a horrible boss. This is the typical way we talk. And this is, in fact, the view of the materialist world. This is the philosophy of the materialist world that is backed up by the view that your mother and father made you, that you're only physical.

ACCOUNTABILITY

One has to know one's mind, because that's the one we can change. Yes, certain people's external conditions make it quite tough – if you're in a prison and you can't open that door; you can say "Well, I can't help being angry, I'm surrounded by mean people." You might say that. But the ones who are really practicing don't say that. They know that this is their physical condition, and this is indeed the result of their karma (and we'll talk more about that in a minute), and so they will adapt themselves to that condition and still work on their minds.

The person who's got the chemicals that aren't working, that seem to be the trigger for depression, yes, you recognize that you've got those particular chemicals, but the depression is your mind, it's your viewpoint. You might be around people who are mean and ugly who hit you all the time, and if you've got an angry tendency it'll make it easy for you to get angry, it's true. But if you're really being accountable, you'll recognize the anger's yours. This is what we

have to do. This is the toughest part. This is the part that's massive for us. So difficult because we're so used to this dualistic way of talking. It's always like, "It's not my fault. It's not my fault."

And that's the view of the materialist world, you look. It's an assumption of ego. "I didn't ask to get born, did I? It's not my fault. My mother made me. My father made me." We don't want to blame God – well, if you're an Italian, you will. They blame God in the most rude way. They say, "God is a pig!" when things go wrong. They say even worse things about Our Lady. We don't mind blaming our parents – a bit nervous about blaming God, maybe.

So, the whole way ego works, Buddha says, is in its nature dualistic. It's always, "Poor me, the victim." Lama Yeshe would call ego the "self-pity me." And as the ego, you look at how we are every time – instantly trying to cover ourselves, defend ourselves, "It's not fair." "It's not my fault." "I didn't mean to." Everything to try to deny accountability. It's so painful for us to be accountable. You look at it. It's typical. This is how ego is, this is its nature. This is the way it is.

So, to go against this and slowly become accountable, you listen to the Buddha's views of karma – that your consciousness comes from you in the past, not your parents – it reinforces this ability to be accountable. Because my mind is mine, I came fully programmed with my tendencies. Don't blame anybody else. But this includes our good ones as well, and we forget about those. We agonize, "Why do bad things happen to me?" We never agonize, "Why do good things happen to me?" We don't care why, just give me more, you know. But we have all the good things for the same reason: I created the cause to have them.

FOUR WAYS THAT KARMA RIPENS

There are four ways in which our actions from the past lives – you know, before we even entered into this present womb of our mother – there are four ways those past actions ripen in the present. Or indeed, there are four ways in which our present actions

leave seeds in the mind that will ripen in the future as one's experiences. It's a constant process, ongoing. Every microsecond of everything that goes on in our mind, and the things we do on the basis of those thoughts with our body and speech, this is the karmic process. This is constantly occurring. This is the natural process of cause and effect, constantly in play.

1. FULLY RIPENED RESULT: A REBIRTH

The first, main one – they call it the Fully Ripened Result – is the type of rebirth we get born into. So, you know, if we're materialists, or if we're Christians, for example, we both agree on one thing at least – that someone else made us. I was made by God. I was made by Mummy and Daddy. They're the same principle, aren't they? That you're made by someone else. Which means it's got nothing to do with you.

Whereas the Buddha says, "Everything to do with me." We are accountable. Our past actions are the main cause of why my mind found its way to my present mother's human womb. Why blame your parents? They're just lying there having fun and you come along. So Buddha puts us right in the center. Which is kind of an interesting concept – who thought that you were the main cause of who you are? Big surprise!

Not more than a few weeks before conception in your present mother's womb, your consciousness was in another form, another life. And at the time – very simply speaking – at the time of the death of that life – and it doesn't always follow that it was a human life, there's a whole bunch of options of types of rebirth as far as the Buddha's concerned – at the time of the past death, then a very strong tendency of morality must have ripened at that time due to many, many, many complicated causes and conditions all coming together. So this is a very simplistic explanation of it.

We've programmed ourselves, basically – in a very major way – with past practice of morality, of goodness, in the context, no doubt, of a spiritual path, which then ripened at the past death when the consciousness got to the subtle level and eventually left the

body, which is when you're dead. Then it would have been on autopilot, basically, programmed, and then in a few weeks or could have been a much shorter time, after having been in the intermediate state, as they call it, like a dream state but out of the old body, then our consciousness found its way very precisely into our present mother's Fallopian tube and joined the egg and sperm there.

The main cause of this is our past morality. Your father and mother having sex is just a co-operative cause. They did not make you, they did not create you. They merely had sex. Your consciousness had very strong karmic connection with them from past history with those particular parents. I mean, it's a highly complex scenario, you know, but simply speaking that karma ripened at the time of your death and then caused your mind to go on autopilot to find its way into our particular mother's human womb.

One lama said that at the time of a male and female human having sex, billions of consciousnesses that are recently passed away – and that's obviously not just from the human realm, Buddha would assert a whole spectrum of possibilities of types of consciousnesses existing in different realms – that at the time of the male and female having sex, billions of consciousnesses are all hovering around trying to get in. Well, we got in. From Buddha's point of view, we should be weeping in delight every day at how fortunate we are, getting such an extraordinarily fortunate life. Human life – so few of those, obviously – we have more mosquitoes in one summer in the backyard than you have humans at any one time.

So, clearly it's easier to get a mosquito birth, dog birth, giraffe birth – maybe less giraffes, not so many of them – fish, who knows how many fish, plenty of fish – the vast majority – anyway, billions and trillions of other consciousnesses, we can see this. So, we got the human one. Amazing – already amazing. That's the first way our karma ripened – we got this human birth. But, you know, Mother Theresa and Hitler both got

one of those, so clearly there's some differences.

2. ACTIONS SIMILAR TO THE CAUSE: OUR TENDENCIES

That gets us to the second way in which our past actions ripened in the present. And this is our tendencies, our characteristics, our personality; our depression, our kindness, our wish to kill, our wish to lie, our being good at piano, our being good at math; whatever it might be. And that's an interesting point, psychologically speaking. In Buddhist terms, we give equal status to whether you're good at love, good at anger or good at music. It's just a tendency. We make this big dramatic difference, you know, we are honored, actually – you think about it – we are delighted and own responsibility for our being good at music .

“Why are you good at piano, Robina?”

“Oh, well, I've got a tendency and I practiced five or ten years – what did you think?” We're honored to own responsibility for our being good at music.

“Why are you good at anger, Robina?”

“Oh, well, it's my father's fault!” No accountability whatsoever! We love being accountable for our being good at music, or math or being a gymnast, you know, but not emotional stuff. We have this different set of laws when it comes to emotional stuff, which I find most fascinating – no logic at all.

The Buddha says, those tendencies – whether you're angry, jealous or just being good at music – are just tendencies. Why do we have a tendency? From having done it before. Quite simple. Mozart clearly had musical tendencies. Hitler clearly had other tendencies, and he expressed them, didn't he, in his actions.

Our mothers and fathers – this is a big shock to us – they're not the main cause of this. The absolute default explanation in the materialist world is it's all in the DNA and the genes. That's why we always in our minds go back to the parents, to check why I am what I am. No, we don't need to. Yes, my mother was good at music. Everyone says, “Yeah, Robina's good at music because her mother was good at music.” No – Robina's

good at music because she practiced it before. So has my mother, and we happen to come together. And then she encouraged my music by teaching me. It doesn't come from your parents, Buddha said – it's a very simple point. A simple point, but shocking to us.

So, your tendencies – they call this Actions Similar to the Cause. They're yours. You're fully programmed with every one of these from the first second of conception. Millions of these different imprints. Millions of these different tendencies.

3. EXPERIENCES SIMILAR TO THE CAUSE: HOW PEOPLE TREAT YOU, ETC.

The third way that your karma ripens, your actions from the past ripen in the present, is called Experiences Similar to the Cause, and that's all the stuff that happens to you. The people you meet, the parents you get, the teachers, the abusers, the ones who are loving to you, the ones who rape you, the ones who give you a million dollars, the ones who are kind to you, the ones who steal from you, whatever it might be. The way you're treated and seen in the world. The main cause? Your past actions.

So Buddha puts us in the center, in the absolute center – each one of us – in the center of all our experiences. He says our actions are the main cause of why we are who we are and why what happens to us happens to us. All the good and all the bad. This applies to giraffes, dogs, ants, fish, humans – all "*sem-chens*." The term in Tibetan for "sentient being" is "*sem-chen*," "mind-possessor." We're all mind-possessors. Buddha says that there's not an atom of space where you won't find mind-possessors. Trillions of them. So, for this reason, Buddhist psychology, interestingly, refers to all sentient beings, not just humans.

4. ENVIRONMENTAL KARMA

And fourth, they call it Environmental Karma. Environmental karma, which is the very way the physical world impacts upon us. So that could mean – so here we are, sitting in this room. It's quite pleasant, isn't it? It's quite peaceful, pleasant view out there, it's quiet, you know – the walls aren't

dripping with mold. It's pleasantly painted. It smells nice.

Don't take this for granted – this experience of a pleasant environmental experience is the result of our collective virtue. If suddenly the building explodes, or a gunman comes in, this is due to our collective non-virtuous karma.

Basically, Buddha's point about karma is that suffering, when everything goes wrong – could be externally, could be the people, could be the environment, could be in your own mind – when everything's out of whack, out of balance, disharmonious, when the elements are all crazy, when people are all fighting, when people are mean to you, when your own mind's berserk – this is when everything's all messed up – this is the result of negativity. Negative karma. It's not blame, it's not punishment. There's no concept of punishment in Buddhism. It's a natural law.

And positive karma is the cause of things work harmoniously and nicely. When non-virtue is prevalent, everything goes berserk. It's very simple.

So the four ways your karma ripens: the very fact that you're this human being, with this very particular family and friends and people who harm you and people who help you – whatever those experiences are. All your tendencies and even the way the physical world impacts upon you – where you were born, the way the physical world is, all of this – our actions in the past are the main cause of this. Buddha puts us absolutely in charge. "We are the boss," Buddha says.

I'M THE BOSS

So if I am the boss of my own present experiences, if I am the cause of it, then indeed I can be the cause of my future experiences – which is why you should then check up, do I like this life, do I like people punching me in the nose? Do I like having people being angry at me? Do I like being depressed and angry and jealous and poor and living in an ugly environment and all polluted or horrible? No, I don't. Then, okay, there must be causes of this; what were they? You check up; well, do I like this? No. Well,

guess what, what's the solution? Don't do it again, baby! It's pretty simple.

This is Buddhist practice. Not complicated. It's just that we fight mightily against this because it sounds like blame, "Oh you mean it's my fault...I must go and kill myself." because we're used to this dualistic view of "poor me" "victim me" "not fair" "life is done to me, I didn't ask to get born, it's not my fault." That is the default mode of ego.

FOUR WAYS THAT KILLING, FOR EXAMPLE, WOULD RIPEN

Let me give one example of one action and the four different ways it ripens; let's say "killing." So, one of the main – we can see, generally, if we look at the world, one of the most harmful things we do with our bodies is to kill other beings, wouldn't you agree? It's quite an intense way to harm. And that, in Buddha's view, would be any sentient being.

So, as a result of killing in the past – those four ways I described – if it ripens at the time of your death, and it becomes the main karma, it would program your consciousness to cause you to get born in a very suffering type of life like an animal realm or a spirit or something like that. Okay. So we can deduce in our case, it was morality that ripened because we got a human life. And the Buddha would say that in general, getting a human life is the result of morality ripening.

But then we look at the next way karma ripens is as a tendency, so the second way killing ripens is as a tendency to kill. Now look at humans – we might be born humans, our main karma that caused the life itself is morality, but lots of humans kill, don't they? Can you see that? So, lots of humans, due to past killing, are born with the tendency to keep killing.

The third way killing ripens is called as an experience – which is you get killed or you die young, or you get sick. So anything that's an experience of where – the opposite to health, or the opposite to the length of life, or the opposite to that, that's the result of harming or killing. Do you understand? So, generally speaking, sickness – the elements not working properly, food not being

digestible, things harming us instead of nourishing us, this is the result of past killing, in general.

So, for example, the fourth way, environmental karma, would be the very environment itself, which is meant to nurture us, nourish us, right? – it harms us. Look at people who eat peanuts – that's a particular environmental karmic result for a person from past killing, where just peanuts will kill them. We've got the collective karma now to have poisoned water, haven't we? More and more – who drinks water out of rivers anymore? So there's pollution – polluted water, polluted air...where the elements themselves are harmful to us. That's the result of killing. Do you understand? Make sense?

IDENTIFY THE CAUSES OF A PROBLEM, THEN WE KNOW HOW TO FIX IT

In the Second Noble Truth, the Buddha states the causes of suffering. And he narrows it down to two main causes: karma and delusions. And they subsume down to the one: delusions. Delusions are the main cause of suffering: because of these we do negative actions, we harm others.

So, in relation to the two causes of suffering, karma and delusions, there are two levels of practice. The most immediate, the most urgent, as Rinpoche puts it, is in relation to the delusions: at the very least refrain from creating more negative karma in day-to-day life. So, if someone punches your nose, you at least protect your mind to not create more negative karma. And that's our ongoing, everyday practice, watching our body, speech and mind like a hawk every minute.

But the second one is in relation to karma, for all the countless past seeds we've already got, all sitting in our mind right now, trillions of lives-worth of seeds, latent, waiting for the appropriate conditions to ripen as one's suffering. Obviously we need to get ahead of the game and purify them before they ripen.

THE PRECIOUSNESS OF THIS HUMAN REBIRTH

Q: Earlier you were talking about...coming as a human...the seeds have ripened, you've got high morality...

A: As a result of the practice of morality and goodness and keeping vows we get this particular life; yes, in general, even an ordinary human life is the result of a lot of morality karma ripening at the time of the previous death.

Q: If we come back as a dog, does that mean that we...I mean, in my mind I don't see that necessarily as a lower form...?

A: I understand. I understand. Okay. Where that fits is this. Would you agree – as nice as dogs are – would you agree they're not very bright? I mean, you have a talk about developing compassion, they don't really get it. You try to explain emptiness to them, they're a bit thick. You try to teach them piano, I mean they're just like a bit limited. I mean, I'm not being rude about dogs.

Let me put it this way. If you want a really long neck, best to be a giraffe. Guaranteed. If you want to fly, be a bird. But, honey, if you want to work with your mind, and have a few more options, probably best to be a human.

So, it's a contextual thing. It's not high or low or some kind of hierarchy – it's a question of what you want to achieve. Lama Zopa Rinpoche said one time, if just for a couple of minutes you could have a direct experience of the mind of your little cute doggy-woggy, the suffering, the mental suffering of the most profound ignorance of that mind would be so intense, you'd never want to waste another second of your precious human life. That's the ordinary ignorance of an animal's mind.

Now, we don't think this way in our culture, I agree. But just think about it – it's a different way to look at what ignorance is. We all have ignorance. Ignorance is the term for this ego-grasping that's this panic state that rises as soon as we're attacked or insulted or hurt or don't get what we want. Well, animals live in that one. Your dog has been living in your house for years, and it

barks every time it hears the gate squeak. By now you'd think he would have learned he knows it's the gate squeaking. But he doesn't, the poor thing, because he's paranoid. His big eyes are round, he's barking like crazy; his unhappy mind, honey, is called fear, and fear is a function of ego-grasping, ignorance. So if you think of it this way, without being mean to dogs. Buddhist psychology refers to all living beings, not just humans.

KARMA IS RIPENING AND WE'RE CREATING IT EVERY MICRO-SECOND

Q: Does the consciousness that moves from lifetime to lifetime – is that a ...collection of seeds or is it –

A: It's a collection of seeds or a bunch of programming.

Q: So, what happens, say for example in this life, like if a karmic seed has ripened, or a number of karmic seeds have ripened over a lifetime, that consciousness that moves on, it is based on those seeds that are left in the consciousness....

A: Every microsecond that you're existing – so, what's your name?

Q: Helen.

A: Okay. So here we have Helen. So your consciousness, every microsecond right now it's working. Every second, you're doing something, thinking something, feeling something, assuming something. Each second, you're programming your mind, aren't you? Every second, you're sowing a karmic seed. This is a way of saying it, for whatever we do, say and think that leaves imprints in the mind. So this is your consciousness. If you tracked it back, just logically going back, each second, each second, you get back to the first moment of conception, wouldn't you? Then you have to go back to a moment before that. And it's the same continuity of mind. And then a previous life, and a previous life and you go back a million lives.

So we can deduce that there's this particular tracking of consciousness that at this moment in time is labeled "Helen" on the basis of this particular human form. So that consciousness will continue to program it, program it, program it, and it leaves this

body, and program, program, and takes another body, program, program – so it just keeps going.

The Buddha says we're usually not in charge of this process, because we think everybody else does it to us, it's not my fault, and how dare? and all this business. But if you're really in charge of this business, you're cleaning up your act. You're stopping programming your mind – as best you can – with more negativity. You're trying to program your mind with positivity, and you're purifying the seeds you've already grown – hopefully this is your spiritual procedure – until eventually you've cleaned up your mind completely and now you're an enlightened being. Do you see what I'm saying? This is a way of saying it.

Q: So, it is a collection that keeps on going from lifetime to lifetime until you...

A: ...cleaned up all the rubbish and grown up all the good. That's it. Precisely. That's it. That's what the process of becoming enlightened is all about. That's the Buddhist way of putting it. You understand. We're communicating, right?

Q: And every microsecond, we're experiencing the ripening of karma, and creating more.

A: Precisely. That's exactly right. That's exactly right. That's exactly the point. Every microsecond is the fruit of a past one, and on the basis of this we do more. So that's why we've got to get ahead of the game. Stop creating the negative ones, clean up our act, control body and speech, clean up the mind, rip out the negative ones from the mind so we quit that, and then grow the positive ones, and that finally eventually will be a mind that's now completely what they call "enlightened" – fully developed in goodness and completely rid of badness. That's what it is and that's where we're heading. So it's not a random thing... if one is in charge of the process, it's not a random thing at all. You're really on track with it and you know what you're doing. You know what to do, what to say, what to think, what not to do, what not to say, what not to think, what seeds to sow, and you just keep on bopping.

The Ten Non-virtues and Their Results

There are four ways that karma ripens in future lives:

1. The Fully Ripened Result, which is the type of rebirth our consciousness will take when it leaves a previous body at the time of death.

2. The Action Similar to the Cause: all the words, thoughts and actions we do in any one life are due to the habit of having done them before.

3. The Experience Similar the Cause: all the things that other people or beings do to us, or all the things that happen to us.

4. Environmental Karma: even the way the world is for us: polluted, beautiful, earthquakes, etc; all this is due to the collective karma of the sentient beings who experience that environment.

All positive and negative actions of body, speech and mind bring all four results (not necessarily at the same time).

Here is a summary of the ten non-virtuous actions that one should refrain from, and their karmic results.

The **Fully Ripened Result** of all non-virtuous actions is rebirth in one of the three lower realms: animals, spirits, hells. The **Action Similar to the Cause** is the habit to continue to do each action. The **Experiences Similar to the Cause** and the **Environmental Result** differ for each action.

PHYSICAL ACTIONS

1. KILLING

Experience Similar to the Cause You get killed; your life is short; you get sick easily, and have little energy.

Environmental Result Food, drink, medicine, and crops are scarce, always inferior and low in nutrition or potency; they are hard to digest and cause disease; most beings around you die before reaching the full life span.

2. STEALING

Experience Similar to the Cause You don't have enough to live on or make ends meet; what you do have is all just common property with others.

Environmental Result Crops are few and far between, have no power to remove hunger, spoil, or never come up; dry spells stay on too long; it rains too much: crops dry up or die off.

3. SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

Experience Similar to the Cause The people who work around you are unreliable; you find yourself having a lot of competition for your partner. Your relationships, all kinds, don't last.

Environmental Result You live in a place where there is urine and feces all round, and mud, dirt, filth; everything stinks, and everywhere seems unpleasant and distasteful.

VERBAL ACTIONS

4. LYING

Experience Similar to the Cause No one believes what you say, even when you are speaking the truth; others are always deceiving you.

Environmental Result Your work in cooperation with others fails to prosper and people don't work well together, everyone generally is cheating one another and is afraid, and there are many things to be afraid of.

5. DIVISIVE TALK

Experience Similar to the Cause You easily lose friends; people around you are always fighting one another; people around you have an undesirable character.

Environmental Result The ground where you live is covered with obstacles like fallen tree trunks, thorns, stones, sharp broken glass; it is rough, dreary, and there are no streams or lakes or water springs; the earth is parched and poisoned, burning hot, useless,

threatening; a place where there are many things to fear.

6. IDLE TALK

Experience Similar to the Cause No one listens to you. No one respects what you say; no one thinks your speech has value.

Environmental Result Fruits don't grow, or grow at the wrong times, seem ripe when they are not, have frail roots; there are no leisure places like parks, glades, pools of cool water; and many things around make you afraid.

7. HARSH SPEECH

Experience Similar to the Cause You will always hear distressing words.

Environmental Result you will be born in a desert country.

MENTAL ACTIONS

8. CRAVING/COVETING

Experience Similar to the Cause Your personality is dominated by desire; you are never satisfied with what you have

Environmental Result Every good thing you manage to find starts to get worse, decreases as seasons, months, days pass.

9. ILL-WILL

Experience Similar to the Cause Your personality is dominated by anger; you always find yourself without help, or never find the help you need; you are always hurting others, or always being hurt by others.

Environmental Result You live in a world of chaos, diseases spread, evil is everywhere; there is plague, conflict, and you have fear of your country's or others' external military; there are dangerous animals, and you are surrounded by harmful spirits, thieves or muggers, and the like.

10. WRONG VIEWS

Experience Similar to the Cause Your personality is dominated by stupidity; you become a person who keeps harmful views (like "an eye for an eye"); you become a deceitful person.

Environmental Result You live in a world where the single highest source of happiness is steadily disappearing from the earth, where people think that unclean and suffering things are actually nice and happy; where there is no place to go, no one to help, nothing to protect you.

From teachings by Lama Zopa Rinpoche.

How to Purify Karma

Ven. Robina Courtin

As Lama Yeshe says, “We create negativity with our mind, so we can purify it by creating positivity with our mind. This is the process of purification.

WE'RE THE BOSS

All the way we experience the physical world; all the way we experience sentient beings and how they treat us and see us and love us and hate us; all our own tendencies and even our humanness – my goodness, this is the result of our past work; it's like we're our own creators. Not kidding. This is Buddha's view. It's kind of tasty. It's kind of powerful. It's kind of outrageous. It's kind of radical.

So, what's the experiential implication of this? We're the boss. We did it. We're in charge. No one else to blame. You did it. You are the responsible for all the good things that happen to you, for all your goodness, and your morality, and the people who are good to you in your life and your kindness and the good things that happen. You did it. When we can own the good stuff, it's easy to own the bad stuff. Makes you courageous.

So, you take stock of this garden – you look at your life, and you see the crummy things that happen. You see the people who lie to you. You see the people who harm you. You see the people who don't pay their bills to you. You see the bad things that happen to you, and you go, “Do I like this?” and you go, “No, I don't.” And then you go, “I wonder what caused it?” and then you go, “Well, it must have been my past actions similar to this. Oh, drat. So what can I do about it?” And then you go, “Well, I'd better stop doing it, hadn't I, if I don't want it in the future. And I'd better clean up the seeds I've already planted that haven't yet ripened so they don't ripen as my suffering in the future. Because, you know what? I'm sick of suffering!”

It's so practical. It's a half a dozen thoughts, but instead look at the dramas we experience when things go wrong – shouting and yelling and depressed and angry and blaming people and cursing and fear. We're kicking and screaming like crazy children, refusing to accept the simple reality that “This is my life, I did it, what can I do to change it?” All the fuss and bother we go through. We're ridiculous.

Of course, easy to say, but very hard to see this, mainly because we're addicted to the samsaric way of interpreting life: that we didn't ask to get born, that it's not my fault: so deeply ingrained in us!

THERE IS SUFFERING: FIRST NOBLE TRUTH

So, if we're sick of suffering, we'd better know how to accurately identify it. This is the First Noble Truth. There are three levels of suffering.

1. The Suffering of Suffering

This is in-your-face suffering; all the bad things that happen.

2. The Suffering of Change

Now this is a bit depressing, because it's what we actually call happiness. Buddha calls it suffering. It's a sneaky, honey-covered razor blade; it's basically when attachment gets what it wants. It looks to us like happiness, but it's just the junkie getting the fix. It's actually fraught with suffering.

3. All Pervasive Suffering

The third kind of suffering, even more subtle – we don't even give it a name in our culture, or even in our religions – is being born in the first place with this body, which is the body of a junkie in a world constructed of junk, and to survive you need to ingest it. There's no choice: it's all in the very nature of suffering. That's the third level of suffering.

THERE ARE CAUSES OF SUFFERING: THE SECOND NOBLE TRUTH

So, we're locked in suffering – the world is in the nature of suffering, the Buddha says. And why all this? Well, it's got causes – that's the Second Noble Truth. And guess what? There are two main causes, and we created both of

them. It's scary – we think it all comes from everybody else.

One is the **1. past karma**, the past action, that left the seed in your mind when you did the negative action that is now ripening as your suffering. And the second cause, and actually they both subsume down to this one, is the **2. delusions** in the mind that cause you to do the negative action in the first place, which then again manifests when you punch me in the nose and I say, "How dare you," and I punch you right back, and the ball keeps rolling.

TWO LEVELS OF PRACTICE

1. WATCH OUR BODY, SPEECH AND MIND LIKE A HAWK AND REFRAIN FROM DOING HARM NOW

So, in relation to these two causes of suffering, there are two main kinds of practice. And as Lama Zopa Rinpoche says, the first one, the most immediate, the most urgent, is in relation to the second cause of suffering, the delusions: do not respond in a deluded way to the good and bad things that happen every day, which are the fruit of our past action.

You own these karmic appearances as yours, so you do everything in your power to not respond with negative mind, body, or speech. You do everything in your power to avoid harming the person back or grasping at the good things; you watch your mind like a hawk and try not to sow more negative seeds. That's your first immediate practice. Every minute, watch your mind like a hawk, watch your body and speech like a hawk. You avoid at least creating more negative karma in relation to the situations of daily life.

The second one is where you now have to take care of the karma you've already created in all the countless past lives, the seeds that are lying in your mind, latent, waiting for the conditions to ripen as your suffering. They haven't ripened yet; so you've got to get ahead of the game, you've got to pull them out, or at the very least weaken them. And that's what purification is.

THE FORCE OF OUR PAST HABITS

But before we get into purification, first let's look at why it's so hard to do the most immediate level of practice, the most urgent: to watch our body, speech and mind and not create negative karma now.

So it's a tough one, because the tragedy of karma is, we're brainwashed, we're completely conditioned, we're completely habituated, we're completely brainwashed – not by others but by our own past actions, habits. We are propelled by the force of our past habits.

Now, when it comes to good things, aren't we fortunate? For example, a friend of mine taking the lice out of her three-year-old son's head, and the little boy cries, "Mummy, Mummy, leave them alone, don't hurt them. It's their home." The little boy is full of compassion. He's three. She hasn't taught him this. So *he* is propelled by the force of *his* past karma, which is his compassion. We can deduce logically that he has practiced compassion in the past so that now it arises just naturally. How fortunate that spontaneous compassion arises in his three-year-old mind and he cries with compassion for the lice in his own head! How marvelous! Programming is good when it's virtuous karma.

Look at Mozart: his mother gives him a piano at the age of six, off he goes writing, his sonatas. We can deduce that he's programmed with music. When I popped out of my mother's womb, shouting and kicking, we can deduce that I was programmed with anger. So, it's a tough one when the programming is negative, because whatever's happening to you appears bad, not fair; it feels so spontaneous that you believe that anger is totally right.

Another example I use, a friend of mine, another mother of a child – she said when her little boy first saw the fishing, he ran like a magnet. She hated fishing. She never taught him this. He saw fishing and he ran like a magnet. Why? Because he had the karma to kill. We can deduce he's been in the lower realms in the past, he's finished that karma, but the tragedy is, he didn't purify all aspects of it. He's still got the residual result, which

in this life is the habit to keep killing. The habit is very strong. The three-year-old boy with compassion, he didn't have to think about it; it just spontaneously came because he'd practiced compassion in the past. So this little boy, he must have practiced killing in the past. He saw the river, the fishing, attachment is instantly activated. He was magnetized by the fishing, it looked so delicious to him. And the thing you run like a magnet to is a thing you've done before, then you put your attachment glasses on instantaneously so it will look good to you, it will therefore trigger a good feeling, therefore logically you assume, "Oh, this must be good because it gives me a good feeling." So then he pursued it. He followed the fishing. He became a professional fisherman.

She said she went fishing with him one time, to please her boy. And she found it unbearable. All she could see was suffering fish. All she could see was the fish, who by their body language were clearly showing that – poor things – they would rather be in the water, please! The poor things can't shout; they haven't got a voice. Their poor little eyes can't show much; the best they can do is wriggle their body, isn't it? I mean, if he had the addiction, the attachment to killing pigs, you'd *know* the pigs were unhappy – they'd squeal and kick and try to run away on their little legs. Who'd want to go pig killing? Nobody. We go fishing because they die seemingly peacefully, poor things – they don't make a noise.

So he can't see suffering. All his life he's killed fish; he's attached to it. He's addicted to it. Every single day going out – and the feeling of feeling good. This wonderful feeling comes from attachment to something. So, because the world accepts fishing, no-one's going to argue with him. If he was attached to killing poodles, he would've been in trouble – keep it secret, snuck out at night. No. Fishing, everyone does it so no-one tells him it's not good. So he never questioned it.

But his mother, having no attachment to fishing, all she can see, nakedly, is the suffering of the fish. He literally couldn't see it, and this is the proof that we make up our own stories based upon what's in our minds.

So, because he had a habit to kill and attachment to it, then his rose-colored spectacles caused it to look good. He couldn't see the suffering. Literally. He was a lovely human being, she said, a kind, lovely, generous man. But he was blinded; and that's what attachment causes – so sneaky. It blinds us from seeing the truth. She saw suffering; he couldn't see it. He'd been doing it for years, killed hundreds of thousands of little fishies. He felt blissful. This is the tragedy of habit.

JUNKIES FOR PLEASURE

So we are propelled by the force of our past habit. And that, conjoined with the attachment – you're lost. Completely lost. That's why it is so hard to change – because we are junkies for pleasure. We are junkies for pleasure. That's this human realm. Buddha calls it a desire realm. So that means we are junkies for pleasure; we are born with these senses that crave their objects. The moment we get the object, that's what we mean by happiness. If we feel happy, then we logically deduce the action we did must be good.

The same with the torturer – I remember reading about one of those guys years ago, a multi-murderer and a torturer. He said, from the time he could remember, he was compelled to kill, to torture and kill creatures, little ants and animals, because it gave him pleasure. And then of course as he got older, he graduated to humans.

He intellectually knew it was wrong; because he could see the world didn't approve, but you know, he had to keep it secret, of course. But he was totally addicted to the pleasure that it gave him. Why? Habit from the past, programming from karma.

We think in the West, Oh, he's just this devil, he's an evil person. But the logical reason he did it is because of his past killing, no doubt as an animal, torturing – look at animals, they torture each other all the time. Constant. They're just addicted to torture. Being tortured and torturing – that's what animals do. Worst, most intense suffering. This guy – karmic imprint, you know, of torture. And what happened? He got

pleasure from it: habit meets attachment equals pleasure. And the logic is, "It must be good, because it gives me a good feeling." Of course, the world doesn't agree, so he's going to keep it quiet. There's always this conflict in his mind. But he is addicted to the pleasure.

Look at our pathetic little habits, you know. Overeating, smoking, junkies for sex, maybe... look how hard it is to get past our old habits, and we've got pathetic little habits, you know. Imagine if you got born with the habit to torture! What a terrible suffering – can you imagine? Or just to even kill fish and not realize it's suffering, not realize it's negative, all because it feels good. This is why attachment is so tricky.

This is why we have to have really logical, intelligent minds to have a sound basis for what is good and what is not, and then judge our experiences according to it. And then struggle to change our old habits. It's a tough job, because we are propelled by our habits. We're on autopilot, you know. We think we make choices. We think we're intelligent. We're not. We're just junkies for habits, you know, craving to get good feelings. Stuff the food in, whatever we do. So we have to look into our minds carefully, and then struggle to change the habits. And it is a struggle, we all know that.

So that's the immediate level of practice, the most urgent, as Rinpoche says, the here and now, dealing with what arises every second.

2. PURIFY THE KARMIC SEEDS THAT HAVE NOT YET RIPENED

This other one – the purification – is to deal with the seeds that haven't even manifested yet, that one can see no evidence of. This is called purification. And as Lama Zopa says, we are insane not to do this practice every day.

PURIFICATION IS A PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESS

So, like all this work in Buddhism, this process of purification is practical, it's psychological. A really easy way to remember is – and I like this one – i

s to call the steps the "Four Rs". There are different orders of these, according to the practice, but I like this particular order.

The first one is Regret, the second one is Reliance, the third one the Remedy, the fourth one, Resolve, the determination to make changes.

1. FIRST OPPONENT POWER: REGRET

So the first one is you've got to acknowledge what you've done wrong. If you've taken poison, let's say, the very first step is to recognize that you've done it. You've got to first acknowledge there's a problem. It's pretty reasonable. You've first got to acknowledge you've eaten poison. "Oh, what a fool! Quick, what can I do about it?" Then you find yourself a decent doctor; then you do something to purify it, you apply the antidotes. Then you determine never to do it again. This is reasonable; it's practical, it's common sense.

Trouble is, when it comes to morality, we seem to have this other set of rules and we get all guilty and ashamed and neurotic; we're ridiculous. We're like children.

BLAME, GUILT, DENIAL

When it comes to doing things like getting angry and killing and lying and stealing and getting depressed and harming others and all the rest of the rubbish we do, not to mention the torturing and everything, if we're a torturer – what we do instead is equivalent to saying, "Who put poison in my dinner?" I'm going to try and find the person to blame, and then you go and try to work out who to sue, because they put poison in your dinner. Meanwhile, you're dying. But all your thoughts are for blaming. Blame is pretty useless, which is our typical mode.

Another typical mode is guilt – "Oh, I ate poison. Oh, I'm such a bad person. I ate poison." Every day, you're getting sicker and sicker... "Oh, I'm such a bad person, I ate poison." We love to live in this one. Completely useless. Complete waste of time. Totally impotent. It's the same as blame, but you're the person you're blaming. One is anger, one is self-blame. They're the same problem.

The third one, even more ridiculous – and we love this one – “Robina! There’s poison in your dinner!” “There is not!” We call it living in denial.

ACCOUNTABILITY

So we’ve got to be accountable. This entire process of purification is based upon the understanding of karma and on the recognition that you don’t want suffering. Regret, the first step, is all about yourself.

So, we have guilt, now, which beats ourselves up. “I’m just a bad person.” Blame or guilt, we run to these spontaneously because they are a natural response to having ego-grasping, of having this ignorance that clings to the self-existent me. It’s this dualistic state of mind that naturally blames others, or naturally blames yourself. And we have to conquer that. We have to argue with that wrong view.

One time His Holiness was asked the difference between guilt, which we know so well, as this first step called regret. It was such a sweet answer, but quite profound. He said: “With guilt, you look into the past and you go, “I did this and I did that and I did this,” and then you go, “and I’m a bad person.” We just assume naturally that if I’ve done bad things, I must be a bad person. That’s how we think. That second thought is the view of ego, the view of ego-grasping, that over-exaggerates the badness, and paints the entirety of myself with that brush.

The same with blame. “You are a bad person. You did this and you did this and you did this and you’re a bad person.” This is what all delusions do; they exaggerate. And it’s just not accurate. Forget being not morally right – it’s just not accurate. It’s an exaggeration. It isn’t accurate to conclude because you’ve killed and lied and stolen, that you’re a bad person. You’re not. That’s mistaken. Your *actions* are bad, no problem with that. That’s clear. That’s more precise.

But the point here is, then His Holiness said, “With regret, you also look into the past and think, “I did this in the past, and I did this, and I did this...” but then you think, “What can I do about it?” Now, we have to cultivate this consciously, it doesn’t come

naturally. Instead of saying, “...and I’m a bad person,” you then say, “What can I do about it?” You change the thought. We have to cultivate that view. That’s what regret is. It’s wholesome, courageous, and optimistic.

You could say that regret is like compassion for yourself. Like the poison, the reason you say, “Oh my God, what an idiot! Quick, where’s the doctor?” – it’s obvious why you say this. You don’t have to state it: you know that poison will cause you suffering, and you know you don’t want suffering. Well, same here. You’re sick of suffering, and you understand that having harmed others will cause you suffering.

WE HAVE TO SAY THE WORDS

So, when we do this practice at the end of the day, you speak out to yourself what you have done to harm others. You bad-mouth your husband, you talked about your girlfriend behind her back, you took the pencil at work and you never returned it. I mean, maybe you’re not going around torturing and killing too many people, but whatever it is, you’ve got to acknowledge it. “I did do this and this...” And then you check the main things throughout this life – maybe you had an abortion, maybe you went fishing, maybe you’re a hunter: you acknowledge it, and you regret it.

And this is regret. You acknowledge what you have done to harm others and, because you don’t want suffering yourself – this is the motivation behind regret (compassion for others comes in the second step), you regret having done it. “I regret this. Why? Because I’m sick of suffering. I don’t want the suffering that will come from this if I leave that seed in my mind. Because if I do leave that seed in my mind – that poison – it will ripen as my suffering and – hey! – I do not want suffering.”

This attitude does not come naturally to us. Guilt comes naturally! Even if we say the word regret, it still feels like guilt. So, we have to spell it out to make it a new thought. It’s a really crucial point, I tell you. It’s not enough just to say, “Oh, I regret killing and lying and stealing.” It feels like guilt, so you’ve got to change the words.

The simple, most fundamental thing about karma is that everything you do and say and think leaves a seed in your mind that can ripen as that experience for yourself in the future. You just have to think: do I like being stolen from? Nope. What causes people to steal from me? I must have stolen from them. So if I've just stolen a pencil, then I'll get stolen from in the future. I don't want that. It's just logic; you've got to think it through, if you apply the law of karma, you know.

So you've got to be logical. Think it through. Make it real for you, not just some religious feeling. Not some weird, guilty feeling. That's useless. It's practical – I regret having done this because I don't want to be stolen from, I don't want suffering, I'm sick of it. Yet again I've shot my mouth off – shouted at people. I'm sick of this habit. First of all, too, you can even right now see the suffering and the hurt it causes you, the pain of that anger, you're feeling all caught up in it and fed up with it and you're so sick of it. You've got to feel that pain and be fed up with it. "I'm sick of this suffering, I'm sick of this boring habit."

And we're just talking here of the habits that we do that harm others; we're not looking at just our own problems yet. We're looking at the actions of our body and speech first – what we do to harm others first – killing, lying, stealing, bad-mouthing; there's only so many names for them. You regret them. Remember the things, your old habits in this life – you know, maybe you're addicted to sex and you harm people with your sexual attachment; but you look at the suffering you're causing yourself.

THE BUDDHA'S VIEW OF MORALITY

You see, this is a very interesting point, let's look at this a bit more – Buddha's view of what morality is. It's a really important point to think about. The usual view we have about morality, which is why we're like children and resisting it mightily, is because we think it comes from somebody on high forcing it upon us: either God or our mother or the judge or the police, you know. We think it's done to us.

It isn't like that, not for Buddha. I asked a Catholic priest, a friend of mine, "What defines something as a sin?" He said, "It's going against the will of God." That is what defines a sin: something you do that is against the will of God. Now, that's reasonable if God is the creator, and that's reasonable if you are a Christian. That's appropriate. That's correct.

But that's not the Buddhist definition of a negative action. Going against Buddha's views is not what defines something as negative. It's got nothing to do with Buddha! That's like saying, "Why is smoking bad? Oh, because my doctor told me not to." Your doctor's merely a messenger. The reason smoking's bad is because it'll hurt you, dear.

For Buddha, what defines killing as bad is really simple; it's because it harms another. Buddha says this is a conventional truth that you can prove quite quickly. You just do your market research in this world, in this room and you ask around, "Do you like getting killed, stolen from, lied to, kicked in the teeth?" Everybody will say no.

So we can deduce logically that a negative action is one that harms another, because you've just proven it by agreeing we don't like it. That's what makes it negative. It does not come from somebody on high, it's not set in stone; it is not, in other words, self-existent. It is a dependent arising. That's Buddha's view; it's a natural law. So, what a negative action is is one that harms another.

But in this very first stage of practice where you regret doing actions that harm others, the reason first – you have to hear this point – the reason here in "Regret" is not for the sake of others; it's for *your* sake, remember? So, a negative action is defined as an action that harms another; but at this first step, you regret it because your doing it programs your mind to keep doing it and to have it done to you, not to mention being born in the lower realms. So, you regret it because *you* don't want the suffering. This is a crucial point. We've got to understand this, not just be vague about it. "Oh I do my Vajrasattva practice, oh I regret lying, killing..." We don't even give it thought, you know, we just wishy-washy gloss over it.

So a negative action is defined as one that harms another, but at this first stage – and this is the very meaning of the first level of practice in Buddhism – in the first scope of practice, junior school, I like to call it – His Holiness uses this analogy as well: the way the teachings in the lam-rim are structured, it's like the education system. In Tibetan medieval language they call it the first scope of practice. So junior school level of practice is to control your body and your speech.

The reason you will regret killing and lying and stealing and bad-mouthing – and there's not that many actions you do with your body and speech that harm others, sexual misconduct, lying, killing, stealing, you know, shouting at people, harsh speech, talking behind backs; there's only so many. "You know what, I'm sick of this suffering, I'm sick of the pain it causes me right now and I do not want the karmic fruits of this in the future. No way! So I regret having killed, lied, stolen, etc. etc."

Then it makes it very real for you, because it's about yourself. Don't feel bad about this. Don't feel guilty, like I should just be having compassion for others. Compassion's university, people – that's the great scope! You've got to recognize your own suffering before you recognize the suffering of others. You've got to be sick of your own suffering – this is what renunciation *is* – you're sick of your own suffering. That's why you've got to contemplate what these ridiculous things that we do, do to *ourselves*. Don't gloss over this step, it's extremely important.

So, you regret the things you did today, yesterday, this life – the things you've done with your body and speech to harm others. "I regret anything I have ever done, since beginningless time to any sentient being."

And of course, for those of us with vows, deeply regret our broken vows: pratimoksha vows – vows of individual liberation, the vows you take for junior school and high school – if you've broken those, then you deeply regret having broken those. If you've taken bodhisattva vows, then you deeply regret having broken your bodhisattva vows. If you've taken tantric vows, you deeply regret having broken your tantric vows,

because these are lifelong vows. So you regret these, hugely, because you don't want the suffering that this can cause in the future: being separate from our lamas, the Dharma, the Buddha's teachings, not to mention other suffering.

And if Buddha is right in asserting, as he does, that we've had beginningless lives, that we've had countless lives as animals, and that mightn't be the most suffering life, but that's where we do the most harm; animals just in their nature harm and get harmed. Look at one whale; opens its mouth for one mouthful of one breakfast on one day and forty million creatures go in. And you get guilty because you killed one person. Get some perspective, please! That's a lot of sentient beings. So they live in a killing environment; they live on killing, animals do. So, the harm we've done to sentient beings as animals is inconceivable in comparison to what we've done as humans.

So if our minds are beginningless and we've had these lives, we've done countless things and that means those karmic seeds are on our minds now. So, you better regret them, because you know you don't want that suffering again! "I regret anything I've ever done to any sentient being since beginningless time." Regret the lot! Because I do not want suffering – we've got to add that thought. "Because I am sick of suffering. Because I do not want suffering." You've got to say that. That's what makes it real, and not just some nice religious feeling. Not just guilt.

That's regret, the first of the four opponent powers.

1. SECOND OPPONENT POWER: RELIANCE.

a. REFUGE

Now you think, "Well, good! Whom can I turn to? Where's the doctor, please?" So you turn to Mr. Buddha. He's our doctor. Second step: Reliance.

There are two parts in Reliance: the first is reliance upon the Buddha; that's called Refuge. So what does that mean? Let's look at this again, carefully. If I'm a Christian, I would rely upon God, because he's my creator. So how I get purified is by requesting

him to forgive me. Well, Buddha will forgive you; he's a nice guy, I promise. But it's got nothing to do with purification. Nothing. It's nice to be forgiven, but it's not the point. It is not the discussion. Quite different.

So we rely on Buddha because he's our doctor – he's got the methods; he's got the medicine. So, "Thank goodness I've got a decent doctor," you think. And you do a little prayer, you visualize Vajrasattva, the particular manifestation of Buddha that all the lamas praise as the best one for this practice.

In the bodhisattva path, the Buddha manifests as like, gorgeous, you know, jewelry on his arms and ears and throat, and silken clothing; they call it the royal aspect. This is coming from Tantra, where that's a whole different discussion and it has to do with enhancing the senses and energizing them. It's quite different, another level. So, Buddha in that aspect is called Vajradhara, or in Tibetan, Dorje Chang, who is blue; Vajrasattva is a white aspect of Vajradhara.

When I first became a Buddhist, I really like this name "Dorje Chang" and I asked Lama Yeshe, "Who's Dorje Chang?" and he said, very simply, "He's the biggest Buddha, dear." I was very proud to know I liked the biggest Buddha! So basically, that's the tantric aspect of Shakyamuni Buddha.

For this purification practice, we use another aspect of Vajradhara, who looks the same, but he's white: Vajrasattva. He's particularly to do with emptiness, because realizing emptiness is when you've finally cut the root of the delusions, and that's when we actually purify our minds. Until then, by doing this purification practice we are simply stalling the ripening, we're weakening the seeds, we're like burning them, we're not pulling them out completely. Until you've realized emptiness, you will never cut the delusions, you'll always have more suffering. We need to stop their ripening, though, and that's what the purification process does. So, one relies upon Vajrasattva.

So, one visualizes him above one's head, and then one takes refuge, says a prayer remembering the Buddha, grateful to have a Buddha, and then grateful – if one has a lama

– who manifests as the Buddha for our benefit, to show us the way. That's what refuge means. You rely upon the doctor.

Now, you've got to look at what it means, "rely upon the doctor." Why would you rely upon a doctor? Two reasons: one, because you do not want more sickness and you need their medicine; and two, because you are confident they're a good doctor. It seems kind of obvious; you don't go to a doctor because they've got a cute nose. So you rely upon their advice. It's perfectly reasonable.

Here, of course, this implies having thought about the Buddha, seeing that he's valid, and wanting to rely upon the Buddha because you want his medicine so that you can heal yourself.

In other words, if you've never thought about suffering, and you haven't regretted anything you've done wrong because you haven't thought about suffering and its consequences, then the Buddha will be pretty meaningless to you. If you haven't taken poison, or you don't realize you've taken poison, you might have heard about some amazing doctor who's got every antidote to every poison on earth, and you go, "Oh, how interesting. But how boring. Who needs him?" You don't care. But check how you feel when you've discovered you know you've taken poison; you're going to hang on every word that doctor says and take his advice perfectly.

b. COMPASSION

The second part of Reliance is where you have compassion for those you have harmed. It's a bit curious that it's called reliance. The lamas put it like this: here we are, now wanting to cultivate compassion for the suffering of others. Whom do we rely up, or need, in order to accomplish compassion? Suffering sentient beings, of course. If we never meet a suffering sentient being, how could we ever cultivate compassion. It's in this sense that they say we "rely upon" sentient beings.

In the first step, Regret, it's like having compassion for yourself. You're regretting the harm you've done for your sake. Now here, what you need to cultivate is

compassion for those you've harmed, and you regret for their sake and want to purify yourself for *their* sake. But you can't have that until you've got the first one. Compassion is based upon this first one, in Regret. You can't have compassion for the suffering of others until you've got this real sense of renunciation for your own suffering. It's impossible, you can't. You've got to have this one first.

Why? Very simple. Renunciation has two parts: The first one, the first part is, you are sick of suffering. Now, we all know that – we're all sick of suffering. But the second part's crucial: you now know *why* you're suffering – your past negativity and your delusions. When you've got these two, that's renunciation.

Compassion is these two as well, but instead of yourself, it's applied to others. One: you see people suffering, and you find it unbearable. But, two: you now know why they are suffering, and that's the big shift here. You now know why they are suffering: because of their karma and their delusions: They, like you, are the source of their own suffering. You don't have compassion because they're poor innocent victims, which is the only people we have compassion for now – we love to have compassion for innocent victims, usually animals and children.

Now you see others suffering and you know why they're suffering. It's a crucial difference and one has to cultivate it carefully. Again, it's completely based on the teachings of karma, so one has to think of this so carefully, analyze it so carefully. Because the feeling we have now is guilt and shame and hate and blame, you know.

Our compassion now on based upon there being no karma. We only have compassion for innocent victims, because we assume the cause of suffering is the horrible oppressor. Buddha says, "Wrong view." Actually, when you've got this view of compassion, you'll have even more compassion for the oppressor. That's a fact. Why? Very logical. It's like a mother for her junkie kid. Everybody else hates him – he lies, he steals, he's a pain to be around; but the mother, her

heart breaks for him. Why? Because he is causing himself suffering. That's the basis of compassion.

You see people who are the victims of harma, you realize it's the result of their own past actions and your heart breaks for them, but you have even more compassion for the people who caused it, because the people who are the victims are just finishing their suffering and the ones who caused it are just beginning their suffering.

Once you've got this first for yourself, which is renunciation: I'm sick of suffering, I know why I'm suffering: karma; then it's easy then to have compassion for others. You can't get it properly until you've got it for yourself. This is a reasonable psychological kind of progression, and all of it's based on karma.

Now, in this second part of the second step, Reliance, you think about compassion now. You think of those you've harmed, and you know what it's like to suffer so you know what it's like for their suffering. You regret for their sake, now. Compassion for others.

And if you're brave enough, you can have compassion for those who have harmed you, because they're going to suffer in the future. And of course, the dynamic of all this is you know you caused them suffering in the past, that's how come they're causing you suffering now. When you've got karma down, you can own it so strongly.

WITH THE VIEW OF KARMA, NO BLAME, THEREFORE NO ANGER

In 2003 I remember, in New York, I was there for a conference that Richard Gere had organized: a bunch of ex-prisoners, when His Holiness was there. Twenty ex-prisoners who had been meditating in prison, twenty of them: black and white, male and female, Puerto Rican, Mexican: a cross-section of American society. So people like me were invited as well. We had this very nice talk all day, just a lovely conference, you know? And they all met His Holiness.

He also invited two young Tibetan nuns who'd been tortured and sexually abused in prison for a couple of years, basically for just

being nuns. So they were telling their experience. And there were tears, of course. First of all, if you could quantify suffering, then it was obvious to all the Americans that the suffering of the nuns was more than all of theirs put together. But second, it was really clear they weren't angry, which is a big surprise to us. Because we have a victim mentality, and because we think we're innocent victims, and we think suffering is caused by others, we assume anger is normal; because anger is blame, isn't it? Anger is the response of the innocent victim.

But if you have the view of karma, you don't have blame. They were sad, but they weren't angry. And at the end of their talk, they said very quietly, "And of course, we had compassion for our torturers, because we knew we had harmed them in the past."

This is a huge point. This is why we can't just gloss over karma, we've got to really give it thought. And this is the basis of all of Buddha's teachings. It is a way of spelling out the law of cause and effect. Really think it through – it's the basis of all practice, it's the basis of compassion.

3. THIRD OPPONENT POWER: THE REMEDY

So now, the third step. Now you take the medicine. You apply the antidote. You take the Remedy. You can say in Buddhism there's a whole medicine cabinet of remedies, but all the lamas in the Tibetan traditions praise this particular meditation, this particular visualization, this particular mantra as a really potent medicine. Often this step is simply called "applying the antidote."

So, you know, anything here would apply. If you've got a habit to kill, you make a point of saving lives. You go get a bunch of worms and instead of having them killed being bait, you release the worms. It's a powerful thing to do. Or one of your practices could be, one of your antidotes could be to help sick people: anything you do that's opposite to the thing you're regretting. If you're regretting lying, you make a special point of telling the truth. You must do this anyway in your life. They are necessary.

But here, in this step, the very powerful practice, very powerful antidote, remedy – and one has to think about why it's powerful, not just because it's religion, you know – this very potent medicine of visualizing Vajrasattva and saying his mantra. This is said to be a very powerful medicine that works at a very deep level of your mind. So, one does this visualization of Vajrasattva purifying the various actions of your body, speech and mind and reciting the mantra. That's the third step.

4. FOURTH OPPONENT POWER: RESOLVE

And the fourth one – as Pabongka Rinpoche says – is the most important, this Resolve, or the determination to change. If you can't own responsibility for what you've done wrong, you can never make the decision to change, can you, because you don't want to own it. When you've got regret and then the determination to change, you're really becoming accountable. You're really growing up. You're becoming mature. And you're becoming your own friend. That's why this practice is so crucial to do. Not just to gloss it over, say, "Oh I've done my Vajrasattva mantras..." That's not enough, I tell you. That's just not enough. You've got to think through these four steps. It's psychologically really profound. It's being your own therapist, as Lama Yeshe puts it, I'm not kidding.

Things really shift if we can do this properly, because this is where we get the courage to know we are in charge of our life and we *can* change. Because it's the power of our own will, our own determination to change.

So this fourth step, again, is so practical: you make determination not to do again. So, if you have taken vows – I will never kill, I will never lie, I will never steal – you've taken those five lay vows, and they're lifetime vows, so obviously you need to reiterate that vow. Every time you say "I will never kill," it's like digging that groove deeper in your mind. It's not enough to say, "Oh, yeah, I took vows twenty years ago. Twenty years ago I vowed I wouldn't kill,"

but you've never thought of it since. It's like saying, "Oh, I'm a pianist, I played piano twenty years ago." You're not, unless you do it every day. We see these things as so self-existent. It's not enough. It's an ongoing, dynamic daily thing.

If every day you say, "I will never kill," I mean, excuse me, guess what the result will be? It's hardly rocket science. If every day you say it, that protects you every day from ever killing. It's obvious. It's so embarrassingly obvious. But we forget these things. So you need to reiterate your vows. I will never kill. I will never steal. I will never lie. I will never whatever they are. I will never break my bodhisattva vows. I will never break my tantric vows. You need to say this every day. Reiterate your commitments.

And it's not just because you're hoping God will make you good or Buddha will bless you; it's you training your mind. Like if you do pushups every day, guess what? You keep getting better at it. We understand it when it comes to creativity and art and learning things, but we think this is "religion" so we don't understand why I should say every day I'll never kill. Because you're training your mind in that direction. Because everything comes down to the thought. All you're doing by becoming a Buddha is programming your mind with positive thoughts. It's nothing more secret than that.

And so this is why they say a vow is your mind intentionally deciding daily, "I will do this or I won't do that." In other words, you're practicing *that* by thinking it, like practicing piano every day, by practicing pushups every day. It's obvious; you keep getting better at it. It's practical psychology.

Then, of course, you don't lie to yourself, as Rinpoche says. If you're not ready to say I'll never do it again, if you haven't taken the vow, and you're still going fishing every day or going hunting, then don't lie to yourself and say "I'll never do it again"; you're not ready. Be realistic.

Look at our old habits, like getting angry. So maybe you'll say, "Okay. I see the reasonableness of not getting angry. I'm going to give it a go. I won't get angry for

five hours." Or you might say, "I won't lie for ten hours," – and because you've got to go to bed soon, when you're asleep, you won't lie, believe me; you'll keep your vow!

Be realistic; it's an incremental thing, and you've got to take this seriously on board. That's why you can't just do your mantras and think, "I've done my practice." It's not enough. It's a serious psychological procedure that you're involved in. Practice is real; it's you dealing with your own mind.

So, you know, you give yourself a timeline. And when it comes of course to your delusions, your neurotic thoughts, the things that harm you only – and I didn't mention this in Regret – but of course you can think of your own rubbish: your own angry thoughts, your depression, your jealousy, which are destroying you. You can deeply regret these because it's obvious the suffering it causes you; because you're sick of the suffering.

Now here in this fourth step, you maybe can't say, "I'll never be depressed again"; it's not possible, if you're caught up in the middle of it. But you make some decisions for yourself; realistic, humble decisions. "Okay. I'm going to watch my mind like a hawk. I'm going to do my best tomorrow."