

Twenty Subtle Causes of Suffering

A Series of Twenty Teachings

**How to Work with the
Twenty Subtle Causes of Suffering: Part 4**

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How to Work with the Twenty Subtle Causes of Suffering

As a meditator, it is very important to give yourself the time and opportunity to see yourself ceaselessly engaging in the creation of karma.

13. Dullness

Dullness, or *rmugs pa*, is just the dullness of a mind that doesn't awaken itself to its own potential.

In awakening to your own potential, at best you are aware of your Buddha nature, or primordially enlightened mind. Second best is if you can awaken yourself to your capacity for genuine compassion. And at very least, you awaken the common sense of a discerning mind, with the mindfulness that can discern between what to abandon and what to cultivate. A meditator who is not aware of these three things is succumbing to the affliction of mental dullness.

Dullness is when we do the same thing day after day, the “daily grind,” so to speak. Somewhat like robots, we just do what we do and react as we habitually do, without putting much thought into it. Instead of awakening to its brilliant potential, the mind is in a foggy stupor set on autopilot.

Practice Instruction

Dullness is very blunt. Watch out for that bluntness; it doesn't have the penetrating wisdom to bring about the transformation of your attitude and conduct. With dullness, we succumb to procrastination, laziness and excuses. We let the busyness of our lives take over and cloud our awareness. It is important to practice vigilance and constantly rely on mindfulness and awareness.

Watch your mind at all times like the best and most alert bodyguard ever!

14. Excitement

What do you mean by “inspiration to practice”? One day you are going to die, and right now you are creating tremendous karma.

What could be more exciting or inspiring than being able to work on the path of transformation?

The Tibetan term *rgöd pa* is often translated into English as “excitement,” or the addiction or distraction caused by excitement. The addiction to excitement is something for meditators to watch out for. If you do notice this in yourself, you will also find that the one thing you always talk about is how to find inspiration to practice.

Now, what do you mean by “inspiration to practice”? One day you are going to die, and right now you are creating tremendous karma. What could be more exciting or inspiring than working on the path of transformation? But dullness of mind immediately gives you the sense that this inspiration isn’t sufficient. You begin to think that inspiration depends on other things—and like modern fashion designers, you must constantly *find* inspiration to create something new. It is amazing what the human mind can do with one garment, a skirt for example. Each year, for hundreds of years, it comes up with new and different skirts. The colors may stay the same, but somehow there is always something new to buy.

New York is a good place for that. When we drive by the shops and I see all the clothes displayed on manikins, I’m always amazed at the ingeniousness of the human mind that comes up with all those styles: some looking lopsided, or torn and stitched up, or very plain, or quite unusual. What genius mind can constantly create something new—and tempt others to think, “That’s what I don’t have, that’s what I must get”? The mind comes up with many kinds of deception in the same way.

This metaphor is leading to the fact that our minds are unable to find inspiration in the truth as it is: the truth staring right out from within us. Because we are so dependent on other things, new practices become exciting, new male and female teachers become exciting. I am always amused when people say, “Oh, the female Rinpoche is here.” Is that supposed to make any difference? Maybe so—but it is short-lived. Remember that. The excitement of hearing the same teachings from a female teacher whom you’ve not heard before lasts, at most, fifteen minutes.

Teachers, teachings, and your karmic connections are all very important. But when you rely on external experiences and charisma to generate excitement, you are like the fashion designers who have to come up with exciting new styles for the catwalk each year. Maybe you could have a catwalk for teachers and their exciting new methods each year, to pep up your mind and motivation.

It is very important to become free of the addiction to external factors to inspire your mind. Where such an addiction is strong, you are sustaining the dullness of your own wisdom mind, which is unable to see clearly the truth of impermanence and karma. Your true inspiration should be your creation of karma and causes that affect the lives of others. This is what should wake you up from the state of dullness that refuses to change. This is what should inspire you to transform the mind by abandoning negative causes, conditions, and afflictions—and generating awareness and watchfulness.

Practice Instruction

To become free of addiction to the excitement of external factors, stare into your own mind for inspiration. Find your inspiration in the truth of change, transformation, impermanence, and the truth of karma. Know that chasing after excitement is like drinking salt water to quench your thirst.

15. Having No Faith

The fifteenth affliction, *ma dad pa*, refers to “not having devotion, faith, or trust.” What that means is not having faith or trust in karma. It is not about devotion to teachers, teachings, or practices; it is about not trusting the truth of cause and effect. To really bring about change and transform your attitude and conduct, it is important to see the power and truth of karma.

Karma is the cause-and-effect continuum of impulses that constantly propels us into habitual actions—the force of which is so strong, it almost completely subjugates basic mindfulness and awareness. It is the sense of being driven or forced into some action, some thought, or some sort of speech, with no ability to rest a bit or discern what to cultivate and what to abandon. It is a state of non-freedom propelled by the force, or wind, of karma.

Propelled by the force of karma, our actions are ceaselessly re-created, becoming seeds, or causes, that determine our own and others’ experiences.

As a meditator, it is very important to give yourself the time and opportunity to see yourself ceaselessly engaging in the creation of karma. As the great teachers have said, even the blinking of your eyes has the power to create an environment or experience for yourself and others. This is the power and immediacy of the ceaseless causes and conditions we create.

Where this is not understood, we think of karma as all of our *big* thoughts and actions. And, yes, those are karma. Such gross karma is easy to identify. But then there is the subtle karma. Whether anyone is aware of it or not, subtle karma is the mental continuum you create with each of your thoughts, each one of which has the power to become an immediate cause of some experience for yourself or others. This cause then settles into a residue that determines the kind of personality you build up. And this is the personality that will relate to the external world and determine your life.

The projections of karma have an immediate effect, which instigate further production of karmas. A meditator must observe all the ways all these causes are produced—and the havoc they create when they’re let loose in the world. It’s like a mad elephant let loose in a crowd. Looking at the rapidly produced karma you constantly create, how different are you from a mad elephant let loose in society?

What we are, who we are, what we experience, what our life has become and will become all depend upon karma—and your own karma is within your own reach.

It is essential to understand that, yes, karma is powerful and, yes, you need to correct your attitude and conduct. That potent recollection will allow you to see wisdom of transforming disturbing emotions into a positive attitude.

When negative afflictions are retained, the force of karma creates the momentum of the many causes of the field of our experience, which we call “the world.” Without trust in cause

and effect, we dismantle whatever good qualities are there. And whatever goodness we try to build up finds no reason to actualize on the path of transformation.

Practice Instruction

Trust in cause and effect is most important. Seeing that the world you create depends on causes ceaselessly generated within you, ask yourself: Who but my own self should begin the path of transforming negative attitudes and conduct into positive attitudes and conduct?

For that, the sixteenth affliction, laziness, must also be eliminated.

16. Laziness

Nothing is easy. I am sure none of you thinks you can easily or lazily become enlightened—although you may hope for an exception to be made in your case. But *everything* is difficult: putting food on your plate is difficult. Who would know this better than all of you? So, of course practice is difficult. We are talking here about lifetimes and lifetimes of habitual patterns that need to be eliminated from a mind that is so used to them, so familiar with them, they're the best friends we have. We may not like them, but these are the friends we know and come back to.

Laziness, or *le lo* in Tibetan, is the comfort of going back to rude behavior. It is the comfort of knowing how you feel when you are angry. You may not like it, but it is so familiar—and that familiarity makes it difficult to exert any genuine effort to defeat lazy tendencies.

If you ever thought this would be easy, there is no good news here at all. It is going to be difficult. This is why you are known as the future bodhisattvas and buddhas.

Practice Instruction

Practice is difficult, but what is not difficult in this world? Since everything is difficult, why not exert effort in the difficult thing that produces the greatest benefit for yourself and others? To do this, you need to eliminate laziness.

17. Carelessness as Heedlessness

The seventeenth affliction is *bag med pa*, or carelessness. It is very difficult to engage in the path of transformation wherever and whenever there is carelessness. Moreover, you cannot be careless if you are fond of compassion and wish to generate compassion. You cannot be careless if you wish to practice genuinely resting your mind in its absolute true nature. And you cannot be careless if you are devoted to the teachings and the teacher.

Carelessness happens when you cannot be bothered to take time out from self-absorption, to become aware of what really needs to be done. It happens when your wisdom mind takes a backseat and apathy takes hold. Carelessness is about not analyzing or looking too closely, because you do not really care. It is so easy to be indifferent, or to carelessly acknowledge something and move on to the next thing.

Strengthening mindfulness and awareness eliminates carelessness.

Practice Instruction

In order to subjugate a careless attitude, it is essential to strengthen mindfulness and awareness. Developing clarity and vigilance frees the mind from carelessness and indifference.

18. Forgetfulness

It is just as important to eliminate the eighteenth affliction, forgetfulness, or *brjed ngas pa* in Tibetan. Once you receive any teachings, they must be carved in your mind. It is all very good to tape the teachings, write them down, and make any other effort to recollect them. But maintaining more mindfulness of the teachings—especially when you need them most—is essential. When you are angry, you must not forget patience. When your mind becomes tight, you must not forget generosity. And when you really want to be lazy, you must not forget to generate awareness and stronger mindfulness.

Practice Instruction

Forgetfulness is what the ego-based mind usually relies on to make you pretend to be someone who has never heard a word of the teachings. Everything I've said here is something you already knew. So don't pretend you are hearing this for the first time.

The best antidote for forgetfulness is to keep practicing and applying the teachings at every opportunity. It is like anything that we don't use or do regularly: we forget how to use it or do it. In order to do something properly and eventually master it, we have to keep doing it. This is especially true of virtue. To break free of habitual patterns takes a great deal of practice—regular practice.

Furthermore, do not pretend to forget the teachings when engaged in actions.

19. Distraction

In order for the above-mentioned afflictions of forgetfulness, carelessness, and laziness to not become strong, you must be sure to abandon *rnam g-yeng* (pronounced *namyeng*), or distraction.

Genuine awareness is an intrinsic quality. It is inherent within us—and what could be closer than that? On the other hand, the distractions provided by the senses, the distractions of “outwardness,” can create a sense of not being able to touch in with basic mindfulness and awareness. Therefore, be humble in knowing that outer distractions can create a momentum that will not allow you work with the positive qualities you need to strengthen at this time.

This is where you begin to engage more realistically with your practices.

Practice Instruction

Although the basic quality of wisdom is inherent, it is still very weak because distractions and the attraction to distractions are very strong. To overcome distraction, strengthen diligence in samadhi, or meditation. Give yourself the opportunity to really engage in shamatha-vipashyana meditation. Then you will be able to uproot the twentieth affliction as well: weakened prajna.

20. Weakened Prajna as Unalertness

Weakened prajna, or discernment, is *shes bzhin ma yin pa* in Tibetan. When the wisdom that can discern what to abandon and what to cultivate is weak, then everything we have said about transforming emotions will be futile. It will be useless. But when the alertness of prajna is strong, it will immediately weaken distractions and allow the quality of inherent wisdom to become strong.

Practice Instruction

Prajna, the wisdom of discernment, is essential to transforming emotions. It must be honed and sharpened with constant practice, and with the fearlessness of looking at your own actions and intentions in a vigilant and unbiased manner. So, apply all that you have learned and studied to your daily conduct—with compassion towards every single being and every aspect of your life.

From here on, you can go one of two directions. You can take the Mahayana approach of looking at the root cause. Or, you can take the approach of a very beneficial practice from the teachings of the mahasiddhas: you can look at the nature of emotions and self-liberate them.



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Ver. 1.1 2015-5-7