

The Roots (1 of 5) The Roots of Behavior

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For this week, the theme of these morning talks is going to be the three unwholesome roots and the three wholesome roots. In that sense, it continues last week's topic where I looked at early Buddhist ethics from the point of view of the Buddha.

First, for those of you who are new, I'll say that one of the closest approximations in the teachings of the Buddha

to the English word “ethics” is the word that's translated as either “wholesome” or “skillful.”

If those are the words that are closest to our English word “ethics,” maybe this suggests that we're talking about something somewhat different than what we often think of as the English word “ethics.” It is still concerned with the same domain of human life – how we relate to each other and behave in relationship to each other. But it has a different orientation than “ethics,” which can have a sense of burden, obligation, and the authority of absolute commandments. Doing what is skillful and wholesome has a very different feeling.

The Buddha taught that there are three roots for all unwholesome, unskillful behavior. In English, we might say, “all unethical behavior.” Those three roots are greed, hatred, and delusion. It is a phenomenal teaching – that everything unethical has these roots. All wholesome things have as their roots non-greed, non-hate, and non-delusion, which I'll talk about more later.

These three roots for the unwholesome are sometimes called “the three fires.” What's interesting about a fire is that it burns the fuel that it depends on. In the same way, these three unwholesome, unskillful tendencies that humans have (greed, hate, and delusion) are like a

fire that hurts us and burns up or exhausts the source they're depending on – us.

The Buddha said that these forces are self-harming forces within us. He put a lot of emphasis on seeing and understanding greed, hate, and delusion, and becoming free of them. In fact, one of the most common ways that the Buddha talks about awakening is as the destruction of greed, hate, and delusion. It is very easy to gloss over or ignore the importance of these forces when Buddhist teachers keep saying “greed, hate, and delusion,” because the theme is so repetitive and we get habituated to it – and here we go again. But the repetition of this emphasis points to how important they are.

It's kind of like when you go to architecture school and the teachers keep talking about how important the foundation of a building is. After a while we say, "Oh, they keep talking about foundations, foundations." So we ignore the foundation, and then we don't learn about what we need to keep the building safe and upright. These three things are a foundation for us to look at.

To give you a sense of how important the three fires are in the early Buddhist tradition and the fascinating ways in which it's referred to: a person came to Ananda, one of the Buddha's main disciples who was with him for many years and really knew all his teachings well. The

person belonged to a different religion. They asked Ananda, "Whose dhamma is well-proclaimed? Whose teaching is well-proclaimed? Who in this world are the ones practicing the good way? Who in the world are the fortunate ones?"

I guess this was kind of a test. There were lots of different local religions in the time of the Buddha, and he wanted to know who had the best religion, the best teachings, who was practicing and living the best way, and who were the fortunate ones.

In the Buddha's answer, he makes no explicit reference to Buddhism and does not try to champion Buddhism. He doesn't say, "Well, we have it here in our dispensation, in our religion. We have the best teachings; our people are practicing the right way; we have the people who are fortunate enough to attain the goal of the practice."

Instead, he says, "The teaching of those who teach abandoning greed, hatred, and delusion is well-proclaimed."

The reference point for the teachings that are well-proclaimed is not so-called religious teachings. The reference point is in ourselves, in terms of greed, hate, and delusion, something human beings have. So the teaching of those who teach abandoning greed, hate, and delusion is well-proclaimed. Those practicing for the

abandonment of greed, hate, and delusion are practicing the good way. Those who have abandoned and obliterated greed, hate, and delusion are the fortunate ones.

In these answers, there's no metaphysical, supernatural, philosophical, or existential claim about the Buddhist religion or what's important. They make no claim about what is ultimate truth, something that religions often do.

For many people, the answer that Ananda gave might not be particularly controversial – the value of not having greed, hate, and delusion seems good to many people.

I would like to say that Ananda is pointing to basic concerns of mental health, well-being, and inner goodness.

Even if there is an ultimate truth that's different than the ending of greed, hate, and delusion, and even though there might be some religious experience that's greater and more wonderful than the destruction of greed, hate, and delusion, the destruction of greed, hate, and delusion is valuable and should still be appreciated.

What good is an ultimate religious experience or ultimate truth if a person is still filled with greed, hate, and delusion? From the Buddhist point of view, first become free of greed, hate, and delusion. Then maybe

we won't have to talk about ultimate truth so much. Maybe we won't get caught up in religious truth so much.

Being free of greed, hate, and delusion is a synonym for the Buddhist idea that the goal of practice is to end suffering. But the common Buddhist teaching of the cessation of suffering has no obvious ethical quality in it. In fact, it could lend itself to the idea that one should just go someplace and meditate in a cave, become free of suffering, and forget about the world.

But the ending of greed, hate, and delusion clearly has very much to do with our relationship with the world. We have greed about things in the world. We have hatred towards things. We often have greed and hatred towards people and delusions about people. So when the Buddha emphasized over and over again the destruction of greed, hate, and delusion, it was not just that this was the well-proclaimed teaching, or that this was a good idea. It was really about how we can live in the world in a better way. In English, we would say it's an ethical teaching. This is not the ethics of rules, but the ethics of a personal transformation where we're no longer being driven by greed, hatred, and delusion.

These three terms – greed, hatred, and delusion – can be seen as umbrella terms for a wide array of emotions, like three families of different motivations we can have.

I'll read you a small list of these emotions that the Buddhist tradition gives in some of the commentaries. Greed includes things like lust, longing, attachment, clinging, craving, relishing, being avaricious, and expectation – a whole long list. You can probably come up with a much longer list if you take greed to mean not just intense greed, because it's a strong word, but even the smallest little movements of greed.

I'm running out of time, so I won't read the other ones today. But I want to say that one way greed is characterized is as any place that is sticky. We get sticky with desire. We get caught in it. It's sticky like the sap of a tree. When we put our hand on it, it's really sticky. That is the metaphor that's used. Based on what I said in the meditation today, greed always diminishes us. Greed always narrows us or harms us. It burns us – even the smallest little form of excessive desire, contracted desire, or sticky desire.

To be mindful enough and clear enough to notice and see that stickiness, and to see how greed diminishes us is a fascinating reference point. That is an exploration. So you might want to look at that throughout the day. Don't make up desires, clinging, cravings, or greed for the purpose of this exercise. But as you go through your day, if it just happens that maybe accidentally you have some greed, stop and take a good look at it. See if you can see that the presence of greed is a kind of suffering.

The presence of greed is a kind of diminishment of who we are.

Then look at what is the opposite of greed. What is happiness? What enhances us, and makes us more expansive? I hope that this week is wonderful for you. I hope your study of greed will help support you to understand and value non-greed when I talk about it. Thank you.