

The Roots (5 of 5) Delusion

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Greetings. We have come to the fifth and last talk on the roots of the wholesome and unwholesome, the skillful and unskillful. It is time to talk about the last of the roots – delusion and non-delusion.

Sometimes it's said that this is the fundamental root because without delusion, there would not be greed or hatred.

Without non-delusion, there would not be non-hatred and non-greed. Sometimes delusion is considered to be the most difficult root to understand. The logic of this is that if you're deluded, how can you see the delusion?

But it is possible to see delusion. This has a lot to do with the strength of mindfulness. It might also have to do with the choice to translate the Pali word "*moha*" as delusion. Some people translate it as "ignorance." Some people translate it as "bewilderment," and sometimes we see the word "confusion." In the ancient texts, all those words are used as synonyms or explanations for what *moha* is. The idea is that sometimes it means confusion, sometimes it means just ignorance, but it's considered to be unwholesome and unskillful. I've been translating the word "*kusala*" as "ethical," so "unethical" is an implied meaning for *moha*.

What is very interesting is that the three roots of unskillful behavior are like impersonal forces within us. We don't have to take them personally, in the sense of defining ourselves by them. When human beings are born, grow up, and live without any kind of practice, self-reflection, or self-awareness, these forces operate within us, to greater degrees in some people than in others.

The conditions of our life and our society, all kinds of things, affect whether wholesome or unwholesome roots

predominate. As we go deeper and deeper into mindfulness practice, we are less inclined to see these roots as something to define ourselves by or identify with. We see them simply as forces within the mind that arise and exist.

Our role is not to judge ourselves for them or be angry with ourselves, but rather, to choose how we relate to them.

Sometimes all we have to do is choose not to pick up the unwholesome things. We can see the forces of greed, hate, and delusion arise in the mind, and we say, “No, thank you. I don't have to go there.” Sometimes we develop healthy, wholesome conditions. Part of the function of developing wholesome, skillful qualities is to create a whole inner landscape, an environment where the species that tend to grow are all wholesome as well. We change the ecosystem of our inner landscape so that greed, hate, and delusion don't have a chance to grow or predominate. Then eventually, we can uproot them. But it helps if we don't take them too personally. Greed, hate, and delusion are impersonal. We see them that way.

The idea is that delusion is also the root of unskillful behavior, and delusion itself is unwholesome and unskillful.

Sometimes delusion is ignorance. What is ignorant about delusion is that delusion is confusion about what

brings happiness. Whenever there's greed and hate, this can be seen as a misunderstanding – a misdirected way of bringing welfare and happiness to ourselves. The delusion is that somehow being greedy, having, and wanting is somehow going to make us happy.

Certainly, greed can bring us pleasure. It can bring us a certain kind of delight, but it doesn't really bring lasting happiness – the deep wellsprings of happiness that the Dharma looks for. An image representing this deep wellspring of happiness is that of a clear mountain lake that has a spring, a fountain of water from the bottom of the lake that flows up into the lake and out in all directions through the lake, refreshing the lake equally everywhere.

This deep wellspring of happiness that arises from within is not dependent on what we get from the world, how much we're praised, or the relationships we have. Rather, we learn to settle and discover the wellsprings within.

The delusion is that other things are going to do it for us – if I just have a better job, more money, better recreational opportunities, better relationships, better this or that; if I just have more power and can dominate more people; or if I can just express my anger more, get my way more, and feel like I'm an important person. All these kinds of things are attempts to try to be happy.

But they are all unskillful and unwholesome. They are a kind of delusion.

Being ignorant about what really brings happiness has a lot to do with the third root. Sometimes we're ignoring the fact that things are not going to provide us what we're hoping for. Sometimes we don't see the dissatisfaction or the unsatisfactory nature of some things, so we get confused about where happiness is. Sometimes we are looking for our well-being in the wrong direction.

If we're looking for the surge of good feelings that comes with being praised, I don't know if that's necessarily a good place to rely on for happiness. Sometimes praise is nice, and we can feel delight and joy if that's appropriate, but to depend on praise for our happiness and to keep searching for more of it is a kind of delusion.

The other kind of delusion that the Buddhist tradition emphasizes a lot are all the kinds of delusion, confusion, or bewilderment arising from the projection onto experience that there is a self there. Without going into the philosophy of self, we do a tremendous amount of projecting. We have ideas about who we're supposed to be, the shoulds – the interpretations about who we should and shouldn't be.

Maybe more painfully, we have projections about the self out there, and others' selves. Delusion also has to do with prejudice and bias that we have, as well as infatuation with other people and judgments of others. In these judgments, biases, and infatuations with people, we solidify who they are as a self and project our views and our ideas on them. This is also delusion and also creates bewilderment.

We also do this toward ourselves. And this can be seen. This is part of what mindfulness can help to do if mindfulness is strong and you're living a life that is unhurried. Doing things fast is not necessarily the same thing as being hurried. In my vocabulary, you can stay very present while doing things fast. But "hurrying" means you're kind of ahead of yourself – you're thinking about the future. You're not really here for this experience because you're going into the next thing. When we're hurried, there's very little mindfulness.

But if we can be unhurried and aware, it's possible to watch thoughts, interpretations, and judgments arise in the mind. That is when you have a chance to really pop the bubble of delusion. We can see something arise, and we see that the mind has an interpretation, an idea, a thought, a reaction, or a judgment. Because we see it so clearly as a thought, then we can question it.

But if we're hurrying or caught up, or the mind is just filled with prejudice, for example, and we have no awareness of it, then this fills all the space and becomes our reality. This becomes what's true. We see through this lens. When we can be mindful, we can watch those thoughts arise. Then we can question them – is that really true? We can give them a second look. Is that idea really true? Is that person really that way? Am I really that way? Maybe there's another way of seeing it, or maybe it's partial, or maybe it's not really accurate.

The delusion around self has a lot to do with the delusion of the projections onto us of all these ideas of self. They can be quite debilitating. If awareness is the medicine for healing, many of the ways we hold on to projections of self or self and others are the illnesses that we're trying to heal.

One of the other delusions that tradition emphasizes a lot is that of permanence. The idea that anything is fixed in any way for more than a short time tends to trip us up. It tends to create an unhealthy relationship that sooner or later is going to cause suffering. But if we can really understand and see how much of life is a river, a stream, and a flow, we can see more accurately and we're more fluid. We are not projecting permanence on experience and trying to hold it a certain way while it's actually changing.

Also, we are actually allowing the healing forces of our own psychophysical body to flow, because the healing force of our own body is flowing. It is like a current of change within us. As soon as we freeze up, hold tight, or seize up, that healing flow or current begins to be unavailable to us.

Delusion, like an illness, gets in the way of the momentum of the natural healing and liberating processes that exist inside of us. Freeing ourselves from the illusion of these projections of self, permanence, and inappropriate ideas of what will bring happiness, is to allow the self-liberating, natural liberating forces inside of us to unfold, open, and flow.

Our heart does not want to be caught in greed, hate, and delusion. If we allow the flow of the healing, liberating forces within, then our hearts will sing. Our hearts will feel happy. The deep wellspring of care, love, and happiness that awaits us will be available to the world as well.

All of you have tremendous goodness – if you don't know it yet, it's there. I hope that what's really good in you is allowed to come forth and you can share it with the world so that this practice we do is really understood as

a direct way of bringing benefit to the whole world. May all beings be free of greed, hatred, and delusion. Thank you. I'm happy to stay here for a while and try to answer some questions in the chat box.

Q1: Please compare the concepts of non-hatred, *metta*, and the Christian concept of loving one's neighbor as oneself.

Answer: The concept of loving one's neighbor as oneself: the Buddha talked about using yourself not to love others as yourself, but to care for others as you would want others to care for you. Just as you wouldn't want someone else to harm you, they don't want anyone to harm them, so please don't harm them. We use ourselves as a reference.

In the Buddhist tradition, the assumption is sometimes that it's a natural thing to love oneself, but I think in the modern world this can be quite difficult for some people. But the idea is that if you love yourself, then you can understand better how to love others. We start here and discover what is here. We discover the love and goodness here first. Then it can grow and go out into the world in an effective way.

The Christian concept of “loving one's neighbor as thyself” is a beautiful concept. What Buddhism has to

offer is how to love yourself, and how to let that wellspring exist so you have a reference point for loving your neighbor better.

Q2: Recommendations for meditating while your body is shaking.

Answer: Yeah. There are many reasons why the body can move or shake while we meditate, so it's a little bit hard to give just one answer. Sometimes if it's a real issue, it's better to talk with a meditation teacher a little bit to explore what's going on.

But generally, unless the shaking is really violent or strong, as long as it's not going to hurt you, the general idea is that it's okay – something is working itself out, and don't be too worried about it. The advantage of not being troubled by it is that you can bring attention to it, allow it to be free, and you feel it and get to know it. Then sometimes you can start to find your way to the source of it. You find the beginning point where the shaking seems to come from, like the little spring at the bottom of a lake, from which flows the current. If you can feel that source place, you might be able to stay there and see if something needs to be settled there.

Or sometimes if you just allow the shaking to be there and pay attention to it, really feel it and make space for it, opening the body to feel it more, sometimes that

releases some place where the body is being held, where the energy is bottled up. Then it can finally relax and let go.

Sometimes shaking is comforting ourselves and we need that comforting, maybe swaying or something. Occasionally it's useful to experiment with holding the body still and then really feeling what's going on that's motivating the shaking. Allowing that can really be revealing. There's more I can say, so I feel this is quite inadequate but it's certainly something to be mindful of, learn from, and experiment with different things to see what's useful.

Q3: I've been using the “*Buddho*” mantra as thought by Ajahn Chah in meditation. “Budd-” with inhale, then “Do” with exhale. Seems to really help with concentration insight. What are your thoughts about this?

Answer: Generally in *Vipassanā* practice – if what you want to do is mindfulness practice – we don't use any kind of mantra, because the idea is to see clearly what's here without filters and without the support of any other means. So that's the general principle.

However, sometimes it's very helpful to use a phrase like “*Buddho*” or counting the breath, for example. When

the mind is really out of control and it's very hard to be present and mindful, then you want some medicine. You want something that settles the mind. Something like *Buddho* can really help to settle the mind. So, yeah, if it's helpful. Remember, “skillful” means is it helpful, or not helpful? If this is helpful, then do it as long as it's helpful.

If you do it for a long time, then at some point when you're really settled and calm, you might experiment with not doing it and see (if you want to do mindfulness) whether practicing mindfulness alone has its own benefits.

Q4: Is a healing touch like a caring touch? “Healing” conjures up wounds, and not all that arises feels like a hurt.

Answer: Sure, I like that. I hadn't thought about healing as conjuring up wounds. But maybe so. I was just thinking of any kind of medicine that heals – more broadly, healing any kind of hurt, any way that we injure ourselves. Sometimes we hurt ourselves. Some of the deepest injuries and wounds that we have are in our hearts. So maybe then healing works well.

Q5: How do I resist righteous anger when I feel I've been wronged by the delusion or ignorance of another?

Answer: Yes, righteous anger. Well, I don't feel like I'm the best person to answer that question, because righteous anger has a long history in Western thought and Western religions. It probably has very specific meanings that I don't understand. For me, growing up in the '60s, the word “righteous” has kind of negative connotations – somehow judgmental, domineering, and forceful.

But I've seen some people translate *dhammatā* as righteousness. Maybe there are positive associations with the word “righteousness” as well. It has to do with what's true, or what's appropriate, or what's right. Within the range of what anger can be, from the wholesome to the unwholesome, the issue is whether we have the ability to feel the costs or the benefits of what's going on inside of us in the different forms of anger.

If it's unwholesome righteous anger, then I think we will feel self-harm in it. If there is such a thing as wholesome righteous anger, then probably we won't feel the same way. Usually, anger is grating, and it diminishes us and limits us. The best I can do is to say that we have to become our own arbitrators of this question. But a lot of this has to do with seeing deeply for ourselves.

Q6: Is delusion the “I” that operates in the world? If so, can I ever be completely non-deluded?

Answer: Well, I don't know whether we can ever be completely non-deluded, to the degree to which sometimes we believe what other people tell us, what our society tells us. Our cultures have delusions, projections, and ideas that were true at one time but they're not true later. We discover it's not like that after all. What comes to mind is the trends in what kind of foods you're supposed to eat and not eat, what's right and wrong.

I don't think any of us can be sure about what delusions we've learned and hold unconsciously. Sometimes I would like to come back in 100 or 200 years and look back at us today. Only then will we see, "Wow, boy, were we deluded. I had no idea. It all seemed true to me. It all seemed so obvious to me." In that sense, maybe we can never be completely free of delusion.

But the delusion of "I" that operates in the world – I think we can be free of that as a delusion if we understand that some of the "I" that's operating is a necessary part of finding our way and being in the world. We put on "I"s like we put on roles, or like we put on a jacket or a shirt. In different situations, we embody different roles. In a sense, we embody different "I"s, different selves, wherever they are useful, important, and necessary for the purpose of the role.

If I'm home with my family, I'm a father. How I behave as a father at different ages of my kids growing up is a role. It is possible to get attached to that and be deluded into thinking this is who I really am. Or, it's possible to see that this is who I am in that context and situation. This is what I'm called upon to be and to do, and I kind of put it on like a coat. As long as I'm there, and that's an appropriate coat, I wear it, but I'm quite happy to put it down in a different situation. So that's a way we can have the idea of self provisionally, in a sense, but we see it as such, so we're not deluded by it.

Q7: Can you say more about aversion as a less intense manifestation of hatred?

Answer: Yeah. I've heard some Buddhist teachers are a little troubled by how often we English-speaking Dharma teachers use the word “aversion” in a negative way, because the word literally means “to turn away, to avert.”

There is healthy averting. If we have a thorn in our foot, we avert it in the sense that we pull it out. We don't expect to not want to take the thorn out. Or if we see ourselves about to step down on a nail on the ground, we avert our foot so that we don't get poked by the nail. That's a healthy kind of caring for ourselves.

Healthy averting can also be used for things like anger. When we see anger or hostility arise, we can say, "Nope, I don't have to do that." We avert ourselves from it. That can be done without any attachment, clinging, or forcefulness. Anger can just be what is, and we turn away from it.

Some people say the word "aversion" should be seen as an umbrella term for what's healthy and unhealthy, skillful and not skillful. I think the question has to do with when aversion is really subtle, not obvious like hatred.

I don't know what more to say, except that the more sensitive we become through mindfulness, the more we're able to pay attention carefully. Then even in the most subtle things that we never thought had hostility in them, where we never imagined that we were hostile, we see that there's a teeny bit of hostility there. This can be seen even in the ways that we use our eyes – the way our eyes focus on someone, for example. I had no idea that I carried aversion in my eyes that way.

One advantage of mindfulness is to have great and greater sensitivity to what's very subtle. And subtle doesn't mean inconsequential. Sometimes the more subtle forces are actually the ones that carry us more and are more dangerous. With mindfulness, we become more and more sensitive to the subtlety and the pervasiveness of these things in ourselves. Hopefully,

what comes along as mindfulness grows is a greater capacity to be aware without selfing, without judging, without criticism, so there is a healing touch, a generosity in the awareness. Then it's more and more okay for the awareness to show us the bad news – what we're actually doing that is unwholesome, the subtle kinds as well.

Q8: Is the healing touch more than an awareness of the object, the thought, emotion, and so forth? How is this similar or different from equanimity, or from allowing whatever arises?

Answer: Yeah, it's a great question. I find myself a little reluctant to answer it, maybe because if I try to parse apart what's actually going on there, we might lose something. What “healing” means might be evocative of something that is useful and very personal for us, that we might lose if we start to define or look more carefully at what's there.

But I certainly associate healing awareness with an awareness that's very allowing and open, that gives space for things to self-heal and reveal themselves. I see healing touch as one that comes with a lot of care. There's a caring. Things are respected and cared for, important and valued. Engaging in this process in a careful, loving, and generous way is a very important

way of caring for ourselves and the world around us. There is the sense that we value this process, value ourselves, and value the potential we have.

There is a willingness to touch the places where we're hurt or wounded or feel like an illness inside of us. We are willing to touch and be with the fever of hatred in a kind way, not an aversive or critical way. These are some of the things I associate with healing awareness.

Maybe healing awareness is more than just clean, clear awareness without any other attitude. There might be some very gentle and easy attitudes that come along with it. Some people might say these are inherently part of mindfulness. Some people might say they just come along with it and support it. I don't know, but these healing attitudes are such a beautiful part of what's possible. If it's possible, please bring a healing touch to the world.

Q9: Can you speak a little about the wholesome and unwholesome need to belong, and how to be with a sense of not belonging?

Answer: Yeah. Belonging is such a fundamental human need. need. It's one of the things that's hard now for some people in this COVID-19 time. Some people who live alone stay indoors in their apartments for days and weeks at a time, and they have very little contact with

other people. The contact we have on YouTube or Zoom or on the phone can be nice. But I think there are deep physiological and psychological ways in which we're social beings, and being in touch with and having contact with people is a huge need that we have. Probably we don't even understand all the ways in which we need that. So now after these many months of sheltering in place and not being in touch with people, there is a weariness and a tiredness for many probably because of this deep need that some people have.

Q10: So how do we differentiate what needs are wholesome from those that are unwholesome?

Answer: Yeah, I don't really have a great answer for you. I think that certainly there's a lot of neediness—a deep feeling of emptiness or inadequacy inside. The drive to belong can be a desire to feel that we're important or a desire to distract ourselves by being entertained by others. It can be a strong need to be identified with others in order to get our own sense of identity. The need to belong can be a strong need to be loved, or cared for, or respected. There can be a fear of being alone, where being with other people can relax us and make us feel a little more secure.

So one has to get a sense of what underlies the need, what's behind it, and whatever that is it needs to be respected, whether it's wholesome or unwholesome. It

all needs our love. It all needs our respect. So in some ways, it doesn't matter too much, as long as we come from the point of view of: *this* we bring our care to, this we bring our attention to, to understand and to see. As we see more clearly, all of it deserves our love and our care equally.

It doesn't all equally deserve our action – what we do based on what we see. That is where we want to be careful to act wisely. The action – how we live with these things – is where the biggest choices have to be. We want to try to act on those things that are wholesome, skillful, and helpful, and avoid the actions that are the opposite. The rest of it – what goes on in our hearts – we want to just care for, look at, and see better and better. I'm confident that if you slow down and begin to really look underneath the sense of belonging, a lot will become clear, and you'll be able to answer the question for yourself.

Q11: Can you say more about what non-delusion feels like?

Answer: Oh, what a great question. What does non-delusion feel like? I think the strongest association I have with non-delusion is a sense of absence and clarity, where there is no agitation, there are no filters over the sense of awareness through the eyes. There is a sense of possibility, and there's a sense of

unboundedness in non-delusion. There's even a sense of freedom in non-delusion.

That's what I associate it with. I think other people probably have different associations. What I didn't talk about today was non-delusion itself. It is often associated with wisdom. Wisdom has its own feelings and way of being experienced. There are a lot of different flavors of non-delusion. I offered you one of them that's how it is for me.

Wisdom might have a different flavor. For me, wisdom sometimes has a flavor of clarity. Sometimes there is a feeling of penetration, as if I see clearly into something. Sometimes wisdom is less heart-centered for me, whereas non-delusion might be more heart-centered. Wisdom has more a sense of the mind becoming more open – open-mindedness – maybe.

Q12: Could you talk about loneliness, please? Am I being greedy for wanting to feel different?

Answer: Good question. Wanting to feel differently, to not be lonely, might be greed. That's certainly possible, but not necessarily. There are healthy desires. When there's a feeling of loneliness, there are many different states

that a person might call “lonely.” If we have a need for some human contact, then loneliness just might be a need for touch, for contact, for being with people. We

could describe that as different from loneliness. Loneliness might be another one of those words that is an umbrella term and has a range of meanings.

The thing in mindfulness is always to look at our experience and really feel it and be with it. Generally, everything we feel, whether it's wholesome or unwholesome, becomes a whole different world to live in when we can hold it in our awareness and really touch it and contact it. When we can start to really be with experience and make space for it, we get a sense of what's really happening for us.

Don't ever give these forces like loneliness or the need to belong the upper hand. Never believe them automatically.

Never identify with them or define yourself by them automatically. Stop and take a good look. The stronger the mindfulness is, the more these things become part of who we are, rather than who we are. So we would never say, "I am lonely," in the sense that this is who I am. We would say, "There is loneliness." Then we can look at that loneliness as a part of who we are. This gives us a chance to see it more clearly and to hold it. It needs our love and care just like everything else.

Then we can start teasing loneliness apart and seeing what's there. It's possible that the loneliness is not needed, and it represents some kind of tension or

holding. If we relax that with mindfulness, the loneliness goes away, and something wonderful happens instead. It's possible the loneliness represents some deeper need we have, or a healthy, wholesome desire. Then we might feel that wholesomeness – “Yes, that feels like an aspiration, not a need. That feels like a movement of the heart that just seems healthy. So maybe this is what I should act on.” If I can't act on that desire now, can I do something comparable? Can I do something else for it? Can I think about something else? How does that need need to be supported?

Thank you very much. I hope my answers were adequate. I think that these were very important questions you asked. When there are such important human questions and issues that many of us have, with everything going on now, I think that we mostly need a lot of care, attention, and time to explore and get to know them. I feel one of the challenges of answering these kinds of questions is saying in a few words something that touches us in a useful way, without making easy assumptions, being simplistic or partial, or missing the question entirely. There isn't always enough feedback to understand the questions.

So if I missed your question, I apologize. I really appreciate getting these questions and finding out what's going on for you all. I want to thank you so much.

And I look forward to our time next week. Thank you very much.