

Binding and Unbinding (2 of 5) Unwholesome and Wholesome Aversion

May 24, 2022

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

bind, tie, unbind, untie, hostility, restrain, restraint, avert, avoid, turn away, poison, burn, ill will, harm, hurt, resentment, aversion, hostile, impulses, conceit, racism

Gil Fronsdal

Today, I will talk about the second of the five bindings – the ways we get bound up, caught, or tied up – and the second of the five unbindings – the ways that loosen and free us. This binding is hostility. The unbinding related to it is restraint – to avoid or turn away from things that produce harm.

Both of these can involve turning away from something. Often in English, we think of aversion as being a kind of hostility. But it comes from the word avert, which means to turn away from. There are two ways of averting. Averting can be done with hostility. Averting can also be done with wisdom and care – with a recognition of what

is beneficial here and what is not. Both movements of mind can be known.

When we turn away with hostility, we should be able to recognize that doing so harms us. Acts of aversion that are hostile or include ill will are considered poisons or a way of burning ourselves. If you put your hand in the fire of hostility, you will get burned.

Sometimes hostility or ill will can feel justified. It can even feel good, as there is power and energy. Sometimes there is a very strong affirmation of conceit – of self-concern and identity – that creates a strong sense of separation, such as: “That is wrong, that is bad.” One form that conceit takes is racism, where there is hostility towards another race. Having that hostility affirms one’s specialness – “I am special, I am something good” – and creates an identity in opposition to others.

As much as hostility burns people, there is confusion about it. Some people have hostility and ill will because they feel it is justified. They feel a kind of pleasure from their hostility, and at the same time, they are hurt by it and hurt others.

One of the great possibilities of meditation is to recognize the impact our ill will has on us. For example, resentment is a kind of ill will towards others. When you

sit and meditate, you feel how much it harms you. In fact, when you are sitting in meditation simmering in resentment, you are not causing harm to the person you resent. If you have been hurt by someone, you may be enabling that hurtful behavior to hurt you even more. You may be reinforcing the pain of resentment in a way that continues to hurt you.

I do not want to diminish the importance of our care and attention to things like resentment. I also do not want to diminish the fact that people do things that are wrong and that can cause us to have ill will, resentment, or hostility towards them. What I would like to say is – without justifying the wrong – there is a better way of living where we take care of ourselves and others but without hostility and hatred. One way is to avert ourselves from harming – from the internal movements of mind that are self-inflicted harm.

For example, the poison or fire of hostility harms us. Sometimes we direct hostility towards ourselves. We can be very critical of ourselves. This behavior is something to avert oneself from – to say: “No, I do not need to do this. It is not useful, helpful, or healthy. No, thank you.”

One form of healthy averting, which Buddhist practice strongly emphasizes, is restraint. You hold your tongue. You hold your body in a way that you do not punch

anyone out. You do not do anything physically with your body that can harm anybody else.

Restraining ourselves in this way requires mindfulness, and it strengthens the mindfulness muscle. It can require a lot of commitment to track oneself, stay present, and not say something hostile. “No, I am not going to speak. I am not going to say that.”

This is the practice of restraint – the practice of avoiding and abstaining. When we feel like we are going to break one of the precepts – if we are going to kill, steal, engage in harmful sexual activities, lie, or intoxicate the mind – here is where we can avert and say no. We can exercise restraint, avoidance, abstaining, averting: “No. I have better things to do. This is not useful. This is not going in a good way.”

A lot of inner strength can be built from restraint, avoiding, and turning away. It can be as simple as avoiding opening the refrigerator to have a snack when you do not need one. You have had plenty of snacks, and you know it is not useful to have more. You develop the capacity to say no – to change direction and avoid getting involved in an unhealthy way. This develops a lot of inner strength – an inner strength that is not punitive. It is not harsh or critical. Done the right way, it strengthens our love, goodwill, and care for ourselves and others.

We have to be careful when using the word aversion. Sometimes people believe that any averting – any saying, “No, not this” – is somehow a negative form of aversion and should be avoided. They somehow believe that, in Buddhist practice, we are supposed to practice mindful acceptance of everything. To be present, accept things and hold them, and somehow not ever say no to anything – just be with things.

Certainly, there is a time and place for acceptance: when the practice of mindfulness is strong and overrides the tendency to get involved with unhealthy states of mind. Here it can be very powerful and significant to just hold our impulses in accepting mindfulness. We do this because we know we will not act on these impulses.

But there is a time to say: “No. Not this – not now.” In fact, the practice of mindfulness increases our capacity to recognize what is not useful and not pick it up – not be involved in it, not go down that road.

There are two potentially powerful movements of averting: one containing hostility, and one expressing kindness and goodwill towards oneself and others. There can be power in hostility – that is why some people love it. But there can also be power in healthy averting. Some people are afraid of that power, that

strength. But this is one of the things that we can develop in practice. It is easier to develop power and strength if we know what kind of averting is healthy and helpful for ourselves and others.

As we become stronger, it becomes easier not to get involved and not pick up things. We are not easily influenced by our impulses. We still might have them, but they do not land anywhere. They do not get picked up because we have the strength of our mindfulness and care.

For this next day, you might look at your movements of averting – where you are turning from one way to another, or just turning away not to do it. See if you can distinguish between averting done with hostility, frustration, ill will, or irritation and averting done with care, love, and wisdom – with a clear sense of doing what is beneficial. Hopefully, you will see the difference between these forms of averting. You will see that healthy averting feels good – that it is beneficial in and of itself to act on it. I hope you enjoy a day of healthy averting as well as the study of how this works for you. Thank you.