

Kusala (4 of 10) The Roots of the Unwholesome: Greed, Hatred and Delusion

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

plant, latent, lust, relishing, longing, attachment, clinging, craving, tension, holding, anger, hostility, wrath, malice, obstructing, irritation, ignorance, bewilderment, foolishness, relax, non-greed, non-delusion, non-hatred, seeds

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We continue with the topic of wholesome and unwholesome. It is a fundamental concept to the entire teachings of the Buddha. The focus this week is on the unwholesome. Next week it will be on the wholesome.

The unwholesome is said to have three roots: greed, hatred, and delusion. The idea of roots is interesting. A plant's roots are underground. You cannot see them. If you chop some plants off at ground level, they will sprout again from the roots. Plants can sometimes die back and not be visible above the ground. When spring

and the rainy season come, they may start growing again. There they are again!

Sometimes greed, hatred, and delusion – as roots – are called latent tendencies. They lay inside us latently, ready to sprout, whenever the conditions are right for them. Some people may feel they have no greed, hatred, or delusion because they do not see it within themselves. But then, at some point, conditions come together and, “Oh, boy, is it ever there!”

There is a story in the suttas of a woman who was always kind. Someone said it might only be surface-level kindness. When someone challenged her in a simple way, sure enough, she got angry and even violent.

So greed, hatred, and delusion are latent roots that live inside of us. Many Theravādan teachers often repeat the phrase “greed, hatred, and delusion.” When I was a young student, I heard it a lot. I think part of my brain checked out when I heard it. The phrase became repetitive and rote. It was emphasized so much, I almost did not hear it anymore.

The phrase “greed, hatred, and delusion” is emphasized because these are the roots, deep inside us, that give birth to unwholesome behaviors. I find it very compassionate to say unwholesome behavior rather

than bad, evil, or wrong behavior. There are lots of judgments around how we see and understand people's behavior. Unwholesome means that you can change it to something wholesome. Unwholesome is more the quality of the activity – some behavior is unwholesome. It does not necessarily judge the person.

The three roots – greed, hatred, and delusion – live deep inside of us and are often unseen. They are the source from which unhelpful, unbeneficial behavior arises. In simple terms, it is related to tension – to holding onto places where we feel hurt or where we have condensed or coagulated around our pain, sadness, or conceit. We hold onto all kinds of things. And those can be very deep, subliminal, and not even seen. The tensions are latent but ready to express themselves in different ways. f

Part of Dharma practice is to reach down into the roots of our very being. We reach not just the places we can see and know. We also reach deep inside – into holding patterns and tensions – places from which unwholesome behavior springs. For that, the process is to relax – to relax deeper and deeper – feeling safer and safer. We are releasing and releasing until we touch the places not usually seen but where the roots are deep inside. When we then pull the plant's root out of the ground, the plant will not sprout again.

I think of greed, hatred, or delusion as an umbrella term for a family of related motivations, feelings, and attitudes. There are synonyms in the ancient texts that describe different elements of each family. For greed, there is lust and relishing. Relishing is enjoying – but holding on and wanting more, getting the most out of it. In the family of greed, there is also longing, attachment, clinging, and craving. When we say the word “greed,” we include all these elements.

When you feel greed, lust, deep longing, attachment, clinging, or craving – respect them in a beneficial way. Respect the power and influence they have on you. Where are their roots? What are they arising out of? What is the deep disposition from which they come? What is the deeper feeling tone? What is the deep tension that seems to be from where they arise?

Synonyms for hatred all involve wanting to harm: anger, hostility. Anger can be a little confusing because not all anger involves wanting to harm. This Buddhist list also includes wrath, malice, obstructing, and irritation. How does irritation involve causing harm? Irritation can cause harm when ill will is a part of it.

Synonyms for delusion include ignorance, bewilderment, and foolishness. A source of delusion is not deeply understanding our suffering – not seeing how suffering arises, how it ceases. That then gets

expressed often in greed, hatred, and ill will. These have a great influence on us.

In the Buddhist analysis of human behavior, all unwholesome behavior – behavior that is harmful to ourselves or others – has its roots in three forces inside us: greed, hatred, and delusion. If these are the roots of unwholesome behavior, the task is to get sensitive, still, and quiet enough – to feel comfortable and secure enough in ourselves – to touch those roots. To feel what is subliminal and latent inside.

An avenue for doing that is physical. With a very heightened sense of mindfulness, feel the physical tension. Tune in deeply to the subtlest forms of tension, which are sometimes only felt if the surface tension is relaxed enough. After a long period of peace and ease, we can get a sense of: “Oh, look at that. There’s a little tightening, contraction, pressure.” Then help that soften and relax – let it release. Even though it might feel like a small, subtle kernel deep inside, it is often the very seed of greed, hatred, or delusion.

The seed of a redwood tree is quite small, but the tree grows really big. In the same way, the seeds of greed, hatred, and delusion might seem inconsequential because they are so small. Deep, quiet meditation is the place where we can sometimes touch those seeds – or roots – and let them relax and release. As all

unwholesome behavior arises from those seeds, it is useful to address, meet, and understand them.

A practice in Buddhism is to recognize greed, hatred, and delusion as it arises. A big word like “recognize” sometimes seems to only represent big, obvious movements of greed and hatred that everyone can see. But in Buddhism, we also want to see very subtle movements. A synonym for hatred is irritation – and attachment can be very small and mild. Any movement like that where there is self-harm – tension, holding, or tightening that is chronic – creates unhelpful conditions for us.

As we relax and soften the tension, we create conditions for something very positive to grow: the opposite of greed, hatred, and delusion. Those can also be roots. To have roots of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion be the source from which we operate marks a sea change in how we live our lives. That is also discovered by deeply relaxing. The seeds of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion are waiting for us, and they can also grow into big, strong redwood trees.

We become sensitive to greed, hatred, and delusion so that we are not pushed around by them, not caught in bondage to them or their influence.

Thank you. I offer these thoughts about the deep roots inside us with tremendous respect and care for your depth and roots. In the depth of who you are, I wish that you find peace, well-being, love, and freedom – and that something deep inside can release and let go. Thank you.