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The Moral Foundation: Kindness, Compassion, Generosity, Morality

The most accessible opening for the spiritual path to awakening is kindness and generosity. Kindness is the quality of well wishing for all beings. The more familiar one is with the experience of kindness, the more obvious it is that it is something worth building on. It is a nice pleasurable, balanced, calm, open internal experience. It is an experience familiar to most people, but it is easily overlooked exactly because it is subtle and calm. But because it is subtle and calm and arises from our own intention, it is much more sustainable and steady than external forms of pleasure.

The experience of kindness is open. Because of that openness it is not limited, not restricted, not constricted. People who are kind develop a wholesome basis in which to dwell within themselves, but also everyone around them benefits from that experience as well. Generosity is an act of kindness, offering another being something that might be helpful to them. The way that the Buddha described the results of deeds is that these types of actions create a pleasurable internal experience and supportive external conditions as a result.

A related but more subtle wholesome experience is the experience of compassion and living a moral life. It is the acknowledgement that beings all over the world go through pain and suffering of various sorts with a gentle caring and wish for them to come out of their pain. Morality is living a life with the basis of harmlessness and not wanting to do anything that might harm another being and create suffering for them.

The Buddha explained ten types of actions that create the most painful results and can even result in being born in hell after death. There are 10 types of wrong action: 3 of body, 4 of speech, and 3 of mind. The three types of wrong action of body are intentionally killing a living being, taking what is not given, and having wrong sexual behavior. The four actions of wrong speech are speaking lies, speaking divisively, speaking vulgar words, and speaking idle chatter. The three types of wrong mental actions are coveting, hostility, and wrong view. He described mundane wrong view as denying the existence of morality or moral consequences of actions and denying the existence of other planes of existence into which one can be born.

While generosity has the effect of creating the seeds of an inner experience of pleasure, morality has the effect of not doing anything that might create the results of inner pain. The more one purifies one's conduct, the more balanced and pleasurable one's internal experience will be.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of these two for the entire rest of the spiritual path. They are what create the reservoir of life and energy and strength and resilience for all the future steps. Generosity is like filling the tank with fuel and morality is like making sure there aren't any cracks or holes in the tank.

With a basis of moral purity, the entire rest of the path becomes possible. It becomes possible to look at one's internal experience and see what is going on. If one has been impure in one's morality, it is like fracturing one's psyche, a pain in one's core. When the psyche is subject to the painful results of doing harm, it will not be able to sustain much effort or energy.

One important theme through the entirety of the spiritual path that the Buddha laid out is an understanding of the results of one's deeds. Our trajectory in this life and afterwards is primarily determined by our own actions. Internally, the good that we can only result in a pleasure experience. The bad that we do will always result in a painful experience. This is the legacy from which we are born.

Just as importantly, while one inherits the results of one's own intentions and their results, one isn't responsible for the actions and intentions of others. While the actions of others may affect us externally, our internal experience is primarily driven by our own intentions, past and present. While one with a truly kind and compassionate intention goes through life with acts of body, speech, and mind based in the desire for the wellbeing of others, the actions of others aren't one's responsibility.

The kindness and compassion that is a basis for further spiritual growth is respectful of the agency of other individuals, even when they are making decisions that may ultimately be to their own detriment. It is not necessarily that one does nothing, only that whatever actions one takes are ultimately aimed at helping another person understand the consequences of their actions.

The Disadvantages of Sense Pleasures

Once one has a basis of generosity and morality as well as an appreciation for the steady, balanced pleasure created by kindness and compassion, it offers a basis for abandoning unwholesome pleasure.

The most obvious and visible forms of pleasure available in the world are the pleasures of the senses: money, possessions, experiences, other people, sexuality, food, sleep, beauty, etc. These are the crudest, loudest forms of pleasure which are experienced through the sense doors. But because these types of pleasure are coming from external sources, they are fundamentally not within one's control.

To try to control the world in such a way that it meets the needs and desires of the senses requires a tremendous amount of work. It is fraught with disappointment and conflict because pursuing these types of pleasure sets us in conflict with others who are trying to do the same. The more one succeeds in amassing control and power over the world, the more one becomes a target for others who want that same thing. Beyond that, it is work that never ends. One needs to keep working to control the world and endlessly fight to maintain that power forever.

Indulging sense desires has a deeper drawback, which is that to engage in these pleasures is fundamentally unsatisfying. The pleasurable or painful quality of our internal experience is largely determined by the moral quality to our actions, while the pleasures of the senses can only offer a temporary distraction from the painful or pleasurable moral baseline. If one is solely fixated on these pleasures, it sets the stage for addiction, becoming so fixated on a short-term pleasure that one loses perspective on how exhausting the process is and how much damage the pursuit is doing to oneself and others.

And even more subtly than that, the indulgence in sense pleasures offers a more fundamental obstruction to peace and further spiritual progress. It has to do with the nature of engaging in sense pleasures in the first place. When one experiences a sight or sound or smell or taste or touch and delights in that experience, grabs hold of it, and identifies with it, the mind goes out to it and the will binds to it. A subtle attachment or fusion to that object is being created.

The next time that object arises mentally or externally, the attachment pulls the mind back out to the object. The more objects are attached to, the more one is pulled around by all the things which have been fused to. Each attachment is the seed for agitation and stress and tension. The more one binds oneself to the pleasures of the world, the more seeds of agitation are being planted.

In this way, indulging in and delighting in any pleasure of the senses is the exact opposite of peace. Peace is the internal experience of stillness. The pursuing sense experience is inherently based in movement and agitation.

When one reflects on all the downsides of sense pleasures, and one begins to appreciate that the more peaceful, steady, balanced sources of happiness and peace are available, it sets the foundation for renunciation, the conscious leaving of sense pleasures.

The Benefits of Renunciation

The conscious abandoning of sense pleasure is the most direct movement in the direction of peace. The more one makes the conscious choice to go without, to live simply, to minimize one's desires, to not fill one's life with the comforts and distractions of the senses, the more time and energy is available for the cultivation of kindness and compassion and contentment with little. It is a conscious choice to abandon the agitation and conflict and complication built into the pursuit of sense pleasures.

This is not to say this process is easy. Inevitably with any addiction, whether physical or emotional, there is a withdrawal phase, where the pain of going without the sense stimuli is more difficult than simply appeasing it. But enduring peace never comes through appeasing the desire for stimuli and agitation, it can only come through understanding the painful consequences of that pursuit and abandoning it.

While the effort needs to be great, it can never be a hostile or masochistic endeavor, or it will only lead to more pain. It has to be one motivated by kindness and compassion for oneself and others. The more clearly one understands the damage that is done, the disappointment caused, and unfulfilling agitation that is created by the fixation on sense pleasures, the more urgently one is motivated to abandon them. The kindness and compassion also offer a pleasurable inner refuge for enduring the pain of going without sense pleasures while the desire for them is still strong.

The result is a sustainable peace, a peace that comes not from getting an experience or object of the world, but from the absence of desire for them. It is not obvious before it happens, but that peace offers a means to a tremendous reservoir of joy and pleasure that comes from a relaxed, open state of being.

That joy and pleasure that arise through balance offer a basis and a window into the capacity to develop awareness and see one's experience as it is.

The Way Out: The Four Noble Truths

With an inner world purified by one's clean moral slate, and a foundation of peace developed through the abandoning of sense gratification, one has the means to look at the painful aspects of life without being overwhelmed by them.

Without looking at pain, one cannot see the cause for it. Without seeing the cause, one cannot come out of it.

The first step is simply to look at pain inherent in life: the pain of birth, the pain of aging, the pain of death, the pain of sadness and mourning, pain, suffering, and tension, the pain of being stuck with those who are not loved, the pain of being separated from those who are loved, the pain of not getting what one wants, and the pain of the five masses of experience which are taken on and identified with.

The more clearly one develops an internal, objective familiarity with all the different types of pain, the more clear the role of craving becomes in fueling it. The objectivity allows one the space to see craving as not oneself, but a habitual momentum that has formed by past attachments.

The second noble truth is the understanding that that fusing to and identifying with the impermanent objects, internal or external, is what sets one up for the pain that comes at their loss. It fuels the pain that comes with existence, and the pain that comes with death, as well as the grief at losing something one believed was oneself. Whether the craving is for a sensual experience, existence, or non-existence, it is that craving that fuels the force to bind oneself to the material or experiential fabric of existence. It is craving and attachment that create the force that keeps the cycle of birth and death going.

The third noble truth is the intellectual and experiential understanding of what happens when one abandons that craving. With the absence of craving, one still experiences whatever has been fused in the past, but it arises and dissolves without being bound to or fueled further. It is just like watching a fire burn, without engaging with it, without fueling it. Just watching as it cools, burns up old fuel and goes out.

The fourth noble truth is all the requisite means required to do this at a moment-to-moment level.

The Means: The Fourth Noble Truth

The last of noble truths, the noble eight part path, is all of the means necessary to internalize the first three noble truths. Establishing constant awareness of every aspect of experience, understanding the consequences of following craving, and abandoning that craving requires a great deal of preparation, skills, practice, and patience to be able to implement. The fourth noble truth is all of those means.

The first part of the eight part path is Right View: the intellectual understanding and view that the purpose of the endeavor is to come out of the cycle of pain, and the means to come to the end of that cycle is through abandoning craving for sensuality, existence, and non-existence.

The second part of the path is Right Resolution: the setting of the goal to renounce, leave the pursuit of sense experiences, without ever succumbing to hostile or cruel intentions either towards oneself or others.

The third part of the path is Right Speech: the abandoning of lying, divisive speech, coarse speech, and idle speech.

The fourth part of the path is Right Action: the abandoning of killing living beings, stealing, and wrong sexual behavior.

The fifth part of the path is Right Livelihood: receiving one's sustenance as a monastic from the complete dedication to the spiritual path towards ultimate freedom without catering to people's worldly desires through fortune telling, prognostications, blessings, magic, healing, or other worldly endeavors.

The first five parts of the path are all the necessary prerequisites. One needs to have a clear understanding of the problem and the way out. To have the internal strength and solidity, one needs to be morally clean. To be able to make sustained progress towards abandoning craving, one needs to be completely dedicated, not indulging in the distractions of worldly pursuits or self-harm. When any of that is compromised, the requisite commitment isn't completely there to be able to achieve sufficient consistency in the abandoning of the deepest roots of craving and delusion.

Right Effort: Abandoning the Unwholesome and Developing the Wholesome

The last three parts of the path constitute a different section. These last parts of the path involve developing much more subtlety and unification of mind and psyche so that one can begin abandoning craving at a moment-to-moment level.

The sixth part of the path is Right Effort: the abandoning of unwholesome qualities and the development of wholesome qualities. To put this into practice, one needs a clear understanding of what are wholesome and unwholesome qualities and a clear understanding of how to counteract the unwholesome and develop the wholesome.

The crudest types of unwholesome qualities are the five obstructions. Each has a particular tool designed to counteract and come out of it.

Sensual Desire

The first of the obstructions is sensual desire. This includes desire for any type of sense experience, any sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch. However the strongest sensual desires tend to be desires toward sexuality, food, entertainment, comforts, beauty, and sleep. To abandon these when they come up most strongly, the Buddha recommended looking at the unattractive aspects of whatever one is infatuated with.

If the object of one's desire is another person, one is encouraged to examine a list of unattractive parts of the body: head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin, muscle, tendons, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, membranes, spleen, lungs, small intestine, large intestine, inner organs, excrement, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, oil, saliva, snot, bodily fluids, urine.

The more one separates each component part of the body, the more it breaks the spell of infatuation. In a similar vein, he also encouraged the contemplation of a skeleton or a corpse in various stages of decomposition.

For other types of sensual desire he also encouraged examining the objects in terms of the four base properties, of earth, liquid, heat, and wind. Seen in terms of each of the separate constituent properties, the object similarly loses its allure.

The sign that this type of reflection is having the desired effect is that there is a palpable release of the sensual desire at the root of the infatuation.

Hostility

The second obstruction is hostility, the entire realm of hatred, cruelty, violence and the like. To counteract hostility, the Buddha suggested the cultivation of kindness and compassion towards all beings.

The experience of hostility and the experience of kindness are the exact opposite. Hostility is the wish to harm. Kindness is wishing well. Hostility is tight, constricting, and burning. Kindness is expansive, open, smooth, and soothing. Hostility is painful. Kindness is pleasurable. Hostility is agitated. Kindness is calm and balanced.

The more one is internally familiar with these experiences, the more one can consciously move towards the opening, calm, balanced experience of kindness. The more one practices cultivating kindness, the more one can recognize the tightening of hostility and move to counteract it as it is starting.

Sluggishness and Drowsiness

The third obstruction is sluggishness and drowsiness. It is the movement of one's psyche towards disconnecting, dissociating, murkiness, depression, or sleep. It is a slow, slothful, stiff, torpid state. To counteract this state, the Buddha recommended recognition of light, remembering, and being fully aware.

The recognition of light is uncovering and developing the light coming from the depth of the psyche, generally in the center of the torso. When developed, that light helps one stay awake and alert. However, even if one isn't able to develop that internal light, the most important part of counteracting sluggishness and drowsiness is generating energy toward staying connected to one's direct experience and remembering.

Remembering and being fully conscious are separate qualities, but are practiced together. Being fully conscious is being fully aware of what is happening at the level of the body, sensations, the psyche, and the mental/emotional qualities arising. Remembering is both watching old memories arise and pass, as well as remembering the characteristics of all the various qualities in terms of the path towards freedom.

While remembering can take many different forms described in the next section, in its most core form it is remembering the causes and consequences of actions—whether they lead towards perpetuating the cycle of pain or towards freedom from it.

Remembering in the context of one's direct experience is the understanding of the painful nature of transient phenomena burning up, falling apart, and grieving for it, the understanding of the role of craving in fueling that process, and the understanding of the way out as cultivating the ability to abandon that craving.

The key to coming out of sluggishness and drowsiness is generating the energy to stay present, keep from disconnecting, keep in touch with the body, sensations, the psyche, and whatever qualities that arise, and remember whether they are moving towards sowing the seeds of pain or moving towards freedom.

Agitation and worry

Agitation and worry are qualities of an overexcited psyche. To counteract that the Buddha recommended to focus on calming the psyche.

In both the mind and body, the main direction is towards calming and relaxing. The main focus is to just let the excitement and energy which is already present settle naturally without doing anything to stir it up more.

While sluggishness and drowsiness are under-excited states and require extra exertion to stay present, agitation and worry are over-excited and require the calming of excess energy.

Sometimes a person may fluctuate between under-excitement and over-excitement, and if so one needs to be very aware of which of the two is present at a given time. Because exerting more energy when one is overexcited can lead to further fueling the agitation and trying to calm when one is already sluggish can lead to settling into a murky, dark, unhelpful state.

The middle point is one where one is both calm, fully aware, and remembering.

Indecision

The last of the obstructions is indecision, confusion, an inability to settle onto a particular course of action. For this, the Buddha recommended reflecting on the wholesome and the unwholesome. The more clear the distinction between those qualities, the more straightforward decisions will be.

The distinction between the two is all of the topics being discussed. Some examples of wholesome qualities are generosity, morality, kindness, compassion, renunciation, contentment, awareness, and letting go. Some examples of the unwholesome are sensual desire, hostility, sluggishness and drowsiness, agitation and worry, indecision, ego, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence.

Ego

While the five obstructions are the crudest types of unwholesome qualities, there are many more rooted in various forms of ego, self-centeredness, conceitedness, being domineering, possessiveness, excessive attachment to view, pride, jealousy, envy, inferiority and all the various forms the sense of self can take.

While ego and identification is a much more deeply rooted process which takes much more subtlety to uproot, the main approach to counteracting ego is the same whether the sense of self is taking a crude or subtle form.

To counteract ego, one develops the recognition of the impermanent, transient nature of that which one is identifying with. The more one can see the transience of that object, external or internal, crude or subtle, physical or experiential, mundane or sublime, the more that the object loses the sense of being “me” or “mine.”

The Results of Abandoning the Obstructions

The five obstructions block one's clear, calm, balanced experience of awareness. When those five are not present, they open the space for a cascade of wholesomeness to arise. This cascade naturally transitions into Right Concentration. Right Remembering is present all along the way.

Right Remembering: What is the Path and What is Not the Path

There are two forms in which remembering is a part of the path. The first is remembering whether what one is experiencing is going on the path towards freedom or on the path towards pain. The second form is that once one puts awareness in practice, one is beset by all the memories one has bonded to in the past. The more one uses the first type of remembering of what is the way to freedom in conjunction with the second type of remembering, the more one moves towards unbinding oneself from all the things in the past to which one has attached to or fused with.

With respect to remembering the path, there is the mundane and the transcendent. The mundane part remembering what is wholesome and unwholesome. This type of initial remembering is absolutely essential because it is what allows for one to develop a wholesome basis of kindness, generosity, compassion, morality, contentment, renunciation, and observation to transition to the more liberating form of remembering.

The transcendent part of remembering is remembering the four noble truths. Right remembering is the transition from remembering the four noble truths as an intellectual view and integrating it into experiential understanding.

There are four bases to remembering, the body, sensations, the psyche, and qualities. These are aspects of one's direct experience which are the place where remembering of the path is integrated. The Buddha described this as:

One who examines the body within the body, fervent, fully conscious, and remembering, would remove greed and suffering for the world.

One who examines sensations within sensations, fervent, fully conscious and remembering, would remove greed and suffering for the world.

One who examines the psyche within the psyche, fervent, fully conscious, and remembering, would remove greed and suffering for the world,

One who examines qualities within qualities, fervent, fully conscious, and remembering, would remove greed and suffering for the world.

Remembering with the base of the body is remembering the impermanent, fragile, disintegrating nature of the body in the context of the experience of the body. This basis for remembering is the whole range of both awareness and remembering. To establish awareness, one can be simply aware of one's body, what posture it is in, whether the breath is deep or shallow, what is being experienced by the body, relaxing the fusion to the body, awareness of the various components of the body, awareness of the four properties of the body (earth, water, heat, wind), awareness of the impending disintegration of the body after death, awareness of arising and passing away, all moving towards abandoning any attachment, any taking on, any identification with the body.

Remembering with the basis of sensations is: in the context of one's direct experience of sensations, remembering whether those sensations are pleasurable, painful, or neutral, are a result of worldly stimuli or whether they are triggered from being separated from the world. The sensations stimulated by the world, external stimuli are increasingly moved away from. They are not one's own and whether painful, pleasurable or neutral, they do not lead toward freedom. One is increasingly cultivating the experience of sensations which arise from being away from the pursuit of worldly stimuli. With respect to these sensations, one is aware of their nature of arising and passing away, moving towards abandoning any attachment, any taking on or identification with those sensations.

Remembering with the basis of the psyche is being aware of whether the psyche is infatuated or not, hateful or not, deluded or not, scattered or collapsed, expansive or not, unsurpassable or not, converged or not, freed or not. It is being aware of the psyche from within the psyche as well as awareness of the quality arising and whether that quality is moving towards or away from ultimate freedom. In seeing each of these types of psyche arising and passing away, one moves towards abandoning any attachment, taking on, or identification with the psyche.

Remembering with the basis of qualities begins with remembering whether the qualities which are arising in one's mind and psyche are wholesome or unwholesome in the context of the direct experience of them. It involves identifying the qualities which are arising in the context of the path, abandoning the unwholesome, and developing the wholesome.

As remembering of qualities transitions to a transcendent nature, one is aware of the impermanent nature of qualities, the fading away nature of qualities, the dissolving nature of qualities, the complete relinquishment of qualities.

Another form of remembering with the basis of qualities is dissecting the five masses which are attached to—the mass of material form, the mass of sensation, the mass of recognition, the mass of fusions to body, speech and psyche, and the mass of percept—seeing each of them in their impermanent, arising, passing away, painful, not-self nature. When one really sees that quality and that they are not really one's own, the infatuation with them and the attachment to them fade away.

Still another form of remembering with the basis of qualities is remembering the four noble truths so that they transition into experiential awareness: awareness of the painful nature of qualities that come together and fall apart, awareness of the role of craving in fueling the fusion of those compounded things, awareness of the experience of dissolution of that pain that comes with abandoning that craving, awareness of the way that leads to the dissolution of that pain.

All of these types of remembering have fundamentally the same approach. They are the understanding of reality as it is in each of the four different experiential contexts. They remind one that that reality is impermanent, painful, not oneself. In this remembering, they all lead towards letting go, complete relinquishing, letting the fire of experience burn out.

Right Concentration: The Development of Wholesome Qualities

Right concentration begins with the abandoning of the unwholesome states described in right effort. With the abandoning of the unwholesome qualities one can dwell in a state of calm, balanced awareness. That one is able to settle into that calm awareness allows for a sense of deep contentment to arise inside oneself.

The more one settles into that deep contentment, a sense of joy arises in the mind, the body relaxes further, and one feels pleasurable sensations all through the body.

With that basis, as the psyche separates from the sense doors and separates from any unwholesome states, while thought and mental movement are still present, it enters the first focus. This becomes a fully pervaded experience in the body, so that no part of the body is unfilled with that joy and pleasure.

As one stops paying attention to the thoughts and mental movements because of their coarseness and moves towards the stillness and unification of the psyche, one enters into the second focus, which is free of thought and mental movement, and the will has unified and lowered further. The joy and pleasure born of that concentration pervade the body so completely that every part is suffused with joy and pleasure.

As one sees the joy as relatively agitated in comparison to the unification, the joy subsides and one is left with the smooth, pleasurable sensations. A sense of neutral, objective observation of the mind replaces the sense of joy, and one enters into the third focus. The body is completely suffused with pleasurable sensations.

Finally, when one settles even further, the movement of the pleasurable sensations slows to a stop, and without pleasure or pain, only neither painful nor pleasurable sensations present, purified by observation and remembering, one enters in the fourth focus. The body is now completely pervaded with the neutral sensations and the completely pure will.

Right Knowledge

With the basis of any of the four focuses, one can start to examine the first three noble truths again. Once one has developed the eight parts of the path one has all the means to be able to be aware of the four noble truths at the experiential, moment-to-moment level.

These very withdrawn and unified states allow one to experience all the different phenomena occurring within one's experience separately.

One can examine the physical form arising and passing away, constructed and deconstructed, and see that it is not "me" or "mine."

One can examine sensations arising and passing away, divided and dissected, and see that they are not "me" or "mine."

One can examine recognition, arising and passing away, flickering, and see that it is not "me" or "mine."

One can see fusions of body, speech, and psyche, arising and passing, disintegrating, and see that they are not "me" or "mine."

One can see one's percept, the bare perception of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, mind, see that they are arising and passing away, see that they are not "me" or "mine."

One can see craving for any of these experiences arise and move towards the object.

One can see and remember the painful experience of losing something that one has attached to and identified with.

One can experience the fading away of anything that has been fused together.

One can experience the dissolution of all the fusions of body, speech, and psyche.

Right Freedom

As one realizes the pain of binding to the impermanent, painful, and not oneself, one lets go. Each object and memory which in the past one has bound oneself to, in turn comes up to the mind. As one sees each formerly alluring object with the perspective of impermanent, painful, and not-self, the infatuation is broken. The craving loses its energy and excitement. The object is released.

As each object is released, the craving gets weaker and weaker until there comes a moment when one is released completely. The fire goes out. There is no more craving. This is the ultimate freedom that the Buddha realized and taught. It is the extinguishing that is possible for every being. It is the going out of the fire of craving, existence, birth, aging, death, sadness, mourning, pain, suffering, tension, and the whole mass of pain.