

The Roots (2 of 5) Lack or Fullness

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The theme for this week is the roots of wholesome and unwholesome behavior. The roots of unwholesome behavior are greed, hate, and delusion. The roots of wholesome behavior are non-greed, non-hate, and non-delusion. Making this distinction, seeing and feeling this distinction is really central to the teachings of the Buddha. Making this distinction allows us to become our own teachers and see where the path of practice opens up for us.

There's a wonderful little dialogue in the *suttas*, one of a whole series of texts where someone asks a question in verse and the Buddha replies in verse. In the Connected Discourses, there's a poem in which someone says: "From whatever one reins in the mind, from that no suffering comes to one. Should one rein in the mind from everything, one is freed from all suffering."

This is an easy conclusion to come to – that somehow the Buddhist teachings are a way to not suffer, to avoid everything, avoid life, pulling ourselves in so far we get disconnected and go into some deep disembodied state that has no contact with the world or even with oneself. There are such reified meditation states. This conclusion implies that only by having no contact with the world and pulling back fully can we be free of suffering.

The person came to the Buddha and made this claim. And the Buddha responded: "One need not rein in the mind from everything when the mind has come under control. From whatever it is that wickedness comes, from this one should rein in the mind." So there is a checking and holding back of the mind – not from everything, but rather from those things from which evil, harm, or wickedness come. *That* we don't want to do.

This is the emphasis of the Buddha. We don't disconnect from the world. If we disconnect from anything, it is from the very things that lead us to cause harm. Not disconnecting from everything has to do with being able to see the difference between what's wholesome and unwholesome.

The wholesome is what allows us to thrive, to grow, to become full. The word "thrive" is not often associated with Buddhist texts, but there are words that could be translated easily as "thrive," like "growth" and "fullness."

There's a beautiful little analogy for this using the moon:

"Just as during the bright fourth night, whether by night or day, the moon only increases in beauty, roundness, and brightness in diameter and circumference, so too for one who has faith in wholesome qualities, whether by night or day, only growth and not deterioration in wholesome qualities is to be expected."

So it's possible to thrive and grow so the inner life feels like the full moon, full and shining. To do that, we have to have faith in our capacity for wholesome qualities. "Wholesome qualities" means qualities of character, and of heart and mind. It means there are beautiful things that we can do.

That's the direction we're going, not in the direction of greater and greater disconnection, not connected to anything at all, or toward an emptiness where we become empty of any contact with life itself. Instead, we're talking about becoming fuller and more enhanced in life, but without any conceit, without any selfishness – that's the art of this.

Understanding the unwholesome roots – knowing how we do the opposite of wholesomeness – is actually quite important. I'd encourage all of us to have a deep appreciation that, when we have something like greed, it gives us the opportunity to study it and see it well. We don't study it so we can be more greedy or better at our greed, but in order to become familiar with it and really understand how it feels physically, mentally, and emotionally. What comes along with greed? In mindfulness practice, we're being asked to understand what's happening here for us in a deeper way.

With that in mind, I thought it might be nice for me to read Nyanaponika, one of the great scholar monks from the last century. He gives a nice list of all the little aspects of greed within the umbrella category of greed. Surprisingly, the first word he uses is a word that we wouldn't normally associate with greed. It is kind of a koan. Rather than just batting the word away and saying, "That's crazy. That's wrong," it's more interesting to ask the question, "In what circumstances is this the case?"

The first list is: liking, wishing, longing, fondness, affection, attachment, lust, cupidity, craving, passion, self-indulgence, possessiveness, avarice, desire for the five sense objects, desire for wealth, desire for offspring, and desire for fame.

That's a big list and some of those things we don't automatically associate with unwholesomeness. But we're not asked to come to some conclusion that all these words point to something unwholesome. Our job is to discover in ourselves when there is unwholesomeness in these kinds of desires.

I think of "desire" as also an umbrella term, which is even broader than the word "greed." I think desire encompasses both wholesome and unwholesome desires. Unwholesome desires are desires that diminish us. Unwholesome desires are ones that come from a feeling of lack, fear, frustration, or even anger that we're not getting what we want. The sense of lack or wanting is a big drive for greed or unwholesome desire.

I like to use the word "aspiration" to refer to wholesome desires, partly because the Latin roots of "aspiration" are related to the word "breath." When the breath is at ease, when we breathe easily, and we're at home in our breath, at home in our body, at home in ourselves, aspiration is the desire that arises from that, which helps us to grow, thrive, and develop these good qualities and become like the full moon.

We learn the difference between the kinds of desires that diminish us and the kinds of desires that enhance us – the kinds of desires that hurt, that have suffering and harm in them, and the kinds of desires that are beneficial, supportive, and healing.

Desires are really central to human beings. We are kind of human desiringings, more than human beings. We want to be very careful not to automatically think that we should rein ourselves in from all desires. We want to rein ourselves in from those desires that, as in the poem, are wicked or harmful.

When we investigate this, can we feel inside what drives our attention? What drives our concern? What's the source of what we want to do? If we are mindful enough, it's possible to feel and sense that there is a sense of lack, or a place of contraction, of tightness. It actually feels very uncomfortable to have this.

On the surface, or in our ideas about it, greed can feel pleasant. The aspiration, the wish for something, and the anticipation of it can feel pleasant. So there can be confusion or a drive for pleasure in greed. However, at the root of greed, we will feel something is off. Something doesn't quite feel right. We're not settled in ourselves.

There is another whole category of desire where we are settled in ourselves, and where there is no harm. In fact, it feels good, satisfying, and nourishing to have this kind of desire.

One of these is faith. Faith is understood classically as a kind of desire for something. We move towards the object of faith, but not out of neediness, clinging, or lack, but out of a sense that this is the direction of growth, this is the direction for the moon to become full. So faith is seen as a healthy desire.

Another healthy desire is generosity. The desire to give may or may not be wholesome, but the desire to be generous comes from the goodness of the heart. Generosity is one of the classic descriptions of non-greed. When we have the wish to be generous, we want to feel and sense that in mindfulness practice. We want to really stay present for ourselves in order to see the consequences and effects of how we live.

When we come from generosity, it's possible to feel the goodness of that and grow from it. We are concerned about whether our generosity supports other people – we want to be wise about generosity. But personally, for us, we get our satisfaction from how good it feels to be generous, how good it feels to love rather than wanting to be loved, and how good it is to give rather than to get.

So there's a fork in the road. Our attention and thoughts can go in the direction of greed and unwholesome desires, or they can go in the direction of wholesome desires. If you're settled and mindful enough, it will feel pretty natural to go in the wholesome direction. That's the way the seed grows and flowers. But it takes exploration, discovery, and time. It takes a willingness to look at what's difficult in oneself. It takes the willingness to see what's hard and difficult, and where the sense of lack is, where the sense of neediness is.

The art of all this is to meet the lack, meet the neediness, meet the fear, and meet the frustration with a wholesome mind and wholesome attention. We meet it with kindness, goodwill, generosity, and faith that it is possible to let that inner life grow. The clouds can part and the full moon can be seen. Thank you for today, and I look forward to our time tomorrow.