

Binding and Unbinding (3 of 5) Unwholesome and Wholesome Not Knowing

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Good morning. Delusion and confusion bind and keep people in bondage. They can have a huge impact on us. Delusion, in Buddhism, is a powerful word. It is considered an important form of bondage and poison. Being caught in delusion can be harmful because we do not see the situation clearly. Even if our intentions are good, we might be causing harm in the world.

We can also be misinformed or misguided in what we think is important. There is a classic teaching in Buddhism of someone who wants fire. They chop up wood, looking for fire in the wood because that is where fire comes from. But it is not enough to chop up wood. You create fire by rubbing two sticks together. It is the same way with grape juice. You cannot get grape juice by squeezing gravel. If you are trying to accomplish something and are confused about how to do it, you will not get the result.

One delusion that Buddhism emphasizes is the improper pursuit of happiness: believing what is not a source of happiness is a source of happiness. For example, we may think that pleasure, power, or anger will bring us happiness. Or we think that criticizing or blaming others will bring happiness. We think, "I'll only be happy if that can happen."

Part of the function of Buddhism is to overcome delusion, confusion, and ignorance. I will talk about ignorance on Friday. I will also save some of the obvious opposites of confusion and delusion for later.

A healthy, wholesome corollary to delusion is a capacity and willingness to not know. When we do not understand something, we can be willing to not spin out delusive ideas and theories. We are comfortable with not knowing. We say, "I don't know," rather than add confusion or project theories, ideas, and solutions onto the situation.

Resting and being grounded in not knowing can be very powerful. There can be wholesome not knowing. Some schools of Buddhism put tremendous emphasis on cultivating a not-knowing mind. Sometimes it can be called a "beginner's mind." The value of not knowing is not that we become stupid and uninformed, but rather we see things freshly. We are willing to learn and see anew what is here, so there are new possibilities. We become better informed by what is happening. And we are not caught up in suffering around not knowing.

It is not a crime to not know. I have met people who were in difficult situations and did not know what was happening. They did not know what to do, but they said so. They were comfortable with not knowing and not understanding. This had a huge impact on me. It inspired me: "Wow, you can do that? You don't have to have answers? You don't have to have solutions?"

Just sit there and not know. Take a stand, not necessarily in not knowing, but rather in not needing to pretend that it is otherwise. Take a stand in not needing to rush ahead and make up or figure things out.

This willingness to not know is phenomenally powerful. It can be a protection from delusion and confusion. I think there is a lot of pressure in our society to know – to have explanations, to assign blame, to live in a fantasy world of what brings happiness. People spin tales of where the danger is and who the dangerous people are – it is delusive. There is pressure to go along with that current of delusion. Instead, we can step back and not know. We can be willing to be comfortable with not knowing. Then it is harder to get swept up in the collective delusion of the people around us or the pressure to do something.

The possibility of not knowing can be a healthy alternative to delusion. It can open doors. It can give us a new perspective. This not knowing can free something very profound within us.

Another healthy, wholesome corollary to delusion is a commitment to building our lives from our lived experience in the moment. Dedicating ourselves to the present moment is where we discover how to live a wise life. We can start seeing here and now how we suffer, how we create our suffering, how we get caught in desires and fear, how we strain, how we get contracted, and how we get resistant.

We can be committed to finding a way to be here without believing that the way forward is through suffering. For example, you might use hostility to feel safe in a challenging situation. Chasing people away might be effective for that situation, but the hostility harms you. Or, thinking you need to become wealthy, you engage in the greedy pursuit of wealth. That is a tremendous amount of suffering for your heart.

The opposite corollary to confusion and delusion is to be committed to discovering how to live a life not built on things that cause suffering to ourselves in the moment. We can do that with a sense of purpose: "This gives clarity. This is important." It is not the final answer to everything, but it can be a foundation for our lives. It is a place where we can sit, be present, and know, "Now I'm contributing suffering to my life," "Now I'm not." We can be strongly committed to that.

I was thinking this morning about a time when I was 14 years old. I had met an attractive young woman my age. All I knew was her first name and the street she lived on. My friend and I went through the town telephone book and called everyone who lived on her street. Halfway through, we finally found her. I share this because of the dedication and focus of that quest to find her.

If you could use one-tenth of that dedication to track yourself, you might not get swept up in the delusion and suffering of needing to know and straining to have solutions. Dedicate yourself to staying in that place where you do not succumb to movements of mind and heart that cause you suffering here and now. A wonderful life can be built from that dedication. It is not a life built on delusion, fantasy, expectations, or abstract ideas. It is a life built on being willing not to know about so many things. You track and stay close to that place where you do not contribute to your suffering.

May you not get caught in delusion and confusion. May you discover the wonderfulness of a not-knowing mind. As you go through the day, you might see if some of your ideas, explanations, and projections might somehow have some tinge of delusion or confusion. Is there some tinge of, "Maybe it's not quite accurate what I'm assuming here"?

Instead of assuming things, practice not knowing. Practice the kind of not knowing that does not ignore what is happening but allows you to look upon it with fresh eyes. See what is actually going on, including what is going on in you. Not knowing what is out there and not being confused by it or caught up in it, you are more likely to see what you are doing to contribute to your suffering. This exploration will probably save you from much delusion. Thank you.