

Delusion (2 of 5) Understanding Delusion

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Gil Fronsdal

This is the second talk on *moha*, usually translated as “delusion.” Today, I’ll talk a little bit more specifically about what the Buddhist understanding of it is. *Moha* is considered to be one of the three roots, or three origins, for everything human beings do that is unwholesome, unhelpful, or harmful.

In the tradition of early Buddhism, *moha* is said to be present in every unethical or unwholesome act someone does. What unwholesome implies here is that it’s unwholesome for the person who does the act, and it is unhelpful or unwholesome for the person who might be the recipient of the act. If we’re doing something that’s not healthy for ourselves – psychologically, heartfully – then there’s some degree of delusion in that action of speech or the body.

The word *moha* (delusion) is related to a cluster of concepts or mental activities. Maybe the biggest one, in Buddhism, is ignorance. Ignorance, not in the sense of not knowing something (e.g., you didn’t read enough books to learn things), but rather, is more like ignoring. It’s a little bit more volitional. It’s almost like choosing not to know. Or allowing the conditions of delusion that interfere with knowing to be present.

Delusion is also related to bewilderment, confusion, and living in the world not quite understanding what’s happening – being bewildered. It’s also related to foolishness. The most common (and essential) way in which the Buddha talks about someone being spiritually mature is that they are wise. And those who are immature are foolish. That divide is not the divide between saint and sinner, but rather, the divide between the wise and the foolish.

Some people might feel it is unfortunate to make this distinction, but the difference between a sinner and a fool is that to be a sinner, in the way it’s often used in the West, is to be beyond redemption. That’s what a person is. But when you’re a fool, it’s possible to become wise. Foolishness is a temporary phenomenon. Partly, what we’re doing is becoming wise. We are overcoming delusion.

Now, the word “delusion,” in English (and *moha* in Pali), implies that the mind is creating ideas not based on reality. Either we have projected some false ideas and fantasies onto how things are, or we’re just living in a world of fantasy that has no connection to the world around us. It’s something the mind is doing. Thoughts, ideas, maybe some degree of feeling, are involved in contributing to this world of delusion.

One of the very useful, I think, reference points for understanding this is the psychological word “projection.” We have ideas, biases, and prejudices, which belong to the world of ideas. They’re sometimes very intimately connected to feelings and motivations. And our biases, prejudices, and preferences are the projections we put on top of our experience. There is a whole slew of ways in which the mind is actively involved in obscuring what’s actually happening in the moment. It has created an idea of what’s happening that interferes with our direct experience.

Socially, this is very painful – when we see people through stereotypes, biases, or prejudices. Sometimes we see *ourselves* through bias and prejudice – these ideas formed by the mind. Then, these ideas are projected onto others, onto ourselves, and onto the world, obscuring our ability to see clearly. This helps us understand why ignorance is not just not knowing, but is an ignoring that happens when we have these projections, when we don’t allow ourselves to deeply see what’s really going on.

Now, in the tradition, there are a few things that are really central in our projections. One of them is projecting the hope of happiness onto things that don’t really produce happiness. We try to make ourselves happy –

sometimes even safe – with unwholesome activities: lying, stealing, cheating, and being caught up in greed or ill will. We think, somehow, that our well-being is there to be found through engaging in unwholesome activity. That's a kind of delusion because unwholesome activity always causes harm to ourselves.

Ending that projection allows us to see, actually, this is not happiness-producing. We've projected our hope for happiness onto that activity – that it was going to do something for us. So, there's the idea of projecting. Part of wisdom is to see the difference between what's wholesome and unwholesome, what's harmful and not harmful, and to become finely attuned to this difference so we really begin living in the world of what is beneficial – both for ourselves and for others.

Another important idea about projection is that we project a kind of permanence onto things that are not permanent. It might be a feeling of permanence we have for the few minutes it's there. We behave, kind of unconsciously perhaps, as if this is forever – it's always going to be a hot day, it's always going to be this way or that way.

I remember a brief period of time when I was, I think, twenty. I was having a wonderful summer. In the middle of that wonderful summer, I said to myself, "I'll never be depressed again." That was an illusion of permanence that came back to bite me because that fall, right after that wonderful summer, I was more depressed than I'd ever been. Then I had the thought, "Now I'm going to be depressed forever." That was my attitude. I didn't say those words, but the weight of it all is the weight of permanence: this is how it is.

It can be a projection, and to live under the weight of that projection causes a lot of suffering. That projection of permanence or constancy obscures how shifting and changing our experience is. There is a whole different way of being in the world when we see the inconstancy of it – its changing, shifting nature. We find how to let go and find our peace with it.

There is also the projection of identity. We all have some kind of identity – gender, nationality, all kinds of things. Even though it is nominally accurate, there's something about the act of projecting. The act of projection – holding onto it and seeing through the lens of it – can create a sense of a solid self, a permanent self, a constant kind of ideation of who we are, and what we're caught up in.

So much of what we think of as myself, my identity, is a projection. Or we're acting through a projection in relationship to it. That's a kind of delusion that obscures, in a very profound way, how we are always more dynamic, complicated, fluid – more changeable, than any projection we have of ourselves. In fact, these projections obscure a deeper capacity for awareness, aliveness, and freedom that is always going to be there.

Delusion is an activity of the mind. It's not passive ignorance, but the creation of ideas that are not accurate. We then project those ideas onto the world, or wear them as filters on our eyes, so that we see the world through those interpretations – through those ideas.

It's a wonderful thing to take those filters off. It's a wonderful thing to let go of those projections. The cost of living in the world of projections – of delusion – is a lot of stress. There's a lot of tension that comes along with it. To live without these projections, without these mind creations that we see through – our assumptions, beliefs, prejudices, biases – allows the mind to be much more relaxed and at ease. To come to that place of ease and peace is not only good – peaceful and easeful for the mind itself – but it allows us to see with the absence of delusion, the absence of *moha*. How to get to that and how to practice with delusion and come to the other side of it is the topic for tomorrow.

You might, for these next twenty-four hours, see if you can become a little more attuned or notice how ideas surface in the mind. And then, notice how those ideas become the means by which – or the filter through which – you then look at and understand what's happening. The key to this is to see it arise – see the beginning of something. Then it's easier to see it as a creation of the mind and to catch it as a kind of delusion. Thank you very much.