

The Road Less Traveled (2 of 5) Wholesome and Unwholesome

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Welcome to the second talk on The Road Less Taken. As I apply this metaphor of a fork in the forest or the road, there is a fork that leads to what is unwholesome, and a fork that leads to what is wholesome. What is the path that leads to the unwholesome? It's unwholesome mental, verbal, and physical activity that we can be involved in. What is the road to the wholesome? It is the wholesome mental, verbal, and physical activity that we engage in. It is what's happening here and now that is important. It's taking the next step on one of these two different roads.

This idea that there is a division, separation, or distinction between two very different roads to take in life is inherent in the Buddhist path and practice. The road that leads to suffering is very much tied to the world of thinking. Not that thinking is wrong or bad in and of itself, but there is a world we construct out of our thinking. If we want something too much, or if we have aggression or hostility, or if we have fear or anxiety, there is a way in which that kind of feeling can prompt a lot of thinking, imaginations, and thoughts. And those thoughts that we construct then bounce back on the rest of us.

If we're anxious about something, it's all too easy to be caught up in thoughts about anxiety – the ideas and the story, what's going to happen. Then those very stories – maybe with imagery that we create in the mind – tie back down to the body and evoke more anxiety. They reinforce the anxiety. So, the question is: What comes first, the thoughts or the anxiety?

We don't have to answer that question because it's like a chicken and egg thing. The world of thinking is often a world of abstraction, imagination, and distraction. To a great extent, that's the source for a lot of the unwholesome ways in which we live our life.

For example, if I have an idea that having a really big fancy car is going to perfect my sense of self and how people see me, and my sense of success in the world, then when I go by a car dealership and see a big fancy car, the desire for that car arises. The very kind of thought

construct of self that I'm living under is then the source for a desire for that car. That could become an obsession.

If I have the same desire to be wealthy and therefore own a wealthy car and have a wonderful kind of life with people praising me and recognizing how great I am, but then someone crashes into my car, my hostility and anger toward that person is not just because of the inconvenience of having a damaged car. My whole self-image is tied to what this damaged car means. The assault this person has done on me is not just to me as a human being, but it's me as my identity, my constructed sense of self that I'm trying to maintain. This reciprocal relationship between thinking and identity, or between thinking and desires and aversions, can become a kind of whirlpool of activity that we get caught in.

There can be another activity, which is a deeper wellspring that arises from inside that the Buddha likens not to something that is constructed by the human mind or the made-up world of thoughts. Instead, it's related to our biological life, to our deep possibility of natural movements within us, where we don't construct things, but we allow things to grow. Like a tree grows. The planting and growing of a plant is a metaphor for this inner growth that can happen deep inside. For growing a plant, we create the conditions for it to thrive, but we don't make it thrive. We don't have to make up a lot of thoughts. We almost have to quiet the thinking down, because the thoughts are just weeds that get in the way. But if we can become quiet enough to feel this deeper world come up, then beautiful things arrive.

This distinction is big in the Buddha's teaching. One of the ways that it explicitly plays out is when he contrasts what are called the five hindrances with the seven factors of awakening. The five hindrances are (1) sensual desire (in some lists it is called covetousness), (2) ill will or hostility, (3) rigidity, sloth and torpor, or numbness, (4) restlessness, agitation, and regrets, and (5) indecisiveness. I've talked about these five hindrances recently.

On the other hand, there are the seven factors of awakening, these beautiful qualities. They're the great wealth of Buddhism that the Buddha is offering you to find inside yourself. These are mindfulness, a clarity of mind that sees clearly – I'll talk more about that. Then, making effort, bringing inner vitality by which we engage in things, joy, tranquility, samadhi, and equanimity. These are states that emerge from within. They're not things that emerge from our thinking. You don't think your way into the seven factors of awakening. If you do use your thinking, you think your way out of your thoughts so that you can allow this deeper wellspring of the states to arise from within.

There is a huge contrast between the hindrances on one hand the seven factors on the other. We see where the hindrances are – they very much involve the world of constructs, thoughts, and ideas that we have about what we want from the outer world. This could be the outer world that we construct inside of ourselves, that's not really part of our deep sense of self, but the constructed world.

When the first of the five hindrances is to covet things of others, then it's clearly about the outer world. Sensual desire is also about how to get the senses met by the environment around us and have a good feeling, comfort, and pleasure. Ill will is also externalizing something. Both with desire and ill will, there's an object of attention "out there" that is the problem. Even if we're upset with something about ourselves or desire something within ourselves, we've objectified ourselves; and there's an operating principle of the mind, and

thoughts and ideas of what things are. That is the object of attention that the mind is operating under.

All five of the hindrances have a lot to do with the objectification of the world that we're living with. But a lot of that has to do with how that relates to the constructed idea of self we try to build up or defend or escape from, that somehow is coming into play in this objectification.

There's the self that wants, and how it reinforces or builds or threatens that sense of self. So again, we're into this world of objectification of thoughts and ideas. People who spend a lot of time in the hindrances spend a lot of time in thought. That's one of the reasons why the hindrances are so distracting. And why they're the hindrances. Because they hinder clarity, intimacy, being in touch with something deep within, where something deep can grow. Something deep can be born, sprout, germinate, flow, and expand within us.

The expansive states are wholesome, which the Buddha says we should cultivate, develop, expand, and bring to abundance ... to fulfill. He does not say let go of the wholesome states. He does not say to destroy them. He actually emphasizes their importance. These are states that arise from a deep place within.

The representative of the wholesome states that can arise are qualities of mindfulness. Not so much mindfulness as thoughtfulness, which is how some people interpret mindfulness. Rather, think of it more as a quiet silence, a capacity for awareness, attentiveness, and a deep silent listening to what's here. That's as natural as hearing if your ears work. And natural as seeing if your eyes see.

Then there's the clarity part: the seven factors of awakening. The word for investigation – usually the name for the second factor of awakening – is the differentiation of states, to be able to distinguish between states. What this refers to is the very thing we're talking about this week, seeing the distinction between these two paths: what's wholesome and what's unwholesome.

It is important to be able to not just see it or know it intellectually, but to really feel the unwholesome qualities, characteristics, sensations, and feelings that come with unwholesome activity of mind, speech, and body. And also to know and feel and recognize the wholesome qualities. That capacity comes from being really quiet, from awareness, being really clear and sensitive to what's happening deep inside.

That sensitivity also includes a sense of inner vitality with a sense of feeling of being alive and having a certain kind of energy. Even if we're sick, there can be a certain kind of vitality, an aliveness that actually feels like it's wholesome. It's good. And then there is joy. Not the joy that comes from thinking things which are delightful and pleasant, or imagining our fantasies are coming true. But rather a certain delight or appreciation of just being alive, just this wonderfulness of a settled, present aliveness that's not caught up in the factory of thoughts or preoccupations we have in thinking and wanting and all that. These thoughts are swirling. They are a labyrinth or a maze with no exit that spins and reinforces itself and can feel like there's no way out.

But there is a way out. Not out from – because the maze has an exit – but if we can step out of the maze. If we can quiet the mind. If we can see the end of a thought before a new thought begins and see in that very momentary gap that there's another life to be had, where we allow this deeper world to emerge. And then joy leads to becoming tranquil, calm, and peaceful.

Then the fourth factor of awakening ... I think it's the fifth. ... Then the sixth is samadhi, which is a state of being organized and coordinated. All the different parts of us become cooperative. We become a cooperative entity. It's usually called unification and a state of wholeness. Then there's equanimity: a profound experience of peace where we feel happy and delighted, where we're not going to react to anything. We're not going to be pushed around by anything. There's a peace that's stable.

This distinction between the wholesome and the unwholesome – these two different operating systems – is that one operates very much in the world of thinking, ideas, fantasies, and commentary, and the other at its root operates under something not with thoughts, but rather with deep inner sensations and feelings that we can tap into, that can come in to spread out to grow within us, what is wholesome within us. A lot of what we learn to do is to let go of the hindrances so that we get out of the way of the deeper wisdom that resides within us.

Thank you.