

Bhante Sanathavihari

*Right Effort: Understanding an Often Overlooked Mental Discipline on the Eightfold Path*

Week Three: “Eliminating Unwholesome States”

November 19, 2022



Hello, and welcome to Week 3 on wholesome effort, or *samma-vayama*. In previous episodes, we covered the importance of *samma-vayama* within the noble eightfold path, and in the last episode, we covered the importance of protecting the senses to avoid unwholesome states arising in the mind.

But, for the moment, we can't avoid all unwholesome states arising in the mind. So what do we do when we do find ourselves experiencing these unwholesome states? This is called *pahana*, or removal or elimination, which is what we're going to be focusing on in this video.

I would like you to think about this as selective thinking. What do I mean by selective thinking? Instead of thinking or entertaining whatever thought arises in the mind, we actively generate and choose to think the thoughts we want to think instead of thinking whatever thought appears in the mind.

So how do we do this? Let's say we see something. We talked about how unwholesome states may arise through one of the senses. We might see something that triggers an unpleasant feeling, and then from that we get an unwholesome state that arises in the mind. How do we deal with that unwholesome state or experience, *akusala-dhamma*, or unwholesome thought, *akusala-vitakka*?

First, to understand what is wholesome and unwholesome and what the Buddha had to say about different ways of thinking, I want to focus on three particular ways of thinking because these particular ways of thinking are part of the eightfold path. In the second part of the eightfold path, *samma-sankappa*, which is sometimes called right thinking or right motivation, the Buddha gives us three thoughts that we can focus on.

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The first is a thought of renunciation, *nekkhamma*. The second is *avyapada*, a thought of non-hatred or non-ill will. This may sound too abstract, but it just means a thought of *metta*, lovingkindness or benevolence. The third is thought of *avihimsa*, nonviolence or non-cruelty, which is a thought of compassion. These are the three types of thoughts that we need to be focusing on to overcome unwholesome thoughts.

There are so many other ways you can do it, but I’m going to be focusing on these particular three thoughts in order to connect to the second step of the noble eightfold path and to enrich our whole practice of the noble eightfold path.

There’s a sutta in the *Majjhima Nikaya* called the *Dvedhavitakka Sutta*, or the sutta on two types of thinking. It’s a very interesting sutta because the Buddha reflects on before he became a Buddha. He says, “When I was only a *bodhisatta*...” *Bodhisatta* means someone aspiring to be a buddha, particularly someone on the path to becoming a *sammasambuddha*.

The Buddha was very interesting. He was conducting experiments in his mind, and one of the first experiments that he conducted was that he actually meditated on greediness, hatred, and violence. When he thought about these thoughts or let those thoughts play out in his mind, he noticed that it was bad. He didn’t feel good. He wasn’t getting further in his spiritual quest, and he was getting even further away from what he was trying to achieve.

So then he says, “I’m going to put those thoughts aside. Putting those aside, let me cultivate the opposite kind of thoughts: instead of greed, a thought of renunciation, or letting go; instead of anger, a thought of lovingkindness; and instead of cruelty or violence, a thought of compassion or kindness towards others.”

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When he practiced this way, he noticed that he felt better, and he was able to overcome thoughts of greed, hatred, and cruelty.

Here in this sutta, we see two things. I’ll bring it back to what I said in the first video: *sabbapapassa akaranam*, avoiding the bad, avoiding the bad thoughts, greedy thoughts, angry thoughts, and cruel thoughts; and *ku salassa upasampada*, generating wholesome thoughts, or thoughts of renunciation, lovingkindness, and compassion.

We can also connect this to the first two verses of the *Dhammapada*. As the Buddha tells us in the first verse of the *Dhammapada*, “If you think in an unskillful way, then suffering follows you.” Then he says, “But if you think in a skillful way, happiness follows you.” Happiness will come to those who think in the proper way, the wholesome way, which is thinking thoughts of renunciation, lovingkindness, and compassion. That is *ku salassa upasampada*, generating the good.

So how do we do this? Well, the Buddha gave us five ways to do this, but I’m just going to focus on the first one, and then I’ll share with you the other sutta, which you can look at at your own convenience. This is the following sutta to the sutta on the two kinds of thoughts, the *Dvedhavitakka Sutta*, the *Vitakka-Santhana Sutta*. *Vitakka* means thoughts, and *santhana* means to calm or tranquilize the thoughts.

So how do we get over unwholesome thoughts? Well, we calm them down. We don’t try to fight them or resist them or push them away. It’s very hard not to think a thought that you’re not supposed to think. If you say, “Don’t think of an elephant,” you start thinking about an elephant. It’s very hard.

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So instead of doing that, you think of something skillful, something nice, something pleasant, something pleasurable, even, something that’s going to bring tranquility and relaxation (*passaddhi*), something that’s going to bring joy and rapture (*piti*), and something that’s going to bring happiness (*sukha*), which is letting go, lovingkindness, and compassion.

So in the *Vitakka-Santhana Sutta*, the Calming Thought Sutta, the Buddha says that the first way is that when there is an unwholesome state or experience or image or thought in the mind, a meditator or a *bhikkhu* replaces it with a skillful, wholesome one. When you feel thoughts of anger, what can you do? Think of thoughts of lovingkindness and benevolence and goodwill towards others. When there’s a thought of cruelty or violence, then you replace it with a thought of compassion and kindness.

This is the way, and I really want to focus on the taste of this. It’s not just about saying in your mind, “May all beings be well, happy, comfortable, and peaceful. May all beings be well, happy, comfortable, and peaceful.” Then we’re just parroting. A parrot doesn’t really understand what it’s saying; it’s just saying something. The important part of it is that thinking in this way and using this concept will trigger that blameless happiness, as I talked about earlier. It will trigger *passaddhi*, *piti*, and *sukha*, or tranquility, joy, and happiness, in the mind.

Thoughts of renunciation and letting go feel very good. It’s a blameless pleasure because they’re not dependent on sensuality. They don’t bring harm to anyone else: to myself, to others, or to both. So we need to rejoice, *anumodana*. We need to rejoice in these wholesome actions. Even thinking in this way is a meritorious deed. It brings a lot of merit, or *punna*. It creates a lot of *kusala-kamma*, good actions, because thinking is also one of the actions.

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As I said earlier in the other videos, there are three types of actions: bodily, verbal, and mental. For mental actions or mental karmas, *kusala-kamma* is generated by thinking thoughts of renunciation, lovingkindness, and compassion. And when we sit and practice and think like this, we really want to get the taste of it. We want to feel it in the body. We want to feel that lovingkindness and compassion and connect with it and soak it up and let it cover our whole body. You can indulge in it because there’s nothing bad about it. No one’s getting hurt. In fact, it’s going to help you speak kindly and behave kindly and be in this world in a more peaceful, compassionate way.

So don’t be afraid of any pleasant experiences that arise. Actually focus on that pleasantness. Focus on that feeling of joy. Focus on that experience, and then you can just leave the thinking behind. You can push the cognitive aspect of the practice of “May I be well, may other beings be well, may they be free from suffering” to the background and get into the experiential part of lovingkindness and compassion. By doing that, not only will you be able to replace unwholesome states in the mind, but you’ll also be able to protect yourself because when you’re in this wholesome experience, it is very difficult for an unwholesome experience to take over.

Not only that, but you’ll also be combining this with your previous practice of protecting the senses, *sanvara*, so then there’ll be two things working for you so you don’t experience unwholesome states. One is going to be protecting your senses so you’re not triggered and taken in by them, leading to the arising of unwholesome states in the mind. The other is that you’re going to be actively removing them. While you’re doing that removal, the wholesomeness will pervade your entire experience, and it will be like a shield that will protect you from the unwholesomeness contaminating the natural, pure state of the mind.

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So now I want to touch upon what we’re going to be talking about next week in the next episode, which is going to be the two parts of right effort. The first one was protecting the senses, and today we talked about elimination of unwholesome thoughts. In the next episode, we’re going to talk about cultivating wholesome states by working with the seven factors of awakening and overcoming the five hindrances and maintaining wholesome states in the mind when they’re there. For that part, I’m going to share some of my own personal experience of how I go about maintaining this practice not only of generating wholesome states but also of avoiding and eliminating unwholesome states in the mind. I hope that you can join us for the next episode.

Thank you.