

Notes for Sravasti Abbey Thursday class on mental factors July-Aug., 2019

From *Samsara, Nirvana, and Buddha Nature* by The Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron, pages 137-139:

In general, virtue is that which brings an agreeable result and nonvirtue is that which brings a disagreeable result....

What does *virtue* refer to? Asanga's *Compendium of Knowledge* speaks of five types of virtue:

(1) *Natural virtues* include the eleven virtuous mental factors—faith, integrity, consideration for others, nonattachment, nonhatred, nonconfusion, joyous effort, pliancy, conscientiousness, nonharmfulness, and equanimity. These are called natural virtues because their nature is virtuous; they naturally bring pleasing results.

(2) *Related virtues* are primary consciousnesses and mental factors that become virtuous because they are accompanied by virtuous mental factors. When compassion is present, the mental primary consciousness and the mental factors of intention, feeling, and so forth that accompany it become virtuous.

(3) *Subsequently related virtues* are seeds and latencies of virtue established by virtuous consciousnesses and mental factors and virtuous actions; for example, the karmic seed created by the mind of generosity. Seeds and latencies are not actual virtues; this is an example of the name of the cause (the virtuous path of action) being given to the effect (the seeds and latencies of virtue.)

(4) *Virtues due to motivation* are physical and verbal actions motivated by the naturally virtuous mental factors. The action of making a donation to a charity is a physical virtue when done with a generous motivation.

Vaibhāṣikas and Prasāṅgikas assert that virtue includes both minds and forms. They consider virtues due to motivation—physical and verbal actions motivated by virtuous mental states—to be virtues. Since Prātimokṣa precepts are form according to these two schools, the precepts are virtuous forms. According to Sautrantikas, Cittamātrins, and Svatantrikas, only minds can be virtues.

(5) *Ultimate virtue* is emptiness because realizing it eradicates all obscurations and enables actual virtue to flourish. However, emptiness is not an actual virtue because it is permanent and itself does not bring results.

This list of virtues is not exhaustive. Other virtues include, but are not limited to, a buddha's speech and the thirty-two signs and eighty marks of a buddha.

Even a moment of a natural virtue can have far-reaching results. When the mental factor of conscientiousness arises in the mind, the primary consciousness and mental factors associated with it all become virtuous. The physical and verbal actions done with that motivation are also virtuous. While the karmic seeds of those actions are neutral, they carry the potency for agreeable results to arise, and for that reason they are subsequently related virtues although they are not actual virtues.

Commensurate with the five virtues, there are five nonvirtues:

(1) Natural nonvirtues are mental factors such as attachment, anger, jealousy, and resentment that are nonvirtuous by nature. [On p. 110-111, the book says: "Not all

afflictions are non-virtuous; by themselves, ignorance, view of a personal identity, and view of extremes are neutral. They are not nonvirtuous because by themselves they lack the capacity to produce pain. In addition, these three do not always give rise to nonvirtuous mental states.... All afflictions of the desire realm are nonvirtuous {except for those three}. All afflictions of the upper realms—the form and formless realms—are neutral. A degree of intensity is needed for an affliction to be nonvirtuous. Since the afflictions of beings in the upper realms are refined, they lack the intensity required to create nonvirtuous karma that ripens into painful experiences.”]

(2) Related nonvirtues are the mental primary consciousness and mental factors that accompany a naturally nonvirtuous mental factor.

(3) Subsequently related nonvirtues are latencies left on the mind by nonvirtuous minds and mental factors. They are not actual nonvirtues but are ethically neutral.

(4) Nonvirtues due to motivation are physical and verbal actions done with a nonvirtuous motivation.

(5) Ultimate nonvirtue is, for example, saṃsarā, which breeds nonvirtue although it is not an actual nonvirtue.

The Six Root Afflictions (from *Samsara, Nirvana, and Buddha Nature*, p. 64-86)

A general explanation of afflictions

Asanga identifies [afflictions] in his *Compendium of Knowledge*:

An affliction is defined as a phenomenon that, when it arises, is disturbing in character and that, through arising, disturbs the mindstream.

Afflictions are distinct mental factors that when they arise in our minds, cause our minds to be unpeaceful and unsubdued. Afflictions may be emotions, attitudes, or views, and they usually arise without our choice. The three principal afflictions are ignorance, anger, and attachment.

1. Attachment

Attachment is a mental factor that, based on distorted attention that exaggerates the attractiveness of a polluted object (an object under the influence of ignorance [or its latencies]), wishes for and takes a strong interest in it. The object could be a material object, a person or a place, or it could be praise or an idea. Attachment functions to produce discontent and to perpetuate the cycle of existence. Looking at our own experiences, we can see how true this is.

This is a general description of attachment; there are many degrees and variations of attachment. Some instances of attachment that arise in daily life are greed that wants more than our fair share, attachment to our ideas that leads to the stubborn insistence on being right, attachment to reputation, praise, pleasing sensory experiences, and so on. We also become attached to people, which leads to having unrealistic expectations of them or of our relationships with them. This in turn leads to disappointment and friction in those relationships, and feelings of bitterness or betrayal when the relationships don't continue as expected.

Covetousness is a coarse form of attachment. As one of the ten nonvirtues, covetousness easily leads to actions that directly harm others, such as stealing or unwise sexual relationships. Other afflictions derived from attachment are miserliness that doesn't want to share our possessions, haughtiness that is attached to our good fortune, and agitation that distracts the mind to desirable objects during meditation.

Attachment and aspiration are distinct mental factors with different functions. Although both are attracted to their object, attachment is based on distorted attention that exaggerates its attractiveness or projects good qualities that are not there. Seeing the object inaccurately, attachment clings to it and does not want to be separated from it. We become attached to people, money and possessions, love and approval, good food and other pleasurable sensory experiences, and so on, and are certain that the good qualities we see inhere in that person or object. If our perception were accurate, everyone should see the person or object as we do and desire it as much as we do. Clearly that is not the case.

Aspiration also focuses on its intended object and takes a strong interest in it, but it is not necessarily based on exaggerating or projecting the object's good qualities. The aspirations seeking a good rebirth, liberation, and full awakening are based on realistically seeing the beneficial qualities that are present. In his *Abhidharma* text, the Tibetan scholar Chim Jampelyang (ca. 1245-1325) clarified that the aspirations or desire for a fortunate rebirth, liberation, or awakening are virtuous; they are not attachment.

Furthermore, Vasubandhu said that objects giving rise to afflictions are polluted. Since buddhahood and the Three Jewels are unpolluted, they cannot induce afflictions in others' minds. If someone thinks, "When I'm a buddha, everyone will respect me," he suffers from attachment to reputation, not attachment to buddhahood.

Craving is a form of attachment and is usually seen as nonvirtuous. However, "craving" can refer to other forms of attachment that may be temporarily useful. For example, in the case of someone who is miserly and doesn't want to part with their possessions, the craving to be wealthy in a future life can motivate him to counteract his stinginess and become generous in this life. Even though this craving seeks happiness in *samsāra*, it is a step up from craving the happiness of only this life and thus is considered virtuous. For someone who lives an ethically corrupt life, desire to be reborn as a deva can induce him to relinquish harmful behaviors and keep precepts. Craving for the bliss of samadhi in the form and formless realms can inspire someone to cultivate concentration in order to be reborn in those realms. These types of attachment are useful in those specific situations. However, for someone intent on liberation, those same cravings are hindrances because they are enamored with *samsāric* pleasures.

Ananda says that based on the craving for liberation—our highest spiritual aspiration, which is certainly virtuous—the unwanted forms of craving can be eliminated (AN 4.159, AN 2.145). The post-canonical Pali text *Nettipakaraṇa* speaks of virtuous and nonvirtuous forms of craving and confirms that virtuous craving leads to the end of craving. For example, one monastic learns that another has become an arhat, and with desire to attain arhatship too, she practices diligently and becomes an arhat, one who has abandoned craving. Similarly, a monastic motivated by arrogance thinks, "I am as capable as that person who attained arhatship." This propels him to make effort and he becomes an arhat, someone who has abandoned arrogance. This is similar to the idea of taking attachment on the path in Tantrayana. Here attachment is employed to make

manifest the subtlest mind and use it to realize emptiness and destroy all obscurations, including attachment.

However, how do we reconcile these examples with statement of Nagarjuna, the great second century Indian sage who spread the Madhyamaka (Middle Way) view (RA 20ab)?

Attachment, anger, confusion,
and the karma that arises from them are nonvirtuous.

“Attachment” here refers to selfish desire for material possessions, praise, good reputation, and pleasant sensory experiences. Such attachment often leads to nonvirtuous actions, while aspiration for the happiness of future lives can lead to virtuous actions. Anger and hatred, however, can never be the motivating factors for virtue; they always lead to nonvirtue. Here confusion refers not to the self-grasping ignorance that is the root of *samsarā*, but to the ignorance that does not understand karma and its effects. While self-grasping ignorance can also precede virtuous actions, the ignorance that has a skewed view of ethical conduct will lead to mental, verbal, and physical nonvirtuous paths of action.

Similarly there are different ways to be “attached” to a beautiful statue of the Buddha. One person wants a beautiful statue to inspire his daily meditation practice. Another person wants the same statue to show off to his friends or sell for a profit. These different motivations will bring different results in the present life and in future lives.

In short, “attachment” may have diverse meanings in different contexts. This is illustrated by the four types of clinging mentioned in the teaching *Parting from the Four Attachments* that Manjushri gave to the great Sakya lama, Sachen Kunga Nyingpo:

If you cling to this life, you are not a true spiritual practitioner.
If you cling to *samsarā*, you do not have renunciation.
If you cling to your own self-interest, you have no bodhicitta.
If there is grasping, you do not have the view.

The first line indicates clinging to the happiness of this life, which is invariably an obstacle for Dharma practice. The presence or absence of this type of attachment is the demarcation between an action that is Dharma and one that is not. The second, clinging to cyclic existence, prevents us from embarking on the path to liberation, although it could lead to happiness within *samsāra* as exemplified by the person who is attached to the bliss of *samadhi* and is born in the form or formless realms.

Clinging to our self-interest prevents us from entering the bodhisattva path, although it could support the attainment of arhatship—for example, by a person who craves to be free of *samsara* and seeks his own liberation alone. The most deeply ingrained attachment is grasping inherent existence, which prevents the attainment of both liberation and full awakening.

The Tibetan term *chags pa* may also be translated as “attachment” and is sometimes used to indicate strong affection and care. In this sense, buddhas are “attached” to sentient beings, indicating that due to their strong compassion, they will never abandon sentient beings and will continuously work to lead them to temporal and ultimate

happiness. This feeling of closeness and care that buddhas have for sentient beings is very different from attachment in the minds of sentient beings.

2. Anger

Anger is a mental factor that, referring to one of three objects, agitates the mind by being unable to bear or through wanting to harm the object or person. The three objects can be expanded to nine: (1-3) he harmed me in the past, he is harming me now, he will harm me in the future; (4-6) she harmed my dear friend or relative, is harming them, will harm them; (7-9) he helped my enemies, is helping them now, will help them in the future. Here *enemy* includes people we don't like or disagree with as well as those who harm us or interfere with our happiness). Anger functions to disturb our minds. As the basis for harming ourselves and others, it involves us in destructive actions and increases suffering in the world.

Anger is based on distorted attention that exaggerates or projects defects on people and things. Our minds create many “reasons” to validate our anger and gives us a false sense of power in situations where we feel afraid or hurt. Anger has many forms, and several other afflictions are derived from it, including irritation, annoyance, frustration, hatred, rebelliousness, belligerence, resentment, vengeance, spite, cruelty, violence, and jealousy.

Behind each episode of anger are many “stories”—conceptualizations proliferated by our minds—in which we impute motivations to people that they do not have, interpret actions from our own standpoint, and favor our own concerns while ignoring or demeaning the concerns of others. Although we may try to justify, rationalize, or deny our anger, the truth is that we are unhappy when our minds are overcome by anger. Sometimes we vent our anger to friends, hoping that they will take our side. (If they didn't, how could they be our friends?). Other times we speak or act in ways that harm others. Here we can see the relationship of attachment and anger: the more distorted attention has exaggerated someone's good qualities, increasing the strength of our attachment, the more distorted attention exaggerates that person's bad qualities when he or she doesn't meet our expectations. We become discontent, and this mental unhappiness inflames our anger, resulting in aggressive behavior that breaks the trust of the people we care about the most. Anger is a mental state; it is not the behavior. While some of us may not think of ourselves as angry because we don't throw things or scream at others, inside our anger rages. In these cases, ignoring the other person or refusing to have anything to do with them may be considered harmful behavior. We should not be fooled thinking that passive behavior like withdrawing from a situation and refusing to communicate indicates a lack of anger.

Anger may also be a reaction to fear. When fearful we usually feel powerless, whereas anger gives us a false sense of power by sending adrenaline coursing through our body. Although anger may sometimes seem to make us courageous, our behavior when angry seldom remedies the problem and usually makes it worse.

3. Arrogance

Arrogance is a mental factor that, based on the view of a personal identity that misapprehends how the I or mine exists, strongly grasps an inflated image of ourselves. It

functions to prevent us from learning and increasing our virtue and causes us to disrespect or denigrate others. Vasubandhu mentions seven types of arrogance:

1. Arrogance thinking “I am superior” in relation to someone who is “inferior.” In this and the next two forms of arrogance, we compare ourselves with others in terms of wealth, looks, knowledge, social standing, athletic ability, fame, and other factors.
2. Arrogance thinking, “I am superior” in relation to someone who is our equal.
3. Arrogance thinking, “I am superior” in relation to someone who is better than us.
4. Arrogance that regards our aggregates and thinks, “I.” This is also called the *conceit of I am (asmimāna)*. Based on self-grasping, we believe ourselves to be inherently existent and very important.
5. Arrogance that thinks we have good qualities that we don’t have.
6. Arrogance thinking we are just a little bit inferior to someone who is really wonderful. We may think, “In this group of esteemed people, I am the least qualified,” implying that although we are less than those who are experts, we are definitely better than the majority of other people. It also claims status by being associated with someone who is better than us: “I am the disciple of a truly great spiritual master.”
7. Arrogance thinking our faults are virtues; for example, an ethically degenerate person thinks he is upstanding and righteous.

In the *Precious Garland* Nagarjuna (RA 407-412) delineates seven types of arrogance in a slightly different way, although the meaning is generally the same as above. The one exception is the arrogance of inferiority. Here Nagarjuna describes it as the arrogance of disparaging ourselves and thinking that we are useless and incapable. The Pali tradition agrees with Nagarjuna’s gloss.

(1) Concerning these, the [first] is called *arrogance*;
it is where one thinks of oneself
as even inferior to the inferior, equal to the equal,
or greater than or equal to the inferior.

(2) It is *presumptive arrogance* for one to presume
that one is equal to someone who is better.

(3) If one presumes oneself to be
even better than one’s betters,
this is *arrogance beyond arrogance*;
thinking oneself to be even loftier than the lofty.
It is excessively bad,
like developing sores on top of one’s boils.

(4) The five empty aggregates
are called the [*aggregates*] *subject to clinging*.
When one apprehends them as I,
this is called the *conceit of thinking “I am.”*

(5) To presume that one has attained a result that one has not attained is to have *conceited arrogance*.

(6) The wise know that boasting about one's negative deeds is *erroneous arrogance*.

(7) Deriding oneself, thinking, "I cannot manage," is the *arrogance of inferiority*.
Such are the seven forms of arrogance, in brief.

Arrogance blocks us from gaining new qualities; when we believe we are already top-notch, we are not receptive to learning. Instead we remain complacent, or even smug, without endeavoring to cultivate virtuous qualities. Arrogance due to our Dharma knowledge or accomplishments does not plague beginners; at that time we are aware of how little we know and how much we need to practice. But after we have studied and practiced for a while, arrogance can easily set in and arrest our spiritual growth.

It is important to discriminate between arrogance and self-confidence. Arrogance is often a cover for insecurity, whereas self-confidence acknowledges our abilities without inflating them. Self-confident people have no need to boast of their achievements. Self-confidence, an essential factor on the spiritual path, should be nurtured. Having the thought, "As I progressively practice the path, I'll be able to accomplish all the bodhisattva activities" is a helpful and necessary attitude; it is not arrogance. Awareness of our potential boosts our enthusiasm to engage in Dharma study and practice. Similarly, rejoicing at our virtue with a sense of satisfaction, thinking, "I feel good because I kept my precepts in a challenging situation" is not arrogance; it's a way of reinforcing our virtue.

4. Ignorance

Ignorance is an afflictive state of unknowing brought about by the mind's lack of clarity regarding the nature of things such as the four truths, Three Jewels, and karma and its effects. It functions as the basis and root of all other afflictions and the afflictive actions and rebirths they produce. This is a general definition of ignorance accepted by all Buddhist tenet systems. However, each system has its own unique definition as well. Furthermore, the meaning of ignorance differs according to the context; some of these meanings follow. Unless otherwise noted, they accord with the Prasangikas' view, which may or may not be shared by other systems. As we delve into the correct view of emptiness later in the series, the meanings of ignorance in the various schools will be clarified. Ignorance (*avidyā*) is often, but not always, synonymous with confusion (*moha*).

1. *Ignorance that is a mental factor* is ignorance as defined above.
2. *Ignorance of selflessness*, in the meaning common to all Buddhist tenet schools, does not understand the selflessness of persons.
3. *Ignorance of the ultimate truth* does not know the mode of existence of all persons and phenomena. This meaning is accepted by the Cittamatra and Mdhyamaka

schools. When this ignorance gives rise to afflictions that produce karma, which in turn projects rebirths in saṃsarā, it is also ignorance that is the first link of dependent origination (#6).

4. *Ignorance of karma and its effects* underlies all destructive actions, especially those that lead to unfortunate rebirths. It is not simply not knowing about karma and its effects, but either strong disbelief in it or temporary disregard for it. This ignorance cannot discern virtuous from nonvirtuous actions, does not accept that happiness comes from virtuous actions and unhappiness from nonvirtuous actions, or does not fully believe this. For example, under the influence of this ignorance we don't see the faults of engaging in business deals that deprive others of what is rightly theirs. We may generally believe in karma and its effects, but when given the opportunity for personal gain, we justify lying to obtain what we like (see #5).
5. *Ignorance that is one of the three poisons* of ignorance, attachment, and animosity is one of the three basic factors spurring the creation destructive karma. This is ignorance of karma and its effects. Often translated as “confusion,” it accompanies all nonvirtuous mental states and is a cause of unfortunate rebirths.
6. *Ignorance that is the first link of dependent origination* starts a new set of twelve links that leads to rebirth in saṃsarā. Tenets systems have different assertions about this ignorance. According to the Prasangikas, it grasps our own I and mine as inherently existent, which is based on grasping our aggregates as inherently existent.
7. *Self-grasping ignorance* grasps persons and phenomena as inherently existent. It first grasps the aggregates as inherently existent, and on that basis grasps the person to be inherently existent. Self-grasping ignorance is synonymous with ignorance grasping inherent existence, ignorance grasping true existence, ignorance grasping things to exist from their own side, and so on. Sometimes when used loosely, “self-grasping ignorance” may refer to grasping a self-sufficient substantially existent person.
8. *Ignorance of the four distorted conceptions* grasps the impermanent as permanent, that which is duḥkha by nature as pleasurable, the unattractive as beautiful, and that which lacks a self as having one. This description is accepted by all tenets systems.
9. In the Pali tradition ignorance is explained as not knowing the four truths—the aggregates, their origin, cessation, and the way to that cessation (SN 22.135)—past and future lives, and dependent arising. In specific contexts, it is described as not knowing the impermanent nature of the aggregates (SN 22.126); not understanding the gratification, danger, and escape with respect to the five aggregates (SN 22.129); and so forth.¹ In all these cases, true knowledge—the mind that understands these clearly, as they are—is the opposite.

Vasubandhu states that ignorance (see #1) accompanies all afflictions.² Prasangikas assert that self-grasping ignorance provokes coarse afflictions but does not accompany them because the two have different functions. Self-grasping ignorance grasps its object as

¹ *Gratification* is the pleasure experienced by contact with the aggregates. *Danger* is the decay of the aggregates that leaves us disappointed. *Escape* is giving up desire for the aggregates, wisely freeing ourselves from the afflictions that bind us to duḥkha.

² A primary consciousness has several mental factors that *accompany* or are *concomitant* with it, meaning that they share five similarities: they have the same basis, observed object, aspect, time, and entity. In this case, ignorance is a mental factor accompanying the mental primary consciousness and thus shares these five similarities with it. See *The Foundation of Buddhist Practice*, chapter 3.

inherently existent, while attachment craves an object seen as attractive and desirable. Self-grasping ignorance arises first and attachment follows. Because they perform different functions and do not occur at the same time, Prasangikas say self-grasping ignorance and attachment do not share the same primary mind and do not accompany each other.

However, they say that ignorance can accompany subtle afflictions because subtle attachment and anger have an element of grasping phenomena as inherently existent. Subtle attachment grasps the object as inherently desirable and craves to possess it. Subtle anger grasps the object as inherently undesirable and craves to be separated from it. These subtle afflictions are obstacles to attaining nirvāṇa, but do not necessarily hinder having a good rebirth. The lower schools do not consider subtle afflictions to prevent liberation because they assert inherent existence.

According to Prasangikas, ignorance (see #3, 7) grasps persons and phenomena as inherently existent. Grasping the self as self-sufficient substantially existent is also a form of ignorance, but is not the ignorance that is the root of saṃsāra. The ignorance grasping inherent existence arises first, followed by the ignorance grasping the self as self-sufficient substantially existent. The former does not accompany the latter, because they grasp their object differently and do not occur simultaneously: the former grasps the self to be inherently existent, the latter holds it to be self-sufficient substantially existent. Similarly, in cases when grasping a self-sufficient substantially existent person causes anger to arise, it does not accompany anger due to the different ways they grasp their object.

Technically speaking, self-grasping ignorance and self-grasping are not the same. *Self-grasping ignorance* refers to the mental factor of ignorance that grasps inherent existence, while *self-grasping* refers to the entire mental state—the primary consciousness and its accompanying mental factors that include self-grasping ignorance. In other words, when ignorance grasping inherent existence accompanies a mental state, all aspects of that mental state grasp inherent existence.

However, sometimes self-grasping and self-grasping ignorance are used interchangeably. In this case, the speaker's purpose is not to distinguish the mental factor from the entire mental state, but to identify inherent existence and how we grasp objects and people to exist in this way.

As you can see, the topic of ignorance is complex and we need a lot of wisdom to understand it!