Two Kinds of Thought - read by Finola O'Siochru

Noirin Sheahan · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Noirin Sheahan · 40:36

Tonight I'd like to look at one of the Buddha's teachings which addresses something we all enjoy very much: thinking.

The Sutta is called "Two Kinds of Thought," sometimes known as the simile of the cowherd. Here are the opening words:

Because before my enlightenment, when I was still only an unenlightened bodhisattva, it occurred to me, suppose that I divide my thoughts into two classes. Then I set on one side thoughts of sensual desire, thoughts of ill will, and thoughts of cruelty. And I set on the other side thoughts of renunciation, thoughts of non-ill will, and thoughts of non-cruelty.

And as I abided thus, diligent, ardent and resolute, a thought of sensual desire arose in me. I understood thus: this thought of sensual desire has arisen in me. This leads to my own affliction, to others' affliction, and to the affliction of both. It obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties, and leads away from Nibbana.

When I considered, this leads to my own affliction, the thought subsided in me. When I considered, this leads to others' affliction, it subsided in me. When I considered, this leads to the affliction of both, it subsided in me. When I considered, this obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties and leads away from Nibbana, it subsided in me.

He then goes on to say the same about thoughts of ill-will and thoughts of cruelty.

Our first task is to recognise thoughts of sensual desire. These would be prompting us to get more of the pleasures of the five senses and get away from their painful aspects. I'm also going to include the sixth sense of the mind here, as it's a huge area of sense desire—perhaps even more so nowadays than in the Buddha's time, with all our many choices for entertainment.

Let's start with the pleasures and pains of food. Think of how much time, energy, and other resources society pours into the food industry: the agricultural sector itself, distribution, supermarkets, restaurants, bakeries, and numerous other food outlets. On top of that we have cookbooks, restaurant reviews, TV shows, the Great British Bake Off—not to speak of all the advertisement needed to sell each packet of biscuits and each carton of orange juice. Even our pets have to get tasty morsels that have been through huge industrial processing and packaging. With all that activity around us, how can we avoid thinking about food?

But not every thought about food is unwholesome. We need to eat, and there's no harm in thinking about what will be best to eat and what we can afford. Sharing a meal is a way of celebrating, expressing friendship, gratitude, and appreciation. So we can happily devote time and energy to those preparations.

What we need to look out for are thoughts leading towards indulgence. If our thoughts are blowing up a bubble of hedonic pleasure, then they are being driven by sense desire.

Suppose you plan to bake a cake for a birthday celebration. Naturally, you need to think about the relative merits of carrot cake and black forest gâteau and lemon sponge, and which kind of icing will let you put candles on top. Lots and lots of thoughts to keep track of here. Mindfulness lets you detect when the hedonic bubble is starting to form. Some tightness will develop in your body as your system starts to curl itself around pleasant feelings generated by all these lovely thoughts.

Remember, the pleasure is absolutely fine and to be welcomed. Joy is part of the spiritual path, and in this case we have the joy of muditā coming from your friendship with the birthday person and the wish for their continued happiness. The danger, however, is that we forget all about the birthday person and start to insist that we make the best ever birthday cake, with a background assumption of being the best cook or the best friend anyone could ever wish for.

A brief aside here to tie in with the teaching on the floods. What started off as the flood of sensuality in the form of the birthday cake has swept us away into the flood of views, revolving around how to make the best cake, and the flood of becoming, which whirls us into being the best cook and the best friend.

This is one reason it can be hard to identify thoughts of sensual desire. The thought we might notice could be something like, "I have to do this for Mary because she's such a lovely person." Hard to label this as an unwholesome thought. One telltale is the insistence: "I have to do this." If we look a bit deeper, we'll find some stress underlying this, signifying that we're being swept into one or other of the floods.

If we don't notice the flood, it will provide a pleasant bubble of energy to get us through the business of shopping and baking, but at some stage the bubble will burst. Perhaps the cake flops, or the party has to be cancelled, or no one gives us any praise or thanks for all our efforts. Even if everything goes perfectly and we get lots of praise, the party will eventually end. The only thing to sustain our bubble is to search for another birthday and offer to make another cake.

This is an example of the kind of affliction the Buddha asks us to consider, since pleasures cannot ultimately satisfy us. If we succumb to the societal delusion that food is a real source of happiness, then we are on the road to dukkha in one form or another. Overweight, cardiac problems, diabetes, and food fetishes are all associated with this delusion, as well as psychological stress as our persona becomes embroiled in the food business—being the best cook, frequenting only the best restaurants, food anxieties and so on. I know someone who, despite being several thousand euros in debt, insisted on having the most expensive brand of orange juice for his breakfast every morning. What starts as a pleasure turns into

addiction.

Going back to the advice from this sutta, we can nip all this in the bud. As we're planning and making the birthday cake, we watch for thoughts with giveaway phrases like "the best," "fantastic," "absolutely must have," and recognize that these stem from sensual desire. The Buddha's advice is simply to repeat, "This thought will lead to my affliction," and see what happens.

It's a gentle approach to working with sense desire. We're not condemning ourselves. We're not making ourselves miserable about the cake and the celebration. We're not quelling joy.

We're just being careful that it doesn't lead to the miseries of addiction.

We can work in the same way with all sensual pleasures—the joy and pride we build from our material possessions, our health, youth, beauty, our relationships, sexual joys, love of music and art. And of course, there are the pleasures of the mind. Most perilous are alcohol and drug addictions, but temptations also come from the numerous forms of entertainment on offer nowadays: books, magazines, newspapers, films, television, internet, as well as the world of ideas and fantasy we can generate within our own minds.

We can get addicted to any of these. On the other hand, we can use them well—to stimulate and broaden our minds, to keep in touch with the world, to see where and how we might contribute to society, for enjoyment, as a way of relaxing, to give ourselves a treat, as a social activity. Too often though, we just switch on the television or check our emails out of boredom or mindless habit rather than with a specific beneficial aim in mind. This is a real danger. The Buddha included idle gossip in his list of wrong speech, and if we're just passing the time with books, internet, or television, this is the modern-day equivalent of idle gossip. We're filling our minds because we don't like them to be empty.

Let's look at an example. While studying this sutta, I'm embarrassed to admit that I was also hooked on a soap opera on Irish television called Fair City. But it made such a good illustration of working with this teaching that I decided to spill the beans. I'm blaming my mother, by the way. She's an avid fan, and to keep her company, I started watching occasionally. But when I was tempted to pre-record all the episodes I would miss while away at Satipanya, I had to admit that sensual desire had overtaken my dutiful daughter role.

During a meditation session, I got distracted into rehashing the plot, hoping Ciarán wouldn't murder Katie. I decided to use this opportunity to follow the Buddha's advice in this sutta, so I said to myself, "This thought will lead to my affliction." My mind gave a kind of "uh-huh" response—a fairly neutral acknowledgement of the suggestion without much reaction one way or another.

I then reflected, "This thought will lead to the affliction of others." At this suggestion, my ears seemed to prick up. It seems my psyche is more worried about causing others a problem than about causing problems for myself. By the way, my psyche has got things wrong here, according to the Buddha. Deep

down, we are most interested in our own happiness, and even though this might sound selfish, it's actually very wise. We can wish that others be happy, and that wish, if sincere, makes us happy. But we can't make anyone else happy. It's only because we get over-attached to friends and family that we believe their happiness is more important than our own. The psychological term is, I believe, codependency—living life to please others. We get over-anxious about them, fuss around them, trying to make things perfect. Hopefully your psyche doesn't suffer in this way, and when you do the experiment, hopefully you will find your ears pricking up for the first phrase: "This thought leads to my affliction."

I then repeated the third phrase: "This thought leads to the affliction of both myself and others." The "uh-huh" response relating to my own affliction now became energized, as if it had been infected by the concern for others' affliction. I could sense myself querying what affliction I might be causing for myself. Rather than dwell on that question, I relaxed and let go, simply noticing the slightly perplexed mind state that had been engendered.

Finally, I moved on to the reflection: "This thought obscures wisdom, causes difficulties, leads away from Nibbana." At this, remorse was stirred. I could see the truth of it. I had started the meditation session ardent and resolute, but had then become completely submerged in the plight of Katie and Ciarán. I could very clearly see this as a loss. I had ruined something quite precious.

From this brief experiment, I could already see the value of this teaching. All three phrases had the effect of interrupting my Fair City narrative. Each phrase had evoked a different response, and I can imagine that the most effective phrase will vary depending on the particular circumstances. The reflection linking my own and others' affliction is not simply a repetition of the earlier two. Some of us may have a wise concern for our own safety but have not transferred this to a concern for others, or vice versa. By combining the thought of self and other, we're letting wisdom flow from the more developed root into the less developed one.

Of the three phrases, it was the third one which rang most true for me in this particular situation. Afterwards, I found myself wanting more clarity on the afflictions caused to myself or others by getting addicted to Fair City. On reflection, I could see that it was starting to shape my day.

What things I'd need to have done before 8pm, what time I should eat. And if anyone called just before 8pm or during the next sacred half hour, my heart would not leap for joy. Basically, the attachment was causing stress, taking priority over more beneficial activities, getting in the way of friendships. To the extent that we're tied up with any addiction, we devalue our friends and family, as well as our own welfare. The addiction comes first. These come second.

We deepen our addictions with every stray thought that finds delight in whatever it is we're attached to. To clarify this, the Buddha makes this striking and often-quoted statement: "Whatever a bhikkhu frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind." Every thought about Ciarán and Katie deepens my attachment to Fair City and increases the power that sensual desire holds

over my psyche. Every time we nurse grievances, we strengthen our tendencies toward ill-will. Whenever we delight in thoughts of vengeance, we increase the power of cruelty in our minds. A sobering reflection indeed. We should often remind ourselves of the Buddha's statement: whatever a bhikkhu frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind.

Now it may well happen that the moment we notice ourselves getting caught up in thoughts about Fair City, birthday cake, or whatever, we immediately judge ourselves for this. By contrast, the Buddha doesn't judge the sense pleasure or judge himself for having thoughts of sense desire. He describes a completely open-minded inquiry. He knew better than to waste time condemning himself. His energies were always clearly directed towards letting go, moving on, inclining towards Nibbāna.

But many of us twenty-first century Westerners easily succumb to self-judgment. If we want to do the experiment recommended by the Buddha, we have to let go of this. But of course, this can't be done by willpower—saying, "Now I want to examine sense-desire objectively, so can I please stop judging this, at least for a few minutes?" Instead, we have to be very patient, letting our attention dwell on the sense of judgment with an open, curious spirit, until, in the gaze of awareness, it starts to dissipate.

Judgment, in my experience, feels oppressive and restricting. Physical energies come downward through the skull, pressing on the forehead and face, causing tension, heaviness, and squeezing sensations. If I relax around all these sensations to any degree, I am then in a better position to try the Buddha's experiment. By then, thoughts about birthday cake or Fair City will have abated, but we can reflect in a more general way: thoughts of sense desire lead to my affliction.

We're not hammering this into ourselves as an absolute truth, remember. We're introducing it to our minds as a thought and seeing what effect it has. A useful image is that of throwing a stone into a pool of water. The stone is the phrase, "Thoughts of sensual desire lead to my affliction." The pool is your mind. The stone disappears and you just watch the ripples. When the ripples subside, we can throw in another stone with the next phrase, and so on for each phrase.

If we repeat this faithfully, whenever we find ourselves thinking about whatever sense pleasure has got us hooked, we're undermining attachment with wisdom. It's a gentle way of working with attachment. We're not beating ourselves up. We're just asking our minds to acknowledge the burden that goes with any attachment. But we do need to be vigilant not to let new thoughts capture us and start blowing up the hedonic bubble again.

The Buddha gives a vivid image for this: "Just as in the last month of the rainy season, in the autumn, when the crops thicken, a cowherd would guard his cows by constantly tapping and poking them on this side and that with a stick to check and curb them. Why is that? Because he sees that he could be flogged, imprisoned, fined, or blamed if he lets them stray into the crops. So too I saw in unwholesome states danger, degradation, and defilement."

There are two components to this. Firstly, the vigilance required to keep poking and prodding our unwholesome thoughts. We prod and poke with reflections like, "This leads to my affliction." When we're at leisure, untroubled by sensual desire, we need to reflect on what affliction exactly we're referring to. This is what I was prompted to do after the exercise—to examine my life and see exactly how much stress was being caused by my attachment to Fair City. I had to admit that the attachment was really degrading. Squeezing activities like Dhamma study into the has-to-be-done-before-8pm slot is quite disgraceful when I think about it. I'm well aware of the beneficial effect Dhamma study has on my psyche, whereas the plots in Fair City are rarely uplifting. The more we can clarify for ourselves that sensual desire is indeed a state of danger, degradation, and defilement, the more determined we will be to avoid its superficial attraction.

The exercise is exactly the same with regard to thoughts of ill-will and cruelty. In my own experience, however, it needs more time and patience to get any degree of objectivity on these thoughts, as my judgmental reaction is so much stronger in these areas. For this reason, I find it easier to work with the second half of the Buddha's advice, which involves recognising thoughts of non-ill-will and non-cruelty. Here are his words: "As I abided thus, diligent, ardent, and resolute, a thought of non-ill-will arose in me. I understood thus..."

This thought of non-ill-will has arisen in me. This does not lead to my affliction, or to others' affliction, or to the affliction of both. It aids wisdom, does not cause difficulty, leads to Nibbāna.

He says the same of thoughts of non-cruelty, as well as the renunciation of sensual desire.

Most of us would think of mettā and compassion as the opposites of ill-will and cruelty, while the concepts of non-ill-will and non-cruelty are unfamiliar. We find it hard to dwell on or value the simple fact of not wishing each other harm. But this links to delusion—the way we obscure our Buddha nature and fail to see the happiness on offer when we rest in simplicity, without desires for this and that. Nibbāna, remember, can be described as "not this, not that," as in this passage from the Udāna:

There is that dimension where there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor wind, neither this world nor the next world, nor sun, nor moon.

Mettā and compassion are the worldly expressions of Nibbāna. They are the enlightened response to samsaric beings like us, who need friendliness and compassion. But the path to mettā and compassion, according to the Buddha, requires first a withdrawal from ill-will and cruelty. We might tend to dismiss that state of withdrawal as somehow unimportant. However, in this sutta, the Buddha tells us that he spent time looking for thoughts associated with non-ill-will and non-cruelty, learning to recognise them, consider their effects on his psyche, and ultimately to value them deeply.

We can sensitise ourselves to these notions in a variation on mettā meditation. Instead of repeating phrases of goodwill, we can repeat a phrase like "no harm" as we think of people in all the usual mettā categories. We can do the same thing for the phrase "no cruelty." Both of these exercises help us to value

the fairly neutral states we often experience in meditation or during quiet moments in life. It's easy to overlook these, but when we reflect on their peaceful, non-threatening nature, it deepens our appreciation.

Thoughts of non-ill-will and non-cruelty will arise spontaneously when we're letting go of their opposites, though again it's easy to overlook these in the heat of the moment. Suppose we've gone through a bout of rage and have been gloating over the details of the punishment we're going to dish out. We've gone from rage to cruelty here, but sooner or later a bit of wisdom will return to suggest that we might be straying off the path a tiny bit. There may then be the tendency to shoot straight into self-judgement and writhe in shame because of having succumbed to anger and cruelty. We might even despise ourselves in these moments.

But the Buddha is asking us instead to fish out any thoughts of deciding not to enact all our delicious punishments, to single these out from the rest of the turmoil and look on them with appreciation. At some stage in the transition from rage to self-judgement, there is the decision to stop feeding the rage. This decision may have come with a thought like, "This is getting me nowhere, I'll have to stop." It would be easy to forget that thought as the mind sinks into despair or ricochets into self-judgement.

To sensitise ourselves to such thoughts, we can steady our attention around the feelings associated with them. This will have the added benefit of stemming the proliferation of competing negative thoughts, which may revolve around despair, self-judgement, blame, guilt or shame—and the odd ricochet back to rage. Thus, paying attention to the thread of wholesome thought will effectively contain our negativity, and we might start to feel better about ourselves, more confident that we can learn to work with anger and not let it harm ourselves or others.

So what do thoughts of non-ill-will and non-cruelty actually feel like? I find these very subtle. A quiet withdrawal of energy from that strong sense of self that builds around anger, or its ricochet into self-judgement and shame. The body seems to shrink a fraction during those thoughts, and there is a momentary relaxation, a sense of withdrawing. There is a danger of shrinking further into shame and fear of judgement. But if I can detect the wish to shrink and resist it, the negative energies drain into that midway state of quietness, and a sense of confidence starts to work its way through the shame, strengthening the "no harm" attitude.

In that more stable emotional state, I might find the mental space to repeat the Buddha's suggested phrases. "This thought does not lead to my affliction." This usually increases confidence, adds an element of joy, suggests that despite all my failings, I might be on the right path.

By comparison, the reflection "this thought does not lead to others' affliction" is more challenging for my psyche. I still get the extra boost of confidence and joy, but the desire to collapse into shame also increases as I start to acknowledge the harm I'd been planning for my enemy. The third phrase, "this thought does not lead to the affliction of both," brings more stability and a determination to mend my ways. As

mentioned earlier, this contemplation of self and other lets the positive energy from the wiser response support the weaker response.

The final phrase, "this thought aids wisdom, does not cause difficulties, leads to Nibbāna," usually deepens my remorse and determination not to indulge anger in future.

We can work in exactly the same way regarding thoughts of renouncing sense desire. Following my acknowledgement of the afflictions brought by worries about Katie and Kieran, I decided not to watch Fair City that evening. It would have been very easy to just nod my head wisely, with a touch of shame for needing to make such a decision. But when I repeated, "This thought does not lead to my affliction," I noticed a pleasant feeling of relief. A touch of pride was added to the relief when I reflected, "This thought does not lead to the affliction of others." A sense of self-care was added to the mix when I reflected, "This thought does not lead to either my own or others' affliction." The final phrase, "This thought aids wisdom, does not cause difficulties, leads to Nibbāna," brought a sense of happiness and deepened the commitment to the decision.

With regard to these wise thoughts of renunciation, non-ill-will and non-cruelty, the Buddha adds this interesting reflection:

If I think and ponder upon this thought even for a night, even for a day, even for a day and a night, I see nothing to fear from it. But with excessive thinking and pondering, I might tire my body, and when the body is tired, the mind becomes strained, and when the mind is strained, it is far from concentration. So I steadied my mind internally, quieted it, brought it to singleness and concentrated it. Why is that? So my mind should not be strained.

He expands on his simile of the cowherd to clarify this.

Just as in the last month of the hot season, when all the crops have been brought inside the villages, a cowherd would guard his cows while staying at the root of a tree or out in the open, since he only needs to be mindful that the cows are there—so too, there was need only for me to be mindful that wholesome states were there.

In the case of unwholesome thoughts, we are to be like a cowherd in the rainy season, poking at them with a stick to prevent them doing harm. But with wholesome thoughts, we can take it easy, just noticing these without any effort to control or develop them. This, in effect, confirms that our natural, relaxed state is inherently wholesome. We don't need to control, protect, or develop it. All we need do is notice it. It's a very comforting thought.

This also ties in with what we spoke of in the Sutta on the raft. Once we've crossed the flood, we have to let go of the raft. We shouldn't try to cling to wholesome states. We will only tire ourselves out and put our minds under strain. Awareness is not troubled by the unwholesome and does not depend on the wholesome.

Let's recap with an example. Say you decide not to have an extra slice of cake. Don't let this go unacknowledged amidst what might be posing as more righteous thoughts like, "Of course I don't need an extra slice—how could I be so greedy?" These righteous thoughts reflect an overshoot into condemnation. In condemning our desire for cake, we are unwittingly condemning ourselves for having desires, thinking, "I am greedy." But the energy of desire itself can be directed towards the goal of our spiritual life. We don't want to suppress this. We want to use it.

What we need to find is the middle ground where the basic energy of desire is known, and our only job is to check that it's not directed towards false hopes of happiness. Like our cowherd in the rainy season, we poke at it with a stick, saying, "This thought will lead to my affliction"—for as long as thoughts of having more cake are nudging us to pick up a knife and cut that extra slice. When we feel a change of heart and are no longer edging towards the knife, happy to renounce cake, we can relax. Like the cowherd in the dry season, we simply notice the contented state for as long as it lasts. In this way, we direct our instinctive desire for happiness towards its true goal.

The Buddha closes the Sutta with another pastoral simile, which this time gives us a broad brush image for our spiritual life. Here are his words:

"Suppose, bhikkhus, that in a wooded range there was a great low-lying marsh near which a large herd of deer lived. Then a man appeared desiring their ruin, harm, and bondage, and he closed off the safe and good path that led to their happiness, and he opened up a false path, and he put out a decoy and set up a dummy, so that the large herd of deer would later come upon calamity, disaster, and loss. But another man came, desirous of their good, welfare, and protection, and he reopened the safe and good path that led to their happiness. And he closed off the false path, and he removed the decoy and destroyed the dummy, so that the large herd of deer could later come to growth, increase, and fulfilment."

The herd of deer represents living beings, while Māra, the personification of evil in Buddhism, closes off the safe path. The marsh represents sensual pleasure, and sensual desire is the decoy. If your mind likes working with images, try imagining a trail of lush vegetation luring the deer toward the marsh. Ignorance is the dummy. I imagine a scarecrow in the shape of a wolf that blocks off the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to happiness. It is the Buddha who removes the decoy of lush vegetation and destroys the scarewolf, thereby reopening the Eightfold Path.

The parallel here with Christian imagery is striking. In the Christian myth, we have Lucifer, the devil, causing the rift between God and mankind. The rift is then healed by Christ, the Good Shepherd, who cares for us, his flock, and sets up a new covenant between God and mankind.

This image of the deer herd fits very well with the Buddha's teaching on *kalyāṇamittā*, or spiritual friendship. To allow such friendships to form the whole of the spiritual life, we are to see the Buddha as our spiritual friend and develop a loving relationship with him. The simile of the deer herd provides quite a beautiful image we can use for such a devotional practice.

The whole notion of devotion may turn some of you off, but if, like me, you were brought up with the family rosary, this simile could be a very helpful way of integrating your Christian heritage within Buddhist practice. And since two separate religions have come up with such a strikingly similar image for spiritual development, I think there must be something worthwhile here. The Good Shepherd image might not appeal to everyone, as it likens us to a flock of sheep. A deer herd is a bit easier on our sensitivities, and I'm finding this image very useful.

Rather than go through all the phrases on affliction, I sometimes picture the Buddha picking up the lush vegetation that is tempting me to take the wrong path. So far, I still find the notion of Māra quite challenging, though I can see the value of this. It's easy to gloss over the perils of sensual pleasure when we live within a society that actively promotes these. Imagining a leering devil lurking behind the TV during the ads wakes me up to the danger these pose. It focuses the mind to think that someone is really out to get you. Our minds are good at enmity, so we might as well put that talent to a useful purpose.

To balance this, we have the image of the Buddha desiring our welfare and happiness, removing the allure of sensual pleasures with his teaching, destroying the scarewolf of ignorance that blocks our path to happiness. See if you find it helpful to let your imagination play around with the image of the deer herd.

And don't forget the other pastoral image given in this sutta. Like the cowherd in the rainy season, we prod at unskilful thoughts with wise reflections on the danger they pose. When wholesome thoughts appear, we relax, like the cowherd in the dry season, noticing these without tiring ourselves out by pondering them.

Just before closing, I want to remind you of this very striking line from the Sutta.

Whatever a bhikkhu frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind.

Let's bring that home to ourselves. Whatever we frequently think and ponder upon, that will become the inclination of our mind.

May we develop a wise relationship with thoughts and thereby avoid the alluring swamp of sense pleasure and find the true path to happiness.

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