

Sublimation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 2 min read

Sublimate comes from the Latin, *sublimare* : to lift up. It's used in science to describe the action of a solid turning into a gas without becoming a liquid. Ice, for instance, has to turn into water before it vapourises, whereas naphthalene, the smelly bit in mothballs, vapourises without turning into a liquid. In the second step of Eightfold Path, Right Attitude, the Buddha lists three sublimations: from selfishness to generosity, from aversion to love and from cruelty to compassion. There's no in-between state. We might use the word transformation, but sublimation gives the idea of rising to something higher – indeed towards the 'sublime'. The Four Illimitables, since there is no perceived extent to which they can be developed are: love, compassion, joy and peace. But they are also termed *Brahmavihara*, The Dwelling Place of the Highest Gods, i.e. the most sublime of exalted states. The important insight is to see that it happens naturally. In Zen they say: with wisdom compassion arises naturally. As we purify the mind of its delusion and the heart of its negativity, all that is negative sublimates into its opposite. Vipassana has a key role to play here for when we are in contact with the raw feelings of an unwholesome emotion or mood, we are allowing it to sublimate. The real insight is the realisation that we don't have to do anything! It happens all on its own. This is also another insight into not-self, not me. What we have to do, of course, is to bear patiently with it, feel it, observe it. We have to attend to it. For sublimation can only happen within awareness, otherwise negativity remains suppressed. Therefore, we need to open up to our inner 'demons'. This doesn't mean that we should not actively develop virtue. The Buddha tells us in the *Metta Sutta*, the Discourse on Goodwill that we do need to develop all the attitudes associated with love. He uses a mother's love for her children to illustrate this: Just as a mother protects with her child at the risk of her own life, So one should cherish all living beings. We can understand *metta* here to be love in the widest sense of that term. Love as to how we develop our connection with all beings and the world as right relationship. And the sublimation of negative, unwholesome states is a necessary part of this process.

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