

Self-consciousness

Self-grasping ignorance and self-cherishing ignorance are the roots of all suffering. Buddhism asserts that the minds of all beings possess potentials for all-embracing wisdom and universal compassion. The goal of Buddhist practice is to attain mental unification of wisdom and universal compassion that oppose self-grasping ignorance and self-cherishing ignorance.

Wisdom is clear awareness of the conventional and ultimate reality of all things. It is the final result of *correct knowledge* acquired through listening and reading; *understanding* acquired through logical reasoning to affirm correct knowledge; and *wisdom* acquired through single-pointed, direct awareness of what has been understood. Wisdom extinguishes self-grasping ignorance.

Universal compassion is the altruistic intention to guide all beings to happiness and freedom from suffering. It is attained through recognising all beings as not different from oneself in the need and right to have happiness and freedom from suffering. Compassion extinguishes self-cherishing ignorance. Wisdom and universal compassion are cultivated in dependence upon each other.

Ethics Abiding in the pure morality of non-harmfulness and of benevolence towards others is the foundation for cultivating wisdom and universal compassion. Humans may obey rules of ethical conduct in dependence upon the authority of a divine creator as revealed by special persons; in dependence upon social law and custom; or in dependence upon reason. Human history, however, shows that ethical conduct under religious rules, law and custom, and even by reason, can be quickly contaminated or abandoned due to self-grasping ignorance and self-cherishing ignorance remaining unopposed in the minds of individuals.

Faith Innate self-grasping and self-cherishing ignorance do not lie down without a fight. To maintain pure ethical conduct, we need faith that cultivating wisdom and universal compassion is a valid path. Belief that wholesome behaviour is the true cause of happiness, and ignorant unwholesome behaviour is the true cause of unhappiness, gives rise to the power of aspiration to cultivate constructive behaviour and abandon destructive behaviour.

Positive feedback then increases our faith and determination to pursue such actions even in the face of social derision and hostility. Such faith includes the attitudes of conviction that non-harmfulness is a proper way of living, admiration of those who live that way, and aspiration to live that way. Self-confidence arising from our resultant benevolent lifestyle then gives us the energy and enthusiasm to seek knowledge at its deepest level: wisdom. Faith is defined as belief in something that is correct at both the conventional and ultimate levels. Belief in something that is incorrect is not faith, it is a mistaken view. There are three levels of faith:

1 *Admiring faith* is generated through the knowledge of listening to and reading correct information, such as the presentation of karmic cause and effect. Admiring those of excellent example overcomes jealousy and endows us with courage and determination to achieve our goal. This simple faith, however, can be lost if we do not understand reality.

2 *Convictional faith*, acquired through logical analysis and meditation, can never be lost. The more we gain understanding, the stronger becomes our faith of conviction. Faith and knowledge play mutually supportive roles until eventually faith is no longer needed as one's knowledge becomes the wisdom of meditation that directly perceives reality.

3 *Aspiring faith* is when we become convinced that wholesome goals such as altruism and the wisdom seeing ultimate reality are attainable, and we aspire to do so.

Consciousness

Mind, or consciousness, is subjective awareness of things. Awareness can be correct or incorrect according to whether things exist or not in the way they are apprehended. Each person's mind is simply a continuum of everchanging awareness that goes from life to life with no beginning or end.

Awareness { **sensory**: awareness of things through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and touch
mental: - *conceptual*: indirect awareness of things through thought images
 - *non-conceptual*: direct awareness of things free from subjective images

Each moment of awareness has two aspects

- 1 Clear appearance of the object: mind takes the appearance of, or “illuminates,” its object, like a reflection in a mirror.
- 2 Knowing or cognitive engagement in the appearing object.

Persons are merely labelled onto individual functioning combinations of body and mind. The merely-labelled person is neither separate from nor the same as the body and mind combination. Merely-labelled persons exist wherever the body and mind exist, they do whatever the body and mind do, but they cannot be pointed out because they do not exist in their own right.

All mental experience includes awareness of both the experiencing subject, mind, and the object experienced. Even in the womb, a foetus experiences a sense of self as the experiencing subject. Introspection reveals that, when we think of *me*, our self appears to be the same person who exists from day-to-day and year-to-year. Despite the effects of ageing, sickness, and various life experiences, there appears to be always the *same me* experiencing those things.

This constant *me* appears to exist in its own right, completely independent of the changes in life. According to whether things go well or not, its status can change from high to low, but it always appears as the same, unchanging person who is either happy or sad.

This appearance of an independent self that exists somewhere within the body and mind but not exactly as one or the other, is the appearance of inherent existence. If self does exist inherently, thorough analysis should reveal it after excluding everything that it is not. But no one has ever found an inherently existing self.

“Selflessness” does not negate the conventionally existing, merely-labelled person. It negates the inherently existing person that we think we are. Nor does it refute the collection of mental factors that we call ego. “Ego” includes our self-identity as well as our whole worldview. The wisdom of selflessness replaces our false sense of self with the correct view of self existing in dependence upon mere imputation upon the body and mind.

The same mistake occurs with the appearance of every other person in our lives, and of inanimate objects as well. We are all simply nominally existent in dependence upon our names labelled onto our body-mind combinations. Whatever exists in the universe is only nominally existent; *nothing* exists in its own right independent of its name imputed upon a suitable base.

Our merely imputed self exists because our body-mind combinations function as persons and are conventionally suitable to be given our name. Persons cannot be unchanging entities because whatever is able to produce an effect necessarily changes while performing that function. Our own persons are constantly changing, from children to adults, from scholars to graduates, from single to married, and so on. Contrary to our innate belief, there is no true, independent self who continues through life in an unchanging manner.

Disturbing emotions

- (i) Due to innate mental imprints of ignorance, all objects of awareness appear to the mind as existing inherently, in their own right.
- (ii) Conceptual mental awareness holds that appearance to be true. This is self-grasping ignorance.

- (iii) *Improper mental engagement* exaggerates and superimposes good or bad qualities onto pleasing and displeasing objects seen as inherently existent.
- (iv) Through believing these subjectively exaggerated good or bad qualities to exist on the side of the object, the disturbing emotions of attachment and aversion arise.
- (v) Seeing our own happiness and freedom from suffering as more important than the needs of others – self-cherishing ignorance – we engage in unethical behaviour through attachment, aversion, and their derivative emotions.

The six root afflictions (mental factors that disturb and prevent peace in the mind)

1 Attachment, a non-aversion to cyclic existence, grasps at the exaggerated attractiveness of a contaminated object and wishes to possess and not separate from it. Attachment wants happiness but results in suffering by disturbing the mind. Love and compassion are concerned for the welfare of others without exaggeration. They are not attachment, they increase our sense of well-being.

2 Hostility sees exaggerated bad qualities of contaminated objects as undesirable and wishes to harm them. Hostility can be directed towards a sentient being, suffering in one's own continuum, or an inanimate object. Hostility is a state of internal agitation and it disturbs our environment.

3 Pride sees one's own qualities as superior to others. It is an inflated opinion about self with respect to our power and influence in society, physical strength and appearance, wealth, family background, knowledge, and so on. Pride functions to have no respect for others and to belittle them; it makes the mind agitated and unhappy. It is an obstacle to wholesome activity and to admitting mistakes.

4 Ignorance, as a non-view, is mistaken understanding of the reality of phenomena, a mental darkness, especially regarding karmic cause and effect. As a view, ignorance is the self-grasping that is opposite to the wisdom realising selflessness.

5 Deluded doubt wavers between the correct and incorrect understanding of selflessness, cause and effect, and so on, and obstructs the attainment of liberation and enlightenment. *Deluded* doubt is not simply a mind which cannot decide, it is a mind which leans towards the incorrect conclusion.

6 Afflicted views are beliefs held as true; they are innate or acquired.

- (i) **View of the perishable group** observes the I and mine of one's own continuum of body and mind and holds the I to be intrinsically existent. It regards the body and mind to be a truly existing self or the possessions of a truly existing self
- (ii) **Extreme view** observes the I or mine of one's own continuum and conceives the I to be either eternal or annihilated at death.
- (iii) **Holding one's false view as supreme** regards one's perishable, extreme, or wrong view to be correct and best for gaining realisations.
- (iv) **Holding wrong morality and asceticism as supreme** sees physical, verbal, or mental wrong actions to be correct and superior methods for attaining liberation.
- (v) **Wrong view**: an intellectually-acquired mistaken belief that denies the existence of karma, rebirth, and so on – things that are necessary to understand in order to attain liberation and enlightenment.

Self-confidence – the positive side of self-consciousness

As the basis for practising the path of wisdom and compassion, *enthusiastic perseverance* is the source of all positive qualities, both ordinary and spiritual. It opposes the three types of laziness:

- (i) *Laziness of attachment to mundane, pleasure-seeking activities*: entertainment, food, sport, etc.
- (ii) *Laziness of procrastination*: even though we understand and desire to practise, we have no energy to do so and we postpone it.
- (iii) *Laziness of belittling oneself*: we want to do wholesome things, we do not procrastinate, but we become discouraged by thinking, "I'm too stupid, this is for noble, intelligent people, not me."

Four aids for persevering in the practice of wisdom and compassion

- (i) **The power of aspiration** is an affinity for the wholesome goal and the desire to attain it. Constant reflection on causality generates convictional faith to maintain our aspiration to practise ethics, especially the Bodhisattva's path. It would be terrible to waste this opportunity by not striving to benefit self and others.

(ii) **The power of self-confidence** (steadfastness) is resolution to complete a task without giving up. We may begin with enthusiasm but as soon as a difficulty arises, we lose interest and look for something else. Before committing ourselves, we must determine whether it is possible for us to complete the task. If it is impossible, leave it for now. If it is possible, do it with the full intention to complete it. Once the bad habit of giving up wholesome tasks arises, it adversely affects this and future lives. To generate the power of resolve to complete a wholesome task, there are three types of self-confidence, or “virtuous prides.”

(a) *Self-confidence of action*: “I will do this by myself,” promising to complete a wholesome action without relying on others to do it for us. Inner growth comes from our own actions, not from the actions of others.

(b) *Self-confidence of ability* Practise self-confidence without conceit. (Shantideva, chapter 7)

50 Powerless, their minds disturbed (by afflictions),
People in this world are unable to even benefit themselves.
Therefore, I shall do it for them,
Since, unlike me, these beings are incapable.

51 Even if others are doing menial tasks,
Why should I sit here doing nothing?
I avoid those tasks because of self-importance;
It would be best for me to have no such pride.

(c) *Self-confidence to defeat the afflictions*: a heroic attitude seeing afflictions as an enemy to overcome.

55 I will conquer everything
And nothing at all shall conquer me.
I, a child of the Lion-like Conqueror,
Should remain self-confident in this way.

56 Whoever has self-importance is destroyed by it;
They are disturbed and have no self-confidence.
For those with self-confidence do not succumb to the power of the enemy,
Whereas the former are under the sway of the enemy, self-importance.

(iii) **The power of joy**: happily beginning wholesome actions and wishing them to never stop. Like a child wishing for pleasure, a Bodhisattva’s desire for the joy of the path is unquenchable. We should train our mind to never be satisfied with small accomplishments. Samsaric pleasures are like licking honey off a razor-blade; Bodhisattvas seek the pleasure of enlightenment like an elephant rushing into a cool pond.

(iv) **The power of rest** When the body and mind approach exhaustion it is necessary to rest and relax. Overexertion can lead to sadness (compassion burnout) and abandoning that activity. We need to relentlessly pursue each higher objective, but take short breaks when necessary.

67 When my strength declines, I should leave whatever I am doing
In order to be able to continue with it later.
Having done something well, I should put it aside
With the wish to accomplish what will follow.