



Two Sorts of Thinking

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September 2, 2020

Sometimes when we wake up in the morning, we are in a bad mood. Nothing seems to be going right; we feel frustrated, dissatisfied and perhaps angry with life. This not only affects our outlook at the moment, but we fear that the mood will continue for the rest of the day. We might ask ourselves, “Why couldn’t I wake up to a better mood?” rather than “What can I do about the mood that I am experiencing?”

Moods are states of mind. The dictionary actually defines mood as a *temporary* state of mind. However, when we are in a bad mood it doesn’t seem temporary!

The Buddha pondered states of mind and shared his experience with his monks in a teaching called the Dvedhāvitakka Sutta translated as Two Sorts of Thinking.¹ Here is that teaching as recounted by Ananda, his loving attendant for 25 years.

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvathī in Jeta’s Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika’s monastery. There he addressed the monks: “Monks!”

“Yes, lord,” the monks responded to him.

The Blessed One said, “Monks, before my self-awakening, when I was still just an unawakened bodhisatta, the thought occurred to me: ‘Why don’t I keep dividing my thinking into two sorts?’ So I made thinking imbued with sensuality, thinking imbued with ill will, & thinking imbued with harmfulness one sort, and thinking imbued with renunciation, thinking imbued with non-ill will, & thinking imbued with harmlessness another sort.

Thinking of the first sort: thinking imbued with sensuality is desire, thinking imbued with ill will is hatred and thinking imbued with harmfulness is cruelty. These thoughts of the first sort are unskillful and unwholesome. Thinking of the second sort: thinking imbued with renunciation is letting go and generosity, thinking imbued with non-ill will is loving-kindness, and thinking imbued with harmlessness is compassion. These thoughts of the second sort are skillful and wholesome.

The Buddha then goes on to describe what happens when he has one of the thoughts of the first sort: *“And as I remained thus heedful, ardent, & resolute, thinking imbued with sensuality arose in me. I discerned that ‘Thinking imbued with sensuality has arisen in me; and that leads to my own affliction or to the affliction of others or to the affliction of both. It obstructs discernment, promotes vexation, & does not lead to unbinding.’*

“As I noticed that it leads to my own affliction, it subsided. As I noticed that it leads to the affliction of others... to the affliction of both... it obstructs discernment, promotes vexation, & does not lead to

unbinding, it subsided. Whenever thinking imbued with sensuality had arisen, I simply abandoned it, destroyed it, dispelled it, wiped it out of existence. Similarly, the Buddha described the same experience with the other thoughts of ill-will and cruelty.

The Buddha is saying that when one of the thoughts of the first sort arises such as desire, he is mindful that the thought has arisen and that it leads to the affliction of suffering, not only to himself but perhaps to others or both himself and others. Note that the Buddha admits that thoughts of sensuality arise. He is not immune from the arising of these thoughts. He notices that this state of mind blocks his clarity, causes frustration, and remains attached (not unbinding). And because he is mindful that this thought is causing his suffering, it falls away (abandoned, destroyed, non-existing).

Thus, the Buddha discovered a way to overcome thoughts of the first sort which are unwholesome by being mindful which he describes as being heedful, ardent (wholehearted) and resolute.

The Buddha then notes:

“Whatever a monk keeps pursuing with his thinking & pondering, that becomes the inclination of his awareness. If a monk keeps pursuing thinking imbued with sensuality, abandoning thinking imbued with renunciation, his mind is bent by that thinking imbued with sensuality. If a monk keeps pursuing thinking imbued with ill will, abandoning thinking imbued with non-ill will, his mind is bent by that thinking imbued with ill will. If a monk keeps pursuing thinking imbued with harmfulness, abandoning thinking imbued with harmlessness, his mind is bent by that thinking imbued with harmfulness.

The Buddha is saying that if one keeps thinking unwholesome thoughts of the first sort and doesn't think thoughts of the second sort, it becomes a habit to think these thoughts of the first sort (unskillful).

What about thoughts of the second sort? The Buddha notes:

“And as I remained thus heedful, ardent, & resolute, thinking imbued with renunciation arose in me. I discerned that ‘Thinking imbued with renunciation has arisen in me; and that leads neither to my own affliction, nor to the affliction of others, nor to the affliction of both. It fosters discernment, promotes lack of vexation, & leads to unbinding. If I were to think & ponder in line with that even for a night... even for a day... even for a day & night, I do not envision any danger that would come from it, except that thinking & pondering a long time would tire the body. When the body is tired, the mind is disturbed; and a disturbed mind is far from concentration.’ So I steadied my mind right within, settled, unified, & concentrated it. Why is that? So that my mind would not be disturbed. Similarly, the Buddha described the same experience with the other thoughts of loving-kindness and compassion.

The Buddha is saying that when thoughts of the second sort (skillful) such as letting go and generosity (renunciation) arise, they don't have the harmful effects of the thoughts of the first sort. There is no blockage of clarity, frustration, or attachment. In fact, constant thinking of thoughts of the second sort even if present for 24 hours will do no harm except to tire the body which can disturb the mind. Therefore, the Buddha said that practicing concentration at this point will help to settle the mind. Concentration can be practiced by using the breath as we do during meditation.

The Buddha goes on to describe the knowledge that is gained through concentration which we will not explore in this talk.

Finally, the Buddha uses a metaphor to help the monks better understand the two sorts of thoughts:

“Suppose, monks, that in a forested wilderness there were a large low-lying marsh, in dependence on which there lived a large herd of deer; and a certain man were to appear, not desiring their benefit, not desiring their welfare, not desiring their rest from bondage. He would close off the safe, restful path that led to their rapture, and would open up a false path, set out a male decoy, place a female decoy, and thus the large herd of deer, at a later time, would fall into ruin & disaster. Then suppose that a certain man were to appear to that same large herd of deer, desiring their benefit, desiring their welfare, desiring their rest from bondage. He would open up the safe, restful path that led to their rapture, would close off the false path, take away the male decoy, destroy the female decoy, and thus the large herd of deer, at a later time, would come into growth, increase, & abundance.

“I have given this simile in order to convey a meaning. The meaning is this: ‘The large, low-lying marsh’ is a term for sensual pleasures. ‘The large herd of deer’ is a term for beings. ‘The man not desiring their benefit, not desiring their welfare, not desiring their rest from bondage’ is a term for Māra, the Evil One. ‘The false path’ is a term for the eightfold wrong path, i.e., wrong view, wrong resolve, wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood, wrong effort, wrong mindfulness, & wrong concentration. ‘The male decoy’ is a term for passion & delight. ‘The female decoy’ is a term for ignorance. ‘The man desiring their benefit, desiring their welfare, desiring their rest from bondage’ is a term for the Tathāgata, the Worthy One, the Rightly Self-awakened One. ‘The safe, restful path that led to their rapture’ is a term for the noble eightfold path, i.e., right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, & right concentration.

“So, monks, I have opened up the safe, restful path, closed off the false path, removed the male decoy, destroyed the female. Whatever a teacher should do—seeking the welfare of his disciples, out of sympathy for them—that have I done for you. Over there are (places to sit at) the roots of trees; over there, empty dwellings. Practice jhana (concentration), monks. Don’t be heedless. Don’t later fall into remorse. This is our message to you.”

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, the monks delighted in the Blessed One’s words.

The Buddha was a scientist because he was observing thoughts and exploring the different natures of the skillful and unskillful ones. Note that his process was in many ways the forerunner of RAINS. Be being heedful, he **Recognized** the thought, by being ardent and resolute, he wholeheartedly **Allowed** that thought to remain. He then **Investigated** including considering the level of **Non-identification**. When he discovered that being mindful was a way to end suffering, he shared his finding with his monks.

The Buddha included his findings about states of mind in his teaching of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. This teaching is also in the the Eightfold Path as the sixth step, Skillful Effort:

“And what, monks, is right effort? (i) There is the case where a monk generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen. (ii) He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the abandoning of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen. (iii) He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the arising of skillful

qualities that have not yet arisen. (iv) He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, & culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen. This, monks, is called right effort.²

Skillful effort is about being aware of our thoughts and dealing with them. Thoughts arise in the mind; they are either wholesome or unwholesome. If we allow unwholesome thoughts to continually occupy our mind, we will develop unwholesome habits which will lead to suffering. Skillful effort is how we can embrace the wholesome thoughts and address the unwholesome ones.

In cultivating a garden, we spend our effort doing four things. We prevent weeds from arising. We pull out those weeds which have arisen. We plant seeds of the plants we want to grow. Once these plants arise, we protect and nourish them.

Our efforts are the same for our garden of thoughts in the mind. We direct our effort in four ways:

1. We prevent the arising of unwholesome thoughts.
2. We overcome unwholesome thoughts which have arisen.
3. We strive for wholesome thoughts to arise.
4. We maintain those wholesome thoughts which have arisen.

Intention	Effort
Prevent unwholesome thoughts	Maintain unremitting mindfulness Adopt the three intentions of letting go, loving kindness and compassion Lead a virtuous life Guard the sense doors – set boundaries
Overcome unwholesome thoughts	Apply mindfulness, concentration and investigate with energy
Strive for wholesome thoughts	Bring up past wholesome states of mind
Maintain wholesome thoughts	Hardwire your happiness: Stay with the wholesome thoughts at least for 2 breaths, pay attention to what you feel in the body, focus on what’s enjoyable about it.

Bhante G notes: “At every moment we choose whether to embrace wholesomeness or unwholesomeness.”³ In order to be able to choose, we need to see our train of thought.

Besides being mindful, how do we incline our mind to skillful thoughts?

Bhante G in Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness gives several recommendations:

The mind is always occupied by some state, that can be either wholesome or unwholesome. When you have overcome or abandoned an unwholesome state, it is a good time to cultivate a wholesome state. This will also help to prevent another unwholesome state from arising.

Some techniques to use include:

- Remember any skillful act that you have done in the past and the pleasant (positive) states of mind that arose with that action.
- Recall your past successes in battling greed, hatred, or delusion and the wholesome states that arose.

- Apply loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy or equanimity. Equanimity is cultivated through practicing the seven factors of enlightenment.

“It’s a self-taught skill. The more we deliberately bring up enjoyable states of mind, the more interesting it becomes and the better we get at it.”⁴

And from Joseph Goldstein in *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening*: “There is some good news here. In his book, *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell references many studies showing that mastery of any given discipline depends less on some innate talent and genius and more on the number of hours devoted to practice. We don’t have to be a spiritual genius; we just have to put in the time.”⁵ (*Mindfulness* p. 396).

¹ [Two Sorts of Thinking Dvedhāvitakka Sutta](#) (MN 19)

² An Analysis of the Path [Magga-Vibhaṅga Sutta](#) (SN 45:8)

³ Bhante Gunaratana *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness* p. 149

⁴ Bhante Gunaratana *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness* p. 181

⁵ Goldstein, Joseph *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening* p. 358