Reviewing Right Action

A previous talk entitled “Reviewing Right Speech In These Trying Times”, on May 25, 2022, was the first of three addressing the Virtue Aggregate of the Noble Eightfold Path. Right Speech requires mindful investigation of the internal “selfing story” that very quickly develops the shaping of Right Action. The Pali term for Right Action is *samma kammanta* (sah-mah kah-mahn-tah); *samma* is understood to characterize *appropriate, skillful*, or *wholesome*, while *kammanta* can be subdivided into *kamma* (karma in Sanskrit), and *anta,* which suggests an *occupation* or *routine activity*. Right Action is fulfilled by the third characteristic of Virtue, Right Livelihood, while will be the focus of a subsequent talk.

Karma is a fundamental concept in Hindu, Jain and Buddhist philosophy, and basically is translated as *action* or *behavior*. When a thought is forming in the mind, there is a karmic history that that is activated, shaping the thought and the subsequent behavior. This history is understood as *karma* *vipaka*, with *vipaka* (vih-pah-kah) being translated as the *fruit* or *consequence* of an action. Karma vipaka is like planting a seed, which comes to fruition, either immediately or over a period of time. Imagine your experiential history as a mental storehouse, within which are a vast array of memories, primed for activation when the right environmental and internal feeling processes are activated. The consequences of these actions are either ethically unwholesome or wholesome, with unwholesomeness manifesting as dukkha and wholesomeness as liberation from dukkha. Karma is activated by *cetana* (chey-tah-nah), translated as *intention* or *volition*; in effect, karma and cetana are synonymous and bound together. Intention is universally involved in shaping all mental formations in every moment, and a basic practice of Buddhist liberation is to intentionally manifest benevolent actions through mindfulness and investigation of mental phenomena, which are activated through Right Effort. When unwholesome karma vipaka intentions are forming, skillful practice involves being mindful of that impulsive tendency and then activating the intention to renounce it, reshaping karma in more ethically benevolent forms through Right Effort.

Here is a quote regarding the elements of Right Action from commentary by Bhikkhu Bodhi, found on the Access to Insight website:

Abstaining from the taking of life:Herein someone avoids the taking of life and abstains from it. Without stick or sword, conscientious, full of sympathy, he is desirous of the welfare of all sentient beings.

Abstaining from taking what is not given: He avoids taking what is not given and abstains from it; what another person possesses of goods and chattel in the village or in the wood, that he does not take away with thievish intent.

Abstaining from sexual misconduct:He avoids sexual misconduct and abstains from it. He has no intercourse with such persons as are still under the protection of father, mother, brother, sister or relatives, nor with married women, nor with female convicts, nor lastly, with betrothed girls.

The traditional rendering of Right Action is expressed as an abstention, assuming that the basic drives for the untrained and unvirtuous mind are shaped and driven by greed, hatred and ignorance. The category of “all sentient beings” assumes that animals and insects are worthy of benevolent actions by human beings; compassion involves an empathetic attunement to the struggles of all sentient beings to live. If a person injures or kills a sentient being unintentionally, then there are no unwholesome karmic outcomes resulting from that action. Alternatively, when a person intentionally injures or kills another person, the negative vipaka is proportional to the level of spiritual development of the person who has been harmed.

Abstaining from taking that which has not been freely given is rendered in this way according to Bhikkhu Bodhi in Access to Insight:

Commentaries mention a number of ways in which "taking what is not given" can be committed. Some of the most common may be enumerated:

(1) *stealing:* taking the belongings of others secretly, as in housebreaking, pickpocketing, etc.;

(2) *robbery:* taking what belongs to others openly by force or threats;

(3) *snatching:* suddenly pulling away another's possession before he has time to resist;

(4) *fraudulence:* gaining possession of another's belongings by falsely claiming them as one's own;

(5) *deceitfulness:* using false weights and measures to cheat customers.

The degree of moral weight that attaches to the action is determined by three factors: the value of the object taken; the qualities of the victim of the theft; and the subjective state of the thief. Regarding the first, moral weight is directly proportional to the value of the object. Regarding the second, the weight varies according to the moral qualities of the deprived individual. Regarding the third, acts of theft may be motivated either by greed or hatred. While greed is the most common cause, hatred may also be responsible as when one person deprives another of his belongings not so much because he wants them for himself as because he wants to harm the latter. Between the two, acts motivated by hatred are kammically heavier than acts motivated by sheer greed.

I think it is important to consider these abstentions in the context of society and the environment. Cheating regarding one’s taxes or intentionally depriving another of appropriate social needs such as food, health care or shelter fall within this unwholesome category in contemporary culture. When we intentionally “deprive the environment” through pollution, an imbalance is created that has consequences. Before the widespread activation of industrialization, the impact of one’s actions didn’t have the same effect as has been the case for the last 150 years or so, and there are unwholesome karmic consequences already manifesting. We are so conditioned by toxic polluting activities that are convenient for our lifestyles that we don’t consider the consequences of our choices. This is not quite the same process or intention as found in the traditional commentary but meets the requirements of unwholesome vipaka.

The third abstention, regarding sexuality, was organized around heteronormal activities, considering the cultural norms of the eras involved, but can be understood in the context of changing gender identification and sexual orientation norms in contemporary culture. The basic premise of this abstention is to not act out erotic impulses in ways that are intentionally harmful because of desire or the exertion of aggressive control. Social norms of this era are obviously undergoing significant changes, and there have been many scandals regarding the sexual improprieties of those who have administrative or religious authority and power. Sexual drives are powerful forces within social systems, and we are often confronted with images that are intended to literally capitalize on these instinctual drives. Learning how to mindfully attend to these drives and renounce any erotic impulses empowers a person’s ability to be more responsible for other drives that are not erotic but also have vipaka consequences.

There are other, more contemporary considerations regarding Right Action that are not specifically described regarding Right Actions but are within the categories of Right Livelihood regarding intoxicants. We live withing a pandemic of addictions world-wide, involving alcohol, nicotine, narcotics and other substances. We can include what are called “behavioral addictions”, such as gambling, computer gaming, and other activities that are as disruptive of a wholesome life as substance abuse. There are certainly vipaka consequences for these actions, both personal and societal.

Contemporary research establishes a clear connection between addictive desires and the impulses associated with the three attributes of abstention withing the Virtue Aggregate. In the brain there are neural pathways that control affective functions—that is, actions to either engage in a behavior or avoid a behavior—that become distorted in their functioning. We are conditioned to avoid unpleasant experiences and much of contemporary media is literally designed to activate those fears. This sort of stimulation is often accompanied by the presence of a pleasurable alternative such as a substance or distracting activity like a computer game. The brain becomes conditioned to impulsively seek out and activate the pleasurable alternatives available, and this sort of association becomes “hard-wired” into a person’s lifestyle—an addictive process.

How can we cultivate Right Action? Once again, the simple process of noticing the urgent feeling that arises with a thought and intentionally disregarding the thought and releasing/relaxing the urgent feeling builds alternative neural pathways in the brain that can “drain” the energy of any action, allowing for the development of an appropriate alternative response—an abstention from unwholesome action towards liberation from dukkha.