



Vision and Transformation: The Buddha's Eightfold Path

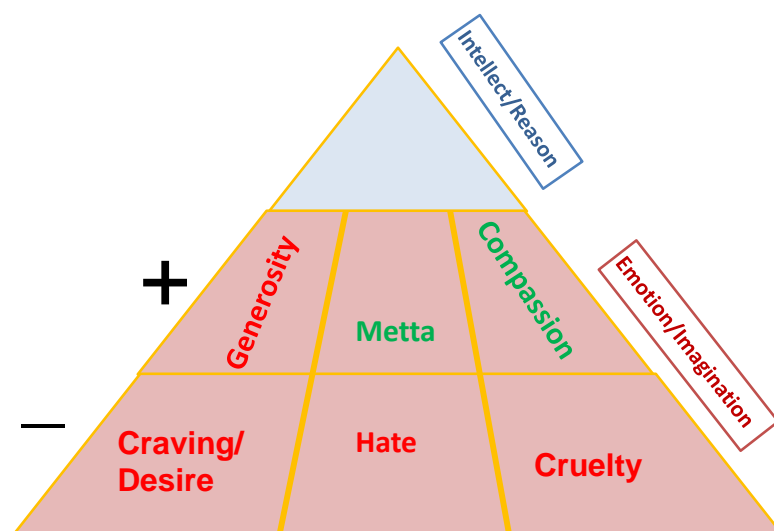


Week 2 – Perfect Emotion

Last week we introduced the Noble Eightfold Path and considered how the Path of Vision (i.e. Perfect Vision) relates to the Path of Transformation (i.e. the other 7 'limbs'). The first step of the Path of Transformation, for very good reasons, is Perfect Emotion. The starting point in looking at this limb is to recognise that we very often fail to act in accordance with what we know to be right – this is simply because, whether we like to admit it or not, our emotions are invariably stronger than our reason. The consequence is that we have no real chance of making progress in the spiritual life if our hearts are not involved in it. The aim should therefore not be to *stifle or suppress* our unruly emotions with the force of reason and concept, but rather to *harness* our very considerable emotional energy in the service of our spiritual development. Sangharakshita says (in 'The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path') that Perfect Emotion "...represents the harmonisation of the whole emotional and volitional side of our being with Perfect Vision...".

Perfect Emotion can be considered, according to tradition and as summarised in the text, in terms of both (a) the emotional responses we should try to eliminate, and (b) those that we need to encourage. We shall briefly describe these 'negative' and 'positive' aspects, noting that certain pairs relate to each other directly, and spending a little more time on a few of them.

The diagram below is meant to represent our whole being as a sort of 'iceberg', where the visible tip is our intellectual or rational side, and the much larger, hidden area belongs to our emotions and imagination:



First, we can think in terms of what an absence of each of the '**negative**' behaviours might entail:

1. **Non-desire** involves attacking one of the three 'roots' of our suffering, **craving**. This is quite probably, for most of us, the single most challenging area in which to work. Our culture is almost entirely dedicated to the systematic cultivation of desire, which is ruthlessly cultivated and exploited by the global industries of advertising and marketing. It's probably fair to say that we could easily assume that our main reason to exist is to try to satisfy desire – at least until we have a glimpse of something that begins to challenge the assumption! If we cultivate non-desire deliberately we can begin to take a radically different approach, investigating how much we can give up rather than acquire, and doing what we can to make our lives less cluttered. However, beware – this behaviour very directly challenges cultural norms, so you should understand what deep waters you might be getting into when you seriously question it!
2. **Non-hatred** is, similarly, the response to another 'root' of suffering, namely hatred or aversion. It is interesting to note that hatred is closely related to craving, in the sense of being a response that occurs when our desires – in the broadest sense of the word - are unfulfilled.
3. **Non-cruelty** is a response to the very unskilful human tendency to revel in the suffering of another sentient being, whether human or otherwise. Any study of history, or current affairs, will give us ample reminders of how strong this tendency can be (if any reminder is necessary).

What, then, are the '**positive**' aspects of Perfect Emotion?

1. Firstly, **generosity**, often referred to in Buddhist circles as *dana*, not only directly counteracts desire, but is often regarded as the 'primary Buddhist virtue'. There are many ways in which we can give, including the wonderful idea of giving fearlessness – in other words, helping others to develop spiritual confidence by the example we set.
2. Next come four closely-connected emotions which are sometimes referred to collectively as the *brahma-vihārās*, or 'sublime abodes'. The first (and, in many ways, foremost) of these is **mettā**, which we already know is difficult to translate (although 'love' and 'universal friendship' are convenient approaches). *Mettā*, of course, is the counterpart of hatred. Just as the **metta bhavana** meditation involves the transformative power of love, so other 'bhavana' practices exist for the other 3 qualities listed below.
3. The direct counterpart of cruelty is **compassion** (*karuṇā*), a response to our seeing the suffering of others that is at the same time emotional and practical. In the Buddhist tradition known as the Mahāyāna (the 'Great Vehicle'), there is a huge emphasis on compassion to the extent that it is effectively seen as synonymous with wisdom. In fact, it has sometimes been said within the Mahāyāna tradition that no other teaching is required to bring us to enlightenment! The beautiful myth of the enlightened being or bodhisattva called Avalokiteśvara is an example of how the only appropriate response to a true perception of the **three characteristics of existence** (unsatisfactoriness, impermanence and insubstantiality) is spontaneous compassion for all beings.

4. **Sympathetic joy** (*muditā*) is a deeply positive quality, in that we can rejoice in the happiness and successes of others. This obviously works, in its own distinctive way, to counter self-obsession and the strength of ego. In considering *muditā*, Sangharakshita makes the point that religious practice in Buddhism is capable of being a much more joyful affair than may be the case in other faiths – hopefully you will find this to be true within the Triratna Buddhist Community!
5. The fourth of the *brahma-vihāra* emotions is *upekṣā*, or **equanimity**. You may have experienced this for yourself, perhaps through meditation, or maybe spontaneously, when a deep feeling of peace and stillness, in one sense hard to describe, but in another very real, has entered your experience. Sometimes equanimity is described as having a sort of emotional and spiritual stability, in which we observe both the suffering and joy of ourselves and others, but are neither overwhelmed or intoxicated by the experience. The winds of worldly experience may batter us, but they don't throw us off course. The image of our being like a perfectly round sphere, at rest on a perfectly smooth surface, has also been applied to equanimity.
6. Lastly of the 6 positive emotions, **faith** (*śrāddha*) is an emotional state which is covered very briefly in 'The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path', but which is often felt to be hugely important. It is important to realise that *śrāddha* has quite a different meaning from that encountered in Christianity – it has nothing to do with blind acceptance, but instead involves our having sufficient **confidence** or **trust** in somebody or something (primarily, the Three Jewels) to accept their message on the basis of (a) its intuitive appeal and (b) an appraisal of its objective reasonableness, until we have had a chance to relate it to (c) our direct experience.

The cultivation of Perfect Emotion is helped by a variety of **ritual practices**. One of these is *puja*, or 'worship', particularly the **Seven-fold Puja**. This is widely practiced, in the Triratna Buddhist Community and beyond, and involves recitation, ritual and imagination in the deliberate cultivation of a range of positive emotions. All 7 stages, including the recitation of Going for Refuge that we met last week, have the ability to strengthen our emotional connection with the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Shorter, simpler ritual practices are the Three-fold Puja, also used extensively in the Triratna tradition, and 'saluting the shrine'. Traditionally, before any class or devotional activity held in a shrine room, Sangha members recite the four phrases *Namo Buddhāya, Namō Dharmāya, Namō Saṅghāya, Namō Nama* – this translates as "Homage to the Buddha, Homage to the Dharma, Homage to the Sangha, homage indeed!".