

A Fire in the Heart = Confession practice

Yesterday - we explored the three body precepts

Love	Abstaining from causing harm
Generosity	from taking the not-given
Contentment	from sexual misconduct

- We have heard two of our friends ethical biographies.
- We participated in a confession group.
- And last night we did puja together, dedicated to Amitabha, the Buddha of Compassion.

As I said last night, he appears in the western realm and is associated with the setting sun. Twilight experience when things start to take on different shapes, different colors, different meanings. We may not be quite sure what we are experiencing or what comes next when we enter the realm of spiritual death.

Through devotional practice we nourish our shraddha, our faith, and come into relation with the enlightened mind, we make offerings to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, we offer ourselves even, and we request teachings from them, guidance, and blessings.

This is how I set up my own confession practice, in reverence to the Buddhas, and in this particular unfolding of events over the last 24 hours, in the presence of Amitabha's infinite love and compassion.

Entitled this talk **A Fire in the Heart - Amitabha's Love**

Why Practice Confession?

When we engage in the practice of Buddhist confession we are actively engaging in a process of transformation of our conditioning. We are taking up a map, a compass, or a key to eradicate the roots of greed, hatred and delusion. We are working in the realm of the karma-niyama to create the conditions for the arising of transcendental insight, the Dharma-niyama

We have the capacity to completely eradicate them, in this lifetime, to become Buddhas.

The precepts reflect back to us the natural, spontaneous state of the Enlightened Mind. We can begin to imagine what it's like to be a Buddha as we deepen our understanding of these ten precepts, in both their positive and negative forms.

With the practice of confession, we are given an opportunity, to move from the dawning of awareness of the effects of our human conditioning to the full splendor of spontaneous purified enlightened mind.

It's worth saying again, that these ten precepts are not rules.

Rule following can degenerate into taking away responsibility. Doing so removes the need for personal judgment, we may stop thinking deeply about something because the rules say x, or someone tells us to do such and such so that it.

Rules degenerate into taking away responsibility and stop us short in developing the sort of ethical sensitivity that we need in the Dharma life.

From Subhadramati's talk Walking the Talk (2009) - (Thank Lois)

“Unskillful actions hinder our development as human beings and therefore they undermine our happiness - especially the happiness that results from a clear conscience.”

If we were Buddhas, if we were enlightened, we would know that unskillful actions are rooted in Greed Hatred and Delusion. This is the cause of ALL our suffering. This is the core of the Buddha's Dharma.

From the Buddha's perspective, We are deeply misguided.

We are responding to the 3 Jewels, we GFR, we learn to really embrace and start from where we are, because there is truly no other place you can effectively start from.

Confession practice is an opportunity to recognize where we are falling short and work quite directly on our conditioning as well as the eradication of the roots of Greed, Hatred and Delusion - Freedom, Love, Wisdom.

Someone who is enlightened sees you making those misguided mistakes —> Isn't going to punish you for that, they are going to feel total compassion. That is the response of the enlightened mind.

If we had that perspective, even a little bit of that perspective, it would change the way we respond to others being unskillful. We would be able to see that if someone is acting unskillfully, it's because they are suffering and that knowledge would completely dissolve any arising of retribution, blame, hatred, and so on.

So why do we hesitate to confess?

Fear of death

Fear of spiritual death

Fear of loss of a fixed sense of self/ego

Fear of being found out
Fear of being seen

Fear of losing approval
Fear of losing the love of someone you care about or admire
Fear of being judged or criticized

Maybe we just don't care
Maybe we don't think it matters
Maybe we think we don't matter

Maybe we are afraid of change
Maybe we are afraid of transformation
Maybe the light is just too piercing and we need to go and hide

WHITE OWL FLIES INTO AND OUT OF THE FIELD

Mary Oliver

The Origin of confession - Buddha's time

Goes back to the time of the Buddha, monks would wonder about the forest and villages, and on the full moon night and the new moon night, they would gather together to meditate, chant verses, and engage in Dharma discourse.

After the Buddha's parinirvana, the monks continued to gather on the full moon and the new moon nights, but the way they met together underwent a significant change. When the monks came together after being apart for some time, the first thing they did (presumably after greeting one another) as to confess. They went off in pairs, with the more experience monk confessing first.

As I was reflecting on this, I wondered why confession practice arose after the Buddha's death. Perhaps not being in the direct presence of the Buddha, who's mere presence elevated the ethical sensitivity of those who had GFR, the monks found that they needed to hold themselves accountable to their transversing of the path.

I engage in confession practice to stay true to my highest ideals and values, to hold those ideals in my sight, as it were, to develop ever greater ethical sensitivity and commitment to practice the precepts when I became a mitra and then in the ten precepts taken as vows at the time of my ordination.

However - The roots of our human conditioning, of greed, hatred and delusion, run deep. Very deep.

From: Mind, Reactive and Creative

Mind, according to Buddhism, is twofold. There's on the one hand what is usually called the Absolute Mind...and then on the other hand, what is known as relative mind.

Absolute Mind, mind in its nakedness as the Tibetan tradition calls it, our Transcendental Mind or the One Mind, is synonymous with Reality itself.

Then, the relative mind, that is to say the individual mind, the mind of each person, or if you like my mind and your mind.

Relative mind itself is of two kinds: the reactive mind and the creative mind.

*The whole distinction between mind reactive and mind creative is of very great importance indeed, and it is the transition, we may say, the passing over from reactive mind to **creative** mind, which marks, which constitutes the beginning of the spiritual life.*

How do we know if our mind is in a reactive mode or a creative mode?

We have a lovely turn of phrase called Dhamma-vicaya - investigation of Mind
Appears in a spiral path called the Seven Bodhiyargas

Specifically concerned with reviewing one's own mental events, analyzing and understanding them in the light of skillfulness and unskillfulness.

Is Greed or Craving present? What is its effect? How does it feel in my body? In my heart?
In my mind? What thoughts are present?

If I am tangled up in a web of confusion, how can I untangle it?
What would inspire me to even try?

The Buddha's example of course, his teaching of the pathway to freedom from suffering.
From the Dhammapada, translated by Sangharakshita

Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows even as the cart-wheel follows the hoof of the ox drawing the cart.

Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow that never departs.

What sparks the creative mind that leads to the pure mind?

Turn to the Abhidharma... In Know Your Mind, or Mind in Harmony

We have 11 positive mental states that are simply different aspects of the creative mind.

The first, in which all other creative, positive mental states emerge from is Shraddha, or Saddha, Faith, Confidence-Trust

This comes first, provides the basis for all other positive mental events.

Faith consists in deep conviction of what is real,
Lucidity as to what has value,
And longing for what is possible.

It is the 'indispensable emotional or volitional element of any experience of insight into the nature of reality.' You never lose it once it arises, although you may drift away from it now and again.

When ashraaddha has arisen, it's more than just a lack of faith. We are lazy with respect to positive things, with respect to the development of positive mental states. No appreciation for positive things or deep conviction even in their existence let alone interest in moving towards them.

We don't appreciate that actions have consequences and therefore we don't make any particular effort in the direction of skillfulness. We may not have faith in the possibility of Enlightenment. Lack of faith may manifest as a sort of dullness in the sense of not appreciating what the Dharma really means, there is laziness in the sense of not practicing.

Faith is more than emotion. It doesn't always feel pleasant. It's a certain faculty that we cultivate and nourish. It can sometimes take a long time to develop. Requires imagination. Can we imagine ourselves and all beings becoming buddhas?

What gives rise, or has sparked shraddha in your experience?

A practice may be to go back and reflect on whatever your first spark of shraddha was - that moment of recognition that you've found something really amazing, really precious, that will ultimately change your life completely.

For me it was the Sutra of Golden Light, and Transforming Self and World, Bhante's commentary on the text... this was the first sutra that I encountered, my very first mitra study, and I was quite taken by it.

As it is the theme of the talk, and happens to also be the source of my sustained interest in practicing Dharma, So I'm going to segue to tell a bit of story in the sutra...especially as we will be doing the Sutra of Golden Light puja this evening. There is some symbolism in the sutra that I'd like to draw out in relation to practicing confession.

In the sutra, the hero of our story is Ruciraketu, a bodhisattva who lives in the city of Rajagrha. He has a problem - he cannot understand why the Buddha had such a short life - why did he live for only 80 years? Surely he accumulated much merit and should have lived for at least a few million years, if not a few hundred..

He was really struggling with this problem. We may not have this problem, but we have our own problems, and problems, Bhante points out are a means of development, a means of transformation.

In the commentary, Bhante distinguishes between a difficulty and a problem. Usually with a bit of effort we can overcome or move through a difficulty. But a problem, a true problem, cannot be solved on its own terms - even while the terms themselves cannot be changed. He says a real problem cannot be solved at all - that's the beauty of it.

So Ruciraketu is sitting in his house, thinking about his problem, and something happens. All of a sudden, the house starts to grow. It expands and expands until it is incredibly vast. The entire house is transferred into beryl, a precious stone with a variety known as aquamarine which is a translucent blue-green color of the sea. The house becomes adorned with divine jewels and is filled with perfumes. The sutra tells us that this transformation is all due to the Buddha, Shakyamuni.

In good old Mahayana fashion, even more happens. Inside the house, in the four directions, four magnificent thrones appear. They are made of beautiful jewels and fine cloths, and on the mats appear jewel-adorned lotuses. Then on the lotuses appear four Buddhas: Akshobya in the east, Ratnaketu in the south, Amitayus in the west, and Dundubhisvara in the north.

The whole city of Rajagrha, indeed the whole universe is filled with light and all beings in the universe 'become possessed of divine happiness.'

The blind can see, the deaf can hear.
The mentally disturbed are restored to their senses.
The naked are clothed, the hungry are fed.
Disease disappears.

On a large scale, the sutra says, the world is filled with the appearance of miraculous things. Ruciraketu is filled with joy and delight and pays homage to the Four Buddhas, and in the act of doing so bumps right back into his problem again. He is reminded to recollect the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, and that in turn reminds him of the fact of the Buddha's short life. Once again he is obsessed with his problem.

(He has a troubled mind...)

The Four Buddhas immediately become aware that Ruciraketu's mind is troubled, and being Buddhas, they also realize what he is thinking. And they point out that his thinking is misguided.

The Buddha's life is not limited to 80 years, but is immeasurable, they say. In effect they tell him that the Buddha is Buddhahood and that Buddhahood transcends time - hence cannot be measured in terms of time.

The Buddhas life is immeasurable not because he lives for an inconceivably long time, but because in the depths of his being he does not live in time at all.

So all this solves Ruciraketu's problem and he becomes extremely happy.

There's all sorts of symbolism in the house expanding, there's a shifting of consciousness, an expansion. The brick and stone and wood of the house becomes the translucent aquamarine. There's a transformation from ordinary waking consciousness to meditative consciousness.

The four buddhas surround Ruciraketu, he sits in the center, not yet a Buddha. This is a late Mahayana sutra and the four buddha mandala appearing here later becomes the five buddha mandala in the Vajrayana tradition.

Akshobya - buddha of the east, the Imperturbable

Amitayus - is a form of the Amitabha, the Buddha of Immeasurable Light

The Buddha of the south in the SGL is called Ratnakara, which means precious jewel, later becoming Ratnasambhava, the Jewel Born one

Then the Buddha of the north, Dundubhisvara, Lord of the Drum, later becomes Amoghasiddhi, Unobstructed Success.

And he's sitting in the middle of this mandala having a conversation with these four buddhas, and what happens next?

"Then indeed, when he was not tired, the Bodhisattva Ruciraketu slept."

No ordinary sleep - Ruciraketu's transformation is not complete, and he has a dream, a very significant dream.

(BEATING OF THE DRUM)

In his dream, in all directions, were innumerable Buddhas seated on thrones of Beryl, under trees made of jewels, surrounded by many hundreds of thousands of beings. In the

midst of it all he saw a golden drum, a drum that illuminated all things, just like the sun in the midday sky, a drum that radiated golden light through out the whole of space.

A man, a brahmin, was beating the drum, and as he struck it, the drum spoke extensive and beautiful verses of confession....

WHY A DRUM?

Dundubhisvara - the Buddha of the North, whose name means Lord of the Drum. After the Buddha's enlightenment, he declared he would beat the drum of the deathless - the drum of Nirvana, the Drum of the Absolute.

Dundubhisvara becomes Amoghasiddhi who's gift to us is fearlessness, in the midnight sky of spiritual death and spiritual rebirth, we enter into the unknown, completely vulnerable and placing our faith on the 3 Jewels, we go for refuge to the Buddha's wisdom and compassion, we deepen our commitment to the Dharma life.

Amoghasiddhi is accompanied by Shang Shang Birds, who lead his chariot lotus throne through the completely dark midnight sky. We no longer know ourselves as ourselves when we fully enter the realm of Amoghasiddhi. All our fears are dissolved as we let go in the death of the ego, let go into complete and total spiritual transformation. Unobstructed Success, Fearlessness, Om Amoghasiddhi Ah Hum. The beating of the drum, may all obstacles be removed!

There's a sense of beating on the Drum of knocking on the doors of Transcendental
Not to be taken literally, of course
But are we ready to step through when the door opens?

The drum is the Buddha who occupies the center of the mandala - the missing Buddha, the 5th Buddha, who's that? Vairocana, the buddha of infinite space who turns the wheel of the Dharma, the wheel is in the same shape of the drum, emitting Truth.

The drum is also Ruciraketu who is in the process of becoming completely transformed. The golden light is the sound of the drum, the sound of the drum is the golden light. The drum and the golden light are Ruciraketu, the newly transformed Ruciraketu.

Not only the self, but the whole of the world, the whole of the universe, the whole of the cosmos is completely transformed by these celebrated verses of confession, pouring forth from the drum, as if the drum is speaking to the world in radiating golden light.

In the sutra, the verses express the wish that all beings may become enlightened, that all beings may be free from suffering. Ruciraketu takes the Bodhisattva vow, dedicating himself to the great task of transformation of self and world.

We ride these beautiful waves of as the verses seamlessly move between confession of faults into rejoicings in merits of all beings, and back and forth again and again. We confess, we rejoice, we confess, we rejoice, and all beings become completely purified,

The Buddha is described as 'the Buddha sun removing the obscurity of darkness with his rays of Compassion.'

And all just read a short section of this:

By the sound of this majestic drum, may the ignorance of the world be dispelled. With fears quelled, may sentient beings become fearless and brave. Just as the omniscient sage in the world is possessed of every excellence, may countless beings too possess oceans of qualities, concentration, and the wings of enlightenment. By the sound of this majestic drum, may all beings be adorned with the melody of Brahma. May they touch the sublime enlightenment of Buddhas. And may they turn the virtuous wheel of the Dharma.

So this continues. I hope I have conveyed a bit of the essence of the sutra, especially for those who have not encountered it previously.

Tonight we will be doing a SGL puja and you'll experience more of the verses of confession emitting from the golden drum appearing at the center of the mandala in the bodhisattva Ruciraketu's dream.

So This was in a way my introduction to Buddhism. I felt like I had stepped out of the world completely and entered into a space of wonder and delight. I felt much like Ruciraketu, rejoicing in having found the dharma, my heart was both expanded and completely full at the same time, there was a sense of infinite expansion, each time it filled up with love and wonder, it expanded further and further.

Purification is a central theme in my Dharma Life...Vajrasattva is my sadhana - I long for spontaneous ethical purity and am committed to practicing the precepts, confession, and devotion.

Ideals and lived experience - collusion and condemnation. Here we need to take a look at the next two positive mental states of the creative mind. These are paired as lokapalas - protectors or guardians of the world.

Without Hri and Apatrapya there can be no moral order.

Hri = self-respect, also translated as shame, positive shame.

To refrain from what is objectionable by having made oneself the norm

one is aspiring to live in accordance with one's ideals. And we fall short, the roots of greed, hatred and delusion run deep. When we recognize that, it's actually quite a good thing, because we can continually go for refuge, we can continually deepen our faith, our shraddha, we can stay to the course, we can listen for the beating of the drum.

Lama Govinda in Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism makes a lovely association here - Amitabha's color is red and Hri is his seed syllable which literally means 'to blush' - what happens when we hold ourselves accountable to living up to our ideals? We blush - it's our own self respect responding to our wrong-doing.

What makes us blush is the shame we feel in the presence of our better knowledge, our conscience."

Apatrapya -
respect for the wise option

To refrain from evil action b/c others deserving of respect will be annoyed.

Not wanting to do something that will disappoint people whom we respect. - Ones teacher, one's spiritual friends

Say something here about guilt

Subhadramati shares a checklist of how to tell whether we are actually feeling guilt, consists of three factors.

- You are conscious of having done something that somebody else didn't want you to do.
- There's a fear that you're going to get punished when you're found out
- And then the person who doesn't want you to do the thing, or maybe even you just imagine they don't want you to do it, is someone on whom you're emotionally dependent. Someone without whose love you feel you can't live without, you feel you can't manage without their love. And you fear that as a punishment they're going to withdraw that love.

So when we are reflecting on Hri and Apatrapya we may need to ask ourselves, is this just a healthy remorse, or is it this kind of more convoluted feeling of guilt. A true individual isn't governed by whether they're going to get the approval of others. So in a sense you can only be truly ethical if you're a true individual.

Ahrikyia is a lack of self-respect, you know you are doing something unskillful, you know what the Buddhist ideal truly consists in, but you refuse to accept the implications that ideal for your own practice. Essentially, you do not care that what you are doing is unskillful. You are going to do it anyways and that's all there is to it.

Similarly, instead of resistance to one's own better judgement, Anapatrapya is lack of respect for wise opinion. Resistance to the better judgement of others, lack of sensitivity to others. Implies that we at one point respected the wise opinion of others, and then something changed and we chose to ignore their opens - not open to the wisdom of others at all, not receptive, we don't care what anybody thinks.

I'm going to finish up by tying this all back to Amitabha and the unfolding of dreams.

Requesting ordination dream - confess it all.

Sexual misconduct no more dream - couldn't do it, even in my dream

On the mountain mediation and the alchemy of Amitabha

The four stages of confession outlined by the Buddha:

Remorse:

- The practice of confession starts with being sensitive to feelings of remorse, or hrī.
- Only confess if you really do feel remorse for something you've done. You don't need to feel under any pressure to confess.
- Confess from the basis of your own remorse, not from a desire to tell others about other people's unskillfulness.
- Clarify which precept/s you've broken.
- Take some time to explore whether you have actually acted unskillfully (or are just feeling irrational guilt, or have made a genuine mistake).

Confession

- Be specific about the action (of body, speech or mind) for which you feel remorse - don't confess a general tendency. Use the precepts to base your confession on.
- We can confess to a shrine, either by writing it on paper and offering it, or speaking it aloud
- We can confess to other people - GFR group, confession buddy, etc - more challenging practice when we confess to other people, but also more effective.
- Choose who you confess to carefully - needs to be someone who has committed themselves to practicing same precepts as you and understands practice of confession - probably an Order Member or mitra who's asked for ordination.
- Be as honest and open as you can.

- Be wary of confessing to the person who has been, or could be, harmed by your action (eg. telling someone you've been feeling ill-will or sexual craving towards them). Instead, confess to a third party, and then apologize for your behavior to the person you've behaved unskillfully towards, if you think that would be helpful to you both.

'Making amends in accordance with the Dhamma'

- Explore whether you need to take any action to make amends for what you've done, (e.g. replace something you've taken, or apologize to someone you've spoken to harshly).

'Undertaking restraint for the future'

- Explore what conditions you need to put in place to help you avoid repeating the behavior you've confessed.
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- Follow through on your resolve!

Some final points:

- You can confess omitting to do something skilful (eg. not being generous when there was a clear opportunity to do so).
- Rejoicing in precepts you've kept, or progress you've made in a particular area, is as important as confessing where you've fallen short.
- If you're aware of something you've done that you feel uncomfortable about, but don't feel ready to take responsibility for it fully and do your best to change it in future, or aren't yet clear exactly what you want to confess, it can help to acknowledge it to others and accept that it's "work in progress"
- Once you've made your confession, going through the four stages outlined above, and had it accepted, let it go! Chanting Vajrasattva mantra can help with this.

Receiving someone else's confession:

- It's usually best just to listen to the person, saying the minimum yourself.
- Sometimes they may need help to go through the four stages mentioned above, or to clarify which precept they've broken.
- Avoid going off on a tangent - keep the focus on the person's confession till everyone feels it is "complete"

- Avoid collusion, telling your story about how you did something similar, justifying their unskilful action or telling them it's not a big thing. You also don't need to give your opinion on the weightiness of the action: telling them it's an awful thing either! They will need to work out the weightiness of the action themselves.
- You may want to clarify that you've understood which precept they've broken, and how they're going to make amends, etc, before you're ready to accept the confession.
- It can often be helpful to the person confessing if their confession is accepted ritually by all who hear it, eg: "I hear and accept your confession" This can provide a sense of closure and enable the person to move on.

the creative tension between thinking and realizing for oneself and listening to and responding to teachings.

There's loads of teachings in Buddhism

Focus on Actions have Consequences

And just give confession practice a wholehearted try!

RUMI?

Questions for Reflection

1. What are your associations with confession?
2. How do we distinguish between irrational guilt and hrī/ apatrāpya in our experience
3. Why do we confess?
4. How does it feel to confess and apologise?
5. How do we set up the best conditions for Buddhist confession?
6. How do we receive confession?
7. What holds us back from confession?
8. What helps us to forgive?