

Week 4 – Confession & rejoicing

Buddhism Level 2 – Ritual & Devotion

The two stages of *Confession of Faults* and *Rejoicing in Merit* are examples of the importance that Buddhism places on cultivating positive emotion, and they illustrate the role of puja in doing so.

Integration & positive emotion together form basis of insight.

CONFESSION OF FAULTS

The evil that I have heaped up, through my ignorance and foolishness...

When we come to Going for Refuge, we start actively progressing in the direction of the spiritual goal. But once we have started making that effort we soon find that there are all sorts of things holding us back – all sorts of bad habits that we have formed and all kinds of unskillful actions that we have committed. So the next stage is to acknowledge that, to confess it – not only in the depths of our own hearts but also in front of the spiritual community. We thus begin to shed some of the baggage that is hindering us from climbing towards the mountain peak of Enlightenment.

Ritual & Devotion in Buddhism, Sangharakshita

The language of “evil” is off-putting for many, carries too many connotations of guilt. It’s not really inherent in the word itself:

Dictionary definition: **evil** adj 1 morally bad or offensive. 2 harmful.

But still, why use this strong, emotive language – why not just speak of our unskillfulness?

Confession is not just a cool, objective recognition, ticking off our actions against the precepts, but something really heartfelt. It should be an emotional experience. ibid

It’s using strong language to connect with a felt sense of regret – of harm done to ourselves & others - but not in a guilt-ridden, unworthy sense.

In puja, this confession is almost stylised / ritualised. But it is also a practice we can engage with: we find a spiritual friend with whom we can confide our regrets.

Why confess?

As a way to recognise our “mixedness”; there’s a lot of our self below the waterline that doesn’t fit in with our idea of ourselves, or how we’d like to be. Could call it our “shadow”.

Don’t have to feel bad about ourselves for this, just simply acknowledge it – being open about it ironically takes away some of the sting. Somehow feels more objective, manageable if you can talk about it. Makes it easier to address in our ethical practice.

Self-disclosure of aspects of ourselves we’re not proud of is a way to dissolve the persona, the face we like to wear: “good Buddhist”, “caring Mum”, “cool guy” etc.

How would it be if we apologised promptly every time we act towards someone in a way we regret?

How would it be to have someone we can “confess” to, to whom we could tell absolutely anything, however apparently trivial or shameful?

REJOICING IN MERIT

I rejoice with delight in the good done by all beings...

We're rejoicing that there's goodness in the world, wisdom, compassion. Isn't it great?

We recall the lives of great sages – where would we be without the Buddha & other spiritual teachers? As we get to know more & more historical Buddhist teachers, we can develop more sense of appreciation for the huge force for the good that flows through history, and that we're benefiting from.

But not just great teachers – recognising the value of ordinary peoples' aspirations and positive qualities. What sort of world would it be without? Recognising the innate desire for self-transcendence.

Rejoicing in merits represents the converse of the Confession of Faults. You have freed yourself from faults, so you feel happy and delighted; and being happy and delighted with yourself, you can feel happy and delighted with others. This is an important psychological fact: you cannot be happy with others unless you are first of all happy with yourself.
ibid

What holds us back from “rejoicing” / appreciating others more?

Jealousy, envy, pride, egotism, habitual focus on the negative in others, feeling of inferiority if we do acknowledge others' positive qualities.

It's as if there's only so many virtues to go around, so anyone else's must be at my expense – poverty mentality. Can have sense of the impersonality of positive qualities – it's just great that they exist, doesn't matter if they're mine or someone else's

Practice of rejoicing in merits works against this tendency, cultivates joyful, appreciative states of mind.

- If giving, balances any tendency to see with criticism – refocus onto what others do well, their “invisible” qualities that we can take so much for granted. Counteracts jealousy, envy, pride, egotism etc
- If receiving, balances any tendency to self-criticism – get to know our virtues through eyes or other, feel appreciated & seen

HOME PRACTICE

See if you can bring confession & rejoicing more consciously into your everyday life.

- Apologise promptly for any actions or communications you regret, even if slightly.
- Consciously dwell on peoples' positive qualities. Look out for occasions to appreciate people; and do it!
- At the end of each day, note these in your practice diary. Also reflect on any actions, words, or mental states that you regret on ethical grounds; and any actions or qualities about yourself that you appreciate.

FURTHER READING

Ritual & Devotion in Buddhism, Sangharakshita, ch 9 & 10.

The Spiritual Significance of Confession, Sangharakshita, CD125 or in *Transforming Self and World*