

# Evolving Beyond Delusion

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The human species is evolving, and at a very rapid rate now that the evolution is cultural rather than biological. Physical changes may still occur; but at such a glacial pace we are unlikely to notice anything. Changes in the human mind, however, are dramatic and can be seen all around us.

The twin forces of greed and hatred—the primal urge to want more of what pleases us and to want what displeases us to go away—have been useful adaptive tools throughout our primitive past, but are rapidly becoming obsolete. Now that our communities are global rather than tribal, our tools are powerful rather than rudimentary, and our weapons are capable of massive destruction, we find ourselves in the position of needing to evolve beyond the old paradigms if we are to adapt to the new environment shaped increasingly by our own activities.

The deeply-rooted instincts of desire have helped us get to where we are, as they continue to help all animals survive in the wild. Greed is necessary to chase down and devour one's prey, and hatred is essential to the "fight or flight" reflex that helps keep a creature alive in moments of danger. But humans no longer live in small family units in a vast and unfriendly wilderness. Huddled together as we now are, shoulder to shoulder on a shrinking planet, our own animal instincts have become our most dangerous predator.

For whatever reason it happened, the sudden bulging of the forebrain in homo sapiens (which took place not very long ago) gave us humans an unprecedented capability: sustained conscious awareness of what we are doing and how it effects those around us. The Buddhists call this capacity mindfulness (*sati*) and clear comprehension (*sampajāna*). It has allowed us to commence the process of evolving beyond the third deeply-rooted instinct, delusion, by beginning to develop wisdom.

What is more essentially human than the capacity for wisdom? Wisdom allows us to see beyond appearances into the hidden nature of things; it enables us to perceive what is counter-intuitive; it helps us know what is essential. Wisdom gives us an ability to understand that our greatest happiness and most profound well-being lies beyond the quenching of immediate thirsts or the suppression of unpleasant truths. In particular, wisdom reveals the limitations of our in-born desires of greed and hatred, as it erodes the delusion that holds us in their grip.

The Buddhist tradition can be tremendously helpful to us in the process of trying to evolve to the next level of humanity. The Buddha himself can be viewed as demonstrating what this new species "homo sapiens" (wise humans) might look like. For forty-five years, between the awakening of his mind and the passing away of his body, the Buddha lived with body and mind purified of all states rooted in greed, hatred and delusion. These three fires had "gone out," had "been extinguished," or had "been

released from their fuel,” and this is what the word nirvana refers to. It describes not a transcendent realm, but a transformed—we might even say evolved—human being.

The goal of becoming a better person is within the grasp of all of us, at every moment. The tool for emerging from the primitive yoke of conditioned responses to the tangible freedom of the conscious life lies just behind our brow. We need only invoke the power of mindful awareness in any action of body, speech or mind to elevate that action from the unconscious reflex of a trained creature to the awakened choice of a human being who is guided to a higher life by wisdom.

We do not have to accomplish this in as dramatic a way as the Buddha did. We may not “complete” the work in this lifetime and root out the very mechanism by which our minds and bodies manifest their hereditary toxins. Yet to whatever extent we can notice them as they arise, understand them for what they are, and gently abandon our grasp of them—if for only this moment—we are gaining ground in the grand scheme of things. And even a modest moment of emancipation from the unwholesome roots of greed, hatred and delusion is a moment without suffering.

Despite the sometimes overwhelming evidence to the contrary, I believe an objective study of history will show that the human species is indeed evolving towards a wiser, kinder and more noble future. The Buddha and his teachings have had a lot to do with raising the sights of humanity, and we may well be in a position today where these teachings can contribute to a new awakening of human potential.

There is something beautiful in us, eager to unfold. Organic, like a plant, it need only be cleared of choking weeds, watered by kindness and generosity, and turned to the bright, nurturing rays of wisdom. Mindfulness is the way we can care for this hope; let’s claim our freedom and see what we might become.