

A 5-STEP PURIFICATION PROCESS

*"...you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate,
but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence....
First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean....
you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful,
but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth.
So you also on the outside look righteous to others,
but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.
– Matthew 23:25-28*

*For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer,
sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified,
how much more will the blood of Christ,
who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God,
purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!
– Hebrews 9:13-14*

*For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it:
thou delightest not in burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit:
a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.
– Psalm 51:16-17*

Jesus and Paul are reminding us that spiritual growth and healing depend on an *inner* process of purifying our minds, hearts and consciences, rather than external rituals. Rituals such as confession and penance can be effective in triggering and assisting that internal process, but without that process they are “dead works.”

I'd like to share with you a process for using your conscience to help your spiritual development, that I learned from the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Gehlek Rinpoche. You'll find a lot of points where this process is similar to Christian practice, but I find it to be a much more systematic way of using the pangs of conscience to promote the kind of spiritual growth that Jesus and Paul are calling for.

Rinpoche tells the story that, upon hearing this teaching, the late poet Allen Ginsberg remarked, “Oh, you're talking about 5 R's: Recognition; Regret; Restitution and Refuge; Resolution not to Repeat; and Reformation.” Well, maybe that's 5 ¾ R's; nonetheless, it's an easy way to remember the steps in the process, and that's the way I learned it, so this is the way I'll try to explain it to you.

Step 1: Recognition

*...through not having realized
That I shall suddenly vanish,
I committed so much evil
Out of ignorance, lust and hate.
– Shantideva (8th century AD)*

The first thing that conscience does for us is to help us recognize that we have done something wrong. In the Christian vocabulary that is *sin*; in the Buddhist vocabulary it is “unskillful action” (*akusala-kamma* in the Pali language of the original Buddhist canon), which is explicitly targeted at **intentional action**.

Like Christianity and Judaism, Buddhism has a “Big 10”. However, rather than a set of commandments, it is an enumeration of unskillful actions or “misdeeds” to be avoided. Because it's divided into misdeeds of the three “doorways” of Body, Speech and Mind, it's easy to remember. I do recommend committing this list to memory so that your conscience will be on the lookout for these misdeeds.

• **Misdeeds of Body**

1. **Killing** of sentient beings (humans or animals); sometimes this is extended even to wounding or causing pain.
2. **Stealing** or “taking what is not given.”
3. **Sexual misconduct:** As with most religions, Buddhism has a whole shopping list

of stuff under this heading. The current Dalai Lama has boiled it down to "sexual conduct that causes pain or mental suffering to another or to oneself."

- **Misdeeds of Speech**

1. **Lying**
2. **Slander or Divisive Speech:** Speech that divides people from each other rather than uniting them.
3. **Harsh or Hurtful Speech**
4. **Idle Chatter and Gossip**

- **Misdeeds of Mind**

1. **Attachment:** Grasping (greed) and clinging (selfishness)
2. **Aversion:** Fear and hatred
3. **Wrong view:** Denying what is true and asserting what is false. In Buddhism, the 2 big wrong views are to deny the Second Noble Truth (the truth of the cause of anguish) by asserting that actions do not have consequences, and to deny the Third Noble Truth (the truth of the cessation of anguish) by asserting that cessation is unattainable.

Step 2: Regret

In both the Christian and Buddhist traditions, the proper function of regret is to create the strong desire to remedy the effects of our unskillful actions.

Regret doesn't mean beating yourself up! "Oh boo hoo hoo, I'm a miserable sinner, I can never be forgiven." That's just another form of self-absorption, and from both a Christian and Buddhist viewpoint is a wrong view. Acting that way is to deny the truth of salvation bought for us at a great price. "O happy fault, which gained for us so great a Redeemer!" (from the *Exultet*, traditionally sung at the Easter Vigil)

Buddhism is pragmatic about regret: Unskillful action, that causes anguish to others, will eventually result in similar anguish to ourselves. The consequences of our actions ripple out through the good or harm we do to others and to the environment. If we take satisfaction in good or evil deeds we develop good or evil habits of mind, respectively. Eventually those ripples of cause and effect will interact with those mental habits to cause us joy or sorrow, even as we have done to others. So if we've been unskillful, we'd better fix it as best and as soon as we can.

*Remaining neither day nor night,
Life is always slipping by
And never getting any longer.
Shall death not come to one like me?
– Shantideva*

Step 3: Restitution and Refuge

Sometimes fixing the damage we've done is possible. Sometimes a sincere and humble apology is all that's needed. Sometimes a little crow (or a lot) must be eaten. In any case we have to give up a bit (or a lot) of our pride; and that's all to the good, isn't it?

Sometimes, if the wound is too deep or the damage too widespread, we need more than just ourselves:

*Therefore now I seek refuge
In the Awakened Ones who protect the world,
Who strive to shelter all that lives
And with great strength eradicate all fear.

Likewise I purely seek refuge
in the Truth they have realized
That clears away the fears of this life.
– Shantideva*

Step 4: Resolution not to Repeat

*...and grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake,
that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life,
to the glory of thy holy Name.
– Book of Common Prayer*

*I beseech all the Guides of the World to please accept my evils and wrongs.
Since these are not good, in future I shall do them no more.*
– Shantideva

Step 5: Reformation

So – we have resolved not to repeat the misdeed that got us into this miserable state in the first place. But the road to Hell is paved with good intentions. How can we keep from stumbling again?

The roots of unskillful actions lie in our own unskillful mental habits, specifically in the three “psychic poisons” of **ignorance, attachment and aversion**, which in turn generate delusions (negative emotions) such as **pride, jealousy, anger, clinging, grasping, doubt** and **wrong views**. Therefore, to completely eliminate the tendency to sin, we would have to pull it up by those roots (don't you just love the word *extirpate*?).

Obviously this is a big project, and not to be undertaken all at once. If you have a garden full of weeds, and try to fix it with Roundup, nothing good will grow there either. You have to identify the weeds and pull them up one by one, then plant the seeds of the plants that will give you the fruits you want. Similarly, we have to reform our minds by replacing the bad habits with good ones, one at a time. And since our garden has been weedy for a long time, we'll have to keep weeding and cultivating it, fertilizing and watering the good plants so they'll grow. Inch by inch, row by row. Conscience is our weed identification book.

There is a lot of wisdom available about specific remedies (good mental habits) that can replace the bad mental habits that ultimately are the causes of anguish, and about meditative practices that can be used to accomplish that process, but that is too much detail for now. The process that is used in each case, though, is the same:

- **Establish a good motivation.** The wish to contribute to the well-being of all sentient beings is a much stronger motivation than just the wish to avoid suffering for oneself, and there are practices for making this motivation stronger as well.
- **Get the information.** Find out about the particular remedy for the particular affliction you are currently dealing with, and the practices for applying the remedy.
- **Analyze the information.** Which parts of it are consistent with what you already know? Which parts of it challenge what you just think you know? Which parts of it seem to hold the greatest promise for improvement?
- **Concentrate** on those parts of the information that can transform your mind, so that the good habits begin to drive out the bad. There are meditative techniques you can learn for this purpose.
- Be **conscientious** about always applying the remedies. “Remember this by repeated recollection.” – Geshe Chekawa (1102-1176)
- Stay **alert** to the workings of your mind – even (or especially) when you're tired.

*In all activities I will observe my mind,
And the moment a delusion arises,
Endangering myself and others,
I will firmly confront and avert it.*
– Geshe Langri Thangpa (1054-1123)

*And empower me that with mindfulness and alertness,
born from thoughts ultimately pure,
I may live in accord with the holy Teachings....*
– Tsongkhapa(1357-1419)

*Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents
than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.*
– [Luke 15:7](#)