

Skillfulness and Wholesomeness In Buddhist Practice

by Gil Fronsdal

Doing no evil,
Taking up what's *skillful*,
And purifying the mind:
This is the teaching of the Buddhas.
Dhammapada v.183

Abandon what is *unwholesome* and devote yourself to *wholesome* conduct, for that is how you will come to growth, increase, and fulfillment in this Dhamma and Discipline.

MN 21.8

One of the foundational early Buddhist concepts is encapsulated in the Pali word *kusala*. In previous essays for the EEP, I rendered the word as “wholesome”, the most common translation choice of Bhikkhu Bodhi. Some translators, such as Thanissaro Bhikkhu, translate this word as “skillful.” Each of these English word choices conveys a different meaning and emphasis. “Skillful” is an appropriate translation in the context of personal practice and growth along the path of liberation. “Wholesome” works well as a translation in discussions of behavior that is interpersonal in nature, for example in behavior we might call ethical. While we can distinguish between personal and interpersonal usages of the word *kusala*, the fact that the same word is used for both of these two dimensions of human life suggests that in ancient Buddhist India they may have been considered closely related.

Kusala and its opposite *akusala* appear frequently in the Pali suttas and are two of the primary words characterizing the ethical quality of behavior and mental states. They are more commonly used and more concrete in meaning than Pali words that can be translated into English as “good” and “bad”.

Definitions for “Skillful” and “Wholesome”

“Skillful” suggests having the ability to do something well, to have proficiency. It can also refer to someone or something that is helpful for attaining particular values and purposes. In the Buddhist context what is skillful is whatever is conducive or supportive for realizing some of the purposes of Buddhist practice.

“Wholesome” gives the idea that what is *kusala* is healthy or virtuous. A dictionary definition for “wholesome” is “promoting health or well-being of mind, spirit, or body.”¹ Another definition is “conducive to or promoting moral well-being.”² Using “wholesome” to translate *kusala* suggests the onward-leading aspect of what is *kusala*, including how it might be supportive of maturation along the Buddhist path. It also suggests the positive psychological effect that wholesome actions have, and the negative mental effect of unwholesomeness actions.

In the suttas, *kusala* is primarily used as an adjective. Occasionally, with the same spelling, it is a noun, which the Pali-English dictionary defines as “a good thing, good deeds, virtue, merit, good consciousness.” These occasional usages as a noun occur mostly in myth-like stories probably composed after the time of the Buddha.³ The more prominent adjectival usage of *kusala* suggest it was not understood as an abstract concept that could exist apart from human behavior; it was a characteristic of behavior as seen in the quote, “One who covers wicked deed with a wholesome/skillful deed illuminates the world like the moon freed from a cloud.”⁴

There are subtle differences in meaning between the two English translation of *kusala*. “Skillful,” on its own, is a value-free word; it doesn’t indicate the value of what is skillful. “Wholesome,” on the other hand, suggests that what is wholesome is somehow good or virtuous. Also, “skillful” more commonly emphasizes having proficiency in accomplishing or influencing something while “wholesome” can emphasize the goodness of something in and of itself, independent of its consequences. Skill is therefore more suggestive of

¹ Merriam-Webster online dictionary.

² Apple’s Oxford American Dictionaries.

³ E.g., DN 19.51 and DN 26.71 (where Walshe translates as “what is right” and “moral”, respectively; Washe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*).

⁴ MN 86.18 (ii 104)

something that is done for a purpose; while something that is wholesome can be valuable regardless of any purpose it may serve. These differences suggest that there may be different contexts for using either “wholesome” or “skillful” in translating *kusala*.

Examples of *Kusala* as “Skillful”

It is likely that *kusala* can best be translated as “skillful” in discussions of meditation practice. For example, the Buddha illustrated the ability, in meditation, to balance the five faculties by comparing it to a lute player who is skilled in playing the lute (AN 6.55). A wise, skilled meditator capable of practicing the four foundations of mindfulness is compared to a skilled cook capable of cooking appropriate meals (SN 47:8). A skillful meditator is skilled in states of concentration (*samādhi*), with entering *samādhi*, and with emerging from *samādhi* (AN 2:63).

Sometimes the kind of “skill” that the Buddha emphasizes is knowledge or insight rather than meditational skill. His own knowledge of the path of practice he likens to that of a person who is skilled about (i.e., knows) the road to a distant city.⁵ Elsewhere the Buddha says that someone accomplished in what is skillful (*kusala*) knows the arising and the cessation of wholesome (*kusala*) and unwholesome (*akusala*) behavior and resolves. (MN 78.9).

One of the most common usages of *kusala* is as an adjective characterizing *dhammas* that arise as part of and as supports for the path to liberation. The word *dhamma* has many meanings. In relationship to *kusala* its most common meaning is “mental qualities” as in the following quote:

Anyone who has developed and cultivated mindfulness of the body has included in oneself whatever skillful qualities conducive to [liberating] knowledge.

(MN 119.22)

⁵ Bhikkhu Bodhi translates *kusala* in this passage as “familiar with” (MN 107.14)

A long list of *kusala dhammas* are organized in a grouping called the thirty-seven wings of awakening, the following sutta passage:

“[The Buddha’s way] of teaching the Dhamma is unsurpassed in regard to **skillful qualities**, that is to say, the four foundations of mindfulness, the four right efforts, the four roads to power, the five faculties, the five powers, the seven factors of enlightenment, and the Noble Eightfold Path. By these one can ... attain liberation of mind and liberation through wisdom.” (DN 28.3)

When what is skillful is defined pragmatically by what is helpful for attaining a purpose, what makes these thirty-seven states skillful is how they contribute to the attainment of liberation.

Example of *Kusala* as “Wholesome” and “Unwholesome”

In the suttas, the word *akusala*, “unwholesome”, characterizes greed, hatred, and delusion. *Kusala* in the sense of “wholesome” describes non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. Greed, hatred, and delusion are known as the roots of the unethical behavior known as the “Ten Courses of Unwholesome Action.”⁶ Their opposite are the roots for the “Ten Courses of Wholesome Action.” Each of these ten-item lists concerns the same physical, verbal, and mental actions. The unwholesome actions are:

- 1) Destroying life,
- 2) Taking what is not given,
- 3) Misconduct in sensual pleasure,
- 4) Speaking falsehood,
- 5) Speaking malicious words,
- 6) Speaking harsh words,
- 7) Frivolous chatter,
- 8) Covetousness,
- 9) Ill will,
- 10) Having wrong views.

⁶ MN 9.3-8

The “Ten Courses of Wholesome Actions” are

- 1) Abstaining from destroying life,
- 2) Abstaining from taking the not given,
- 3) Abstaining from misconduct in sensual pleasure,⁷
- 4) Abstaining from speaking falsehood,
- 5) Abstaining from speaking malicious words,
- 6) Abstaining from speaking harsh words,
- 7) Abstaining from frivolous chatter,
- 8) Not being covetous,
- 9) Being without ill will,
- 10) Having right views.

(MN 9)

Part of what makes these wholesome actions ethical is that they are rooted in non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. They are also ethical because they all clearly involve causing or potentially causing harm. It is because of this ethical nature, that *kusala* and *akusala* are, in this context, best translated as “wholesome” and “unwholesome”.

In the suttas, the ten courses of wholesome actions are discussed in the suttas more often than the five precepts and the monastic rules. They are also placed more centrally in the teachings of the Buddha. Their importance is represented by the Buddha’s use of this list to define both what is the Dhamma and what is beneficial.⁸ The Buddha also specifies that doing the ten unwholesome actions, i.e., the opposite of the ten wholesome actions, is opposed to the Dharma and is harmful.⁹ Even more significant is the Buddha’s description of the ten courses of wholesome action as being “noble Dharma”¹⁰ and the unwholesome actions as being “ignoble Dharma.”¹¹ They are also called the “noble path” and the “ignoble path, respectively.”¹² Using one of the most significant metaphors found in the suttas, a

⁷ For monastics, the third Course of Wholesome Actions is celibacy (*bramacariya*).

⁸ *attha*

⁹ *anatta*; AN 10:171 and AN 10:173

¹⁰ *ariya dhamma*

¹¹ *anariya Dhamma*; AN 10:178

¹² AN 10:189

metaphor that is usually used to represent the distinction between being not awakened and awakened, the Buddha states that “the near shore” is the ten courses of unwholesome action and “the far shore” is the ten courses of wholesome action.¹³

The Buddha associates the ten courses of wholesome action with concepts that can be considered ethical in nature. Conversely, the ten courses of unwholesome action are associated with concepts related to what is unethical. For example, the wholesome actions are associated with purity (*soceyya*); the unwholesome actions are referred to as not pure (*asuci*).¹⁴ The Buddha also refers to them as “good” (*sādhu*) and “bad” (*asādhu*).¹⁵ They result, respectively, in happiness (*sukha*) and suffering (*dukkha*).¹⁶ They are also said to lead to rebirth in heaven and hell.¹⁷

An added aspect of the ten skillful actions that gives them an ethical dimension is the positive qualities that are associated with five of them in the full description or definitions provided in the suttas. It is probably appropriate to call these “virtues”.

The following list correlates these:

1. Abstaining from destroying life	Is compassionate toward all living beings
5. Abstaining from malicious speech	Reunites those divided, promotes friendship
6. Abstaining from harsh speech	Speaks gently and courteously
7. Abstaining from gossip/idle speech	Speaks what is factual and good
9. Abstaining from ill will	Wishes others to be free of affliction

The association of these virtues with the ten wholesome actions adds to the impression that the ten skillful actions qualify as the primary ethical or moral code found in the suttas.

Overall, the Pali adjective *kusala*, in usages where it can be translated as “wholesome”, appears to be a close match to the English adjective “ethical” in the sense of “relating to moral principles.” We might also match *kusala* with the English word “virtuous” if we use

¹³ AN 10:169 and 10:170

¹⁴ AN 4.192; cf. AN 10.176

¹⁵ AN 10:178

¹⁶ AN 10:179

¹⁷ AN 10:176 and AN 10:177

the dictionary definition, “having or showing high moral standards.” The moral principles associated with *kusala* are those of wholesomeness and unwholesomeness, especially in then relationship greed, hatred, and delusion have with what is unwholesome and non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion have for what is wholesome. The moral standards for *kusala* are the Ten Courses of Wholesome Action. As we shall see in an upcoming essay, *sīla* – the word commonly translated as “ethics” or “virtue” – does not make as good a match as *kusala* for the English *virtuous* and *ethical*, at least in its usage in the suttas. In order to understand early Buddhist ethics it is, therefore, necessary to study the ethics of *kusala*.

The Causes and Conditions for *kusala*:

The suttas also discuss the causes or conditions for the arising of wholesomeness/skillfulness. These include the arousal of energy, great aspiration, fewness of desires, contentment, wise attention, clear comprehension, and good friendship (AN 1:61-70). Right view is also said to be a condition for the arising of the following set of behaviors explicitly described as skillful/wholesome:

right intention, right speech, non-opposition to noble ones, convincing another to accept the true Dhamma, and avoidance of self-praise and the disparagement of others. (MN 60.11)

In this passage, the view that is considered “right” (*sammā*) is the belief “there actually is another world.” This belief not only gives rise to wholesome states, one’s former bad conduct (*dusīla*) is also abandoned and good conduct (*susīla*) comes forth.¹⁸

The Pragmatism of Thinking in Terms of *Kusala*

The Buddha frequently paired the concept of *kusala* with that of *akusala*. One reason for this is because of his pragmatic interest in what works and what doesn’t work, what is

¹⁸ It is noteworthy that Bhikkhu Bodhi translates *dusīla* as “corrupt conduct” and *susīla* as “pure virtue” in spite of the fact that both words contain the Pali word *sīla*. By choosing the English words corrupt, pure, and virtue, Bhikkhu Bodhi may be infusing the text with particular ethical orientations or values not present in the Pali (*The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 509).

helpful and what isn't helpful for the path of liberation. The Buddha was concerned with what led to the growth of skillful/wholesome states as the following passage indicates:

When based upon *sīla*, established upon *sīla*, you develop these four establishments of mindfulness ..., then, whether night or day, you may expect only growth in skillful/ states, not decline."¹⁹

This dichotomy in relationship to *kusala* and *akusala* is also seen in the following passage:

I saw in unwholesome states danger, degradation, and defilement, and in wholesome states the blessing of renunciation, the aspect of cleansing.²⁰

This binary, pragmatic way of thinking may well be rooted in the primary Buddhist dichotomy on the path of liberation: suffering and the ending of suffering.

Such bodily conduct as causes *akusala* states to increase and *kusala* states to diminish in one who cultivates it should not be cultivated. But such bodily conduct as causes *akusala* states to diminish and *kusala* states to increase in one who cultivates it should be cultivated.²¹

Conclusion

While in English *kusala* can be translated as either "skillful" or "wholesome" depending on the context, the ancient Buddhists did not choose to use two different words. While "skillful" works well in passages having to do with skill on the path to liberation and "wholesome" is more suitable in contexts that are more clearly ethical in nature, by using *kusala* in both contexts it seems the ancient Buddhists did not differentiate the path to liberation from the practice of ethics. Perhaps the two are more than mutual, interrelated partners: perhaps for the Buddha they are equivalent. Perhaps our distinguishing of the two is similar to how we might distinguish two sides of a Mobius strip.

¹⁹ SN 47.3

²⁰ MN 19.7

²¹ MN 114.5

Appendix: Analogies for *Kusala*

In addition to those mentioned above, the Buddha used a variety of analogies to convey ideas involving skillfulness. Some of these relate to other usages of *kusala* in the Pali discourses:

Sutta	Analogy using <i>kusala</i>	What the analogy represents
MN 27.10 ff.	The ability or knowledge an elephant hunter has in tracking elephants.	The proficiency in practices that give rise to the direct, personal experience of awakening so that confirms the awakening of the Buddha
MN 58.10-11	The knowledge of a charioteer	The Buddha's insight into reality.
MN 21.7	The ability of a horse trainer	The Buddha's skill in guiding capable monks.
MN 85.56	The skill Prince Bodhi has with controlling a tamed elephant.	The Buddha's skill and ability to guide others to realization.

The first analogy suggests that *kusala* refers to proficiency, understanding, and skillfulness in following the "trail" that leads to awakening. The second seems to refer to skillful knowledge by which the Buddha navigates through the world. The last two analogies connect *kusala* with having skill in teaching others. Just as a meditator develops skills and skillful states, so a teacher develops teaching skills and states of mind that support teaching.
