

The Ethical Heart (3 of 5) Wholesome and Skillful

June 17, 2020

SUMMARY KEYWORDS nourishing, healthy, *kusala*, onward leading, liberation, purify, *Kalama Sutta*,

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What I've been teaching about meditating with the way the mind wanders off and you come back could be described as developing the skill of meditation. We can become more skillful. Skill is something we can develop, like developing a skill for a craft. We get better and better at doing it as we practice. When we are learning a new craft or activity that requires skill, we are not expected to know how to do it well at the beginning. We just practice and learn. It becomes a skill. Maybe it even becomes second nature and easy to do.

However, when we look at how we can bring compassion or kindness to what's happening – how we can come back to meditating in a way that's peaceful and nourishing – we see that the process has other aspects besides being skillful. I like the word “nourishing,” a word that is often used to mean “wholesome.” Wholesome is that which is conducive to health. It is healthy to do this. These two English words – skillful and wholesome – are represented by a single word in the ancient language of the Buddha in the Buddha's teachings. This is the word “*kusala*.”

Kusala is an extremely important word. Some translators will translate it as “skillful” and some as “wholesome.” “Skillful” connotes that there is a goal, a purpose for what we're doing. We're trying to cultivate or develop something. It's skillful for a purpose. “Wholesome” is healthy in and of itself. It's virtuous; there's a goodness to it. It has more to do with the quality of what we're doing in the moment and how that quality is onward leading. Its focus is not the purpose.

Depending on what we're talking about in Buddhism, sometimes the word “*kusala*” is translated as “skillful” and other times as “wholesome.” It's the same word in Pali. Furthermore, “*kusala*” is probably one of the primary candidates for translating the English adjective “ethical.” There is no obvious word in the Buddhist language for our English word “ethics.” This is not because the ancient Buddhists were not ethical in our eyes. It's just that they didn't look at their experience through our Western English concept of ethics. That arose in a particular cultural, historical, and religious context where the category of ethics was singled out and made into a concept.

Perhaps there is a value in specifying ethics as a specific concept. But doing so carries the risk of separating it from the rest of our life. I've known people who thought that ethics was just a little bit too “pollyanna-ish” (that is, unrealistically optimistic) or hypocritical. They turned away from ethics because they felt they didn't need that kind of judgmental or limiting idea.

In the ancient world, they didn't have the word “ethics.” They didn't tease it out from experience. It was integrated into the Dharma. From the point of view of the Buddha, if you are really involved in understanding the Buddhist path of practice, ethics is not something you can separate from the path. It is integral to the path.

One of the key slogans of Buddhism is a four-line verse that goes this way:

Don't do what is wicked. [Some people translate it as “evil.” I don't know if that's the best translation because of the heavy connotations of “evil” in English and Western thought.]

Don't do what is wicked.
Do what is skillful.
And purify the mind.

This is the teaching of the Buddhas.

For many of us, the teachings of the Buddhas have a connotation of ethics in our language – don't do evil; don't do harm; do what is skillful. Or, if you translate differently, do what is wholesome and purify the mind. Purifying the mind is skillful and wholesome. It's part and parcel of all that we're trying to do in Buddhism.

That little saying puts the idea of wholesomeness right at the heart of the practice. There is a very famous *sutta* called the *Kalama Sutta* where some people come to the Buddha and say, "We've had a lot of spiritual teachers coming through town. They all say they have the right teachings, the true teachings. How do we decide between them? Who has the right and true teachings?" And the Buddha declines to answer the question that way. Instead he offers a principle or standard by which they can decide for themselves. But first he says what *not* to do as a standard in order to understand what is true. I guess he means spiritually true. For the Buddha, truth was always for the purpose of liberation.

It's a remarkable passage because it suggests *not* to use as a source of absolute or ultimate authority what many people use as an authority for the source of religious teachings or a lot of things in life. The Buddha says to the *Kalamas*:

Do not go by oral tradition.

There was only oral tradition back then. In our day we could say, "Don't go by scripture. Don't follow it just because it's in the sacred texts."

Don't go by the lineage of teaching.

Just because it's in a particular lineage of teachers, traditions, or cultures, that doesn't necessarily make it true.

Don't go by hearsay. Don't go by logical reasoning. Don't go by inferential reasoning.

Don't go by reasoning things out for yourself. Don't go by the acceptance of a belief after simply reflecting on it: "That seems like a good idea. Seems right."

Don't go by the seeming competence of the speaker [someone like me] or because you think that person is your teacher.

That's a very impressive list of things the Buddha says not to do.

Then he says what to do. I won't give you the whole text now. Many people will translate this next piece into English as "Go by your own experience." But that isn't really right. It's too broad and vague, and it's actually dangerous to word it that vaguely.

Here's part of what the Buddha said:

When you know for yourselves, "These things are unwholesome," or, "These things can lead to harm," or when you know, "These things are wholesome and will lead to benefit," then avoid the unwholesome and do the wholesome. Avoid the unskillful, and do the skillful.

The assumption here is that we can know for ourselves and go by our own experience in a particular way. We can know whether something is skillful or wholesome, and whether it's not. We can know whether it's harmful or conducive to harm, or not. In this way, we become our own teachers. We develop sensitivity.

Part of the purpose of mindfulness practice is to develop a deeper capacity to see, to know for oneself, and to sense this distinction so it becomes a reliable source of how to find our way. Is an action skillful or not skillful? Is it wholesome or not wholesome? These questions are the substitute for going to scripture or listening to a teacher to know what is true. We ourselves are the arbitrators. We ourselves are supposed to be able to have this ability.

But to cultivate this ability takes time and practice. We must be very careful to not jump to conclusions based on superficially registering things. The more deeply mindful we become and the stronger our mindfulness is, the more ethical we become, in Western English terms

The Buddha doesn't use the word "ethics," but he does make a very clear connection – an equivalence – between the development of mindfulness and becoming a more ethical person. This is a person who does more and more wholesome things and is less and less likely to do things that are unwholesome.

How do we know something is wholesome or unwholesome? We can know it for ourselves. We really feel it. And we feel it in different ways. We feel it both in terms of how nourishing it is, how healthy it feels within, or how harmful it is. And we feel it by how conducive it is to being onward leading. If it's wholesome, it's conducive to and onward leading toward greater wholesomeness. If it's unwholesome, it's conducive to greater harm and shutting down.

We are finding our way here in this practice. The more wholesomeness we develop, the further along we are on the path of liberation. Even if you're not very interested in ethics, coincidentally you become more ethical. If you're interested in being ethical, then the more you can live in a wholesome way, becoming more and more wholesome from the inside out, then coincidentally you are also developing on the path of liberation.

These two outcomes – liberation and ethics – come together in the heart. I like to think that when we come to bow and put our hands together, it's a beautiful expression of the coming together of the best in our hearts: the wholesomeness and the care for the world around us. Ethics has a lot to do with how we live our lives. The way we live our lives and cultivating the path of practice come together. They're really the same thing.

Thank you for today. I'll continue this topic of skillfulness and wholesomeness tomorrow.