

The Ethical Heart (4 of 5) The Ten Wholesome Actions

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Today is the fourth day on the theme of ethics. There's not a good match in the Buddha's *Pali* language for our English word "ethics." *Sīla* doesn't quite match because *sīla* has to do with conduct, while ethics, in addition to conduct, often has to do with other aspects such as virtue and the principles behind how we act. *Sīla* refers to action. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates *sīla* as "virtuous conduct."

Conduct is actually quite important. There is a wonderful teaching in the Middle Length Discourses about two Brahmins who came to the Buddha. They were having a disagreement about what makes a person a Brahmin. Are they Brahmins by birth, and that is how they become the top caste in their society? Or is it by their actions?

The Buddha had a lengthy response. He was very clear that people are defined by their actions, not by their birth. In this teaching, the Buddha is explicit that there is no differentiation based on species or race among human beings. Human beings are all one class of beings. For the Buddha, what differentiates human beings is their actions, what they actually do.

In the texts, the Buddha repeatedly comes back to how people are actually living. Are they living in ways that are causing harm, or are they living in ways that are not causing harm? He answers philosophical, metaphysical, and sociological questions, such as questions about societies and castes, by focusing on how people act. What are they doing? In English terms, are their actions ethical or not ethical?

In this discourse, the Buddha says:

One is not a Brahmin by birth, nor by birth a non-Brahmin. By action is one a Brahmin. By action is one a non-Brahmin.

He is redefining the meaning of Brahmin, from a particular caste of people to someone whose actions are ethical. In this teaching, everyone can be a Brahmin.

The Buddha goes on and describes how people are defined by what they do. People are farmers because they farm. People are craftspeople through doing crafts. People are merchants because of what they do. People are robbers because they rob, soldiers because they are soldiering, and chaplains because they're chaplain-ing. They are chaplains because of their actions. Some people are rulers because of their actions. That is how the truly wise see action as it really is:

The truly wise are skilled in action and in the results of actions.

They see the consequences of actions. I think a good comparison might be the way we say in English, "Love makes the world go round." The Buddha said the equivalent of "Action makes the world go round.":

Action makes this generation of people turn. Living beings are bound by action like the chariot wheel by the pin that keeps it to the axle. By self-control and inner training, by this one becomes a Brahmin. In this, supreme Brahminhood lies.

Here again, actions are central. They include not only physical actions in the world, but also the inner actions of inner training, self-control, and developing oneself through practice. So action makes the world go round.

Action is very important, and the measure of action is whether it is causing harm or not, or whether it is skillful or not. There is a list called “Ten Skillful Actions” or “Ten Wholesome Actions.” If we translate the word “*kusala*” as “ethics,” these are ten ethical actions that the Buddha emphasized much more than he emphasized the Five Precepts, for example.

The ten unskillful or unwholesome actions are killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, malicious or divisive speech, harsh speech, pointless speech, avariciousness, ill-will, and wrong view. The skillful ones are abstaining from killing, abstaining from stealing, abstaining from sexual misconduct, abstaining from speaking falsehoods, abstaining from malicious or divisive speech, abstaining from harsh speech, abstaining from pointless chatter, abstaining from avariciousness, abstaining from ill-will, and abstaining from wrong view.

This teaching is very important for the Buddha. I think the word “*kusala*” (skillful or wholesome) is probably the closest to the English word “ethics.” This list of ten is so important in the Buddha’s teaching that he said:

Doing the Ten Skillful Actions – this is the Dharma. This is the noble Dharma, and this is the far shore.

Some of you might know that both the word “noble” and the phrase “far shore” are often used to represent enlightenment – the goal of practice. The Buddha is very powerfully saying that acting and living in these ten ethical ways is what the Dharma is. This is what is noble. This is the far shore.

Then he says that the near shore – what’s not the Dharma, what’s not noble – are the Ten Unskillful Actions. I want to emphasize today that what we might call “ethics” and what the goal of Buddhist practice is are one and the same. They can’t really be separated. In attaining the far shore and the noble Dharma, we become ethical. We become these qualities.

Someone who is ethically and spiritually mature in Buddhism will naturally live by the skillful actions. It’s just who they are. They’re not going to kill, they’re not going to steal, they’re not going to engage in sexual misconduct, they’re not going to lie, and they’re not going to be involved in malicious or divisive speech. They’re not going to be involved in harsh speech or pointless chatter, being avaricious, wanting, and acquiring. They’re not going to live with ill will, and they’re not going to have wrong view.

When I first came to Buddhism many years ago, in the counterculture of the United States at that time, this kind of ethical teaching was somewhat uninteresting for us. What was interesting was great states of mind – the non-ethical descriptions of awakening and liberation. Actually, that was all fine; it got many of us to practice.

But as we develop the practice, a natural tendency develops to want to live more and more in ethical ways (what we would call “ethical;” the Buddha would call them “skillful, wholesome, or healthy”). These ten actions define this healthy and wholesome way. When ethics is associated with purity, the Buddha calls these ten actions “the way to live with purity.” He also calls them “good” and “bad” – abstract terms often used to describe ethics. He calls skillful actions “conducive to happiness,” and unskillful ones “conducive to suffering.”

He associates some of these with inner virtues so there is a positive correlation to them. Abstaining from destroying or killing life is correlated with being compassionate for all beings. Avoiding malicious speech is using speech that “reunites those who are divided and promotes friendship.” Abstaining from harsh speech is “to speak gently and courteously.” Abstaining from pointless speech is “to speak what is factual, useful, or good.” Abstaining from ill will is “to wish others to be free from affliction.” These are considered virtues and ways to live well.

“*Kusala*” is the word of the week. This is probably the best word for the English idea of ethics. We have a very different feeling about ethics when we ask, “What is skillful, what is wholesome, what is healthy?”

There are three roots of what is unskillful and three roots of what is skillful. That will be the topic for tomorrow. I’ll suggest that there is another *Pali* word that can be associated with the English word “ethics,” and that is the word I will translate as “beautiful” – *kalyāṇa*. What is ethical is also associated with beauty. I look forward to it.

Thank you very much.