

# The Ethical Heart (5 of 5) The Roots of Ethics

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

delusion, greed, hate, unconditioned, plant, ten skillful actions, Theravada, harming, killing, stealing, sexuality, lying, avaricious, ill will, *Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, *nibbāna*, *akusala*, truth, far shore, unaging, stable, unmanifest, un-proliferated, peaceful, deathless, sublime, auspicious, secure, destruction of craving, wonderful, amazing, un-ailing, unafflicted, purity, freedom, island, shelter, asylum, refuge, *dukkha*, *kalyāṇa*

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Greetings. This morning will be the last of the five talks on the general principles of early Buddhist ethics. Yesterday I talked about the ten unskillful and ten skillful actions. The Buddha was very concerned about how we act and live in the world. We want our actions, our behavior, and our relationship with other people to be skillful or wholesome.

At least nine of those ten skillful actions have to do with our relationship with and actions toward others in the world. What is wholesome or skillful is to avoid killing and harming other beings; to avoid stealing; to avoid hurting people through our sexuality and sexual behavior; to avoid lying and to avoid divisive, malicious, harsh, or pointless speech; to avoid being avaricious (wanting other people's things); and to avoid having ill will. These nine are all about how we are in relation to other people. The Buddha put tremendous emphasis on the importance of behaving and acting in ways that avoid harm, and instead, living for the good or welfare of others.

These ten skillful and unskillful actions are said to have “roots,” which is a plant metaphor. If you just cut them off at the surface of the ground, some plants will sprout again from the roots. But if you uproot them, they do not grow anymore. The Buddha said that unskillful actions in the world always have one of three roots. Those roots are greed, hatred, and delusion. These are the roots that we want to uproot.

You will find that I and other Theravada Buddhist teachers repeat these three (greed, hatred, and delusion) over and over again. After a while, we get used to this. Sometimes it is a bit too much to keep saying the same thing over and over again. I apologize for that. But the three roots are central to this tradition and are seen as the psychological roots for all the ways in which we intentionally, consciously, and knowingly cause harm in the world. The idea is to live without causing harm. So we find that seeing how greed, hatred, and delusion work and then becoming free or liberated from them have a central role in the Buddha's teachings.

There is a somewhat famous chapter in Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of the *Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, called *The Chapter on the Unconditioned*. In it, he gives a series of 44 synonyms. I've heard Dharma teachers recite these synonyms as if they are all synonyms for *nibbāna* (liberation) because

*nibbāna* is one of the words. The list is actually supposed to be a list of words that are substituted into a bigger text. So the rest of the text is the same and only these words change.

These words are almost like poetry. To settle back and just hear some of these words can be quite inspiring: “truth, the far shore, the unaging, the stable, the unmanifest, the un-proliferated, the peaceful, the deathless, the sublime, the auspicious, the secure, the destruction of craving, the wonderful, the amazing, the un-ailing, *nibbāna*, the unafflicted, purity, freedom, the island, the shelter, the asylum, the refuge.”

Great words. But when they're listed just as synonyms for *nibbāna*, we actually miss the central teaching in this chapter because they're not exactly synonyms for *nibbāna*. They are synonyms for something else. We can see this with the very first one where it talks about “the unconditioned.”

The first time this word appears, they give you the whole text. I will read a little piece of it. The Buddha says:

*And what is unconditioned? The unconditioned is the destruction of greed, hatred, and delusion. This is called ‘the unconditioned.’*

So all those synonyms that I read are being linked or explained as synonyms for the destruction of greed, hate, and delusion – more than as synonyms for each other. The emphasis over and over again is the end or destruction of greed, hate, and delusion. That is what the Buddha is pointing to. In fact, I think the most common definition of enlightenment is the destruction or the ending of greed, hatred, and delusion.

Now, because greed, hate, and delusion are the roots of unskillful, unwholesome, unethical behavior in the world (*akusala* in Pali), then the destruction of greed, hate, and delusion has an ethical component. It is an ethical realization because the source, motivation, or impulse to be unethical is eliminated. In this way, enlightenment is indistinguishable from becoming completely ethical, in the sense that there is not any kind of intentional or conscious causing of harm to anybody else. One of the themes for this week is how much of what we would call “ethics” in English and what in Buddhism we might call “liberation” really should be seen as one and the same. They are inseparable.

In Theravada Buddhism, there is a very famous part of the liturgy about the Dharma that some of the monastics chant every day. To illustrate how deep this goes in the Buddha’s teachings, I’ll read this line about the Dharma:

*The dharma is visible here and now, immediate, inviting to be seen, onward leading, and to be personally realized by the wise.*

I’ll read a slightly longer passage from the Buddha about what this means specifically:

*When you know there is greed, hatred, or delusion within you, and when you know there is no greed, hatred, and delusion within you, then you know the Dharma that is visible here and now, immediate, inviting to be seen for oneself, onward leading, and to be personally realized by the wise.*

The whole heart of the Dharma – what it really is when you know it for yourself – is not a metaphysical truth, a cosmic truth, or a transcendent truth. It is not some reified or great state of consciousness. The Buddha is defining the Dharma like this: you really know the Dharma when you really know your own greed, hatred, and delusion – you see it. Hopefully, you see it with a beautiful mind or beautiful awareness.

Then you know when it is absent. You know that it is possible to have a mind and a heart that does not have greed, hatred, and delusion. If you really know this in a deep way, then you know the Dharma. Then you know what is onward leading. Then you know you can move in this direction and you can mature and grow and develop this wonderful capacity.

In this way, the Buddha is giving priority to personal, empirical experience over any kind of teachings that are relied on through faith, texts, or teachers. The idea is to become your own teacher. You discover how to really know and feel greed, hate, and delusion through sensitivity, mindfulness, and awareness. I keep emphasizing ethical sensitivity because we can actually feel the impact that greed, hate, and delusion have on our system.

The Buddha says:

*These unwholesome, unskillful roots are suffering in this very life. They come with fixation, despair, and fever.*

He emphasizes that people who have the three unwholesome roots of greed, hate, and delusion:

*are injuring themselves because they are forms that bring harm, suffering, and discomfort to oneself.*

The Buddha gave this poem:

*Greed, hatred, and delusion, arisen from within oneself, injure the person as its own fruit destroys the reed.*

(Apparently, there was a reed plant in ancient India that died when the fruit matured. Maybe its sap took out the nutrients from the rest of the plant and caused it to die.)

The idea that we can feel and sense the *dukkha* or pain of greed, hate, and delusion is very important because it gives us a clue for how to be free. It gives us a sense that this is not what we want to do. The Buddha called it “a thorn” that we pull out of the heart.

A mind and heart that does not have greed, hate, and delusion is beautiful. The Pali word *kalyāṇa* (and sometimes in English the word “beauty”) is associated with being virtuous or ethical. Even though “ethics” is not a word the Buddha used, he did talk about *kalyāṇa* in terms of virtue, in terms of living an ethical life or living by the precepts.

In Buddhism, the motivation to live an ethical life can arise from the inside out. As we feel, sense, and experience what is happening within, we see how the roots of unskillful, unhealthy, unethical behavior arise out of the way that we are injuring ourselves. And then we can see how the absence of it arises out of what is actually nourishing and supportive and beautiful.

This is why mindfulness is such an important quality. By really being in the present moment, noticing and paying attention to what is here, we can become our own teacher for what in English we might call “an ethical life.” In Buddhism, we might call this a life that doesn't cause any harm in the world – a life that is concerned with the welfare and happiness of self, of others, of self and others, and the whole world.

As I said earlier in the week, this is the definition of a wise person. This is the definition of someone who's spiritually mature in Buddhism. They are concerned for the welfare of self, others, self and others, and the whole world. May it be so.