

Kusala (1 of 10) Wholesome and Unwholesome – Introduction

May 24, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Kālāma Sutta, Yvonne Rand, Buddha, *kusala*, *akusala*, true, truth, criteria, tradition, lineage, common, scripture, logic, reason, competence, pivot, harmful, beneficial, wholesome, unwholesome, gymnast, ethics

Gil Fronsdal

I am going to begin this talk with a “semi-story.” We often find in the discourses that a context is set up for the Buddha to teach. This context is a semi-story about who the Buddha encounters, their situation, and what they ask him. The Buddha then responds. So it is not a full-blown story.

The Buddha has a very famous text called the “*Kālāma Sutta*.” For some people, it is their absolute favorite discourse of the Buddha. The semi-story that begins this teaching is about the people of Kālāma.

There was a very ethical, wonderful Zen teacher by the name of Yvonne Rand. She was very involved in trying to address the ethical issues in Western Buddhism in the United States from the 1970s through the 1990s. She made a rather dramatic statement about the “*Kālāma Sutta*”: everyone should have it tattooed on the inside of their eyelids.

Yvonne Rand always wanted people to know the “*Kālāma Sutta*” and have it close by. One reason for this is that it offers protection against some of the more dangerous ways that people can adhere to religious teachings. These ways do not have to be dangerous – but historically, when people adhered for those reasons, it could create tremendous problems.

In the discourse, the Buddha is in the territory of the Kālāmas. Some people come out to see him and ask him a question. They say: “Lots of religious teachers of different kinds come through our town. They all say, ‘This is the truth, and whatever everybody else is saying is not true.’ So, Buddha, how can we discern – know – who is teaching the truth and who is not? What criteria can we use for understanding who is teaching the truth and not?”

First, the Buddha offers criteria that we should not use for understanding who is teaching the truth. He then does something very interesting – he changes direction. He puts aside their question about truth and untruth to offer something more primary for him.

So the Buddha offers these criteria you should not use to decide what is true and false. You should not go by your religious tradition. You should not go by the teaching lineage of your teacher and your teacher’s teacher. Just because you adhere to a particular lineage, political party, whatever it might be – do not automatically take that as truth.

Because something is popular or a commonly held view of the times, do not take that as truth. Do not take something as truth because it is in the scriptures. Do not base your criteria for what is true on logic or reason. That you worked it out logically, and therefore, it must be this way.

Do not go by intuition or preferences. Do not go by the competence of the speaker – someone who is very eloquent, clear, and seems to understand what is happening. Do not believe it just because you think the speaker knows.

Finally, do not believe something is true or untrue because your teacher is saying it. At this moment, I am your teacher in a sense. I am teaching and you are listening, so please do not take what I am saying as either true or false. Just because I say something does not make it a reliable source to know for yourself whether it is true or false.

Before the Buddha replied that way, he said to the Kālāmas, “It is reasonable that you should have doubts about what is true and not true.” He appreciated that they were coming to him with their question. So he gave them a list of what not to go by.

The Buddha then offers his criteria. It is not criteria for what may be true or not true, but perhaps this is implied. The Buddha is more likely changing what is meant by truth – or he has his own idea of what truth is (which he does not explain in the text). Or he is changing the flow of the conversation to be about what he emphasizes – rather than focusing on what is true and not true.

What statements and beliefs are religiously true and not true is not his interest. Instead, here are the Buddha’s criteria. Is it harmful or beneficial in and of itself? Also, does it lead to harm or welfare? Is it wholesome or unwholesome? Are the people you think are wise critical of it or not? This does not mean that you take what the wise say as being true, but you do respect their point of view. When they are critical of something, it may be time to look more carefully and pause. Is it praised by the wise? You may not necessarily believe that, but it may be worthy of further investigation. So the core concept here is: Is it harmful or beneficial?

I cannot underscore enough how wonderful the Buddha’s central pivot or orientation is. He is not so interested in religious truth or doctrine. Rather, he is interested in what we can know for ourselves about what brings harm or welfare. It is radical to have fully brought all forms of harming to an end in ourselves. I mean, what a fantastic thing!

We read in newspapers how much harm human beings are inflicting on each other. Also, vast amounts of other harm never make it into the news. To be a person who does not inflict harm on oneself or others is phenomenal.

I think it is like a gymnast doing a gymnastics routine. To have worked through and found a way in which there is no inclination or tendency to cause harm – that is such a beautiful, amazing thing. And, maybe, there is the opposite – an inclination to do what is beneficial and brings welfare to oneself and others.

There are all kinds of lofty religious states we can attain. There are all kinds of wonderful perspectives on life and experiences we can have that people say are spiritual or religious. These are not to be devalued in and of themselves. But, I think with the Buddha’s criteria one wants to be careful not to assume that this gives us privileged access to what is true and what is false – *unless* it has taught us something.

From the Buddha’s point of view, be very careful. For the Buddha, those states are also evaluated and looked at. What do they teach us about how to live a life that is beneficial, that avoids harm? Over and over again, that is what the Buddha is interested in.

So you could, in the context of modern Western ideas, say the Buddha is more interested in ethics than he is in religion. He is interested in how people act and behave. To behave in ways that our bodies, speech, and minds do not cause any harm. What makes it beyond ethics is the thoroughness with which the Buddha points out that it is possible to do this. That level of peace, well-being, happiness, and freedom is possible when there is no inclination to cause any harm. It is an experience of radical non-clinging, non-compulsion, freedom, and liberation.

This potential is a phenomenal human capacity and possibility. But it does not matter so much if we take the Buddhist path all the way to its end. What matters is that we are practicing a life of doing what is beneficial, avoiding what is harmful. And we are doing it in a beneficial way.

So this teaching is partly about the beneficial and the harmful. But it is also about really making a distinction between what is unwholesome and wholesome. That is going to be the theme for the next couple of weeks.

I want to look at wholesomeness and unwholesomeness, a very important concept of the Buddha. This week we will look at that. There is an alternative translation for the Pali words *kusala* and *akusala*. Besides “wholesome” and “unwholesome,” sometimes they are translated as “skillful” and “unskillful.” This week, I want to look at *kusala* and *akusala* as wholesome and unwholesome. Next week, I will look at them as skillful and unskillful.

This is a pivotal orientation for all of the Buddha’s teachings. Understanding the idea of *kusala* and *akusala* – and understanding it well – is like a key to understanding so much of what the Buddha is about. If you understand these two together – the avoidance of harm and doing what is beneficial, *and* the notion of wholesome and unwholesome – you are well on the way to discovering what the Buddha is all about.

Independent of feeling you have to know what is ultimately religiously and doctrinally true, you are on the way to becoming a person who is true – true in that you are free of the causes of harm and filled with beneficial ways of being in the world.

That is the introduction to what is coming up, and I look forward to our time together. Thank you.