

Kusala (2 of 10) Discerning Wholesome and Unwholesome

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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We are continuing with the topic of wholesome and unwholesome. It is a central orientation in the teachings of the Buddha. A pithy poem from the early tradition that encapsulates the teachings goes like this:

Avoid doing what is harmful. Cultivate what is wholesome. Purify the mind. This is the teaching of the Buddhas. [Dhp 183]

The word “harming” in Pali is translated in many ways in English. It could be “wicked.” Sometimes it is translated as “evil.” But it has to do with causing harm in the world. It could be said: “Abandon what is unwholesome. Don't do what is unwholesome. Cultivate the wholesome. And purify the mind. This is the teaching of the Buddha.”

At the heart of Buddhist practice, there is a distinction or dichotomy – some people would say duality – between two different directions to go. To make it pragmatic, which it is, we could say, “what works” and “what doesn't work.” If something works, even partially in the right direction – great! Let's do it. And if it doesn't work in the direction we want to go, then don't do it.

The ability to distinguish between what works and what doesn't work – what's helpful and what's not helpful – is at the center of what mindfulness is about. Mindfulness places us in the center of our experience so that we can make these pragmatic choices.

I want to illustrate further how important this is in the Buddha's teachings. I will be paraphrasing here. My examples are not going to be exact quotes.

Someone comes to the Buddha and says, “Do you teach that we should avoid all pleasure?” The Buddha answers: “No. I teach that we should avoid pleasure that is unwholesome. But we should cultivate pleasure that is wholesome.”

“Do you say that we should always speak the truth?” “No. I say that we should speak the truth when it is wholesome and beneficial to do so, but not when it is unwholesome and harmful to do so.”

“Do you say that we should always be X or Y, always believe in this or that? Is it always one way?” And the Buddha keeps coming back saying: “No. If it is wholesome, we do it. If it is not wholesome, we don't do it.”

The Buddha seems very reluctant to essentialize or absolutize behavior, beliefs, and ideas. In fact, there is a whole discourse in the *Middle Length Discourses* based on what should be cultivated and what should not be cultivated. It goes through different categories of what should be cultivated through actions, speech, and mind. And the answer is always that we cultivate what is wholesome, we abandon what is unwholesome.

In discussing the wholesome, the Buddha says these qualities lead to a sense of abundance. They grow. We thrive. We want to take the wholesome and make it abundant, thriving, and increasing – for it to grow. The language is very dramatic, emphasizing the value and importance of what is wholesome.

In my early years of Buddhist practice, especially when I was doing Zen practice, I think that kind of message was not something I understood or picked up from the teachings I was engaged in. In fact, I got the opposite message – maybe not quite the opposite – but more like, “Any attempt to try to cultivate intentionally or orient

toward what is wholesome was somehow missing the boat.” That what we should do is just sit in emptiness – sit as if we are Buddha, without trying to do anything or make anything happen.

I sat that way in Zen, and it was very beneficial for me. There is a whole Zen dharmology or approach to life where that is coherent. If you understand it, it works well. But, as time went along, I also felt that it was limiting if that was all I did. But rather, to meditate recognizing what is wholesome and what is unwholesome.

Making the distinction between wholesome and unwholesome, one becomes one’s own teacher. It isn’t that we are supposed to go to the books asking: “What should I do? What should I not do?” We are using our inner antenna – our psychosomatic apparatus for sensing, feeling, and knowing our wisdom – to recognize the impact of our behavior in body, speech, and mind. If it is healthy and wholesome; if it brings a sense of goodness; if it brings joy, happiness, and well-being, then – yes! Do it. Develop that. You are allowed to develop that. If it does the opposite, abandon it. Avoid it.

Another criticism I would have of my early years of practice is that not trying to change anything can lend itself to selfishness, or to the pursuit of pleasure and hedonism. But I think that it doesn’t when what we are doing is practicing real mindfulness – careful attention, really sensing and feeling what is happening. In that way, we will feel and recognize that if it is selfish or hedonistic, it is unwholesome and unhealthy. We can feel that. We can feel the impact that has – that it debilitates, deflates, and undermines us. It is not a good thing to do.

Part of what this practice is about is starting to become a connoisseur of the impact of our behavior. It is not whether that impact is good or bad – or right or wrong – in some abstract way. But rather, it is what we know from the inside out – what we learn to recognize directly. It’s almost like we feel the wholesomeness and the unwholesomeness. We feel the “Ouch.” We feel the “Ahh – that’s going in a good way.”

The importance of doing that for oneself – being one’s own teacher – is that there is no divine authority in Buddhism who is judging us. There is no external source for what is right and wrong. It’s all mediated *here*. In our psychophysical being, we can find the wisdom for exactly how this works.

In this way, early Buddhism has tremendous trust in the human being’s capacity, provided we have heightened mindfulness, sensitivity, and maybe even a heightened ability to be still and peaceful – so we can really tune in to what happens.

When we have hostility, we can start feeling that we are hurting ourselves. When we are greedy, we are hurting ourselves. When we are caught in delusion – that very tightness, contraction, and being lost in delusion – it also feels like something is being lost here. It obscures or confuses what is going on. And we can feel that: “Oh! Look at that. There it is.”

Sometimes the early warning sign that we are going in the wrong direction does not come from our abstract ideas, but rather from our body and felt sense. “It looks like, with what has happened just now, I feel diminished, contracted, drained. I feel like there’s tension building up.” Then we look more closely. Is this wholesome or unwholesome, healthy or unhealthy?

The Buddha described the unwholesome as something that harms the very thing producing the unwholesome. The analogy he used was of a reed or plant in ancient India. When the fruit ripens, it takes all the nutrients from the rest of the plant, and the plant dies. The unwholesome is like that. It takes the energy from the person in some way of being, and something gets diminished. Something, at times, can even die if the unwholesome thing we do is really dramatic – like harming someone terribly.

In this way, there is a possibility of not getting caught up in old ideas inherited from society or religion that we are good or bad, right or wrong. Instead, we lovingly evaluate, look, and consider: “Is this wholesome or unwholesome? Is it helpful or not helpful? Does it lead to the growth of wholesomeness or diminishment of our wholesome qualities?”

What we are looking for on the path to liberation is the growth of our wholesome qualities and the diminishment of the unwholesome ones. On the dharmic path, unwholesome qualities agitate and obscure the mind and heart. That makes it very hard to be on the path of liberation. The cultivation of wholesome qualities – looking for what is more and more wholesome – leads to a deep sense of well-being, settledness, and peace that allows us to move into freedom and liberation, freedom from all unwholesomeness.

Tomorrow, I will talk a little more specifically about the unwholesome. In a sense, we are supposed to become a connoisseur of the unwholesome so we can recognize it and not be caught by it.

In the meantime, please study yourself and see what you recognize. See how you recognize the distinction between healthy and unhealthy, wholesome and unwholesome. What does it mean for you right now? Over the next few days, you may come to a more refined understanding of these concepts. Thank you.