

Kusala (3 of 10) Understanding the Unwholesome

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I have been talking about the wholesome and the unwholesome this week. Today I am going to talk about just the unwholesome. Understanding the Buddha's teachings on this topic helps us investigate it for ourselves. It gives us an orientation for seeing the impact of our attitudes, behaviors, and ways we speak and think. Occasionally, some of that may be unwholesome, uninspiring, unskillful, or unbeneficial. We will look in particular at what is called the three roots of the unwholesome. They are the source for all things unwholesome.

First, the unwholesome is described as involving suffering in this very life. It involves stress in this very life. People sometimes take suffering to mean only the big things in life. But *dukkha* can be applied to even mild forms of stress, distress, and suffering. Whatever is unwholesome always involves some degree of *dukkha*.

The Buddha goes on to say that the unwholesome involves vexation, despair, and fever. Because these are strong words, it is important to understand that there can also be mild versions of them. But it always involves some way that we harm ourselves. It is a type of self-harm that involves discomfort. The unwholesome always involves *dukkha*, harm, and discomfort. So, it is when we act with hostility or in a mean way toward people, when we are consumed with meanness or criticalness of ourselves, or when we are greedy.

This teaching is not moralistic like, "I shouldn't do those things because that's an immoral thing to do" – with some abstract morality coming from outside. The pragmatic and experiential orientation of the Buddha is always: "How does it feel? How am I experiencing myself? What's the impact of this here on myself?"

Rather than looking at the moral rule books for: "Is it okay to lie? Is it okay to steal? Is it okay to gossip negatively about my friends?" – what you can do is practice. Mindfulness is amazingly useful. When you develop a strong capacity for self-reflection and self-awareness, you don't go to the rule books. Instead, you go to your own heart; you go to yourself. You see the impact of your behavior, attitude, or way of speaking.

It is possible, with heightened sensitivity, to feel the way the unwholesome causes suffering, pain, and discomfort for oneself. It is not nourishing. It is not inspiring. In fact, with mindfulness, some people become uninspired by seeing the impact of the way they are. They become dismayed and discouraged. They feel that even though some unwholesome ways of acting can be energizing, like when people, who are hateful and angry with others, feel the pleasure of being alive.

Unwholesome behavior drains some essential vitality and goodness within us – some wholeness and sense of being connected to ourselves. It happens because the focus of unwholesome behavior, like anger, is often directed outward, and we are out of touch with what is behind the outward movement.

That is true for ourselves as well. If we are mean or critical of ourselves, we are treating ourselves as an object. We do not see what is behind it. We do not see the way that we are aware. We do not see the impact it has in closing us down or contracting us, or the discomfort of it.

We have as a reference point the impact of our attitudes, thoughts, speech, and behavior – and we take that in deeply. I have known people who have only experienced the impact of their behavior many years later. They finally woke up and were shocked. Sometimes it came like lightning: "Oh my, wow! I can't believe it. I really hurt someone." It is better late than never. But even better is to feel it right away.

For the Buddha, the unwholesome is, in modern English, instant karma. When we act on something unwholesome, we instantly feel how debilitating or draining that is. It limits us. It closes us off – compartmentalizes us – so that we are not whole anymore. It is vexation, despair, and even a fever when strong.

We can certainly become aware of all this, so that we then not do something unwholesome. I think that is good and fine in itself. But I think it is important not to underestimate the value of this teaching. The Buddha has a very pragmatic orientation toward the Dharma. It is very functional, experiential, and immediate. It is not metaphysics. There aren't abstractions. There isn't some divine authority beyond. For the Buddha, everything unfolds here in our experience. This is where we discover peace. This is where we discover how we are not at peace.

The Buddha talked about how you can know the Dharma really for yourself. This Dharma that he is teaching, or pointing to, is visible here and now. It is immediate; it has to do with right now. It invites itself to be seen by you. It is saying: "Come here. Look at this." If you are attentive, there is a kind of pull of attention toward it. It is onward leading. It has beneficial consequences that lead to more and more goodness. It is personally realized by the wise. Again, it is very personal pragmatism. So that is the Dharma.

And how is the Dharma that way? When you know there *is* greed, hatred, and delusion within you – first you have to know that it is there. And then you know there is *no* greed, *no* hatred, and *no* delusion within you. You see the movement from the unwholesome to the wholesome – the absence of the unwholesome and then the presence of the wholesome. Then you know that the Dharma is visible here and now, immediate, inviting inspection, waiting to be seen, onward leading, and personally realized by the wise.

Here the emphasis is on greed, hatred, and delusion because, in the Buddha's experience, all things that are unwholesome are rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion. That may almost be a definition of unwholesome. It can be very mild or very strong forms of greed, craving, compulsion, compulsive desire, or hatred. But mild forms of unwholesome – mild forms of greed, hatred, and delusion – are the common denominator for all things that are unwholesome.

To get down and see underneath our behavior, see the greed, hate, and delusion, and let go of it – that is how we see this pragmatic, experiential orientation or approach of the Buddha. It is very personal because it is only something we can know for ourselves in the way we experience it and know it for ourselves.

Today the emphasis is on this very personal, experiential reference point for the Dharma, the Buddha's teachings, the path of liberation. And, using modern English terminology, it is a reference point for ethics and morality. Morality can spring out of a very deep connection to oneself. We know for ourselves. It is inspiring to have our ethics – how we live in the world – well up from a deep understanding within. This is a wellspring or source of goodness that carries us along in goodness as opposed to carrying us along in a sense of grim duty or fear of retribution.

You may have in the next twenty-four hours some thought, speech, or behavior that you recognize as being unwholesome. Take that opportunity to turn the attention back on yourself and really see how it impacts you. If you can – see the way it negatively impacts you. It may be an impact you do not want – one that is not inspiring to have.

The stronger your bout of unwholesomeness is, the better it is for this exercise. Don't invent unwholesomeness for the exercise. But the stronger your bout of doing something unwholesome – expressions of greed, hatred, and delusion – the more clarity you can have in this exercise of really seeing its impact on you. Thank you.