

Kusala (6 of 10) Ten Wholesome Actions

May 31, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

skillful, interpersonal, personal, proficiency, moral, ethics, karma, ten practices of wholesome action, abstaining, killing, speech, nourishing, liberation, nourishing, Ten Courses of Wholesome Action, Ten Practices of Wholesome Action

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We are continuing with the topic of *kusala*. The two primary English translations we have for *kusala* are “wholesome” and “skillful.” Perhaps, in the ancient Buddhist world, *kusala* had a singular meaning. The opposite (*akusala*) is “unwholesome” and “unskillful.”

The meaning of *kusala* depends to some degree on the context in which the term is being used. When the context is interpersonal – relating to others or ourselves as if we are another person – “wholesome” seems to be the better translation. But, when the context is personal spiritual development – one’s meditation practice – “skillful” seems to be the better translation.

Wholesomeness implies that something is nourishing and healthy. A dictionary definition of wholesome is: “promoting health and well-being of mind, spirit, and body.” Wholesomeness can imply the goodness of something in and of itself. Just doing it is its own reward because it feels good to do it.

Skillfulness has to do with proficiency – one’s ability to do something well. It implies that you are doing something for a purpose, and it supports that purpose. It might support the growth of wholesome qualities – the growth of what is good – but it is skillful for a purpose. When you say, “This is skillful,” you can ask, “for what purpose or in what way?”

These distinctions are not absolute, but there is a tendency to divide the two translations. One has to do with interpersonal relationships, and the other with personal development. One meaning has to do with promoting health and well-being in a direct way – acting in ways that benefit oneself and others. When something is done wholesomely, it is nourishing and supportive: “conducive to or promoting health or well-being in mind, spirit, and body.”

Interestingly, another definition of wholesome in the dictionary is: “conducive to or promoting moral well-being.” This definition has to do with the translation of *kusala* that refers to interpersonal relationships. In fact, the word *kusala* is probably the closest match for the English words “moral” and “ethics.” But rather than having a feeling of moral obligation (right and wrong, should and should not), this definition, for me, has a warm internal feeling or upwelling of the good within, which is nourishing and supportive. So there is an inner source for ethics rather than an external source. We can know and stay connected to this wholesome inner experience.

This inner experience can be eclipsed if we are too caught up in abstract ideas of what is and is not ethical – what we should and should not do, what is right and wrong. These ideas come from our society and religious textbooks – sources very different from the welling up of an inner reference point that feels nourishing and healthy.

This upwelling of the good within is also different from using the experience of pleasure as a reference point. If we refer simply to what we enjoy or what brings pleasure, then we might go astray. But what is wholesome is a reliable reference point, which ensures that we will act well and generously in the world.

Let’s stay for a moment with this translation of wholesome relating to the interpersonal world. In the teachings of the Buddha, the most common reference to wholesomeness in terms of our relationships is probably found in a list of ten ethical guidelines called the Ten Courses of Wholesome Action or Ten Practices of Wholesome Action. The opposite is the Ten Courses of Unwholesome Action. The word “action” here is karma – wholesome and unwholesome karma.

Because the word *kusala* (wholesome) is used, these ten practices look like precepts. Maybe they should not be seen as precepts. They are more like ten wellsprings of wholesome actions that we can act on and live by.

Briefly, the first nine practices of wholesome action are: not killing, not stealing (not taking what is not given), not engaging in sexual misconduct, not lying, not speaking maliciously, not speaking harshly, not speaking frivolously, not being avaricious, and not having ill will.

The tenth and last practice of wholesome action is having right view – a skillful view and understanding. One of the skillful views is to distinguish between what is wholesome and unwholesome, and another is to understand how to come from what is wholesome as we engage in our life.

These guidelines mostly tell us what not to do. But, it turns out that abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and so forth clears the decks so the wholesomeness inside can come out. Practicing these wholesome actions also provides a tremendous sense of safety and room for other people to thrive. If we kill, steal, or hurt people through our sexuality, that does not allow the best in other people to come out. Violence and hostility against others, and meanness to others, can close people down and cause challenges for communities, sometimes for centuries.

It was very touching to read about the survivors of the Tulsa massacre who recently went to Congress. Today is the 100th anniversary of that massacre. A 107-year-old woman spoke about the legacy of that violence. She has relived and has been troubled by what happened to her every day and night for 100 years. That is a long time. So our negative actions can have huge impacts.

We are trying to live a wholesome life. That, for me, has a very different feeling than living an ethical life. A wholesome life simply feels wholesome. It feels good. It is relaxing, softening, and warm-heartening.

The wholesome actions are examples of what is wholesome. In the *suttas*, there is a paragraph-long description of each action. I will give you an example of the first one so that you get a sense of it.

Abandoning killing living beings, one abstains from killing living beings. With weapons laid aside, gentle and kindly, one abides compassionate to all living beings.

This is not just a matter of avoiding killing. The Buddha is encouraging us to allow positive wholesome qualities to develop. So the action is not simply a prohibition of something because it focuses on what is wholesome. He says to live by these beautiful qualities as well:

With weapons laid aside, gentle and kindly, one abides compassionate to all living beings.

The passage continues:

In abstaining from malicious speech, one reunites those divided and promotes friendship, and unites those who are not yet united. In avoiding harsh speech, one speaks gently and courteously. In abstaining from frivolous speech, one speaks by what is factual and useful. In abstaining from ill will, one wishes for others that they be free from affliction.

The ten wholesome actions are listed and mentioned over and over again in the *suttas* – much more than the five precepts. While they overlap with the five precepts, the ten skillful actions seem to be richer and more heartfelt in terms of positive qualities. But more significantly, they are also presented as important stepping stones on the path to liberation. The five precepts have a lot of benefits, but they are not so directly tied to the purpose of liberation. The purposes of the five precepts are to create a better society, to help others feel safe, and not create bad karma for ourselves.

The ten courses of wholesome action lead both to liberation and the growth of wholesomeness in us. What a wonderful thing to do with one's life: to develop wholesome qualities that support, protect, and are for the benefit of others. And right on the path to liberation – how nice that these two things coincide.

The ten courses of skillful or wholesome actions are found repeatedly in the *suttas*. Discourse 9 in the *Middle Length Discourses* has a list of them. The full description might be in Discourse 39 or 40 in the *Middle Length Discourses*.

Thank you, and may your day be wholesome.