

Dharmette: Wholesome (1 of 5) Finding One's Path

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So, hello and welcome to this beginning of this series. And this week's topic follows last week's. Last week's was the qualities of the *Dharma*, characteristic qualities by which we can find our own way. We can be our own teachers by really knowing how to connect to, touch, that inner intelligence that exists in the present moment, arises from a careful attentiveness to present-moment experience.

I offer the idea that this *Dharma* intelligence is there in between the sensations, the perceptions we have of present-moment experience, and the knowing of that, the awareness of that. Something dynamic can happen there that can guide us, support us. This is onward-leading. This is what invites us to be present. And so, this way of being our own teacher, this way, is key to Buddhism.

Finding our own way, and we find this in this very famous *sutta* discourse called the *Kālāma Sutta*, the discourse to the Kālāma people, where he came to there. He did not frequent that part of northern India, but he came there, and so the people there were eager to ask him a question. And they asked it. They said, "There's a lot of spiritual teachers that come by, come and tell us this is what the truth is, and how do we know which one of them is speaking the truth?"

The Buddha avoided answering the question directly, but rather gave them guidelines for how they can know the truth for themselves, rather than trust other people to provide it. And the first thing that he offered was that you can know for yourself what is wholesome and what is unwholesome, and then he continued a little bit: what is harmful and what is beneficial. And there's a few other things he said, but we get the sense here that we ourselves become the person who understands this. There's the evidence. We can be present in the present moment and acquire the evidence, acquire the information, that we find our own way.

Maybe not to great philosophical truth, cosmic truth about the nature of reality, but rather the profound truth that's needed to find our way to peace, find our way to the end of suffering. And for that purpose, we ourselves are meant to be our own teacher. And so this criteria of wholesome and unwholesome will be the topic for this week. And you find it in the teaching of the Buddha. He comes back to it over and over and over again.

There's a famous poem in this *Dhammapada* that ends, "This is the teaching of the Buddhas." It's in the plural, as if all Buddhas in time and space have this particular teaching. And it says, "To avoid causing harm, to avoid doing what is harmful or wicked, or bad, harmful. Sometimes people use the word evil here: to avoid what is wicked, to avoid doing what's mean and harmful." And so that's the first line.

The second line is to cultivate, to engage in what is wholesome, to purify the mind. This is the teaching of the Buddha. So this little kind of four-line verse puts this cultivate-the-wholesome right at the center of what the Buddha wants us to do. Elsewhere he has said, "If you could not cultivate the wholesome, if you were not able to do what is wholesome, I would not teach you to do so. But it is possible for you to do the wholesome. Therefore, I teach you to do the wholesome."

So, over and over and over again, this criteria is central to what the Buddha has to teach, and this inner intelligence, the *Dharma* intelligence, that makes us find this and recognize this, recognize where we can move to greater health, where we can avoid what's unwholesome or ill health.

So, the Pāli word for wholesome is *kusala*, K-U-S-A-L-A. And there's some maybe fanciful etymology for the word, that it comes from the Indian word for a particular kind of grass called the *kusa* grass, K-U-S-A. And it's a grass which has a, it's very hard grass with very sharp edges. And it was apparently collected and used for different things, maybe for feeding animals.

Sometimes they say that people collected it in order to make a sitting place. They would sit on top of it to make it a little bit softer than the hard ground. But the thing is, the edges of the grass are so sharp that if you're not careful, you can cut yourself on the grass. So the people who collect the *kusa* grass have to be very skilled at it, and so they have to touch, go from the base. They know how to do it so they don't cut themselves.

So this word *kusala*, then, in this kind of etymology, means that we're trying to do things which are skillful, from which we can benefit ourselves with a soft place to sit, rather than do something that harms us. And what's nice about this etymology is that even things which are beneficial for us, how we do it, how we acquire it, we can do it in harmful ways. So the idea

is we always come back into something deep inside of ourselves. How are we taking the next step? How are we engaged with whatever we're doing?

If we're doing something that seems like it's universally good, it's possible to do it with greed, with conceit, with even some aversion, which is how we cut ourselves. But can we engage in everything we do in a way that we don't harm ourselves? And this is the call for reference to *kusala* inside of ourselves.

And there are two ways that *kusala* is discussed in the texts. One—not two ways it's discussed, but two ways it's translated into English. One is as wholesome, and the other is as skillful. And if we go back in the ancient texts, we see that in different contexts, different ones of these translations work best.

The third translation that we could use for *kusala*, it turns out, is probably the word that's most qualified to translate the English word ethical. And most people who know a little bit about the ancient Buddhist teaching think that *sīla* means ethics. But *sīla* literally means, focuses, it means conduct, and by usage refers to ethical conduct rather than something that's ethical. And so *kusala* is a deeper, has a deep inner ethics that we want to live by, an orientation of how we live.

And for this word to mean wholesome, skillful, and ethical all together makes a wonderful mix that makes it particularly rich for one of the key concepts of Buddhist practice and Buddhist life. And some people love to translate this word as skillful and *akusala* as unskillful, because it takes decision-making out of good and bad. If we're doing an ethical evaluation, we ask, "Is this a skillful thing to do or an unskillful thing?" And then it's not good or bad; it's something more specific.

Some people, like myself, love the word "wholesome" because I think of it etymologically as meaning part of the whole. And the idea is that we sit here and meditate to become into a harmonious whole, into a place where all of ourselves is included. And all of us is included in a way that it works together in a healthy way. And so that's the fourth way that I like to translate *kusala*: healthy. What is healthy? What's the healthy thing to do?

So this week the topic will be *kusala*, and a little bit of *akusala*, and skillful and unskillful, wholesome and unwholesome. And as I hope, as I give these talks and do this guidance, that you'll take it as a pointing to how you can feel your way, sense your way, and know for yourself what is wholesome and unwholesome, rather than what is true and not true in some philosophical, abstract, metaphysical way. You can find the next moment, the next step you take. Can you do that in a wholesome way?

And the presumption, I think, the underlying basis of this in the *Dharma* of the Buddha, is that this path of wholesomeness, finding what's wholesome, is the path to liberation and freedom from suffering. It's such a useful skill. And so, that's the topic, and I hope it's meaningful for you. And certainly, I'm looking forward to talking about this important area of practice. Thank you.