

Dharmette Wholesomeness (3 of 5) Abundance

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Hello and welcome to this third talk on *kusala*, the Pāli word that can be translated as wholesome, wholesomeness, or skillful, skillfulness. Yesterday, I talked about how, in meditation especially, the word skill and skillfulness is particularly useful as a translation of *kusala*, this very important Buddhist word. But today, I want to talk about how, in some contexts, it works better to translate as wholesome. In general, these days, I prefer wholesomeness as the generic or general translation of this word.

Some people have a little negative relationship with the word wholesome. I think the older generation grew up with advertisements for Wonder Bread that was considered to be wholesome, this white bread that maybe was used too much in commercials. But wholesome, for me, has a number of associations that are inspiring. One is that I interpret it to mean part of the whole, and the idea of feeling whole, with all of ourselves included.

There is a sense of wholeness that is not possible if we are stuck and preoccupied with certain thoughts, certain feelings, certain attitudes, certain preoccupations, certain fears. When we are preoccupied and caught and not whole, we do not have access to the full working of our human intelligence. Some things can seem like they have a great priority. We have to focus and be fixated on some things, which is true sometimes in the present moment.

But when the fixations around things are no longer about what is here and present, we actually end up limiting ourselves more often than not. We limit this full intelligence, the full ways in which all of who we are comes together and works together in one harmonious kind of event. So, you have whole and the entirety. Sometimes the word *sabba*, all, is used for that in Pāli. Sometimes the word *kevala* is used for the whole, the entirety.

Sometimes the word *kāya* means body, but it is more like the English word body. Sometimes it means the body of work, the entire work that someone has written, for example. So there

is the mental *kāya*, the physical *kāya*, the whole that we are. The *dharmakāya* is the whole experience of *dhamma* within us.

Wholesome belongs to the whole, but also in English, the word wholesome is very closely connected to healthy. Healthy can be an abstract idea and wishful activity, but healthy also can be an embodied feeling. You can feel like you are really healthy, and it is not an idea, it is not a thought. We might think about it, but the source of that, the evidence for feeling healthy, comes when there is certain vitality within us.

There is certain energy, aliveness, that keeps us maybe uplifted a little bit. There is a flow of something that feels very clean or healthy through us. I imagine different people can feel the experience of health in different ways. In meditation, even sometimes when we are conventionally sick or ill or cold, there can still be a flow of something that feels nourishing and healthy in the whole meditation posture.

Meditating when there is a harmony and a flow and a unification of all the different kinds of capacities and faculties coming together here, just here, we are not divided from ourselves. So the word nourishment sometimes works. Sometimes the word cleanliness works. The Buddha talked about embodied cleanliness. The Buddha talked about an overflowing of *kusala*, overflowing of this wholesomeness.

So there, the idea of flow is very closely connected to some sense of inner sensory flow that moves through us: energetic flow, vibratory flow, or vitality flow. The idea of overflowing suggests that it is abundant. Sometimes, in fact, the Buddha talks about the wholesomeness, these wholesome characteristics, sensations, feelings, and qualities of what we have becoming abundant. It is not just here and there by accident. The Buddha actually encourages cultivating a sense of abundant wholesomeness within us.

Once we know what is wholesome to do in our lives—the wholesome states, the wholesome attitudes, the wholesome activities—stay close to that, and let that grow and fill you. He uses the language of being filled with wholesomeness, having a sense of abundance with what is wholesome. So there is a feeling here not of denial, not of denying ourselves or diminishing ourselves, or not availing ourselves of what is really healthy and good. This sense of abundance is sometimes called an inner wealth.

Letting go in Buddhism, which is such an important thing to do, does not mean let go of everything. When the Buddha talked about letting go, he used the word renunciation in this passage. He said:

“I do not teach you to renounce everything. I teach you: if you renounce, and it decreases the unwholesome in you and increases the wholesome, I encourage you to renounce. If I heard not to renounce, if it increases the unwholesome and decreases the wholesome, do not renounce it. But if renouncing decreases the unwholesome and increases the wholesome, then renounce it. So the idea of renouncing is not meant to be a principle: let go of everything.”

It is meant to be done with a reference point, to do so in a way that is good for you, what is nourishing for you, or brings a sense of this wholesomeness. One of the reasons I like to translate *kusala* as wholesome rather than skillful is that skillful sometimes is value-free. It is just not connected to our inner ethical sensibilities. Sometimes skillful is for a purpose, to develop a skill, whereas wholesome is good in and of itself. It does not need to have a purpose.

To have a feeling of generosity flow through us, it does not have to be expressed as a generosity. It is just good to be generous, to be kind, to be loving. It is just a healthy, wholesome state. They can just be felt in meditation. It does not need to be enacted, or nothing has to happen.

It is just a healthy thing in and of itself. Mindfulness can be very wholesome in and of itself. It does not need to be there for a purpose. It does not need to be part of a skill-building thing. It is just good and healthy and nourishing in and of itself right now.

So part of meditation, part of Buddhist practice, is to be able to recognize within ourselves the embodied, physical, sensory feelings of wholesome and unwholesome. What is nourishing and not nourishing? What enlivens us in a healthy, good, nice way, and what does the opposite? What deadens us, maybe sometimes?

The body becomes a very fine-tuned reference point for what is healthy for us and what is not healthy for us. That can be a reference point that helps us to understand and helps us make decisions about what to do, what to say, how to be in the world. It might not be the overriding thing, but it is part of taking in the rich sense evidence that the present moment provides us to help us find our way. For the Buddha, one of the most important reference points is, in fact, our ability to discern the difference between what is wholesome and unwholesome.

It is not a distraction from our life. It is actually what allows us to live our life fully. Whatever we are doing, we live it with that sense of wholeness. All of ourselves comes into it, the wholeness, but in a way that is nourishing for ourselves.

If it is not nourishing for ourselves, why do it that way? Why keep doing something which is denourishing? Why do something which does not support the wholeness of who we are, the healthiness of who we are? Why do we have to sacrifice that for any kind of reason, all kinds of reasons? Why?

For the Buddha, the ability, as I said, to discern what is wholesome, healthy, nourishing, and gives us a feeling of abundance and goodness is a phenomenally useful intelligence capacity. It is a capacity and ability that resides in that place where awareness and sensations come together, in the place that exists between them, in relationship to them. So it is not just being aware of things that is important. It is useful to be aware of what is going on and be aware of the space between the interaction.

What happens? What comes alive in between sensing and sensations, in between knowing and the sensation? One of the things that can come alive and be there is this sensory, almost sensory—it is not quite the sensations, but it feels like sensation sometimes—of wholesomeness, goodness. One teacher I know likes to call it, in certain ways, a sweetness within, a cleanliness within. That belongs to this world of here and now.

What can be perceived directly? What is inviting inspection? What is inviting us: “Come here. Stay close to this”? It is onward leading. It kind of leads to more wholesomeness, allows it to grow, or guides us to how to go forward with it.

So, *kusala* as wholesome. You might today go through the day and maybe periodically have some reminder and just kind of reflect: Is how you are doing what you are doing wholesome? Is what you are doing healthy and nourishing for you? Or could you do it in a more wholesome way?

Could you do it in a more healthy, nourishing, beneficial way? Can you do it in a way that makes your body smile, makes your heart smile? Ah, doing it this way feels good. So, thank you very much, and we will continue this topic of *kusala* tomorrow.