

Dharmette: Wholesomeness (4 of 5) Wholesome is Ethical

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Hello and welcome now to this talk, the fourth talk in the series on *kusala*, the Pāli word for wholesome and skillful. And today, I'd like to introduce the idea that, in context, certain usages of the word wholesome, *kusala*, can also be translated into English as ethical.

If we're focusing on the word wholesome, the general reference point is in oneself—the felt sense, the experience of healthiness, goodness—that can exist when we live in a certain way, carry certain attitudes, and relate to this world. We're cultivating certain wholesome ways of being and attitudes, and meditation practice tends to elicit this deeper source of wholesomeness from within. If we settle the reactivity we have, settle the intensity of greed or hatred, and let the heart be quiet, peaceful, secure, reassured, and the belly be soft and relaxed, then we're at ease in this moment.

For most people, the natural tendency is to meet others, meet the world, and meet ourselves with kindness, with care, with friendliness, not with viciousness, not with hostility. And so, wholesomeness is something wholesome for ourselves. And skillful, as well, has to do with our skill, how we're developing and cultivating certain capacities that we have.

But the very thing that's wholesome for ourselves is also, at times, wholesome for others, beneficial for others. To live from a wholesome place is to live in a non-harming way. What is really wholesome for ourselves and healthy for ourselves is to live in a caring way, in caring for the welfare of others. And what is unwholesome for ourselves is to harm others and have hostility toward others.

And so, at some point, as the practice deepens, as we mature in this practice, the word *kusala* can equally be translated as ethical, because it has to do with avoiding causing harm to others. Living in such a way that we live beneficially for others, to benefit others. So the word

kusala sometimes has an interpersonal role, and that's very clearly stated in the Buddha's teachings.

Where the closest thing to represent his ethical conduct is not the Five Precepts. They have some role in his early teachings, but what really has closer to the heart, and what the Buddha emphasized more, is something called the *Ten Wholesome Actions*. And these are actions which are wholesome for ourselves and wholesome for others.

If she avoids causing harm to others, so some of them are like the precepts: not killing, not taking what is not given, not engaging in sexual misconduct, and not lying. And then it goes into six other ones: not being hostile, not being divisive in your speech, not being hostile in your speech or harsh in your speech, not being divisive, not being frivolous in some kind of empty, harmful way. Not being harsh in your speech. Not being avaricious, not wanting other people's things, not having ill will for others.

The tenth, it doesn't usually seem to be ethical interpersonally. It's having right view, but here one of the right views is that our behavior affects other people. We can have consequences that are harmful to others that are simultaneously harmful to ourselves. We can do benefits to others that are simultaneously beneficial for ourselves. So this idea that these are called wholesome or skillful actions, but they're clearly interpersonal in nature.

And so, things like generosity are considered one of the predominant wholesome activities in the Dharma. Living with ethical conduct, living with kindness, the *Brahmavihāras*, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity, having patience, having wisdom—you know, there's a whole slew of these kinds of qualities that are wholesome for ourselves. And the reason to do them is it just feels really good for ourselves. It's like we feel rich, we feel healthy, alive. It just kind of is a medicine for ourselves, provided we do them in a purely wholesome way.

And this is the art of Buddhist practice: to really begin having the inner sensibilities, inner sensitivity, to what—how we go about our day, how we speak, how we act—so we know and recognize how it's medicine, how it's ambrosia, how it's kind of deeply meaningful. And if it comes from a deep place, oh, this is satisfying, this is right. And not because we're self-centered, but because we care deeply.

Why do we want to harm ourselves? Why do we want to live a life of stress that overlooks our good heart and this deeper sensitivity of knowing what's wholesome? It is also not selfish because it's the very source for Buddhism from which we then live in a wholesome way for others, benefiting others.

So that it's not an obligation, it's not a duty in Buddhism to benefit others and care for others.

It's not like a rule that we're supposed to do it, but rather it's the heart's wish. When we're really connected to the deep wholesomeness within, there's almost like a natural movement toward care for others.

And this beautiful thing, and this I think is quite profound, that caring for the wholesomeness in ourselves cares for the well-being of others. Caring for others in a wholesome way cares for ourselves. And so, what is wholesome is not radically separate from our interpersonal relationships. What is wholesome is also ethical, and the way I define ethical here is that which avoids causing harm and is more concerned about causing benefit. That's the basis of Buddhist ethics: focus on harm and non-harm, harm and benefit, avoiding harm, doing what's beneficial.

And in the beginning of the week, I quoted this very famous verse from the *Dhammapada*, that's sometimes considered to be kind of the central teachings of the Buddha. And the last line of the poem says that—and, slightly paraphrasing it—“Don't cause harm, cultivate what is wholesome, cleanse the mind.” This is the teachings of the Buddha.

So from this point of view, you might understand that in Buddhism, early Buddhism, to really delve deeply into your own personal practice, maybe even do a lot of meditation alone, maybe go on retreat, maybe alone, really work on that, is not seen as a selfish thing to do. The idea of being selfish is not worrisome for early Buddhism. Because the very nature of this deep practice turns us inside out so that, when the context is right, we will help others, we will support others, we will be beneficial for others.

And in the same way, Buddhism does not emphasize altruism in the same way that it's emphasized sometimes in the West and different kinds of philosophical religious traditions. That you just have to live, giving up any concern for yourself, and just be there, benefiting others. That would be kind of bizarre in a Buddhist context. Because you benefit others better if you are caring for yourself, and you care for yourself better if you relate to others in a wholesome way.

And there's this mutuality, this mutual kind of feedback loop here that we're operating under. And to be purely altruistic doesn't allow for that loop to happen. And if we're purely selfish, we don't allow for that to happen. And we're shortchanging ourselves. We're actually limiting ourselves and preventing the full growth of what's wholesome in Buddhism, if either selfish or altruistic, but living in this wonderful world where what is wholesome is deeply connected to others, deeply connected to ourselves.

So wholesome, *kusala*, skillful: doing what is skillful and helpful and beneficial, developing

the skill to do that by repetition, by coming back to it, not expecting that we can do it automatically. Cultivating what is wholesome by really feeling and recognizing and knowing for ourselves, being guided by our own deep sensitivity to recognize what is beneficial and not beneficial for ourselves, and to have that be a constant reference point. And then to appreciate how this works in our interpersonal relationship.

So that's the next talk on this *kusala*, a very key topic in the teachings of the Buddha, and we'll have one more talk tomorrow. And so I want to thank you all for being here and being part of this. And I look forward to this last talk.