

Dhamette: Wholesomeness (5 of 5) Right Effort

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Welcome to this fifth and last talk on *kusala*, k-u-s-a-l-a, which is the Buddhist word that we're translating. I'd like to translate it as wholesome. It is sometimes translated as skillful, and sometimes it's good to understand the word means ethical when it involves how we behave interpersonally.

It's a rich thing that what is internally wholesome becomes externally ethical when we see it in relationship to the world around us. Of course, we don't have to use the word ethical, but it's wonderful that what's wholesome within is concerned with the welfare of others and not causing harm. It has interpersonal implications.

So today, I want to emphasize again that this word *kusala*, wholesome, is really one of the very important concepts in the Buddhist lexicon and the Buddha's teachings. One of the places where it's really held up as being kind of central to it all is in the *Eightfold Path*. The sixth step of the *Eightfold Path* is usually translated into English as right effort. It wouldn't be wrong, I believe, to translate the word *sammā*, translated as right, as complete, consummate, or full.

So, where the fullness, the wholeness of who we are, is represented by these four ways of participating in this world, four ways of being engaged in this world. The four right efforts, the four complete efforts, the four wholesome efforts. There are four, and each of them is explained from the point of view of either what is wholesome or unwholesome.

Here in the *Eightfold Path*, in order to really live the *Eightfold Path*, we have to be able to know how, for ourselves, to recognize what is wholesome and unwholesome. You don't go to a Buddhist manual and get a list of the wholesome, a list of the unwholesome, and then just live your life by the lists. It doesn't work that way. Partly because, on some occasions, what is wholesome might, on other occasions, be unwholesome, and vice versa.

It has a lot to do with the whole ecology of our inner life, the purpose we live, the meaning we assign, and the outer life and what the context is. It's a very dynamic world, this whole world we live in. So we want to be able to really feel and sense, not to read carefully, the evidence within and the evidence without. Both directions are important.

I think it's actually quite important that the word *kusala* can mean both something deeply personal, like what is wholesome, what feels healthy within, and ethical. It has to do with the world around us because the two are related. The ethical has to do with consequences of our actions. So, part of the big picture, the whole picture, is to be cognizant of the impact that we have, the consequence of our actions. That's part of how we understand what is wholesome.

So it's not just a feel-good movement. It's not just follow your bliss, just follow whatever feels good inside, what feels healthy inside. Who cares about others and the impact it has? These have to be done in coordination, or they're part of the same whole.

Consequences are part of the picture. It isn't that we have to measure the consequences, but we have to include the idea of consequences, likely consequences, in the heart's way of processing the whole, so the heart knows how to respond best. So the sixth step of the *Eightfold Path* is this marvelous word *kusala*, wholesome, and there's four right efforts.

I used to ignore it because the technical way it's described in English is kind of boring and off-putting, and kind of so technical that it's almost like it just tied my mind in knots to consider it. But as I've gone back and really tried to study it and understand it, I find it really rich.

So it begins. The first one has to do—there might be a time, someday, by accident, this might be a time when you're just minding your own business and things are just fine and relaxed and peaceful. There's nothing unwholesome going on in your mind, your heart, your body. You're just at ease, and you know there's nothing—nothing. Everything is good, and there's nothing unwholesome.

At that point, maybe you get inspired that that's possible. Maybe you realize that much of your day you're stressed, much of the day you're anxious, much of the day you're go, go, going from one to-do list to another, from one thing to the next. There's never enough time. There are all these ways in which we can live our life continuously that, if we take an honest look at it, don't really feel healthy. They don't really feel easeful.

Actually, there may be a continuous low-grade stress in it, maybe a high-grade stress in it. So it's a remarkable thing for some people to go on vacation, to go and meditate, to go on retreat, to do something, to go for a walk in the park—something that really drops all the

stresses, all the anxiety, all the continually going, going, going that we do. They say, “Wow, this is possible. Isn't this wonderful?”

At some point, there might arise a strong dedication, a strong inspiration to no longer give in to these unhealthy instincts, to not live continuously this way. So say that you've finally arrived, and you've maybe been in meditation and are really deep and peaceful. There's nothing unwholesome going on, and you suddenly see a thought arise that you would really like to get revenge on your neighbor who is using the leaf blower all the time. Maybe you can go over there and steal the battery from the leaf blower. Do it.

But you're so peaceful to begin with, and you see these neighbor thoughts arise, and you can feel they're unwholesome, so you let go of them. Then you might be inspired to undertake, to be dedicated to, to want these kinds of thoughts to not arise again. You don't want to live under their force. You don't want to live under their influence.

So the first right effort is to have the desire, the wish, the inspiration to initiate living in such a way that you have the non-arising of new unwholesome actions. The non-arising that nothing unwholesome arises. There might be things you can do. Maybe you know that if you peruse a shopping website, greed will come up for you, and you will be wanting. So maybe you don't need to go on that website because you don't want that greed to come up.

Maybe you know that when you watch horror movies, what arises is anxiety and aversion to being in the world. So why watch a horror movie that brings up these unhealthy tendencies? Maybe there are things we can do that are healthy and appropriate that protect you from the birth and arising of unwholesome activity. Maybe you've learned that meditation is one of those protections, and if you meditate every day, you're less likely to get caught in the unhealthy, reactive states of mind.

So here, the first right effort involves a decisiveness, a decision, an inspiration, a love to protect yourself from what is unhealthy, and to initiate what it takes to prevent the unhealthy from arising. The second one is if, in fact, some unhealthy state of mind, desire, wish, or activity arises in you, and you recognize it. You recognize it's undermining you. It's not healthy for you. It's not really good to be stressed all the time, not always good to be caught in these things all the time.

If you have the wisdom to see that, then there can arise the inspiration, the desire, the wishing to do. Like, okay, I'm going to try here. The desire to let go, to abandon these things which are unhealthy and unwholesome. The Buddha primarily focuses on mental states because mental states are the birth for actions in the world.

The third one is to have the same kind of inspiration to engage, to follow through on, to live this way. That is to do the things that inspire healthy states of mind to arise. Maybe spend time with other people who inspire goodness in you. Maybe it's to meditate. Maybe it's not to watch horror movies or war movies, but watch documentaries about people that inspire goodness in you.

Maybe spend time reflecting on your own goodness. Maybe just simply meditate. It's okay to want to live with healthy states of mind. But then the fourth is the one that inspires me the most.

The fourth right effort is, from time to time, wholesome, healthy states of mind have arisen, and we recognize it. We know now to see, "Oh, this is good." This is not just good because it's in the manual of good human behavior. This feels good. This is inspiring for me, that I'm having this. This is good.

So this is what the Buddha says about that. The practitioner strongly undertakes and strongly initiates the taking up, the holding up, of a mind. So here, we're holding up a mind. We're holding up a way of being with a mind where it is not just having the right mind state. There's a whole orientation of awareness, of stability of mind, or a mind which is wise, a mind which is here.

There's a real presence of mind that allows for this. So we're inspired with this presence of mind to have it, that gives rise to a wish, a desire. So intentionality is important: to be inspired. The desire for practice, the *dharma* desire, comes out of a healthy mind.

Here's the real zinger for me. There are six different verbs that the Buddha describes here to really give emphasis. So when one has a desire for those wholesome states that have arisen, one has a desire for their continuation, non-forgetting, maintaining them. Don't forget about them. Let them increase into a sense of abundance.

Let them become abundant. Cultivate them. Care for them like a gardener that cultivates and nourishes the growth of a plant. Bring them to fulfillment. This is a powerful word, fulfillment.

Fulfillment kind of means let it fill you. This is not about letting go. This is not about a life of simple renunciation, that nothing counts, just let go of everything. This is a life where certain things are allowed to grow and develop into a feeling of abundance and to fill you.

To fill you with kindness, to fill you with joy and *dharma* happiness, to fill you with wonderful happy feelings of virtue, fill you with generosity, with kindness, fill you with awareness, fill

you with peace. This is inspiring. So, a mind that really feels the wisdom of living in a healthy way, a mind that really feels the wisdom of avoiding what is unhealthy for us.

This is what the teaching of wholesome and unwholesome is about. Only you can be the mediator of this. Only you can be your teacher for this, and only you can do this work, because it has to do with the state of your mind. For the Buddha, there's a high kind of expectation of us that each of us becomes the custodian of our own inner life.

We don't farm it out to other people to do for us. We learn how to have the presence of mind, where we can track this and make the choices moment by moment, maybe small little choices each moment as we go along, to stay close to what is wholesome, avoiding what is unwholesome.

So, thank you very much. I have a couple of announcements, if I may take a few more minutes. I'll be away teaching at IRC for, I think, the next four weeks. I think I'll come back, I think, the last Monday of September. I'll be here again.

We have these wonderful teachers that come and replace me. I've been very gratified by meeting people who have been thanking me for these wonderful teachers that replace me when I'm gone. I agree that IMC has really great people.

If you'd like to do more things online with IMC, we have a number of things online. There are two new things that are happening, kind of the next generation of teachers coming up, that are fascinating, wonderful people to listen to and be engaged with. They teach online on Tuesday evenings and in person here at IMC on Thursday evenings. We're very, very happy to have them here and encourage you to check them out.

So thank you all very much, and I'll see you all at the end of this month-long retreat that I'm teaching.