

Kusala (5 of 10) Seeing Wisely the Unwholesome

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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The topic for these two weeks is wholesomeness and unwholesomeness or skillfulness and unskillfulness. Today, I want to continue with a focus on the unwholesome. Next week, I will focus on the wholesome.

I will begin with a story. When I was 27, I was ordained as a Zen priest. Entering religious life as a calling was a big turning point for me. After the ordination ceremony, I was surprised that I was a more public figure. I had a shaved head, and I wore robes. People could see that I was publicly demonstrating a dedication to religious life, the Dharma life. So I felt much more accountable to people. I felt more acutely sensitive to people studying me and how I behaved. Consequently, I became much more acutely aware of my many shortcomings.

At the same time, I felt that I was now metaphorically a child of the Buddha because I had been ordained. So it was more okay to have shortcomings. I was accepted with them. This combination – being more aware of and okay with my shortcomings – was precious to me.

This did not mean that I indulged in the shortcomings, had free rein to act them out, or continued merrily going along with them. I had a practice – to look at the shortcomings, work with them, and find freedom from them. To see a heightened sensitivity to one's shortcomings as helpful. At the same time, not to be troubled or defined by them – not to feel belittled by or ashamed of them. That is the way forward in the Dharma.

Many *vipassana* teachers give talks about the hindrances. These are five unwholesome states of mind and unwholesome forms of behavior and thinking. We can get caught in greed, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and regrets, or doubt.

The *vipassana* teachers will often say: “Do not take the hindrances personally or define yourself by them. Do not judge yourself by their presence.” It is completely natural for the human mind to produce hindrances. Millions of years of evolution have shaped us the way we are, and we cannot automatically undo it. You did not choose how many arms and hands you have. You did not say as an embryo: “This time, I think I want four or six arms, so I can be more efficient and do more things. That would be a good idea.”

Our genetics operate in a certain way. Before we are consciously aware and can make choices, much of who we are has been shaped by the continuum of evolution and genetics. That unfolding of our lives is part of the natural world, and with it comes tendencies to behave in unskillful, unwholesome, or unbeneficial ways. But, to see those tendencies as part of nature rather than a sin or a great moral crime. So to be willing to see clearly – to acknowledge and recognize our shortcomings.

If you think the word “shortcomings” is a bit judgmental, you might say “foibles” or “unwholesomeness.” Or you might use “unskillful,” a translation of *akusala*. “Unskillful” can be simple, straightforward: “Well, that’s unskillful. That’s not useful, beneficial, or a good thing to do.”

We are willing to acknowledge our shortcomings. They might sometimes amuse us. We might feel a little sad because they are a way of causing harm to ourselves and others. But not to carry the weight of our shortcomings. Not to allow ourselves to be defined negatively by them in a way that we add suffering. To see shortcomings as natural. We work with them – with care and wisdom – not to cause harm.

There is a wonderful list of unwholesome states in the suttas, the teachings of the Buddha. One particular teaching is to see the presence of those unwholesome states – really acknowledge them – and then see when they are definitively absent, no longer there. That shows us the movement and potential of what we are looking for here in the Dharma. We are not looking to simply accept our foibles. We are looking, in the Dharma, to live without them – to be free.

Some people feel this radical teaching is unattainable or unrealistic. But it is phenomenal how much we can redo the software of our minds so that certain tendencies or habits can fall away. It takes practice and dedication. It is not going to happen from wishful thinking. But to see the presence of unskillful states and then really experience their absence. To say, “Wow, this is a possibility,” and be inspired by that. “This is what inspires me to practice – this possibility of freedom, fresh air, open space, and clarity. Now that I have a taste, this is what to practice with.”

Interestingly, almost all of the unwholesome states on the list are social in nature – meaning that the motivations we have usually exist in relationship to other people. These unwholesome states are painful for the person who has them. They also cause pain, suffering, or problems for others – those whom we inflict the unwholesome states on.

Here is the list of unwholesome states of mind or motivations. Covetousness – coveting the things of other people. Ill will, anger, resentment, and contempt – are often directed towards others. Insolence. Envy – is often related to others. Avarice – wanting the things of other people. Deceit – is usually done in social situations. Fraud – involves other people. Rivalry. Conceit – is often formed in relationship to others. We are better or worse than others. We want something from others, so there is conceit about one’s status. Without other people around, there would not be much reason for conceit. Arrogance and vanity – are often in relationship to others.

All the unwholesome states may be addressed to oneself. One may have ill will, anger, resentment, or even contempt towards oneself. There could be deceit towards oneself. Some people have rivalry within themselves, an inner war between different sides of who they are.

I want to highlight how much these are social emotions. If we want to contribute to a better society – a better world where we do not harm others – it is useful to settle and resolve the unwholesome states in ourselves. As we do that, we do not experience the self-harm that they create. It is fantastic that we can resolve and settle these forces in our lives – and it benefits ourselves and others.

Hopefully, seeing these benefits motivates us to look at our unwholesome or unskillful states – greed, hatred, and delusion in all their different forms. To look at unwholesome behavior, thoughts, and motivations *not* in unskillful ways or with ill will. That adds suffering upon suffering. The Dharma approach is to see unwholesome states as natural and impersonal. To see them as if you are a child of the Buddha – a child of nature – of the world. The world is not judging you. Nature is not judging you. You are accepted. You belong here.

But please, in this deep sense of acceptance and non-criticalness of yourself, be realistic and honest about your shortcomings and unwholesomeness. Be inspired by that. “Wow. If I see this in me, it is possible to work towards freedom. Without knowing it and seeing it clearly, where is the freedom?”

This is a call for a loving, peaceful, and very clear recognition of your foibles, shortcomings, and unwholesome tendencies – whatever you do that is not healthy. Try to see them, be with them, relate to them in healthy, skillful, and wholesome ways – and be inspired by the wholesome.

The wholesome will be the topic for next week. Because we cannot separate wholesomeness and unwholesomeness, I will go back and forth a bit. I will discuss wholesomeness using the alternative translation of *kusala*, which is “skillful.”

Thank you so much. I look forward to next week.