

Kusala (10 of 10) The Wholesome Dharma

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We have come to the end of our two-week series on *kusala* (wholesomeness and skillfulness). I love the idea that the *Dhamma* (the teachings) are oriented towards what is wholesome, skillful, or beneficial.

A man named Nissim once came to the Buddha with a question about *kusala dhamma* (skillful or wholesome spiritual teachings). *Kusala dhamma* is a very different orientation from the focus in many religions on discovering the “true” or ultimate teaching – an absolute or most profound truth. The Buddha regularly avoided that kind of language. He was always pragmatic. He emphasized that which was wholesome, was beneficial for leading to the end of suffering, and brought

happiness and welfare.

Nissim challenged the Buddha. He said: “It seems to me that if someone discovers a wholesome teaching, a wholesome Dharma, they should not teach that to anybody else because it is an impediment – an obstacle – for them. It gives them headaches to have to go and teach other people. After all, what can one person do for another?” He implies that you usually cannot do much for others.

He asked the Buddha, “What do you think?” The Buddha said, “Well, let me reply with an analogy.” I think this was a very kind thing to do. Rather than directly criticizing Nissim for his teachings, or offering an alternative view that was clearly opposed to Nissim’s view, the Buddha offers an analogy and asks questions.

It is important to understand that Nissim was a large landholder. He owned a vast estate, where many sharecroppers worked his fields. Their payment was a share of the crops.

The Buddha said: “Nissim, imagine that a visitor came to you and said: ‘You should keep all the produce on your estate for yourself, so you can enjoy it and have a good life. Do not share anything with your sharecroppers.’ Would that be a challenge or a difficulty for your sharecroppers?”

Nissim said, “Yes, it would be a difficulty and a challenge for them not to receive any payment or any of the produce for themselves.”

“Would that visitor be concerned for their welfare?”

Nissim said, “No, the person would have no concern for their welfare.”

“Would that person have ill will for your sharecroppers, or rather, goodwill and kindness for them?”

Nissim said, “They would have ill will for them.”

The Buddha said: “In the same way, if a person discovers a wholesome teaching, a wholesome Dharma, a wholesome practice, and does not share it with people who could benefit from it, that is a challenge and an obstacle for them. It would impede their progress towards greater welfare. It does not support and benefit them. Keeping the teachings to oneself is likely a form of ill will and aversion.”

So, rather than directly countering Nissim, the Buddha offered an analogy and asked how he would behave under that circumstance. When Nissim understood how he would behave, the Buddha did not have to answer the question directly. Nissim could figure out how the

analogy applied to his question.

This story conveys the idea that there is a wholesome, skillful Dharma, and it is good to share it with people. It is good to teach it if you know it for yourself. (Although, whether everyone should be a teacher is another matter.) When you have discovered how to live beneficially, you share this with others. You live it so that you can benefit other people. We do not live hermetically sealed off from others. We are in the world to cooperate and show mutual kind regard and support for each other.

When you discover wholesome states of mind, practices, and ways of being, you could keep them to yourself. But rather than teaching your family and friends, be sure to live these wholesome dharmas. Express them in how you live your life. Share the goodness and freedom you have discovered. Living wholesomely is an art and a skill we learn gradually by repetition. Although it can seem difficult or tiring to be kind and friendly, it becomes easier and second nature with practice.

I want to end this series of talks by emphasizing what I have said repeatedly about the nature of the Buddha's teachings: they are pragmatic. Many people asked the Buddha ultimate spiritual, religious, philosophical, and existential questions. Some people even demanded that

the Buddha answer ultimate questions, like: Does the soul exist? Will the soul exist after we die? Does the soul die when we die? Is consciousness eternal? Is consciousness temporary – only here when we are alive? Is the world eternal? Is the world not going to last forever? Is the world infinite – goes on forever – or is it finite? There are all these kinds of ultimate questions. We can probably add ones that we have heard ourselves.

Perhaps, people want answers to ultimate questions because answers reassure them or tell them they are on a good path. I do not know all the reasons. But, the Buddha always said, “Those kinds of questions are not beneficial.” He mostly kept silent. He did not answer those questions because they are not beneficial for helping people come to the end of suffering or discovering real happiness.

The Buddha said that he teaches the practice, the orientation, the view that supports people to discover what is beneficial – what brings welfare, happiness, and the end of suffering. With this pragmatic orientation, the Buddha’s concern was about suffering and overcoming suffering.

Sometimes our Theravada tradition is considered a lesser Buddhist tradition. Maybe we can embrace that label. Yes, it is lesser in the sense that it does not

pursue all the grand, cosmic, existential questions that people can think up. But it focuses on something very fundamental: suffering and the end of suffering – the discovery of lasting, profound happiness and well-being.

With the end of suffering and the discovery of happiness, the great existential questions – the meaning of life and what happens when we die – might still interest us, but they are mostly philosophical and abstract. They are not as weighty or important to us because we have discovered how to be at peace and happy here. There is no fear driving those questions.

Wholesomeness and skillfulness are fundamental concepts in the teachings of the Buddha that I find quite inspiring. *Kusala* is meant to simplify things, to keep us close to what is most important if what we want is to become free of suffering.

I hope that you will live a wholesome, skillful life for your sake and for others. It is a great privilege and honor to do even the smallest thing to benefit the life of someone else. Thank you very much.