

# The Roots (3 of 5) Hostility

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**Gil Fronsdal**

We're in the middle of the series on the three roots of the unwholesome and the three roots of the wholesome. The words "*kusala*" and "*akusala*" (wholesome and unwholesome) could also be understood as "skillful and unskillful."

I think of "wholesome" as that which is healthy, and unwholesome is that which is unhealthy. And I think of "skillful" as that which is helpful, and "unskillful" as that which is unhelpful.

This represents a fundamental distinction the Buddha makes that helps us to find our way in any situation. It is

as if we're always coming to a fork in the road, and that fork can go in either the wholesome or the unwholesome direction. To some degree, that's our choice. Learning to sit in the place of mindfulness means being able to have some choice about which of those forks we take. We don't have to just go along with things. We can decide which to avoid and which to go along with.

There's a statement by the Buddha about wholesome and unwholesome, skillful and unskillful, that has been a very powerful little teaching for some people I've known. It really galvanized them around practice and what the Buddha had to teach. So I'd like to read it to you.

The Buddha said:

“Abandon what is unwholesome. It is possible to abandon what is unwholesome. If it were not possible to abandon what is unwholesome, I would not say to you, ‘Abandon what is unwholesome.’ But because it is possible to abandon what is unwholesome, I say to you, ‘Abandon what is unwholesome.’

If this abandoning of what is unwholesome were conducive to harm and pain, I would not say to you, ‘Abandon what is unwholesome.’ But because this abandoning of what is unwholesome is conducive to

benefit and happiness, I say, 'Abandon what is unwholesome. Develop what is wholesome.'

It is possible to develop what is wholesome. If it were not possible to develop what is wholesome, I would not say to you, 'Develop what is wholesome.' But because it is possible to develop what is wholesome, I say to you, 'Develop what is wholesome.'

If this development of what is wholesome were conducive to harm and pain, I would not say to you, 'Develop what is wholesome.' But because this development of what is wholesome is conducive to benefit and happiness, I say to you, 'Develop what is wholesome.'"

It's very definitive. He's very clear, very definitive, and very confident. There is nothing wishy-washy about this. It is possible to do something. It is possible to change, grow, and develop. It is possible to let go of the things that we're doing inside that are causing us and others harm. It is possible to cultivate that which is for our benefit, well-being, and happiness, and those qualities that are also beneficial for the world around us.

I'd like to suggest that these two aren't separate and distinct. As we develop what brings benefit, well-being, and real happiness to ourselves, this is inseparable

from developing a concern and a desire for the welfare and happiness of the world around us.

So abandon the unwholesome. We have to be a little bit wise about this. Abandoning is not aversion or hostility to what's unwholesome. You can't use the unwholesome to get rid of the unwholesome. We use the wholesome to abandon, to let go, to dry up, to evaporate, or to thaw what is unwholesome.

I want to talk about the second of the three unwholesome roots, which is hate or hostility. The three roots are greed, hatred, and delusion. Sometimes people associate hostility with anger. But I'd like to suggest that people have a lot of opinions about the word "anger." I've talked to many people about this word during my career as a Buddhist teacher. It's amazing how quickly people defend anger. After Dharma talks, I don't think there's any other emotion that I know of that people want to defend as much as anger.

I don't know what it is about anger that makes people feel so strongly they want to defend it. But I would suggest it is a semantic issue, and that the word "anger" is an umbrella term like the word "desire." I think that the word "anger" is a general term within which is held a range of other motivations, feelings, and attitudes. These can include hostility and hatred on the unwholesome end of the spectrum, and there can be

fierce disapproval of something on the wholesome end of the spectrum.

It might look like a person who has strong disapproval is angry. However, the inner life is very different for someone who is hostile, versus someone who has deep stability, stillness, warmth, love, and freedom inside. When that person has strong disapproval, their inner life is very different. It's clear that the Buddha had strong disapproval. When I read the *suttas*, at least the English translations, sometimes I feel the Buddha is pretty stern. "Stern" is my language. I don't know if you would read it the same way. But maybe strong disapproval sometimes has a sternness to it.

Sometimes the Buddha doesn't appear to match my early romantic ideas about how a compassionate person is always supposed to be. Sometimes compassion does involve sternness, clear disapproval, or a clear "no." But with compassion the *inner life* is different from true hostility.

In this quote I gave, if it's an unwholesome, unskillful side of anger, then we are harming ourselves. There is self-harm involved. If it's a wholesome side of the spectrum, then it leads to benefit. Maybe I'm a little shy about saying it leads to happiness. Maybe in the long term it does, but it leads to benefit.

Feel the difference – feel how hostility or hatred is really violence toward oneself. The hateful person is destroying themselves. Living in hate is a kind of poverty. The commentaries give this description of hatred – as poverty. Maybe we can take hatred to include all of the unwholesome side of anger. Even the mildest irritation can have hostility or annoyance in it. Even complaining can sometimes have a little hostility in it.

So this is the translation that Nyanaponika gives: (Maybe some of you will choose different words for the English translations.)

“Hatred has the characteristic of savageness like a provoked snake. Its function is to spread like a drop of poison, or its function is to burn up its own support, like a forest fire. It is manifested as persecuting, like an enemy that has got its chance to destroy. Its proximate cause is the grounds for annoyance.” (I guess just being bothersome for others.)

“It should be regarded as being like stale urine, urine mixed with poison.”

I think in the ancient world, they used urine as a kind of medicine. It's pretty bad for it to be stale urine, but then you don't taste the poison. That's kind of strong language. But maybe there's a time and place for this

kind of strong, definitive, clear language about something that can cause so much harm in our world – hatred.

I think that many of us probably don't want to think of ourselves as hateful people. But if we look at the spectrum of what we call anger, all the way from the wholesome to the unwholesome side, sometimes we're just a little bit into the unwholesome, with this annoyance or that criticalness. Sometimes we're so identified with them that we don't really see that's what we're doing. It seems obvious to us that this (annoyed, critical point of view) is true, and we're supposed to do this.

As we practice mindfulness, the idea is to become more and more familiar with the cost of having unwholesome anger and hostility. What is it costing us? Even though anger sometimes motivates us to act in the world and get things done, there always might be a better way. There might be a skillful way. We might be able to learn the skill of having strong disapproval, and a strong “No” that has no hostility in it.

Also, strong disapproval – anger that is a strong, fierce “no” – sometimes gets mixed up with hostility. The energy of hostility can feel pleasant for some people. They can feel there's a rightness to it or have a very

strong identification with it. A sense of personal power can come with hostility. The attachment to the hostility is not to the hostility, but to the power, the identity, or the good feeling about ourselves that might come from it.

These are my brief words for today. What I hope to leave you with is the idea that hate (or hostility) is a phenomenally important issue for our world to address. There is so much of it in all directions. As a people, we really need to study, understand, and get to the bottom of what hostility is. We need to learn how to wisely separate out the healthy sides of anger or fierceness from the unhealthy sides. We need to learn how to act from better places than the places of hate.

How do we go into ourselves in such a deep, deep way that not only do we heal the suffering and poverty from which our hatred comes, but also tap into that which is deeper still? Deep inside, underneath the hard shell of hatred and hostility, there is love, and that is wholesome.

Maybe study this today, and I'll do it as well because I don't feel as if I understand all that I wish I understood about how this works. For the next couple of days, hostility and hate can be a subject of conversation and reflection with your friends. Maybe read about it. We want to become wise to the whole idea of hostility and hatred. It would be a good thing for the world for us to



have that wisdom. Thank you very, very much. I look forward to tomorrow.