

Kusala (9 of 10) The Buddha's Teaching to his Son

June 3, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

wholesome, skillful, non-afflictive, Rāhula, son, father, Buddha, MN-61, reflection, mirror, affliction, unwholesome, unskillful, harmful

Gil Fronsda

Good morning, everyone. Today we continue with the theme of *kusala*. The Pali word *kusala* is often translated as “wholesome” or “skillful.” An action is defined as wholesome or skillful when it is non-afflictive. It causes neither harm nor pain.

Some things can be painful – like today I am going to the dentist. I think it is going to be a little painful – but it is not harmful. It is actually beneficial. Things that are beneficial and bring happiness are wholesome.

These ideas come together very nicely in a teaching the Buddha gave to his son Rāhula. Rāhula lived with his father from the time he was about seven onwards. I'm

not sure what living with his father meant when his father was a monk. But he lived in the monastic world with his father and was a novice monk at the age of seven.

This story happened soon after Rāhula became a novice and moved in with his father. He might have been seven or eight years old.

It seems that Rāhula is caught telling a lie. The Buddha sits him down and says something like:

The religious or monastic life of someone who tells a deliberate lie is about as valuable as the amount of water left in this bowl of mine, my eating bowl.

The Buddha turns the bowl, which he had cleaned, upside down, and the leftover water drips out. It is an indirect way to say to a young child that what he did was counterproductive or not good.

The Buddha goes on and tells his son:

The criteria for how to know what to do physically with the body, what to say, and even what to think involves a reflection.

The Buddha asks:

What is the purpose of a mirror?

The son says:

It is for reflection.

The Buddha responds:

And in the same way, this is how you should reflect on yourself. This is a way to be a mirror for yourself, to really see what is going on. It helps guide you in deciding what you are going to do.

Here is an act of attention, of mindfulness. Mindfulness is not done just for the sake of being mindful – but for knowing how to act in the world: what to say, what to do, and even what to think.

This teaching that the Buddha gives his son can be seen as simple for a seven or eight-year-old. But many Buddhist teachers I know, including myself, see the simple teaching as encapsulating very clearly the thrust or the center of the Buddha's teachings. All the rest of his teachings flow in an important way from what he said to his son.

The Buddha tells his son how to consider his actions:

An action with the body should be done after repeated reflection. An action by speech should be done after repeated reflection. An action by mind should be done after repeated reflection in this way. Rāhula, when you wish to do an action with the body, you should reflect upon the same bodily action thus. "Would this action that I wish to do with

the body lead to my own affliction, to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both?"

I think the word "affliction" here could equally be "harm." Does it lead to your harm, someone else's harm, or harm to you both?

"Is it an unwholesome bodily action with painful consequences, with painful results?"

When you reflect, if you know: "This action that I wish to do with the body would lead to my own affliction, to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both. It is an unwholesome bodily action with painful consequences, with painful results." Then you definitely should not do such an action with the body.

But when you reflect, if you know: "This action that I wish to do with the body would not lead to my affliction, to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both. It is a wholesome bodily action, with happy consequences, with happy results." Then you may do such an action with the body.

The Buddha goes on to say the same for acts of speech, acts of the mind, and even for how we think.

There is a movement to reflect on how you are thinking right now – your attitude, bias, and desires. Is it afflictive? Is it harmful to you, someone else, or both? Is it unwholesome or unskillful? Does it lead to pain or suffering? If it does not – if it leads to what is beneficial, to what is wholesome, to happiness – then go ahead and do it. That is what the Buddha says you should do before you do something. Before doing something, reflect on it as best you can.

The Buddha says you should also reflect while you are doing something – to have some self-awareness as you are doing it. While you are acting, if you find that it is afflictive and unwholesome, then stop doing it. If it is not, then keep doing it.

The value of checking in while we do something is we get more information about the situation. We do not always know ahead of time the impact that our words or actions are going to have. In the middle of doing something, we may say: “Oh, wait a minute. I realize that the situation differs from what I thought it was. To say or do this right now is actually harmful to me or others.” So we continue the reflection as long as we are involved in the action.

The Buddha goes on to tell his son:

When you finish doing something, also be reflective

about it in the same way. “Is what I did harmful, unwholesome, or painful?”

If it is – and this is interesting – he says:

If you have caused harm in this way, then you should go find a wise person you know, and let them know what you did.

In other words, be accountable for it.

Letting someone know what you did is a real step toward honesty. It is a way to work through and acknowledge it fully. We begin to move toward no longer being behind that behavior – or easily slipping into doing it again – because now someone else knows about it. When you have someone’s support, it is more likely your mind will be attentive and careful to stop yourself from doing something you do not want to do.

The Buddha is teaching about a reflective life. And mindfulness – being in the present moment, seeing what is going on – is a support for living a considered life. To do that might seem like a lot of work. When we add a layer of self-reflection, we might slide into being self-conscious and self-critical.

That is why there is a third category of reflection. Pay attention to what you are doing in your mind. Is it harmful? Is it unwholesome? Is it painful? If it is, stop doing it. We have a self-corrective mechanism in

mindfulness. The very way that we are mindful, reflective, or tracking what is going on should be beneficial. The way we are mindful should bring some well-being and happiness.

The movement of reflection needs to be not critical, heavy, or stressful. Instead, it has a light, generous, and kind touch. It has a nice feeling – like we are our own best friend, who helps us see ourselves in a better light, who wants the best for us. So, to have your own best friend inside – who cares for and supports you, who will always see you in a positive light – but will not let you do harmful, unwholesome, and painful things that cause suffering.

Here we see in action the practice of working with what is skillful, unskillful, wholesome, and unwholesome. I find it interesting that these are not commandments for what you should and should not do. They are principles for how to investigate your life. They are principles for finding out for yourself what is appropriate and not appropriate – not external rules of morality.

Wholesome, unwholesome, skillful, and unskillful reflections are a valuable part of the Buddha's teachings. This is from the *Middle Length Discourses*, number MN-61: "Advice to Rāhula at Ambalaṭṭhikā."

So thank you. We have one more day tomorrow to talk about this topic. I appreciate this opportunity. Thank you.