

# 2020-06-19: The Heart of Ethics (5 of 5) The Roots of Ethics

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

buddha, delusion, greed, synonyms, roots, ethical, avoiding, word, unconditioned, harm, unskillful, destruction, call, dharma, buddhism, unwholesome, arises, plant, mature, skillful

## SPEAKERS

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So again greetings. And this morning will be the last of the five talks on kind of the general principles of early Buddhist ethics. And yesterday I talked about the 10 unskillful and 10 skillful actions. That the Buddha was very concerned about how we act and live in the world, and that we want to live in the world, our actions, our behavior and our relationship to other people, to be skillful, or wholesome. At least nine of those ten skillful actions have to do with our relationship to others in the world. Actions. So it's what's wholesome or skillful is to avoid killing and harming other beings. What's skillful or wholesome is to avoid stealing. Hurting people through our sexuality and sexual behavior. Lying, avoiding lying, avoiding divisive or malicious speech, avoiding harsh speech, pointless speech. Avoiding being avaricious, meaning wanting things of other people. Avoiding having ill will. So those nine are all about how we are in relationship to other people. And Buddha put tremendous emphasis on this importance and to behave and act in ways that avoid harm and provide good for other people to live for the welfare of others. Now, these 10 skillful and unskillful actions are set to have roots. It's a plant metaphor, that some plants if you just cut them off at the surface of the ground, the roots will sprout more. But if you uproot them, then they don't grow anymore. So the unskillful actions in the world, Buddha said, always have one of three roots. And those are the roots that we want to uproot. And those roots are greed, hatred, and delusion. And you'll find myself and Buddhists, Theravada Buddhist teachers will repeat these three over and over again, greed, hate and delusion. And it's a little bit you know, after a while we get familiar with it, used to it. It's kind of like it's a little bit like be too much, you know, to keep saying the same thing over and over again. And I apologize for that. But it's also that it's so central to this tradition. Because those three are seen to be the psychological roots for always in which we live, that we intentionally, consciously, knowingly cause harm in the world. And the idea is to live without causing harm. And so we find that greed, hate and delusion has a central role in the teachings of the Buddha, seeing how they work, and then becoming free of them, being liberated from greed, hate and delusion. There's a somewhat famous chapter in the connected discourses of

the Buddha, that in Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation is called the chapter on the, I think it is called the chapter on the unconditioned. And in it, it gives you a whole series of synonyms. And I've heard Dharma teachers recite these synonyms, 44 synonyms, I think, as if they're synonyms as if they're all talking about Nibbana, liberation because Nibbana is one of the words. And at some point, it just goes through a whole list, the texts, the translation, but the list is actually supposed to be the word that's substituted into a bigger text. As with all the text is the same, except these words change. And these words are kind of inspiring. You know, and some people it's almost like, I don't know if poetry is the right word, but to settle back and just hear some of these words can be quite inspiring. Truth, the far shore, the unaging, the stable, the unmanifest, the unproliferated, the peaceful, the deathless, the sublime, the auspicious, the secure, the destruction craving, the wonderful, the amazing, the unailing, Nibbana, the unaffected, purity, freedom, the island, the shelter, the asylum, the refuge. Great words. But when they're listed just as synonyms for Nibbana, we actually miss what the central teaching is in this chapter. Because they're not really synonyms for Nibbana, exactly. What they're synonyms for is something else. And we can see this with the very first one where it talks about the unconditioned. One of these lists of 44 is the unconditioned and the first time that this word appears, they give you the whole text and to read a little piece of it, "and what is the unconditioned," says the Buddha. "The unconditioned is the destruction of greed, hatred and delusion. This is called the unconditioned." So for all those synonyms that I read, for all those synonyms that I read,, they're all being linked, or being explained as synonyms for the destruction of greed, hate and delusion. More so than of each other. It's the emphasis over and over again, it's the destruction, the end of greed, hate and delusion, which the Buddha is pointing to. In fact, the most common, I think the most common definition, for enlightenment is the destruction, the ending of greed, hatred and delusion. Now because greed, hate and delusion are the roots for unskillful, what we could call unethical behavior in the world, unskillful unwholesome, akusala. The destruction of greed, hate and delusion has an ethical component. It's an ethical realization, because the source the motivation, the impulse to be unethical, is eliminated. And in this way, the enlightenment is indistinguishable from becoming completely ethical. That in the sense of any kind of intentional, conscious, causing of harm to anybody else. And so this is one of the themes for this week is how much, what we would call in English ethics. And what in Buddhism we might call liberation, really should be seen as one in the same, they're inseparable. And how deep this is in the Buddha's teaching is I'll read this passage. There's a very famous part of the liturgy in Theravada Buddhism and where they chant every day, the monastics especially, and they chant this line about the Dharma, "the Dharma is visible here and now, immediate, inviting to be seen, onward leading, and to be personally realized by the wise." I'll read a bit bigger passage of what this means specifically, the Buddha said, "when you know there is greed, hatred or delusion within you. And when you know there is no greed, hatred and delusion within you, then you know the Dharma that is visible here and now, immediate, inviting to be seen for oneself, onward leading, and to be personally realized by the wise." The whole, you know the Heart of the Dharma, what it really is when you really want to know it for yourself is not a metaphysical truth. It's not a cosmic truth, you know that transcendent truth, it's not something you know, some great state of consciousness that's, you know, reified, you know, wonderful states of consciousness, something. He's defining it here that to really know the Dharma, you know when, you know you really know your own greed, hatred and delusion,

you see it, hopefully you see it with a beautiful mind, beautiful awareness. And then you know, when it's absent, and know that possible to have a mind, a heart that doesn't have greed, hate and delusion. If you really know that in deep way, then you know the Dharma, then you know what's on word leading, then you know you can move into this direction, you can mature and grow and develop this wonderful capacity. So in this way, the Buddhist giving priority to personal empirical experience, over any kind of teachings, that are relied on through faith, or through texts or through teachers. The idea is to become your own teacher. And you discover it by this sensitivity, mindfulness, awareness to really know and feel greed, hate and delusion. Now I keep emphasizing this ethical sensitivity, because greed, hate and delusion, we can actually feel the impact that has on our system. Again to quote the Buddha, these unwholesome, unskillful roots. They are he calls them they are suffering in this very life. They come with fixation, despair and fever. He said he emphasizes that people who have the three unwholesome roots, greed, hate and delusion, are injuring themselves. Because they're forms that bring harm, suffering and discomfort to oneself. And so he has this poem, greed, hatred and delusion, arisen from within oneself. Injure the person as its own fruit destroys the reed. Apparently there was a reed plant in ancient India, that when the fruit matured, maybe it's sap took out the nutrients from the rest of the plant and it died. So this idea that we can feel, sense the dukkha, the pain of greed, hate and delusion. It's actually very important, because that gives us the clue for how to be free. It gives us a sense of this is not what I want to do. The Buddha called that a thorn that we pull out of the heart. The absence of greed, hate and delusion, mind, a heart that doesn't have it, that is beautiful, the word kalyāṇa, and sometimes in English, the word beauty is associated with being virtuous or being ethical. And even though ethics is not a word the Buddha used, he did talk about kalyāṇa, in terms of virtue, in terms of living an ethical life, living by the precepts. And so this motivation to living an ethical life in Buddhism, all arises from the inside out. It can arise from the inside out, as we feel and sense and experience what's really happening within, seeing the roots of unskillful, unhealthy, unethical behavior, how the roots of it, how it arises out of a way that we're injuring ourselves and how the absence of it arises from what is actually nourishing and supportive for us, that rises out of what's beautiful. Now, this is why mindfulness is such an important quality. To really be in the present moment and notice what's here, pay attention to what here, we can become our own teacher, our own coach for what in English we might call an ethical life. Within Buddhism we might call a life that doesn't cause any harm in the world. But a life which is concerned for the welfare, and happiness of self, of others, of self and others and for the whole world. And as I said, I think earlier in the week, this is a definition definition of a wise person. This is a definition of someone who is spiritually mature in Buddhism. They're concerned for the welfare of self, others self and others and for the whole world. May it be so.