

## UNIT 1.11A

## HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY ROOTS

1.11A ☸ TEXT

*Middle Length Discourses 9*What is **unhealthy**?

Killing living beings is unhealthy,  
 taking what is not given is unhealthy,  
 misconduct in sensual pleasures is unhealthy,  
 false speech is unhealthy,  
 malicious speech is unhealthy,  
 harsh speech is unhealthy,  
 gossip is unhealthy,  
 greed is unhealthy,  
 ill will is unhealthy,  
 wrong view is unhealthy.

And what is at the **root of the unhealthy**?

Greed is at the root of the unhealthy;  
 hatred is at the root of the unhealthy;  
 delusion is at the root of the unhealthy.

And what is **healthy**?

Refraining from killing living beings is healthy,  
 refraining from taking what is not given is healthy,  
 refraining from misconduct in sensual pleasures...  
 refraining from false speech is healthy,  
 refraining from malicious speech is healthy,  
 refraining from harsh speech is healthy,  
 refraining from gossip is healthy;  
 non-greed, non-ill will, right view are healthy.

And what is at the **root of the healthy**?

Non-greed is at the root of the healthy;  
 non-hatred is at the root of the healthy;  
 non-delusion is at the root of the healthy.

When a noble person

is aware: such things are unhealthy,  
 is aware: such things are at the root of the unhealthy,  
 is aware: such things are healthy, and  
 is aware: such things are at the root of the healthy,

1.11A ☸ PALI

*Majjhima Nikāya 9**katamaṃ akusalaṃ?*

*pāṇātipāto akusalaṃ,  
 adinnādānaṃ akusalaṃ,  
 kāmesumicchācāro akusalaṃ,  
 musāvādo akusalaṃ,  
 pisuṇā vācā akusalaṃ,  
 pharusā vācā akusalaṃ,  
 samphappalāpo akusalaṃ,  
 abhijjhā akusalaṃ,  
 byāpādo akusalaṃ,  
 micchādītṭhi akusalaṃ.*

*katamañca akusalamūlaṃ?*

*lobho akusalamūlaṃ,  
 doso akusalamūlaṃ,  
 moho akusalamūlaṃ*

*katamañca kusalaṃ?*

*pāṇātipātā veramaṇī kusalaṃ,  
 adinnādānā veramaṇī kusalaṃ,  
 kāmesumicchācārā veramaṇī kusalaṃ,  
 musāvādā veramaṇī kusalaṃ,  
 pisuṇāya vācāya veramaṇī kusalaṃ,  
 pharusāya vācāya veramaṇī kusalaṃ,  
 samphappalāpā veramaṇī kusalaṃ,  
 anabhijjhā...abyāpā...sammādītṭhi.*

*katamañca kusalamūlaṃ?*

*alobho kusalamūlaṃ,  
 adoso kusalamūlaṃ,  
 amoho kusalamūlaṃ.*

*yato kho ariyasāvako*

*evaṃ akusalaṃ pajānāti,  
 evaṃ akusalamūlaṃ pajānāti,  
 evaṃ kusalaṃ pajānāti,  
 evaṃ kusalamūlaṃ pajānāti,*

one entirely abandons the underlying tendency to greed,  
 one abolishes the underlying tendency to hatred,  
 one removes the underlying tendency  
 to the conceited view 'I am,' [i.e. delusion]  
 and by abandoning ignorance and arousing knowledge  
 one here and now makes an end of suffering.

*so sabbaso rāgānusayaṃ pahāya,  
 paṭighānusayaṃ paṭivinodetvā,  
 'asmī'ti diṭṭhimānānusayaṃ  
 samūhanitvā,  
 avijjaṃ pahāya vijjaṃ uppādetvā,  
 diṭṭhevadhamme dukkhassantakaro hoti.*

1.11A ❖ COMMENT

A. Probably no other single subject is more central to the Buddha's teaching around living with integrity than the distinction between healthy and unhealthy. Just as biological systems are benefited from healthy conditions (sufficient nutrients and oxygen, optimal temperatures, etc.), and damaged by unhealthy conditions (starvation, dehydration, toxins, etc.), so also psychological systems are enhanced by states such as kindness, care, compassion, and generosity, and are afflicted by such states as cruelty, anger, hatred, etc. This is not an abstract ethical judgment, but the description of a simple law of nature. Another way of thinking about these terms is that some things we do and say and think are beneficial to our well-being and the well-being of others, while some other things are harmful, to ourselves, to others, or to both.

B. You will recognize four of the five precepts here, including the four unhealthy modes of speech. However this text is not just a reiteration of the precepts, because it makes the further points that these unhealthy and healthy behaviors are rooted in the three unhealthy and three healthy 'roots' (greed, hatred, delusion on one side, generosity, kindness, wisdom on the other). These are primal emotional stances that underlie the way we respond to various things that arise in experience. Greed is the basic instinct to go after and get whatever we want, selfishly and at any cost. Hatred is the reflex to avoid, attack, or destroy anything that gets in our way, that we don't like, or that threatens our survival. Delusion refers to the relatively undeveloped sense we have of what is really going on, led by the dominating delusion of the primacy of self. The healthy emotional roots have more to do with taking into consideration the needs and interests of others, whereby we share with others (generosity) and take care of others (kindness), with a growing understanding (wisdom) of the interdependence of self and other and the value of a collective good.

1.11A ♦ LANGUAGE

A. There many ways we might render into English the words *kusala* and *akusala*. You may be most familiar with 'wholesome' and 'unwholesome', which is the translation preferred by Bhikkhus Ñānamoli and Bodhi in the Wisdom Publications editions. There is nothing wrong with this, but I shy away from it because these terms have been used in American popular history by one group to judge and condemn the behavior of another group. I prefer 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' because it suggests objective conditions of biological/psychological flourishing rather than moral judgment, and because health seems to be a relatively non-controversial matter of universal concern.

B. It is important to be clear that *kusala* and *akusala* do not mean ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ or ‘good’ or ‘bad’. They are not moral or normative absolutes, but are defined in light of their outcome. Thus *akusala* is anything that will involve or lead to suffering, cause harm, and move one away from seeing things clearly, while *kusala* leads to the cessation of suffering, toward welfare and well-being, and toward greater clarity. In this light, we might also consider ‘helpful’ and ‘unhelpful’ as possible translations of *kusala* and *akusala*.

C. The words also have a secondary association that allows them to be translated in many contexts as ‘skillful’ and ‘unskillful’. This suggests that ethics is a skill that can be learned, and that when one misbehaves it demonstrates a lack of skill due to some profound lack of understanding, which can be remedied by appropriate education and practice. There is no existential ‘evil’ in this system, as we find it is so many of the Western religious traditions. Rather there is ignorance, delusion, or confusion, which can be overcome by learning and mastering the skill of ‘health’.

D. Notice that the healthy ‘roots’ (*mūlā*) are given in the opposite form as the unhealthy roots, rather than as positive words in their own right. This gives them a wider scope, but I think we are justified in replacing the negative forms with positive when it suits our purpose. Thus: ‘non-greed’ (*alobha*) might be called either ‘non-attachment’ or ‘generosity’ (*cāga, dāna*); ‘non-hatred’ (*adosa*) could be loving-kindness (*mettā*); and ‘non-delusion’ (*amoha*) can be specified as wisdom (*paññā*).

#### 1.11A ★ INVESTIGATION

A. Look for the truth of these assertions in your own life and in your own experience. Remember, this is a ‘come and see’ teaching (as in UNIT 1.1B), and these things are not meant to be taken on faith. You are invited to look closely into this matter for yourself, and the Buddha trusts that the healthy benefits of ethical behavior will show themselves to be true because he is merely pointing out a natural phenomenon. Yes, unhealthy mental states and unhealthy behaviors can feel well justified and can be very effective in our getting what we want—that is not in dispute here. But, in the course of winning the battle you will surely lose the war. These unhealthy states are just, well, unhealthy. This means that they will do subtle but consistent damage to your ability to steer away from suffering and achieve greater clarity, while their opposites, healthy states and behaviors, will consistently result in greater personal happiness and collective well-being. See for yourself if this is true, by paying careful attention to the effects of your actions, however small.

B. Remember when we discussed the five precepts (MODULES 1.5 – 1.8) that the point of steering away from these behaviors was not to uphold a theoretical set of ethical rules, but to experience the beneficial practical effects that doing so had on our lives. Explore the cause-and-effect relationship between healthy or unhealthy actions and their immediate and long-term effects as these manifest themselves in your own life. Is it true that you are better off when you behave well, and less better off when you do not?

C. Also see if you can explore in greater detail the relationship between the healthy and unhealthy behaviors and their corresponding roots in the mental states underlying them. For example, to what extent can you notice that an angry verbal outburst is actually rooted in a core emotional

tone of not liking or not wanting something; or perhaps you can investigate how, in order to kill an insect, you have to actually ‘hate’ it for an instant; or when you tell a small lie it is because underneath it all there is something you very much want to get that you might not otherwise get. There is plenty to explore here, and much self-knowledge to be gained by doing so.

#### 1.11A ✪ PRACTICE

A. See if you can make use of this distinction between what is healthy and unhealthy in your own practice. You can do this at the level of overt behavior, where you notice the quality of the deeds you do—either before doing them, while you are doing them, or even after they have been done. You can do this at the level of speech, looking at what it feels like to say something harsh, untrue, or abusive, compared to saying something kind, gentle, and truthful. And you can investigate healthy and unhealthy thoughts and intentions. Just look at how you are holding your mind at any given moment. Is it kind and benevolent, open and equanimous; or is it tight, hard, aversive, or confused? Being able to see what is really going on is half the challenge.

B. Whenever you notice yourself in an unhealthy stance of one sort or another, see if you can shift it to something healthy. This is a wide-open suggestion that can be followed at any time and in any situation. Don’t judge yourself harshly for being unhealthy; just shift it, slightly and gently, toward the healthy.

C. Let us not neglect the other side of the practice, which is to notice when healthy states or healthy behaviors are present. These are to be nurtured and developed, and it is okay to feel good about your own good behavior. Of course one does not want to get conceited about it (as we were warned about last week in UNIT 1.10B), but it is important to give yourself, and to allow yourself to receive, praise and encouragement in healthy states.

D. There is a danger in getting too focused on the negative side of things, which can happen when Buddhist teachings on suffering are aligned too closely with the medicalized attitudes toward mental health so prevalent in our culture. It is not that something is ‘wrong’ with you that needs to be ‘fixed’. It is just that some things are good for us, some things are harmful, and it is wise to learn the difference between these and to learn the skill of navigating our environment intelligently. Positive states, such as joy, pleasure, and happiness, are natural to the human condition, and are to be cultivated as a living practice.