

## Study Guide for MN 78

### *Samanamandikā Sutta*

#### The Discourse Concerning Mandikaputta the Renunciant

*Just as the footprint of any living being that walks  
can be placed within an elephant's footprint, ...  
so all skillful states can be included in the Four Noble Truths.*

Ven. Sariputta (MN 28.2)

#### Background:

In the suttas the Buddha frequently uses binary or dichotomous thinking to evaluate effort and mental states. The most common dichotomies are *puṇṇa/papa* (meritorious/"demeritorious") and *kusala/akusala* (skillful/unskillful). Others are *dhamma/adhamma* (righteous/unrighteous), *sukka/kanha* (bright /dark), and *sevitabba/asevitabba* (what should be done/what should not be done). One theory for why the Buddha divided things this way is that he was pragmatic, *i.e.*, interested in what works or doesn't work, what is helpful or isn't helpful.

Among these paired concepts, *kusala* and its opposite, *akusala*, are the most important for people engaged in the Buddha's path of liberation. These two adjectives are used frequently in the Middle Length Discourses; a quick computer search brought up over 1000 occurrences of *kusala*. Some discourses, such as MN78 revolve around these two concepts.

*Kusala* cannot be fully translated by a single English word. Theravada commentators list up to 5 different meanings (not all of which are used in the suttas). Bhikkhu Bodhi usually translates *kusala* as 'wholesome,' sometimes as 'wise' and 'familiar'. Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates it as 'skillful'. 'Wholesome' conveys the idea that what is *kusala* is good, virtuous, or healthy. 'Wise' and 'familiar' suggest having good understanding or knowledge about something. 'Skillful' conveys the idea that *kusala* is connected to qualities that can be developed which are beneficial and useful.

In the suttas, *kusala* is sometimes used in analogies that rely on non-Buddhist activities to describe Buddhist ones. For example:

- 1) In MN 21,7 *kusala* is used to describe the ability of a horse trainer
- 2) In MN 27,10 ff *kusala* is used to describe the skill or knowledge an elephant hunter has in tracking elephants
- 3) In MN 58.10-11 *kusala* is used to describe the knowledge a charioteer has of the parts of a chariot
- 4) In MN 85.56 *kusala* is used to describe the skill Prince Bodhi has with controlling a tamed elephant.

These examples are used in their respective suttas as analogies for:

- 1) The Buddha's skill in guiding capable monks.
- 2) The proficiency in practice which gives rise to the direct experience of knowing that the Buddha is fully enlightened
- 3) The Buddha's knowledge of reality
- 4) The Buddha's skill and ability to guide others to realization

These analogies suggest that *kusala* refers to proficiency, understanding and skillfulness. Most frequently the word is used with *dharmas* to refer to the skillful or beneficial mental states or qualities that support the development of the path to liberation. The suttas repeatedly emphasize that these skillful states are to be cultivated. One way that they support practice is in 'equipping' the mind with gladness (MN 99.21). When occasionally *kusala* is used to describe *dhamma* (singular) it is in reference to a realization that is or is going to be attained (MN 96.50, 78.10). Since attainments are not skills but are in themselves what is ultimately good, perhaps *kusala* is better translated here as 'wholesome'.

In a few passages *kusala* and *akusala* are used to characterize ethical behavior. Particularly important are the *kusala kammapadas* or the ten skillful actions. The Middle Length Discourses makes no mention of the five training precepts but instead lists ten skillful actions as the basic guidelines for ethical conduct. See MN 9.6 wherein *kusala* is defined by these actions. In this passage, the ten skillful actions are used in the definition of right view. This clearly assigns them their role as supportive elements on the path to liberation more than as elements of ordinary ethics. Because of this connection to the path, 'skillful' is probably a better translation here of *kusala* than 'wholesome.' The list of ten has survived in some currents of Mahayana Buddhism, and it eventually evolved into the ten bodhisattva precepts used in Japanese Soto Zen.

*What are the roots of the skillful?  
Non-greed is a root of the skillful;  
Non-hate is a root of the skillful;  
Non-delusion is a root of the skillful.*  
(MN 9.7)

### MN 78:

In this discourse the Buddha explains that the simple absence of evil intentions, speech, actions and livelihood is not enough to establish one as "accomplished in what is wholesome." In other words, the purity that comes from the mere absence of certain behaviors and intentions is not enough in itself to attain the highest goal. One must, through cultivating such skillful states as *jhana*, also have insight into both wholesome and unwholesome habits and intention. In particular one must understand through direct experience how habits and intentions arise and how they cease.

The discussion of what needs to be cultivated is also described in terms of the four right efforts. MN 78.10 contains the standard formulation of these right efforts. The

description is important because it is the standard description of the sixth factor of the eightfold path. Sometimes the four right efforts are abbreviated as “guarding, abandoning, developing and maintaining.”

The sutta concludes with the Buddha stating that in order to be “accomplished in what is wholesome/skillful, perfected in what is wholesome, attained to the supreme attainment” one must have perfected in oneself the tenfold path, *i.e.*, the eightfold path plus right knowledge and right liberation. Rather than practicing the path, this is sometimes described as ‘becoming the path’ or ‘going beyond the path.’

### Notes

In MN 78 the Buddha says that it is important to practice the cessation of skillful *sankappas*. The Buddha also says that it is in the second jhana that wholesome *sankappas* cease. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates this important word as intention. Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates it as resolve. *Samma sankappa* is the second fold of the eightfold path. *Kappa* means something that is made or shaped for a particular purpose. It seems *sankappa* is related to a form of thinking or consideration. As with the cessation of ‘applied and sustained thought’ that occurs in the second *jhana*, in this absorption the kind of thinking or application of mind also ceases. However, it is important to note that ‘intention’ or ‘volition’ (*cetana*) does not cease. In MN 111 it is taught that *cetana* is present in at least the first seven absorptions. In other words, ‘intention’ is a needed part for most of the path.

In Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation of MN 78.11 the Buddha says that a monk does not ‘identify with his virtue.’ The word in Pali is *silāmaya* which more literally means ‘not made/fashioned by *sila*.’

To my knowledge, the five precepts are not mentioned as such *i.e.*, as precepts, anywhere in the Majjhima Nikaya. While the list does show up in four suttas, in three of them it is as a list of virtues rather than training precepts. For example, it appears in MN 81.18 (describing a mythic Non-returner’s virtue), in MN 123.9 (describing the Buddha’s mother’s virtue when she was pregnant), and in MN 142.3 (describing Mahapajapati’s virtue in a passage that suggests she is a stream-enterer). In MN 129.28 the list is used to describe the behavior of a wise person that leads to “pleasure and joy here and now.” In the first three occurrences, what is being described clearly refer to virtues rather than to training precepts or guidelines for people to try to live by. Nothing in these three suttas suggests that the five precepts should be ‘practiced’ or adopted. Rather, it indicates that with realization one attains these virtues instead. As the list of a wise person’s behavior in MN 129, it is not clear whether these are describing how the wise person’s virtue naturally manifests as behavior or whether they are guidelines he or she makes effort to live by. More research into the other discourse collections is needed to understand how and when the Buddha taught the five precepts.

Reflections:

1. Please review carefully the ten skillful actions (MN 9.6). How do these differ from the five precepts? Why might these be listed as part of the eightfold path rather than the five precepts?
2. Why do you think it might be important to develop meditation practice to the point that even skillful intentions come to an end?
3. What kind of reactions, views and feelings do you have when you read the instruction to 'make effort, arouse energy, exert your mind, and strive'? In what ways is the instruction to cultivate skillful states challenging for you? What skillful states do you commonly cultivate? What skillful states would be helpful for you to cultivate? What unskillful state would it be most helpful for you to abandon?