

Right Effort (3 of 5) Emergence of the Wholesome

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Hello, everyone. The topic this week is right effort. Today we turn towards the effort to allow the wholesome to emerge. Classically in Buddhism, there's a dichotomy, a division, between the mental states, motivations, thoughts, and activities, just about anything, that are afflictive and those that are beneficial. In this dichotomy, that which might be in the middle – neither afflictive nor beneficial – is not really addressed or talked about. Not because there's maybe a radical duality between them. But the neutral is not so spiritually meaningful or important to focus on. The neutral has a place – it is what it is – but in terms of the training, growth, and development that Buddhism is about, it's not particularly relevant.

For example, if a person is training for a bicycle race, there are things they can do that undermine their training and things that support it. Some things do neither. Let's say the person likes to read about football scores and football standings. They find that pleasant to do, but in terms of their training for a bicycle race, it doesn't undermine or support it.

So Buddhism has this dichotomy between the wholesome and the unwholesome: the unwholesome is afflictive and the wholesome is beneficial. There are beneficial states of mind, movements of mind and heart, that can live within us. We want to enable or evoke those or allow room for those. They are important.

Buddhism is not just about abandoning, letting go, and renouncing. The abandoning of Buddhism, the letting go – when the Buddha talks about it, he very seldom talks about letting go of things. It's always an inner world of your letting go of clinging to things, attachment, craving, the things that we're caught in. So we don't have to necessarily let go of things of the world. Wisdom might tell us to do that; compassion might tell us to do that. But in terms of the Dharma, what we're letting go of is the clinging, the attachments, in the mind.

That is not all we are supposed to do. Sometimes people pick up a simple idea of Buddhism and think, "Oh, this Buddhism is all about letting go." It is important; it is part of the four right efforts. But equally important is the cultivation or the allowance of beneficial, wholesome, and skillful states.

There are many wholesome states. The wholesome states that are closely associated with mindfulness practice are the Seven Factors of Awakening: mindfulness, investigation, effort (endeavoring), joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. Happiness is important. Patience. Wisdom. States of mind that are expansive, open, peaceful, and boundless. Loving-kindness. Compassion. Sympathetic joy. There are so many wholesome states that the mind can go dizzy like, "Wow, I have to get busy here and do so much."

But it isn't so much that we have to do them all and all at once. There is an art here – not necessarily the art of making and doing, but of allowing. This language is usually translated into English as "the arising." One makes room for, one makes space for, one puts energy into the arising of wholesome states.

Rather than call it "arising," I sometimes like to call it "emergence." I like the word "emergence" because it doesn't imply that we are the doer or the maker of it. Instead, there is something within us that wants to be born, something that has the capacity of emerging coming out. Our job is to make space for that emergence, to allow for that.

The reason I trust this so much is that I associate afflictive emotions and states of mind more with surface reactivity. This is the world of reactions to what's happening in the world and how it impacts us and how it impacts our attachments and fears. As deep as those reactions can feel, they still have to do with this interactive world that is more on the surface.

The emergent world comes from some different place within. It's something that can well up as opposed to react to. We don't have to have anything, in particular, happening in the world that triggers us, triggers the beneficial. It's more like we get settled and make room for it.

A remarkable thing to discover in meditation is that the more peaceful, more quiet, and calm we become, the more we have this sense of not knowing, just willing to be here in our experience. Then the beneficial kind of begins to flow and come out. It's not intentional. But the intention is to make room for it, to allow for it, to be with it. So that can seem a little bit passive. It can seem a little like magical thinking: "I'm just going to sit here and do nothing and something wonderful will emerge." Maybe that's a little too passive.

I would say that the language of right effort is kind of dramatic and powerful. Here is the classic description of the third right effort. This is my translation, so if you look it up somewhere else, you'll find that it is quite different.

Practitioners take up and take hold of their minds.

This doesn't mean that they grab on. It means that they enter into the world of their minds. The thinking mind and the reactive mind doesn't have us. We are there for our mind. There's a kind of freedom there.

Who's in control, the mind or you? In a certain kind of way in this practice, you are. And the machinations of the mind don't have us, don't grab us by the nose, and pull us around. Another way of saying this is to really be present in a full way.

Practitioners take up and take hold of their minds and generate desire, and then endeavor, and initiate courageous effort for the arising of wholesome mental states that have not yet arisen.

So, generate desire – have some desire for wholesome states. That is a good thing. And initiate courageous effort (*virīya*) – not to make space for it, but trust that it is okay to have it. There are times when having this kind of open experience of presence, attentiveness, and awareness to the world feels very vulnerable and scary. To be able to feel the depth of what's going on for us, we have to go through layers of things that are difficult. And so to keep opening and being "Okay, this too; this too I stay with." To have this courageous effort to not believe the thoughts in the mind that we have to fix and do and react and blame. But rather, have the courageous effort to really be present in a simple, relaxed way here, putting aside all other things to allow something to emerge.

At first, what might emerge is grief, sadness, or anger that has been long unresolved. Trust opening and seeing what wants to emerge. The courageous effort is to keep getting out of the way for that. This idea of not knowing can be a way to get out of the way to allow something to begin to come. This not knowing, this emergence, seems to work best when we're most settled, most calm, and most peaceful. It doesn't work so well if we're caught up in our reactive world, which is a kind of self-perpetuating world of *samsāra*.

So to drop down, to quiet down, or to pause long enough to have this not knowing, this availability, for something here to emerge. When you make room, take the time, to stop the running – the running of the mind, the running of the body, the running around doing things – and pause (a sacred pause) to feel and be available, what is here? What wants to emerge? What wants to be born? Even in times of great crisis (unless there's a danger) and great challenges, become quiet enough to ask the question: What here wants to be born? In the center of it all, what wants to emerge? As things emerge that are wholesome, beneficial, nourishing, and nutritious for the heart, allow for them; let them come.

So, much of this third right effort is not making something happen, but rather, availing ourselves of what is already here. I'd like to propose that you have more beneficial states going on all the time available to you that if you pause, make room, or quiet down for just a moment, you will start feeling that things are good. There are reasons for joy. There are reasons for happiness, kindness, and love. There are reasons for curiosity and interest in a delightful nourishing way. What is here? – as opposed to "Oh no, this again."

Rather than trying to make yourself a certain way that is wholesome, see if you can pause, make space, and avail yourself of the wholesome that is already here and available – no matter how small it is, no matter that it's accompanied by unwholesomeness. Don't give the unwholesome a lot of authority that it takes you, grabs you, and pulls you around, or that you have to listen to it or obey it. Avail yourself of the wholesome that is here.

If you don't have that for yourself, borrow it from others. If you can be with people or somehow connect with someone, even if it's on the Web, put yourself in the presence of people who you feel are emanating something wholesome. And then kind of borrow it from them, so you can avail yourself of it. Begin exploring the world of the emergence of the wholesome.

That is the homework for today. Make yourself available for the wholesome. It's not making it but making space for it and being available for it to be there. And if you're only running around, then there is no space, no possibility for it.

Thank you and I look forward to our time tomorrow.