

Wholesome Self Whisper

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That's a strange question to ask because if you can hear it, then you'll answer. And if you don't hear it... So, we do have hearing assistant devices around the side table there, just in the outer hall. And sometimes my voice gets softer as I speak. So, if you feel like you need to get it in the middle of the talk, you're welcome to get up and pick one up. So, I thought of starting this talk with a warning.

And so that, because I'm going to say something that some people immediately turn off. So just pay attention and just get through this. So I'm going to introduce to you a Pāli word, an ancient Buddhist word. So some people, as soon as they hear the Pāli is going to be spoken, or this ancient word, it's like, okay, this is not for me. But this word is maybe, in my mind, maybe the most important word to learn if you want to understand Buddhism and a little bit the ancient language.

And what's important about this word and the reason to use the ancient language version of it is that there's no one English word that translates it. And because the word can mean a variety of things in English. But the two main ones, in some contexts, it means wholesome. In some contexts, it means skillful. And it's not so clear which of these contexts are which translation. So some people just leave it untranslated.

And we might also just use two words, wholesome skillfulness or skillful wholesomeness. So the word is *kusala*. K-U-S-A-L-A. And the concept of it, or the experience of it, the attunement to what is skillful and unskillful, wholesome and unwholesome, lays at the heart of what Buddhism has to teach. All of Buddhism flows from this particular concept, this particular human experience. And so as a way of beginning to introduce it more, I would like to use a simile.

And the simile is that of a horse whisperer. And so a horse whisperer is someone who trains horses usually. And it's in the field of what's called natural horsemanship. So where people who've sometimes gone into, whereas wild horses and living together, and learn to see how they communicate with each other, how they relate to each other. And then they come back and they use positive reinforcement to work with the horse. Where they approach them with great rapport, sensitivity, in ways that don't intimidate the horse.

That the horse feels safe. And the horse develops a sense of trust of the person. And then there's positive reinforcement where they get trained to communicate with the human. And the human can ask them to do certain things and they're happy to do it. And there's also similar people, they're not called dog whispers, but there are natural forms of training dogs. And one of the things they have learned with dog training is that, and horses as well, is that to use negative reinforcement, to use pain, for example, to train them, actually works faster.

You can train them quicker. But the results in the long term are not as good. And so, for example, they have military dogs who they would need to bring into maybe places of great conflict and war, perhaps. And they found that if they use negative reinforcement to train the dog to do what it has to do, the dog becomes chronically anxious. And that anxiety doesn't serve the dog well in a conflict situation. But if they use positive reinforcement, the dog has certain kind of confidence and doesn't have the anxiety and so, you know, can go into the conflictive situations and remain confident and more responsive in a good way, I suppose.

I don't know if that was the best example. But still, this idea of someone who's a horse whisperer really has to have a rapport and feel and sense what's going on. Buddhism is similar. And Buddhism is asking you to be a self-whisperer. And I don't know all your names, but if I could, I would go around the room and say each of your names. And like Sveta sitting right up in front here, so I know her.

And so Sveta is supposed to become a Sveta whisperer. And Alex, an Alex whisperer. And so for each of you to become your own whisperer, meaning that you develop a rapport, a sensitivity, that your inner life trusts you. That when you approach and come in, You are there to read the person that you are in some deeper way than you would if you show up with your regular concepts, your anxiety, your hostility, your self-criticism. There's all kinds of ways that we approach ourselves that, whatever way we approach ourselves, we are training ourselves. That's kind of one of the principles of Buddhism.

That whatever way we live our life, whatever way we speak, whatever way we act, even how we think, that has an influence on us. In classic Buddhist language it's called conditioning. We are conditioning ourselves. And if we're a self-whisperer, we're paying attention to what's

being conditioned. We're paying attention to what the consequences are as we go about our life. And we care about that.

And we notice a difference between an effect, an influence it has on our body, heart, and mind that is unwholesome, unskillful. or one that is skillful and wholesome. And being able to read ourselves really well in this way guides us in how we find the Buddhist path. And in fact, the goal in Buddhism is for you to become your own teacher. And how do you do that? By being able to read yourself or listen to yourself really well.

So become a self-whisperer. Then you'll find your way. And you don't have to impose on yourself Buddhist beliefs. You don't have to impose on yourself Buddhist ideas of what you should be doing. Buddhism would rather have you understand this principle, this way of being a horse whisperer, so that what guides you is wholesomeness. What guides you is...

So, when it's translated as wholesomeness, the word *kusala*, I sometimes associate that with health. So we're doing that which is health producing. And maybe not physical health, which is a little bit more complicated, but certainly psychological health. Inner health for inner well-being. Mental health that we're cultivating. So is what I'm doing healthy or not healthy would be the question.

is another word I associated with this word, *kusala*, is nourishing. Does it nourish us? Or does it de-nourish us? And all these things are things we can feel and sense. And a lot of it is sensing it in our own body. And so the body provides the evidence for what is nourishing, what is wholesome.

Not some abstract idea of morality. Occasionally the word wholesome has ethical connotations. And people think it means following some rules of right and wrong, good and bad. And there's something like that in Buddhism perhaps. It's not absent of that. But the core thing is the evaluation for ethics in Buddhism is not kind of the moral principles, but rather the wholesome reference points inside of ourselves for what is wholesome and what is not wholesome.

And so that becomes a source of our ethics when we see the consequences for ourselves. And so to be a horse whisperer, a person whisperer for ourselves, means to pay attention to the body signals. Just like I think a horse whisperer really pay attention to body language and how it affects the horse, the body language of the human, and also the body language of the animal. So our body language, what's happening in our body? Where is there tension? Where is there tightness?

Where is there anxious energy? Where does the focus of attention come? What's activated

in our body? Where does the body start feeling more relaxed and softer? Where does the body behave and feel and to behave in good ways that feel nourishing, feel wholesome, feel healthy? And so for some people that's a huge challenge to use their own body as a reference point.

Some people don't have ever had any practice with doing that. They have a lot of practices with paying attention to what's on a screen. And so that's, you know, everything should be there. And that's how we learn and change by what's on the screen. But reading things and hearing things. And some people, the body is a very difficult place to be.

There's a lot of pain, physical pain, sometimes psychological pain, in the body that makes it hard to drop in there. And then, sometimes, for example, it's like these dog and horse trainers have to work with traumatized dogs, traumatized horses. And there's a whole skill in how to approach someone who has that kind of issue. And so for oneself, how do we approach ourselves when it's traumatizing to touch into our inner life and to our body? What kind of care? How do we help this inner life trust us, that it's okay for us to approach?

Do we have to approach from a distance? I saw a photograph once of a person who was, I guess, a horse whisperer. I guess approaching, maybe, a horse who was part of a wild pack of horses. And she was crouched down. She bent down so to clearly not be a threatening presence. And you could see in the photograph the horse was coming over to her with its head down because her head was so low.

Coming close to check her out. And so how do you approach yourself? With what kind of compassion and care, gentleness, so that what's in there trusts showing itself to you? So wholesomeness. Skillfulness is also a nice translation because it emphasizes that it's a skill to develop. And I'm fond of the idea that when a craftsperson is learning a craft, and they become skilled at it, they're learning how like a potter can, you know, in a wheel can make pots.

And that's a skill to learn. And it's a craft to learn. As they're learning the craft of making the bowl, the craftsperson is crafting themselves. They're reshaping themselves. They're learning how to move, how to sense, how to focus, how to hold their body, how to be attuned to something outside of themselves, and how to be involved in a reciprocal relationship of self and pot, pot and self. And so there's a change.

And you can see someone who's really skilled at a craft, for example, sometimes there's a beauty and watching how they've been shaped, and their movements, and their elegance, and their simplicity, and their attunement. And I've watched people who are craft. And one

of the things that has moved me is their focus. Their attention is right there. And they can't be too focused. They can't be too little focused.

They have to be right there. And they have to track themselves. They have to be able to know when they're getting distracted. They have to kind of recognize when the mind is drifting away and not so focused. Or they have to recognize when their mind is interfering by judgments or something. And they have to track it enough to be able to maintain, just like on the bowl, just the right pressure to make a thin bowl. It's a real skill.

So to be skillful in Buddhist practice is both to shape ourselves and be shaped by the shaping. Be shaped by how we do it. So here we're back to how. For wholesomeness, how we approach ourselves is important. How we pay attention to ourselves, how we attend to ourselves, so that this inner life can receive positive reinforcement. And with skill, again, how do we change? How are we impacted by the very skill? How are we doing in building a skill?

Not a few Buddhist practitioners have been introduced to meditation. And they're maybe very competent and capable in the world to get what they want by hard effort and bearing down and studying hard and getting everything and getting it, you know, furrow in their forehead in the process. And so they're ready to do it in the usual way. And it doesn't work. And I've done that, where I've tried to use the old way of getting really engaged that I've sometimes engaged before. And sometimes I got a headache, which is not very healthy or wholesome.

And sometimes I despaired because it didn't work. And so there were times where it didn't work, so I tried harder. That worked even less, so of course I tried harder. Until I just like came to rock bottom. It was so hard for me. I was so critical and upset and felt hopeless. And it was only by reaching rock bottom that I was able to give up a certain effort. And then, only then, could I discover a wholesome way to begin doing my meditation practice.

So part of Buddhism then, Buddhist practice, is to be able to read yourself, or sense yourself, or feel yourself. And what are we feeling? We're sensing and feeling, does this feel good in a healthy way? Does this feel right in a way that feels harmonious with being a connected, attuned human being? It's not becoming sensitive and aware of what we want and what we don't want in and of itself. Because that can come from conceit. That can come from just greed and attachment.

We really want to step back and look more deeply and see what does it feel like to want? What does it feel like not to want? And sometimes we'll see that it comes out of a place that feels quite wholesome, feels good. We're caring for ourselves and caring for the world. And

that caring can feel really nice. Other times it's clear it involves some place of clinging, of being twisted up inside, or being contracted, or being tight. You can really feel that there's an irritation. There's a form of suffering in the very effort to want something. And you can see the consequence is not so good on us.

And so to read ourselves and feel ourselves. And one of the things why this is so important is we're trying to also break the addictions of the mind. And not a few meditators have come to—I'm not an addict, they'll say—until they sit down and watch their mind. And their thoughts, you know, are so driven. We're so caught up over and over again in the same thoughts, pulled into the world of thoughts and preoccupations, pulled into certain emotions over and over and over again. seemingly without being able to control it. Like something has us in its grip. And some people are so in the midst of anxiety, or the midst of resentments, or the midst of complaining and cynicism. All kinds of things. And they've been that way for decades that they think this is life as it should be.

It's just like, you know, you don't even see it because it's like a fish doesn't see the water it's in. But as we sit and get quiet in meditation, then we start seeing some of the habits of the mind. And some of them are difficult to see. Some of them involve addiction. They're kind of really grabbed and caught in something. So the question is, What do we do about that that's wholesome? What do we do about that that's skillful? What do we do about that that something inside of us, maybe the very powerful forces of attachments that we can have, trust us? Feel it's okay to come out and be seen? Maybe there's a kind of, maybe not positive reinforcements for being attached, but maybe there's some equivalent of approaching in a way that our attachments don't feel threatened. Don't feel that we're critical of them or see them as being automatically wrong. Maybe we approach them with kindness. Maybe we approach them with gentleness. I think these horse whisperers and dog whisperers, I think kindness and gentleness is one of the hallmarks of that kind of work. So how do we do that for ourselves?

And some people will protest. You guys can't be gentle and tender. Because we have to be stern. We have to fight and be aggressive to get our way. That's the only way we're going to get our way. So, certainly Buddhist practice will leave you alone to do that. But if you're paying careful attention, you'll start seeing sooner or later that this isn't serving. That somehow the influence on the system doesn't feel good. And that what has a much better influence is care. Compassionate care, friendly care, kind care. Care for this person that we are. care for all the different ins and outs of our complicated inner life. And how do we approach it? And how do we cultivate it and develop it?

And so, as I said, Buddhism emphasizes the becoming skilled at recognizing what is wholesome and unwholesome in ourselves. And the emphasis is on cultivating the wholesome. And for people who want to meditate, in the classic instructions or classic model of Buddhist practice, before starting to meditate, you would first learn this topic of wholesomeness and unwholesomeness. You would understand how to navigate through these two major concepts. And you'd learn to avoid what's unhealthy, and learn to promote what is healthy. There's actually a choice that's being engaged here in Buddhism, choosing one over the other.

And how that's done in this classic teaching, that before becoming meditating, it would be, You would learn something about how, when, there's four steps that they say. When you're doing something that is harmful to self or others, something unwholesome, something unskillful, stop. Just stop. Easier said than done, I know. But there are some occasional times where you can just stop. what you're doing. And then if you haven't, if you're not doing anything unwholesome, prevent the unwholesome to arise in the future. In other words, create the conditions in your life so that some of the unwholesome behavior that you have won't get triggered.

So I know, for example, that if I'm stressed out, I'm more likely to get grumpy and say, you know, unhelpful comments to the people I'm with. And so it's important not to be stressed. How easy is it not to be stressed in this life that we're living? Because isn't that what, aren't we just kind of like You know, the boss of society is asking so much of us that how can we even think about not being stressed? That's just what life is now for some people. To give into it means that maybe then we kind of perpetuate the unwholesome because we have set up the conditions for that to happen. How do we cultivate a way of being that isn't so stressed? Some people find that meditation helps. Some people depend on a daily meditation practice. It sets the stage for the day so that they're much less likely to be triggered into the unwholesome in a reactive way.

So it isn't just a matter of staying in the present moment that Buddhism emphasizes. It emphasizes, take a good look at the bigger picture of your day, of your week, of your year, of your life. And what are the conditions you need to put in place so that you're less likely to be triggered in unwholesome ways? The third is, if you're not doing anything wholesome at all, do something wholesome. Evoke it. Bring it forth. So, if you haven't smiled at anyone all day, try smiling. Find a stranger. Anybody. If you can't find a person, at least smile at the dog. You know, or the horse or something. You know, do something wholesome. Speak in a wholesome way to someone. In a way that's nourishing for you. That feels good for you.

That there's a, you develop, you know, a rapport with the person you're speaking with. That's nice.

I'm fond of when I go to the supermarket. to see what kind of rapport I can have with the checkout clerk. And sometimes they're hardly looking at me. And sometimes they're clearly present and available for some kind of human exchange. And sometimes I've missed that. And I feel bad afterwards. Wow, that person was there and available, but I was so involved with my things, getting out of there as quickly as I could. But I try to have a practice of really seeing, can I have rapport? And can I say hello? Can I check in and can I have a conversation? And I've had some great conversations with people, checkout clerks, that are doing this wonderful work for us. And, you know, in a minute, it all takes sometimes. And so do things that are wholesome. Meditate. That's considered to be wholesome, but it's possible to meditate unwholesomely if you spend the whole time rehearsing your resentments. But can you find a way then to approach the resentful forces that we have in a kind way? Or approach it with gentleness, with quiet. Approach it as if you're going to be somebody trustworthy, trusted by the resentment, so you can feel and sense what's going on. Feel the tension in the body. Feel the difficult energies in the body. Hold it carefully. And so how you're approaching your own challenges, if you take a bigger picture, at least the how feels good. But what I'm feeling is really difficult.

So I think one of the wholesome things is to be patient. To listen. It's very respectful to our inner life. To approach it with care, with love, with tenderness, with gentleness. Here, let me get to know you better. Let me know you. As you do that, you're doing two things. Just like the potter is doing two things. The potter is shaping the bowl, and the potter is shaping themselves. So you're beginning to shape or have some positive influence on that part of you that holds the resentment. And you're shaping yourself as the person who can do that.

And as meditation practice gets deeper, it's really wonderful to feel the mutuality between how you're shaping something inside of yourself, and how in doing so you're shaping yourself at the same time. The how we're doing something. So the Buddha said, so then the reason I wanted to emphasize this, so he said there's three ways. So stop, prevent the unwholesome, initiate the wholesome. Don't wait around until it happens by accident. But what I like is the last one. And the last one, in the first three, and the Buddha talks about it, he only has one verb to describe what you do. Stop, prevent, and initiate. But the last one has to do with when you find wholesome states, wholesome activity going on within you, Listen to what he says about that.

For wholesome states that are occurring, one engages one's mind for the continuation,

non-forgetting, increase, abundance, cultivation, and fulfillment of these wholesome states. That's a mouthful. Imagine that. And I love the word abundance. The idea of abundance. Not just wholesome, but an abundant sense of wholesomeness. Isn't that bad? And sometimes people have association with Buddhism that, oh, it's about the *Four Noble Truths*, and we have to suffer better, and we have to understand our suffering, and we have to let go of our clinging. And that's all kind of good and wise and understandable, but it's kind of flat. Like, you know, suffering at the end of it. I mean, that's okay. But here the message is an abundance of wholesomeness. Wow, really? We're allowed to do that in Buddhism? I thought it was just about non-attachment. Let go, let go, let go. Yes, let go in a wholesome way. There's a way of letting go that's so wholesome that you're filled with wholesomeness. And I'll get to that in a couple of moments again. And then I'll stop.

So for the continuation. So when you're doing something wholesome, notice it. It feels good for you. It's healthy for you. Maybe for others, too. And keep doing it. Stay close to it. And then it says, don't forget it. Don't lose touch with it. Stay in touch. So that takes mindfulness to pay attention. And then increase it. Do a little bit more. Do it more in a wholesome way. Don't do more in an unwholesome way. Make it abundant. Cultivate it and bring it to fulfillment.

So we see that in how the Buddha teaches meditation, teaches the path in other ways. Over and over and over again, the way he teaches the Buddhist meditation path is with words like developing happiness, joy, delight, gladness, contentment. That to understand the wholesome is to understand how to find our way to how to be happy and joyful and content. So, to just sit and meditating and wishfully hope that one day I'll be happy if I just sit here. If I just sit enough, something wonderful will happen and I'll be happy and free of my suffering. It's a little bit magical thinking if you just think that sitting here is going to do it. There's also Being a self-whisperer and sensing and feeling and understanding what you're doing that's wholesome and unwholesome. What you're doing that's happiness producing. Where do you find the happiness? How do you evoke it? Maybe you're more happy than you realize. Maybe there's more opportunities for joy than you avail yourself for. Go out on a nice day, now it's blue sky. Do you leave here in a hurry to get to the next thing and not notice the nice weather? I think it's kind of nice out there. I hope I go out and notice and feel some delight and joy in such a simple thing. Not only is it just good to do that, in Buddhism it's part of a strategy a skillfulness in trying to cultivate more and more of this. So that it becomes abundant in our lives. Not Pollyannish, not kind of as a pretend that things are all good, but rather so that we can really meet the tremendous suffering in our world, in our society, and some-

times in ourselves. in a way that's wholesome and effective and meaningful, that's so much more effective to meet it and be with it if we found some way to develop these wholesome good qualities inside ourselves, including happiness. That's the skill. That's the art of what Buddhism is working with. And that's why this word wholesomeness, or *kusala*, wholesome skillfulness, skillful wholesomeness, is so important.

So, my hope is that in this talk you'll never need to come back here again. You've learned everything you need to do for Buddhism and it'll take you. all the way to liberation. So, we do have a potluck today. And everyone's welcome to come. You didn't have to bring anything. It's mostly just an excuse for us to be together in a nice way. And if you're new to IMC, you're welcome to just walk up to people and say hello. And I think people here are friendly and just they might get, you know, absorbed in their conversations. And if you've been here a long time, look around and see who hasn't, you know, might be standing there. It would be nice to say hello to. And we do have 10 minutes before the potluck. So those of you who are willing to stay for a few minutes, maybe turn to next to maybe one or two people, maybe two people next to you. So no one gets left out. Look around and make sure no one's left sitting there alone. And then say hello and introduce yourself briefly. And just share a little bit. What do you think of this idea of becoming a self-whisperer that I talked about today? Thank you. I'll ring a bell.