

Serving What is Wholesome

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Today I am going to talk a little bit about a discourse of the Buddha that I find kind of inspiring in its simplicity. It's very repetitive. So in years past I would have just glossed over it and didn't really read it carefully. But now, lately, I find it very meaningful in its repetition and its simplicity. The context for giving it is a kind of how I'm feeling after a very full week of all kinds of input from this world around me. I re-taught a two week retreat that ended last Sunday, a wonderful experience of being absorbed kind of into the world.

It's *dhamma*, and in a sense, I kind of came out of it into the wider world again, to experience many things that are difficult and wonderful in this world of ours. The big one that had a big impact on me was reading about the current COVID-19 situation in the United States and in the wider world. I'm also talking to people who work in hospitals and their experience there, what's happening there and around the hospital, and reading and reading about these things. It's so tragic how many people are dying and sick and impacted from the illness. There's the tremendous strain on the hospital systems, and hospitals in various states overflowing, and people not being able to find hospitals that'll take them because they're all full. I'm also struck by that—terrible—the fault lines of tension that exist in this country are exacerbated through this.

The whole COVID-19 crisis and the level of animosity and hate in all directions that is being spread and acted on is kind of astounding for what is an illness, the illness of which many people are dying. At the beginning of the pandemic, there was a fair amount of discussion about superheroes, the medical first responders, and hospitals, and nurses, and doctors, and staff, who were not vaccinated, and were kind of showing up to support and help and try and offer medical care to people who were sick and dying of cancer, doing it at their own risk of life. That's still happening, and it's kind of frustrating for them that with the vaccine available,

they're probably vaccinated, most of them, but still it's dangerous for them, and they have to experience so much death. Some of these people in the hospital—doctors, nurses, chaplains, staff—are witnessing multiple deaths a day, day after day, when they go to work. There are also some hospitals where there are demonstrations outside the hospitals, where people are angry at the medical staff for treating COVID, for the whole divide between the anti-vaccine and the pro-vaccine people, and the anti-vaccine people coming and denying there's even COVID.

I've read about the nurses who will take off their uniforms and have no medical badges or uniforms at all if they go into stores and local stores, because if they do, people hate them. They get attacked, at least verbally, and now it does not feel safe. I heard a story of people who, going to work to try to help people from dying from cancer, had to go through a gauntlet of protesters who were yelling and hating at them as they tried to do their medical care. It felt so painful to read and know and learn about these experiences that are going on, and so on so many fronts. I wondered, what do I say for this? How do I talk?

I felt like I had to say something about it in a *dhmma* talk. What do you want, what do I say? Then other experiences during the week were very much in my heart that also led me to wonder what do I say here? So I decided to talk about this particular discourse, which I think many people would read and not find inspiring, find it dead, you know, soporifically repetitive and dull. Somehow, I don't think that was the case when it was originally composed in oral culture, and that the repetition was part of the song, the rhythm. There was a rhythm, there was a tune, there was a lyricism to it, and the chanting it in unison in the monastic communities was kind of like a song which repeats its lines over and over again, and has a kind of rhythm of the way it affects the heart, and washes through us, and makes it, you know, these really great *dhmma* points are just washing through.

They didn't have, couldn't write back then either. So if you wanted to remember something, you didn't write it down and then check at it later. You had to really memorize it. Memorizing this rhythmic kind of way of repeating the same kind of thing with slight switches, changes, was probably very effective in an oral culture, and maybe not effective in a written one. So this text, the sutta, is number 114 in the Middle Length Discourses. It's the *Sāva-sevitabba Sutta*, the Discourse on the Word *sevitabba*.

The word *sāva*, some of you know, is a kind of Indian word that means to serve or to help someone. There's an organization that Ram Dass started called *Sāva* that does humanitarian work in India and other places. So it's this word, and the word means to serve. It also means to attend to. It also means to practice. I love this idea that the word means both, that

somehow we practice in order to serve.

It's a way of serving. One translation, the most common translation, translates it as "what should be cultivated." "What is cultivated" misses the idea that there's a kind of little bit of a devotional quality to it, of serving, of helping. But what shall we serve? What do we give ourselves to in a nice way? It is practice, as it's talking about.

This teaching is, the Buddha gives a very simple teaching, and then without any explanation. Then the Buddha's disciple Sāriputta follows up in explanation of what it means. The Buddha then approves of that and doesn't add more simple teaching; Sāriputta explains. Then the third round, the same thing, at the end of which the Buddha says, if it is to summarize it, if lay people listen to this and apply this in their lives, it'll be for their long-term happiness and welfare. It's interesting, he specifies lay people. In a sense, it's a lot like secular Buddhism.

There's nothing about rebirth. There's nothing about all kinds of liberation, anything that makes it more complicated or more kind of religious. For some people, it's a "here are some things you can do that are beneficial for you, how you can live your ordinary life if you pay attention to this." Nothing religiously really is asked of people; it's kind of secular practices that way. However, it also points to the heart of the Buddhist message, and something very central to how he or she orients himself and how the Buddhist starts. He talks about what should be done and what should not be done, or what one should serve and what one should not serve, what one should practice and what one should not practice, and he goes through a list of things.

So, you know, there's a symbol that's put up there. In that, you know, we're always doing something, whether we're thinking or using our body for something or speaking in some way. What criteria do we use for what we do with our body, what we do with our speech, and also what we do with our mind and how we think? Don't just leave it to chance. Don't let it kind of go amok by itself, but have some presence of mind to notice what we're doing, and then to make a choice between different things. What do we serve?

So the Buddha goes to make this list. He says there is conduct of body that one should serve, and conduct of the body that one should not serve. There is conduct of voice, of speech, that one should serve and conduct that one should not serve. There is conduct of mind that one should serve and conduct of mind we should not serve. Then he goes on and says: There are dispositions of mind that one should serve, dispositions of mind that one should not serve. There are perceptions—here we are, the conceptions of the world, conceptions of things—that we should serve and conceptions that we should not serve.

There are views, opinions, stories of the world and ourselves that we should serve and ones we should not serve. Then there is an interesting one. For many people who struggle with Buddhist ideas, there are identities that we should serve, and identities we should not serve. This kind of way of thinking is central to the Buddhist teaching, which means that it's avoiding categorical teachings about what one should do, categorical teachings about what kind of views, perceptions, conceptions, dispositions, and even identities that one should have or shouldn't have. Some Buddhists have this categorical idea that you should have no identities, you should let go of all identities when you're practicing. But here the Buddha doesn't want to reject everything in some category or accept everything in some category.

He is always asking the question, looking at the world, some that you should do in some way, you shouldn't do in some way. So that's all the Buddha says. Then his disciple, Sāriputta, says, "Well, let me explain further." Buddha says, "Sure." Sāriputta says, "If what you're doing is unwholesome, don't do it. If what you're serving is wholesome, keep doing it."

If your disposition is unwholesome, then don't do it. If it's wholesome, do it. If the identity you're holding on to, you're living with, is unwholesome and explains it as unwholesome, leading to affliction, it's unwholesome and it's harming, you don't do it. But if it's wholesome, leading to non-affliction, then it's fine to do it. So there is always for Sāriputta, evaluation for what to do and not to do is based on the idea of wholesomeness and unwholesomeness, which sometimes is translated as skillfulness and not skillfulness. It points to—it's consequential—as considering, in doing this, what are the consequences?

If it's skillful consequence, beneficial consequences that are useful for you, then do it. If not, then don't do it. So here, there's an evaluation process that each person can do for themselves. These are not categorical teachings of anything about how to behave, about ethics necessarily—a little more one wants than that—but or about views, you know? Some people will not like this text because it's so dualistic. They'll say what should be done and what shouldn't be done as two things, they're standing in opposition.

It's a binary, like it doesn't leave any other room for something, but that's a view. So, you know, what about non-dualism? The Buddha would say there is a way to serve non-dualism that one should do, and a way of serving non-dualism one should not do, and if it's wholesome to do it, do it. If it's not wholesome, don't do it. Having this kind of a guide is a perspective. Each person becomes their own teacher, their own guide, their own person, finding our way forward.

Now, because the word for skillful also can mean very close to the English word for ethical, it's how we become our own ethical guide. It's being always wholesome and unwholesome.

This is so crucial to the Buddhist teachings that we have our own ability to recognize this quality of all the things that we are going to do in body, speech, and mind, and to track it. When it's unwholesome, it feels painful. It has an itch in it. There's an ache.

There's a contraction. There's tension. There's stress. There's a closing down. There's unwholesome. It undermines the person who has it.

So things like anger, hostility, delusion, greed are the primary representations of what's unwholesome that undermine the person who does it. The ancient language I talk about these things—greed, hatred, delusion—burn the person who has them. So they might be outwardly directed, wanting something or being hostile to someone else, but then we're harming ourselves when we do it. It isn't always so big like the harm, but there's a feeling of tension, stress. Even sometimes something gets lost, some self-alienation. When things are done wholesomely, there's the whole other way of feeling it.

It doesn't feel deflating or diminishing, or doesn't have an ouch. It has more of an awe, more of a feeling of a yes to it. There's a feeling of opening, of relaxing, of delight or warmth, a feeling of wholesomeness. Not everyone associates in English the word wholesomeness as something that feels so good. But when I was a kid, the advertisements for bread talked about wholesome bread. That's my big association with the word.

These commercials on TV, and I think the idea was that it was nutritious. But more than nutritious, it kind of felt comfortable, like there may be some food that we grew up with at home that a parent made that just felt like more than just tasty. It felt like the parent's love came with it and was so nourishing in a psychological way. It's kind of what I associate wholesome with. So we do things that have this beneficial effect. For some people, this is a new idea—that we can be tracking ourselves carefully with mindfulness and make simple choices: away from what is unwholesome, to what is wholesome, away from what has kind of not as an ouch, and towards what has an awe and is nourishing for us, away from what is denourishing, unnourishing us.

To be sensitive to this, one of the purposes of mindfulness is to develop a heightened sensitivity to that very difference, so that we can choose to be nourished. So it isn't just simply being mindful in the present moment, and just that's enough of it, but it's being mindful from the present moment so we can make these simple choices, as they are obvious, of how to do something. It could be as simple as how we make a meal. If we do it tense, in a hurry, resentful, if we do it afraid about, you know, "Will they like my food or not?"—that's varied, that's kind of not, that has a little bit of an edge to it. But if we do it with an inspiration and joy and love and generosity as part of it, just delighted that we have people we can feed, that has a

very different feeling for it, done from love. So to track this, to know it, and then to kind of begin to know it, kind of smell the direction, most second nature, that's the way to go—to what's wholesome.

This is the way that hopefully we can find our way in a fractured society that has a lot of tension in it, and a lot of hatred in it, and a lot of greed in it, that we don't want to contribute to that. We want to contribute not to the unwholesome, but to the wholesome. Unwholesomeness produces more unwholesomeness, is the teaching of the Buddha. Wholesomeness produces more wholesomeness for oneself and also into the world. So unfailingly, dedicatingly, committedly living a life that's committed to the wholesome, the beneficial, that which is nourishing, that which is inspiring, that which is for the greater welfare and happiness of all beings.

We don't always know what that means, like, in terms of actual things in the world—should we vote for a different kind of taxes or not? What kind of system should we have? What kind of economic system should we have? All these big questions that are difficult to, you know, agree on, let alone really have answers for. But be very careful not to lose sight of the wholesome in discussing these. Don't sacrifice the wholesome because of views and stories and opinions.

Remember what the Buddha said. There are some views that one should serve and some views one should not serve, and those views that are wholesome and have wholesome consequences, those should be served, but those which are unwholesome not to be served. It isn't just the views, but it's how we hold views, how we use views, how we speak of our views. There's a way of speaking about them, and a way of not speaking about them. How do we know the ones to speak? The ones to speak are those in a way that's wholesome; don't speak in a way that's unwholesome.

So it goes on, and on, and this idea of wholesome in this way in the text. But that's—you get the general idea of it. That's what I felt most inspired to talk about in the wake of so many challenges that exist in our society. May it be that we are wholesome, contribute to the wholesomeness of our society, the nourishment of our society, so that what is really good and beneficial for the welfare and happiness of every single person in our society—including the people who are so often forgotten and marginalized or that we don't include in our hearts. Let us include everyone in our hearts, even the people we disagree with, so that our attitude towards them is wholesome even if we disagree with them. So thank you all very much.