

Doing The Wholesome

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So, let's see. It's maybe a little bit loud. Let's see. Is that better? Can you hear me okay? Okay.

So, there's a famous poem from the *Dhammapada*, one of the earliest anthologies of poetry in Buddhism. And the poem is, the last line of the poem says, this is the teaching of the Buddhas. That's it in plural. As if all Buddhas in all times, this is what they teach. So it's kind of like, wow, this must be important. And it's only a four-line poem, so that's one quarter of the poem is that statement.

So the first three lines must be very important. And it goes like this. Don't do anything malicious. Engage in what is wholesome. Purify the mind. This is the teachings of the Buddha.

So... Maybe that's really disappointing to hear. I mean, like what? This is supposed to be one of the great world religions. They must have something really sophisticated to teach. And it's all about, isn't it about some great experience of meditation and consciousness and liberation?

Don't these Buddhas have something better to teach? Just avoid doing malicious things, wicked things, and wholesome. You know, when I was young, if someone said I was going to come to Buddhism to learn to do things that are wholesome... I probably would have lost interest. But now, I think it's actually a very profound teaching.

So it's a clear teaching. Be careful. Don't harm anyone. Don't do things that are harmful. That's kind of like a very bottom line, that teaching that Buddhism. Avoid causing harm.

Don't do anything malicious with your speech, with your body, but also with how you think about people. Be careful. And then, I think if just human beings followed that one instruction, we'd live in a radically different world. It doesn't take much to imagine. I'm like, wow.

And then the second thing is engage in, be involved in, give yourself over to, pick up. I like the word engage. There is a way in which we have to initiate some effort. It's not just a sit quietly and passively and do nothing. But there's some kind of, something that's required of us.

And that is, when you take your next step, literally but also metaphorically, the next moment, can you recognize what is wholesome? Do that. Do the wholesome thing. Sometimes one of the most wholesome things we can do in Buddhism is not a doing exactly, it's to be mindful, to be aware. To enter the, allow yourself to be there for the next moment so you can really register it, really be present for it, really sense it, feel it, really know it.

Directly, maybe unfiltered, without the lens of your judgments, your bias, your desires, your aversions, to really really see there's something very wholesome about that. The word that we translate as wholesome is *kusala*, the ancient *Pāli* word. And sometimes it gets translated as skillful. And I like skillful because skillful implies a development and growth of a skill, and it's skillful to accomplish something that's useful usually. And so it has a kind of onward leading.

This is good. Wholesome has a benefit of just something as wholesome, it's healthy in and of itself. And it doesn't have to lead anywhere. So somewhere between those two or including both those meanings is the word *kusala*. And so a word, I try, sometimes I use the word healthy to translate it rather than wholesome.

Okay. Sometimes I, I know some of you, most of you are all younger than me maybe, but in people in my generation, the word wholesome wasn't so, isn't such a good word because there was this Wonder white bread that was called wholesome. All these advertisements for, you know, the wholesomeness was just this yucky white bread. And so, and that's so, so, but luckily maybe many of you didn't grow up with those commercials on TV. So wholesome, but sometimes I use the word healthy.

And sometimes I like the word nourishing. Because both healthy and nourishing have physical reference points for many of us. And it can feel, it can be a physical reference point for what is wholesome. It's not an intellectual calculation of what is healthy, what is skillful, what is nourishing. It's something that is registered or you feel through a heightened sensitivity to yourself.

You can feel the difference. If you... get angry at someone, get road rage, and yell profanity at them with tremendous fury. If you should stop right in the middle of it, completely stop, get really, really, just freeze, and notice what's happening, you probably feel that it's not nour-

ishing. It doesn't feel healthy.

It feels stressful. It feels constricting. It feels kind of like if you keep doing this, this is going to really drain you. There was a doctor apparently that I don't know if I read it someplace, some study about the anger. Apparently sometime in the late 1700s or early 1800s, there was some doctor in England who apparently maybe must have had an anger issue.

Because apparently he said at some point, the next person who makes me angry is going to kill me. And sure enough, next time he got angry, he had a heart attack and died. So, you know, so maybe he could feel how unwholesome and unhealthy it was, but maybe he had no ability to control it. But he was.

So this kind of almost somatic reference point in the mind, in the body, in the heart, for what doesn't feel right, feels off, feels unhealthy, feels stressful, feels constricting, feels limiting, versus the things that are wholesome that have the opposite effect. Maybe they're de-stressing, maybe they're nourishing, they're reviving, refreshing. Maybe they're feeling opening. Maybe there's a kind of deep somatic feeling of, yes, yes, this is good. This is nice. It's nice to be doing this.

And so part of the purpose of mindfulness is to, not just to be mindful, but to develop that kind of sensitivity, that capacity to be attuned to yourself so you can become your own teacher. So you can feel and know in the next step you take, the next time you say something, the next time you move to do something, the next time you, anything. You can ask yourself, is this wholesome or unwholesome? Is this nourishing or deflating or? Is it inspire me in some nice way, or is it deflate me?

Does it drain me? Does it, you know, what's the effect this has? And the more we're mindful, the more we can start seeing the subtlety in which that works. If we're very busy and active and don't have a lot of sensitivity, sometimes it takes a lot of, reality has to really work hard at showing you, this doesn't feel good to do. Maybe it's even after the fact.

Right. Wake up, waking up with a hangover. Oh, now I understand that it wasn't so good what I did. But over time, with mindfulness, you can see it in subtle, small ways, even something as subtle as how you sit in the chair. There might be ways that are more or less enlivening, bringing a nice feeling of being alive and present.

And other ways which are innocent enough ways to sit, maybe relaxing enough, but maybe you lose a certain kind of sense of vitality or being present in a clear way. After three years of intensive Zen monastic life, where a lot of the days were choreographed, how you stood, how you walked, the schedule was all told you where you had to be and how you'd eat, and just it

was amazing. Everything was kind of intensive practice. And when I left, one of the first things I realized was that I wasn't living in this choreographed life anymore. And so there wasn't any guidance about how to stand, how to sit, how to eat, how to move, all these things we had to do there, monastery.

And so what I saw, I didn't see before, was I saw how much choice I had. And I had no, I never considered in my life that I had a choice in how I sat in a chair or something like that. I just sat in a chair. What's the big deal? I didn't pay attention to myself, the effect that sitting in a chair had.

Right. Sometimes I sat in a chair with, you know, giving in, collapsing into my depression, feeling sorry for myself. And I had to, I had really good postures for that expression, giving myself over to it. Surrendering, you know, or resistance. There was a resistance posture.

I'm not going to, my parents, I'm not going to go along with that. And so I saw that I had choice. And so I went to my Zen teacher. And we were sitting in formal Zen posture like this for the formal interview with the teacher. And I said, leaving the monastery, I see how much choice I have.

I have a choice all the time now to do what is wholesome or unwholesome, to do what is beneficial or helpful or liberating or not liberating. And so I said, I literally said to him, I see that even how I sit in the chair I have a choice. Right? And he did something very un-Japanese, for a certain era at least, because it was a Japanese Zen monastery, and very un-Zen. He reached his hand forward to shake my hand. Like, congratulations.

Like he was showing, he wanted to show some wholehearted appreciation of what I had discovered. So part of the function of this practice of mindfulness is to show you that you have a lot more choice in your life than you probably avail yourself of, than probably you choose to act on. And you're probably an automatic pilot with lots and missing so many other choice points you have throughout the day. And to be more mindful, more present, maybe even slow down a bit, you might discover that you have choice between doing what is wholesome and unwholesome.

And if you're unsure what it is, as a mindfulness practitioner, mindfulness is always wholesome. So at least do that. At least pay attention, notice, listen more deeply to what people are saying. Just show up more and find out how that is wholesome. And then over time you might realize, maybe because you paused, that what you're about to say does no one any good...

It doesn't do good for you, it doesn't help the other people. And you ask yourself a question,

what could I say that does good, does good in the world? What could I say here that supports this person, or helps us in our difficulty? What is wholesome and what unwholesome? That's kind of the foundation of what early Buddhism was teaching.

And for that, we have to be our own teacher. So those are my offering today. So thank you.