

Ease, Steadiness, Harmony

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So there is an idea out there in the world that when someone teaches, like you talk, people only remember three things. So I'm going to do you a favor and start with the three words I want you to remember. Just words, and then we can fill them in, maybe.

So the three words are ease, steadiness, and harmony. So it can't be too bad. Ease, steadiness, and harmony—that's one. These are three things we're cultivating here, and kind of considering that ease, steadiness, and harmony is kind of the orientation we have for finding our way.

We ease into steadiness. We steady ourselves in ease. And with easy steadiness, steady ease, we come into harmony. And so, to be in harmony with the world, with ourselves.

There is, in our *Suttayāna* tradition, the Theravāda tradition, a later commentary that has a long list of what *samādhi* is. And it's mostly *samādhi*. They mostly use the word harmony, *sama*, to define what *samādhi* is. So now we can stop. Like, those are three things. So, my talk continues.

In these ancient teachings, there's a metaphor—allegory, metaphor—of a walled city. You know, in the ancient world, people would come and raid or attack the town or the city. So they put up walls. And part of the function of the walls was to protect the city from people who would come in and maybe rob people, steal, or cause problems.

So they had a gate, and they had a gatekeeper. Everyone and everything went into the city and out of the city through this one gate. And the gatekeeper sat there at the gate, watching carefully who was coming and who was going, and would decide who to let in and who to let out.

If the Roman legions were standing there with their swords drawn, he would say very nicely, "No, you can't come in. But maybe we'd like to invite some of you in. Maybe we could invite

three of you at a time, without any weapons, and you can be our guest. And we start with the youngest, most precious recruits. That would be nice.”

But then, if the local *Dharma* teacher came, he’d say, “Oh, so nice to have you. We could use you. Come on right in.” And if some of the citizens of the town—like maybe the teenagers who were a little bit rowdy and aggressive and had their slingshots—were just eager to go out there and zap the Roman legion, he would say, “No, you guys, I don’t think that’s a good idea. But I have a game for you. I’m going to set up a little target, and see who can use your slingshot to knock it down. And I’m going to put nine little pins.”

And that was the beginning of bowling. And if someone came to the gate and just sat inside, wanting to leave, and saying, “You know, these Roman legions out there—it’s a holiday, and we made a nice cake, and I’d like to go give them a gift,” that’s a good idea. You can go.

So the gatekeeper kind of tracks what’s coming in and out of the town, and has some choice about letting in what was useful and good. He was always kind and friendly, or letting out what was useful and good. He was always friendly, but sometimes things that were going to be troublesome wouldn’t get to go out because they were keeping it down. So the town people can be more responsible for that and care for the people who are a little bit more ambitious and want to show.

So, in the teachings of the Buddha, this metaphor, which was a little bit more elaborated than this, is a metaphor for mindfulness, for being aware. Mindfulness sits at the gate. Everything in the world that you know comes through the gates of awareness: through the gate of the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the tactile sensations, and, in a certain kind of way, the knowing mind, the observing mind.

Everything in your experience of the world begins with sense input. And as little babies, we kind of begin making sense of the sense input. We start having names for things, and then the context for things, and the purpose of things, and the stories around things. And it gets more and more elaborate.

Then, slowly, the stories predominate. By the time we’re maybe, I don’t know, well into our adulthood, it’s mostly stories. My stories are talking to your stories. And we’re kind of, you know, butting up around our stories.

They agree, disagree, and it’s all navigating the world of stories, constructs, ideas. But all those began, at one point, once upon a time, with sense. And the Buddha came in, and they still are. We’re very, very quick to overlay the meaning, the stories, the purpose, you know, all these other concepts.

But it's still happening that if you come to Big Springs and you have eyes at work, the experience of Big Springs partly happens through the eyes, through your ears, through your touch and the feeling of feet against the ground, through the smell, the air. I don't know if you're going around tasting it yet. But then you attach to those very simple sense-data ideas.

Some of those ideas you kind of were told to have before you came. Like, you were told to take all the sense data and construct a retreat center. Thank you for doing it. So you just came in and saw that you were taking in sights, and then your mind was applying, assigning to those sights, "a retreat center."

For you, it was just so quick and simple and obvious: it's a retreat center. But actually, it doesn't have to be. This would be a great gym. You could probably put up basketball hoops.

And so, what mindfulness does is it places us right there at the gate, where we watch what's coming in, and we watch what's going to come out. Everything has to go through this little portal, this little channel, or channels, that presents this. And if you stay right there, one of the reasons to be really present in the present moment is not because the present moment is God for the inside world. It's that the present moment is where we have a chance to sit at the gate, and watch it come in, watch it go out.

And for some of us, it's really great that we have a gate and we can see what wants to go out, and we hold our tongue. Sometimes we shouldn't speak with the impulses. And sometimes we shouldn't do the impulses we wanted to do. And so we have this protection.

If we stay right at the gate, we see the choice. We see what we're letting out, and see what's coming in. So part of the reason to come really here, into the present, here, the visible *Dharma* right here, is so that you can be there and be responsible. You can live a good life, an ethical life.

You can be careful not to cause harm. You can do good. The Roman legion comes, and you might not let them in, but you might offer them a cake. It might diffuse some of the tension.

And so, this idea that right there at the gate we have choice: what we let in, what we let out. And the question is: how do we exercise that choice? And one of those guidelines for that is what I talked about yesterday: to know for yourself what is wholesome and what is unwholesome.

Some people prefer to translate these words, *kusala* and *akusala*, as skillful and unskillful. In different contexts in the Buddha's teachings, one or the other of those single choices

works really well. Sometimes in meditation, the word skillful seems to work better. You're developing a skill, like a craft skill, and you're cultivating and developing through repetition.

And some things you have to do a lot in order to develop the skill. And that's what we're doing. I mean, how many times have you had to come back to your breathing? I love coming back to my breath, returning to my breath.

I've been doing it for over 50 years now. I still love it. I still like the process. I've come to love it.

It should be boring by now. I mean, it's just the breath. Partly, what makes it not boring—not boring for many reasons—but partly what makes it boring is not the breathing itself, but how I attend to the breathing, what I bring to it. And what I bring to it is beautiful.

It's nice. It's something that brings joy, brings a nice feeling to me. It's a nice thing to connect to my breathing. So I've developed that skill of learning how to be with the breathing so that it's really something I like doing.

I've also learned the skill of staying kind of connected to the breathing in a very embodied way, kind of surfing it, riding it out, kind of feeling this, feeling the fullness of breathing in and breathing out in a steady way. Steady. Stay there. Don't try to go any easy way.

Let's just stay right there with the breath, right there. And maybe the breath is inherently boring, but not if you begin riding it like riding a wave, or kind of immersing yourself in it. Have a steady attention that begins to harmonize with the breathing. There's a whole bunch of physiological, neurological, maybe biochemical processes that come into play when we start having a steady, harmonious, focused attention.

Just stay right there. And so, developing a skill through repetition over and over and over again, like you would for a craft, or learning a language, or learning to play a musical instrument, playing the scale over and over and over again. We're coming back to the breath and learning the skill, so that the breathing starts coming. Breathing becomes alive, becomes full, it becomes delicious.

One Buddhist teacher I know calls his breath "beautiful breath." He tends to encourage people to connect to the beautiful breathing, or the sweet breathing, or the delicious breathing. Now, when I was new to meditation, I would have thought people who said that were crazy. But now I just want everyone to come and kind of share with me, partake with me.

I want to share with you how cozy it is in here. I'd love for you to feel that cozy. It's so good. I don't have to keep it to myself.

I want to share it, you know. But it's a wonderful kind of event to sit down and meditate and have this easeful steadiness with the breath, steady ease with the breath, have a sense of harmony as I'm being with the breath. Something being and shifting and changing—it's just so nice. So, the skill for doing that.

So sometimes *kusala* is translated as skillful, but also it's translated as wholesome in English. And I like that a lot for a number of reasons. One, wholesomeness sometimes implies health. It's healthy, and health is something you can feel.

You can feel when you're not healthy. And sometimes, especially if you're not healthy for a while, it feels so good to feel healthy again. You know, there are degrees of feeling healthy. There's a kind of feeling healthy with vitality: wow, this is good, good.

So whether you're physically sick, in the *Dharma* you can still feel what is ethically healthy, what is dharmically healthy, and it's a feeling. Feeling healthy is not like a thought. It's not like an idea. It's not logical.

And where does that live, that feeling of feeling healthy? It maybe pervades certain parts of your body: some kind of vitality, some kind of sense of flow and ease, maybe even a little bit of sweetness or goodness or something. So the wholesome, to begin with, has a physical reference point to it.

And there's no really good English Pāli word for the English word ethics, such an important word here in the West. It would be surprising to hear that there's not really a good Pāli word. People want to say *sīla* means ethics. The word *sīla* simply means conduct, and by association, in most of its use, it means good conduct, ethical conduct.

But literally, the good is not part of it. It's just conduct. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it as virtuous conduct. But being ethical is more than just conduct.

There's an inner sensibility that we have, an inner disposition we have to be ethical, that also can be quite beautiful, quite nice to have. I was so surprised by this when I stumbled into my first *vipassanā* retreat. I didn't even know what *vipassanā* was. And I had to go to Thailand for a new visa to stay in Japan, in Zen monasteries.

I had to leave the country to get the visa. And in an old piece of paper in my wallet, I had an address of a meditation monastery on the edges of Bangkok. I had no idea what I was getting myself involved in, but I thought, well, it was kind of like a dogpatch, chaotic, dirty monastery. So I'll wait for the visa, and I'll go to this monastery at this little address someone gave me before I left the United States.

So I didn't know what I was going to, and I came. I introduced myself to the abbot, and I said, "Why don't you teach me what you have here? What kind of meditation do you do?" And he said, "Sure."

And he said, "Go sit. Here's a little hut for you to sit in, to the edge of the monastery. I want you to meditate for 15 minutes sitting, and then get up and do 15 minutes of walking meditation. And I want you to do that all day, and then come back to see me."

And I protested. "I'm a Zen monk. I've lived in ten monasteries. I can sit longer than 15 minutes." Nope, he insisted: 15 minutes.

So I did. And then every day I saw him, and for a while he kept increasing the time that I could meditate. And it turned out to be *vipassanā*, and I was waiting for my visa. And after 10 weeks, I decided it wasn't coming.

And so my first *vipassanā* retreat was 10 weeks long. Yours is just a week. So that got my attention big time. But one of the things—a lot of things—got my attention in that retreat.

But one thing that really surprised me was there was a feeling inside that developed when I got very still and concentrated. That was kind of like a feeling of being ethical, feeling of some kind of ethical purity, like a place of purity inside. And these are not words that I cared for. You know, I'm kind of a byproduct, aftereffect, of the countercultures of the '60s, and that purity was not considered a good word.

You know, it's puritanical and too judgmental and all kinds of things. And ethical was just not really a word that we used. It wasn't interesting. It was kind of Pollyannaish, or you're a goody-goody or something if you were interested in being ethical.

So I wasn't oriented around those things at all. I wasn't particularly unethical, but that was just a lack of imagination. But I was sitting there day after day, and this amazing feeling arose in me. What is this?

And then I had a kind of unethical thought of doing something—a little bit unethical, maybe. It's questionable. But I felt like that beautiful purity, cleanliness that I had inside was all crunched up or torn when I had those thoughts. Wow.

There's a reference point here. There's something to protect, something to care for, something to love here. And that requires being careful in how I live my life. So the closest word in Pāli to the English word ethics is *kusala*.

This word for wholesome, another word for skillful, also means ethical. And so, cultivating this *kusala*, this wholesome quality within, wholesome feelings, sense within—and that

can grow and develop. And they can grow a lot.

So here is a quote from the Buddha:

As a person would clean up, clear out the interior of a grove of trees, and tend to the straight, well-forming saplings, so that the *sāla* tree—the *sāla* tree is like the redwood tree of India—the *sāla* tree grove would come to growth, increase, and abundance.

So the arborist is taking care of it and taking out the weeds and the other trees, so that there can be abundant growth, abundant with these beautiful *sāla* trees. And here, this expression is actually—I want to repeat it for emphasis—so that the grove would come to growth, increase, and abundance.

Isn't that a great word, abundance? So this is just an analogy. And so too, abandon what is unwholesome, and devote yourself to wholesome activities. And activities here means of body, speech, and mind.

For that is how you will come to growth, increase, and abundance in this *Dharma* and discipline, in this tradition, in this practice.

Have you ever heard such a ridiculous thing? To come into abundance—this is a renunciant tradition. You're supposed to let go. You're not supposed to have a good time.

You're not supposed to be filled with rich, abundant feelings, because isn't that going to be conceited? Isn't that going to be kind of like being attached or something? You just have to see that it's impermanent. See that it's arising and passing.

That's what you have to do: see the impermanence. Don't go after the abundance. Go for the impermanence. How sad!

The Buddha is telling us: go for the abundance. Let these wholesome qualities grow and develop. Be filled with joy. Be filled with happiness.

Be filled with the *Brahmavihāras*. Be filled with peace. Be filled with ease. Be filled with harmony. Be filled with purity.

And he uses language of being filled. And he does say to let go, to abandon the unwholesome. The abandoning is very specific. It's always what's unwholesome.

As far as I know, the Buddha never did a generic teaching: "Just let go of everything. Let go, let go, let go. That's what you should do. Let go."

That's a good strategy sometimes, in certain kinds of retreats, to let go, let go, let go. So it's a

strategy that's really nice sometimes. But to live a life, that's not the way to live a life. That's not how to grow in the *Dharma*.

So, to recognize the goodness that's inside of us, that's coming maybe in small little seedlings, or in very, very faint hints of it, and make room for it to grow, allow it to grow. The Buddha said a wonderful, wonderful teaching, I think: "If it was not possible to cultivate the wholesome, I would not tell you to do so. But it is possible to cultivate the wholesome. Therefore, I tell you, you should do it."

One of the reasons I like the English word wholesome is because it has in it the word whole. And I think, in my limited English, wholesome implies that it's part of the whole. And so, the wholesome is what belongs to the whole of who we are, where we are not divided.

The constructing mind divides. The constructing mind separates and pushes away and bifurcates things. If you have greed and you're latching onto greed and greedy thoughts, you've left the whole. You're now very limited into that world.

If you have hate, it's a very limited world we live in. We're no longer whole. We're unwhole, unwholesome. And part of what the *Dharma* is doing is helping us return to the whole.

And so, becoming and doing those things that belong to the whole, that come out of the sense of being whole. When we feel that wholesomeness, the goodness, the wholeness, the fullness of it, it's very hard to want to do unethical things. It's very hard to be mean and to lie. It's very hard to be cruel.

It's very hard to do all kinds of things. You don't want to hurt anyone, because that severs the whole, separates you from yourself. And so, what comes out of this whole is quite beautiful. So this whole grows.

And in the traditions, it's understood that it comes to abundance in this *Dharma*, in this practice. That's kind of the direction we're going. And so, in teaching mindfulness of the body today, part of the function of that is to create the container, the capacity to let these wholesome qualities grow. The capacity of this inner goodness, sweetness, healthiness—the space to let it come into abundance.

It's the body that provides that container, partly because that's where a lot of these qualities, the sensations, the experience, where they live, is in the body. So the more the body becomes full and whole and connected to it, the more room there is for these things to grow. Growing them doesn't mean you go to a garden and tug at the plants to grow faster. Growing means that you tend it carefully.

You water it. You nourish it. You give it light. You give it breathing room.

And so all the stuff inside of us, the wholesome, can grow. It's not engineered. That's the constructing mind—that's engineered. The womb mind is where things grow.

So, this thing about mindfulness of the body: anyone who has developed and cultivated mindfulness of the body has included in oneself whatever wholesome mental qualities are conducive to liberating knowledge. Here, there's a direct connection to being present in your body and developing those wholesome qualities that lead to liberation. That gives the body a phenomenal role in this practice. It's not an afterthought.

It's not like the thing that you kind of carry around to get enlightenment. But it's really the place of enlightenment, the place of waking up, the place of maturing in this practice. So, um, and then this thing about—what did I say?—about letting go.

But this Buddha, as I said, did not give a universal teaching, just like, "Oh, let go of everything." Then you wouldn't stay and cultivate the wholesome. He had this beautiful teaching. I think he said—it's a little bit of paraphrase—"If letting go is unwholesome for you, if letting go is unhealthy for you, I don't tell you to let go of that. If letting go is wholesome for you, healthy for you, I say, then let go."

So it's very particular. And how do you know it's wholesome or unwholesome? You pull out the Buddhist manual, and it tells you. "I'm irritated with my neighbor, and I think I want to, you know, give him a piece of my mind."

So you pull out the Buddhist manual and look it up: neighbors, 32.1a, irritation with neighbors. Just don't do it. That's not what you do. You're the teacher.

You're the arbitrator. You're the one supposed to read yourself and to recognize giving your neighbor a piece of your mind that way is not wholesome. It limits you. It takes away what's whole.

It makes you partial. It divides you. What would come out of the whole? What would be harmonious with the whole?

I think I'll bake a cake—not for the Roman legions, but for my neighbor—and go over and give him the cake and see if I can have a conversation. Maybe we can just have a conversation for a while. And maybe I can introduce this topic that is challenging for me, and let him know how difficult it is to have a chainsaw on all the time.

Our neighbor had a—it was amazing how much noise came out of our neighbor's house. It's like, wow, there's a blower. But he loved—he had a little gas, what do they call it, generator

for when the power goes out. But he had this idea that in order to keep it kind of going and fresh, at least once a week he had to turn it on for an hour.

And it was right next to our house. There's that motor again. So that didn't really bother me, but I could imagine someone being irritated. So, how could you be doing this?

So, back on track. We're supposed to be arbiters. We're supposed to be able to recognize this in ourselves. And that has a lot to do with developing your capacity to feel the body.

So over and over again, you're hearing this call of how useful it is to be grounded here in the body. The body is always in the present moment. It's the mind that is often not. And harmony: you want to bring the mind and body into harmony so they work together.

This is a phenomenal thing that can happen, where they're not at odds with each other. If you're already planning—say, I unfortunately brought it up yesterday—if you're already planning to buy lottery tickets, and you can't wait to enter the retreat, and you're already planning where to buy it and what numbers, you've left your body. You're in some other place. Your poor body, you know, has been abandoned.

The body—even, you could take your body along, but you're not supposed to. Let's stay here. So the task here is to bring the mind into harmony with the body. To bring the mind so the mind is in the same place as the body.

So here's another reason why we want to be here and now, because that's where there's a chance for the body and mind to come into harmony, to work together, to be in the same place at the same time. And then to start finding what it's like when they start being in the same place, when the mind is not tugging at things that are stressful, frightening. The mind is not going into the past that was so difficult. The mind is really here and settling here.

And more than just settling the mind, the attention is to let it become steady in the body, to steady the mind, to steady the body. I don't know how each of you are going to steady, to steady. But take a deep breath, and then steady.

When my son was in second grade, he had some challenges. He was kind of dyslexic, and the mind was kind of wild. And he had a dyslexia teacher who taught him a skill of getting oriented. He was supposed to imagine a green light at the back of his head.

He was supposed to take a deep breath, and on the exhale have that light go straight in front of him to something that he was seeing in front of him, and put that green light from the back there right on there. So he would take these—we would sometimes tell him, when he was really crazy in the house, or he was really crazed—"Get oriented." And he would stop.

He'd always stop to do it.

He'd take a deep breath, close his eyes, and then do the deep exhale and hold it really steady, a long exhale, steadying himself on that green light that was going down there. When he opened his eyes, our son was back. It was just—the difference was so dramatic. We'd lost our son, and now he was back.

It was kind of almost that dramatic, the kind of craziness that was going on. And so, steadying the mind so that your craziness can stop. Steady. Steady your mind.

Hold it here. Steady the mind. Steady the body. So you can really give yourself a chance to feel and sense this body, to be present for the breathing, and then to steady yourself on the breathing.

And don't be ambitious. Maybe just steady yourself on this exhale. My son changed dramatically in the period of time it took to do one exhale. Don't underestimate how significant it is to really give yourself and steady yourself just there on that breath.

Inhale. And if all you do is, every exhale, you steady yourself, maybe you steady yourself for the inhale too. Or what I do is I steady myself on the exhale, and I allow the inhale to steady itself on me. So it's kind of reciprocal, and somehow that works well.

And then the steadiness, but really staying present. Mind and body come together, same place at the same time, and then have the reference point of ease. Be easy. Let yourself be at ease.

So when you steady yourself, experiment and see if you can find how to do it with ease. Don't do it with strain. Don't do it unwholesomely. Do it in an easy way, so that steadiness becomes part of the whole.

It's like entering the whole. Maybe it's healing the whole. A steady ease, ease or steadiness. And that can be done with anything, with walking meditation.

It's the whole that's steady, not with strain, but with love, care. Stay right there. And as we do that, we're also looking for the harmony. How not to be in opposition to things.

How not to be scattered from things. Not to be resistant to things, but to really be attuned, to really sense and feel what's happening here, and know how to be with it in a whole way, in a beautiful way, in a harmonious way. So your mindfulness is not just kind of a dry, dutiful recognition of what's here. The mindfulness itself contributes harmony.

How do you know? How are you aware within harmony? How do you walk in harmony? How do you walk in harmony with the inner goodness that you all have, even if mostly it's a

potential?

But that doesn't mean it's not there. And allow it to grow and come into abundance. There's absolutely no reason that any of you—there's no justification. The lawyers of your mind can be out of business.

There's no reason to believe that you're not someone capable of being filled with abundant goodness. Abundant joy, well-being, coziness, warmth, steadiness, ease, harmony. The list goes on and on.

So, if you remember anything from this talk: steadiness, ease, and harmony. Steady yourself in the ease. Ease yourself into steadiness. And find a way to be in harmony with the whole of who you are, so that the ways in which we divide ourselves, separate ourselves from ourselves, lose the whole, can stop.

And as you become more and more whole, your capacity for the growth of these marvelous, wonderful *sāla* trees within you will just—well, they'll just keep growing until they grow into an abundance. And then, when the time is right, you let go. You let go of everything that's attached, all the holding, and you're not left with nothing. You're left with the abundance.

You even get to let go of yourself, and you're left with the abundance. Like, is that that bad? It's less frightening to let go of yourself if you let go of it and then, wow, this is cool. So let's take a minute to sit.