

Wise Effort in Relationships

San Rafael Meditation Group

November 23, 2011

We're continuing this month's exploration of mindfulness and relationships.

We began with exploring how people could serve as role models, refuges, and resources on spiritual path. Then expanding the step of Wise Speech to include wise presence, wise speech, wise listening and wise dialogue. Last week exploring equanimity – the capacity to be not reactive to other people or to our own habitual patterns of reacting to other people or to our own thoughts, our own emotions, our own startle or upset. So that we can engage and disengage and respond to other people wishing to engage or disengage with us from a place of presence, openness, and equanimity.

Tonight I want to focus on Wise Effort – traditionally taught as cultivating the wholesome and letting go of the unwholesome. Wise in any endeavor, essential in relationships. I want to back into this practice of cultivating the wholesome and letting go of the unwholesome by introducing a concept from psychology of ego-syntonic and ego-dystonic. Ego syntonic meaning something aligns with who we feel we are and ego dystonic simply means something doesn't fit or resonate with who we are. Some people like getting up early in the morning, and some folks love to stay up late. No right or wrong. There may be temperament and conditioning and habits but no right or wrong. Getting up early just feels right or fits or works better for some folks and staying up late feels more natural for others.

Some folks like going to the beach for vacation, some folks like going to the mountains, some folks like traveling to Manhattan, some folks like going on retreat, or staying home working in the garden. No right or wrong, just in sync or not in sync with our sense of who we are, at this moment, and how we flourish.

I find the concepts useful because where we come to knowing what the wholesome is so we can cultivate it, and knowing what the unwholesome is so we can practice letting it go, it's helpful to know from the inside out what wholesome feels like and what unwholesome feels like.

In the Buddhist teachings there are general guidelines to the wholesome and the unwholesome available in the precepts, the paramitas, the seven factors of enlightenment, the three hindrances, etc. Last week I was preparing for a Deepening Joy group and came across the quote in James Baraz's *Awakening Joy* again from Cicero, the Roman philosopher and humanist: *Gratitude is not only the greatest of all virtues. It is the parent of all the others.* So virtue is another way to study the wholesome and the unwholesome. In Buddhist teachings virtue or sila is as important a practice for awakening as samadhi or concentration and panna or wisdom.

What important to me about all these guidelines is that we can know what's wholesome and unwholesome for ourselves when we cultivate a deeply embodied sense of our true nature or Buddha nature. The qualities of compassion, kindness, patience, that would be the expressions of universal Buddha nature. Our experience of true nature can guide us into what is wholesome

– this is aligned or congruent with my true nature; and this is unwholesome, this is not aligned, this is incongruent with true nature.

So we practice all the time coming home to our True Nature, noticing where we're there, noticing when we go off, get distracted, confused, lost, and mindfully compassionately come back. The point is, inhabiting our True Nature feels ego syntonic, oh, this is home. This is who I truly am or this is who I'm meant to be, and being out of alignment with our true nature feels ego dystonic – this is not who I truly am or not who I truly want to be.

It feels important to get this. We can know what's wholesome and unwholesome from being authentic in our True Nature. That's the guide; that's the compass. We don't have to follow rules or lists (though they are available and can be of great help to remind and guide and encourage.)

This becomes important because what's wholesome and unwholesome could manifest differently when we're dealing with our partner, that when dealing with our parent, or our child, or with co-workers, or with a dharma buddy.

It might be wholesome to challenge a brother about neglecting his health, yet unwholesome to offer the same challenge to a co-worker if it's not wanted or would only cause embarrassment or withdrawal. It might be wholesome sometimes to push ourselves to go the extra mile to take a child to a football game or the Exploratorium, and at other times, it's more wholesome to listen to the wisdom of the body and take a nap.

This anchoring in true nature - part of that is presence, awareness, compassion - is essential as we head into a holiday season where it's so easy to tuck our true nature inside and revert back to old habits with old people in our lives, even when we want to stay anchored in who we are now.

Rick has taught you can have unilateral virtue. You can maintain your sense of virtue, integrity, the wholesome, even when others don't. You can maintain equanimity and flexibility even when others don't. We can stay aligned with our own true nature, and still stay in connection with others, unless the behavior of others becomes so unwholesome we have to practice letting go of them.

Cultivating the wholesome may mean being far more understanding and compassionate and forgiving than we are accustomed to on a daily basis. Letting go of the unwholesome may mean letting go of "fixing" people and shifting to embracing them.

Many of you know the story of a dharma practitioner who went home for Thanksgiving full of passion for the dharma; she did her best to persuade people of the wisdom of these new teachings, but her family was having none of it. They resented her preaching at them and just wanted her to enjoy her time with them. When she finally relaxed, and could just be with them, she got it. "My family doesn't necessarily care about me being a Buddhist. But they love me when I'm a Buddha."

I remember what Ruth said last time about being reluctant to switch from absorbing a dharma talk to having to explore our own wisdom, our own struggles with the dharma, in these exercises. But I hope these exercises do evoke the teachings or curiosity about the teachings, and that in the de-briefing afterwards there's a chance that the dharma will flow through me in responding to people's reflections and inquires.

Exercises:

Do one guided visualization to practice cultivating the wholesome, then a second small group exercise to explore letting go of the unwholesome.

1. This first exercise calls on your own sense of your true nature as the embodiment of the wholesome, your personal expression of these universal qualities or virtues. I learned this one from Jack Kornfield.

[Induction] When you're ready, imagine that you are engaging with someone who is difficult for you. Something about your personalities, the dynamics of the relating, just doesn't quite click for you. So you can feel some discomfort, some distress, in having to talk with this person. But here you are.

Now, imagine your own wiser self, who embodies all the qualities of your true nature, no problem, comes up to you and says, would you like for me to fill in? And you're so relieved! So your wiser self, dressed like you, looking just like you, steps between you and this person so that you can overhear whatever your wiser self, the voice of your wholesome true nature, is about to say.

Now simply take a moment to listen, to however your wiser self speaks wisely, understandingly, compassionately, acceptingly, with this other person who has caused you difficulty. Simply listen to the wisdom of the wholesome coming through your wiser self to this other person.

Bring this conversation between your wiser self and this other person to a close. Then have your wise self turn to you and whisper in your ear just one word or two, of advice or wisdom to you. And listen to what your wise self has to say to help you deal with this other person in the future. Take in the wholesome.

When you're ready, return your awareness to being present in this room, present here and now, and open your eyes.

De-Brief

2. Gather in your groups of four (or with partner). Identify something unwholesome it would behoove you to let go of. This could be pattern of behavior in you that is not in alignment with what you know the wholesome to be; it is not congruent with what you know your true nature to be. Or it could be a relationship with someone that is not longer wholesome. Not judging the other person as unwholesome; we're all a bit too complicated for that, and we are trying to

perceive the wholesome the underlying true nature of the other person. But something in the dynamic between the two of who has become unwholesome and it would serve to let go of it.

De-brief.

Closing meditation