

Joshua Bee Alafia

*The Three Beautiful Roots: Cultivating the Three Wholesome Qualities in Unwholesome Times*

Week Four: “It Takes Courage to Be Wholesome”

May 28, 2022



We’ve talked about the three wholesome roots of mind, *alobha*, *adosa*, and *amoha*, or generosity, goodwill, and wisdom. Now it’s time to talk about the courage to actually embody these wholesome roots. It’s funny, I’ve looked throughout my life, and there’s been a real migration into wholesomeness. It took time. If you would have met me when I was 17 or 18, I was wearing combat boots and a leather jacket and dreadlocks and listening to reggae and punk rock and hip hop, but there was kind of an edge to it. I was dissatisfied with the world.

This is *dukkha*. And this is also a response to injustice. Anger is a normal response to oppression. But I think that our anger has a real way of making the unwholesome attractive. So when we think about what is wholesome, we associate the word with naïveté. I think this started even in the 1950s, this feeling that wholesome was suburban and simple, lacking depth, lacking a certain cosmopolitan quality. We can think about our association with wholesome being corrupted by marketing geniuses. They found that folks would buy more cigarettes when the hazard sign was on it saying that it could kill you.

I associate my own transformation into embracing the wholesome with *parenting* my inner teenager instead of *befriending* the inner teenager. We want to be cool with the inner teenager because the inner teenager is cool in part of our mind. The inner teenager was so aggressively attenuated to what is cool. So often, we were so fixated, and that was what it was all about, even if we were hurting ourselves in the process. If it was cool to get super hammered at a party and have to puke outside, that’s what we were going to do. That’s what I did.

I think of wholesome as very much like the word *dharma*, or that which supports liberation. Wholesome is that which nurtures the support of liberation. It takes generosity to move through life joyfully. It takes generosity to ourselves to practice. There’s no way we’re going to practice without this inclination towards generosity to ourselves. There are too many other things to do.

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The courage to be real with our own suffering, the courage to face the wounds in our heart head on—we have to pull it from somewhere. It’s supported by our practice. I think we cultivate courage in our practice. Metta was a teaching that was given to cultivate courage. This lovingkindness or loving friendliness transmission first was given to priests and nuns who were terrified to practice in the forest. They came back to Siddhartha and Yasodhara and said, “We cannot practice out there. We have to come home. We have to be with you.” And their response was, “Go back. Radiate goodness inwardly from your heart and radiate goodness outwardly.” With that, they completely transformed this fear into this warmth, friendliness, this loving awareness, loving friendliness, and tamed the beasts and angry deities.

This is happening internally. We’re taming our fears. We’re taming our insecurities. We’re taming our ignorance with this goodness, this radiance of goodness, this ability to be vulnerable, the vulnerability of generosity, the vulnerability of having goodwill and putting ourselves out there and doing what we know is right no matter what. Standing in the courage to do what’s right for ourselves and others takes courage. Our metta practice can really support this cultivation of courage.

It’s funny, I had so much resistance to metta. I did not want to say those phrases. I did not want to give it to myself. I just wanted to rest in the elegance of being in the present moment without anything else. I just wanted to stay with the breath. When I decided to commit to a metta practice, once I gained insight of my behavior and my choices being aligned with some of my feelings of abandonment and trauma, I realized that insight comes through metta as well, not just through vipassana. It really was one of those really defining moments in my practice where I said, “Yeah, I will take this path of metta, especially self-metta.” Self-metta is a beautiful way of going back and healing past versions of ourselves, being a guardian angel for those versions.

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So we cultivate this courage. Gotama Buddha, Siddhartha and Yasodhara, would often say the greatest gift you can give another being is fearlessness because fear is so crippling. Fear has such a profound way of dimming our light and making us live a compartmentalized version of our lives and ourselves that is disembodied. It takes courage to be wholesome. It takes courage to see clearly. It takes courage to be available to ourselves. It takes courage to give ourselves access to our true nature because all the projections of self seem so much more important, so much more colorful or attractive than just this knowing, this presence by itself. Without the zodiac, the culture, the gender, and everything. Just this knowing, just this presence, just this being. Warm, honest, here.

I'm thankful that I've stuck with this practice, even when it was excruciating, even when I would be sitting for months feeling like I was just pretending, daydreaming in a meditative posture, and not realizing what was happening internally. So much of it was this training of the will to show up again and again and again. I like the Buddha's saying that the only things that we lose are those things that we cling to. Clinging to a false projection of self is something I'm happy to lose.

Thank you very much for entertaining these inquiries and taking this road with me as I've reflected on some of my own journey. Hopefully you've gotten a chance to reflect on your journey and the cultivation and practice of these three roots of wholesomeness of the mind. It's very satisfying to be wholesome once we get the courage to do it. It's very fulfilling to practice these practices of generosity, goodwill, and wisdom, cultivating insight. I'm obviously geeked out on it, hoping that I can share some of this enthusiasm through this talk. So thank you again for your attention, for your presence. I want to give a big heartfelt thank you to *Tricycle* magazine, and I hope to see you on the path. Take good care.