

Jake Dartington

Wise Effort and the Window of Tolerance

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Welcome to the talk. My name is Jake Dartington. I've been practicing meditation since 1995 and teaching since 2007. I trained to teach at Gaia House in the UK in Devon with Christina Feldman.

I've also had a long standing interest in the conversation between Buddhist psychology on the one hand, and contemporary approaches to mindfulness on the other, like Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), and Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT).

This is something I'm going to explore more in this talk as I make links between the contemporary teaching of the window of tolerance, and the Buddhist idea of wise effort.

Meditation: Taking a Moment to Arrive

Before we get into this, let's take a moment to arrive.

Taking a moment to find a posture in which you can be upright, and also have a sense of ease.

Finding the balance of these qualities. And noticing how things are for you right now, whether the mind feels smooth and calm, or maybe this is a time where things are more difficult or stirred up.

However things are, taking time to notice and be aware as much as feels possible, giving space to all that's here. And in the midst of this, feeling the feet or the legs on the ground, grounding the attention.

Feeling the body on the chair or cushion, allowing the attention just to rest with the breathing.

Then as we come to the end of this brief practice, widening out to a sense of the whole body, from the feet to the top of the head. And letting this presence continue as you hear the talk.

The Window of Tolerance

I want to make links in this talk between the idea of the window of tolerance, and the teaching from Buddhist psychology of right or wise effort.

The teaching of the window of tolerance originally comes from Dan Siegel, and I find it a very powerful thing.

To give you an idea of it, many times in our lives, hopefully often, we're within this window of tolerance. So this means that we feel like we can deal with what life brings. There may be some ups and downs, maybe some difficult moments, unpleasant events that we face, as well as the joyful and happy times.

We are within a window where we feel we can deal with it, cope with it, respond to what's happening.

But then we find there are times when we are pulled out of our window of tolerance and this may happen in a couple of directions according to this model.

There are times where we become hyper-aroused, where there may be very overwhelming feelings of anxiety or anger. These are not things that we choose. It feels like something has come over us, this overwhelm of very strong emotion.

We may find the thoughts are really racing. The body feels tense. There is a strong impulse to act in a particular way.

But other times, we may be pulled out of our window of tolerance in the opposite direction into what's called hypo-arousal, where we feel more spacey, zoned out. There's a feeling of numbness.

One of the things I'm suggesting is you may reflect on times when either yourself or other people around you have gone into these spaces. You can notice them.

In my experience, whether it's noticing myself or other people, it can almost seem, and this may sound a strong way of putting it, like the person has become someone else.

The way they're behaving or thinking, the way they're perceiving the world is quite different in these different states.

All kinds of things might trigger this for us. A classic example would be a difficult email. Maybe you're going along pretty okay in life, and then you get an email that really triggers something very strong.

It might be something that you see on the news, it might be a really difficult conversation at a family gathering, or even the prospect of going to a family gathering.

It might be an appraisal at work.

So many things could do that. These are just examples.

One of the things this model teaches us is that for those of us who've had particularly traumatic things happening to us, and there could be different levels of that, what happens is our window of tolerance gets smaller.

We're more easily pulled out of this place where we feel balanced and okay and able to respond. This is one of the effects of trauma.

You may notice that either in yourself or other people that sometimes people can have what from the outside looks like a sort of disproportionately strong reaction to something that's happening. And we may say, in colloquial language, that something's been triggered in that person. The good news with this is that there are all kinds of ways that we might begin to expand our window of tolerance.

You could see many therapeutic approaches are seeking to do that. We could see our whole practice of meditation, mindfulness practice, of the whole path also including this aspect of expanding this window.

Wise Effort and The Window of Tolerance

I wanted to make some imaginative links here with the classical teaching on right or wise effort in Buddhism, which is called *samma vayama* in Pali.

I'm not at all implying an exact equivalence, but I think there's some interesting connections between the window of tolerance and how we might relate to that in this teaching.

So right or wise effort has different elements to it. Our states of mind are divided on the one hand into wholesome and unwholesome and they're also divided into arisen and non-arisen. So if you put those together, you actually get four particular things that are involved in wise effort.

Just to make that clear, with wholesome states of mind, there's the effort to develop wholesome states that are not yet here. That's the first. There's the effort to develop wholesome states further, that are here, to sustain them, to allow them to grow.

And with unwholesome there's the effort to prevent the arising of unwholesome states. There may not be any around, but we make some effort to prevent them from arising. And there's the effort to let go of those that have arisen.

So there are some similarities that I think are interesting between what might be called these unwholesome states in the Buddhist tradition, and being pulled out of the window of tolerance.

These two have some affinities there that I think are interesting.

Practicing with Ease

So practically, how do we practice with ease? One thing that is immensely useful is to deepen our awareness of what it feels like to be out of our window of tolerance, to begin to know these states, what they feel like from the inside.

And again, the classical description of mindfulness internally, externally, you can see this in yourself and see this in other people. So we start to get to know these places as territory of human life. And we also get to know how we can respond more skillfully to these when they arise.

Developing Wholesome States

If we think about developing wholesome states that have not yet arisen, there are many ways we could do that. One is to practice gratitude or appreciation.

There may be a time when we notice that our attention is not particularly focused on what's lovely, beautiful. For many of us, the default mode of perception is not going to be in that direction. So that's where these practices are very skillful. We're skillfully inclining the mind to notice what's lovely, pleasant, beautiful.

I remember doing this once. I was doing this as a practice and walking along quite a busy road where I live in Nottingham, here in the UK. And I thought I'm going to notice things that are beautiful. It was a really busy road with cars. I was walking along for a few seconds, and I thought, *this isn't going to work*.

But then what happened is, I noticed on the other side of this quite busy road, that there was quite a lovely garden with very big sunflowers in it, and someone had really taken care to look after their garden in that way. And this was a front garden as well, something that everybody, the whole community could see.

So that lifted my spirits. And then I noticed next door, somebody's put quite an interesting sculpture in their garden. And that's interesting.

Then my mind was going to town with it, *there must be some quite creative, interesting people*

living there, what's going on. And then as I turned the corner, I started to notice the birdsong and some of the beauty of the trees.

It's interesting what happens there, the way that the focus on what's lovely, beautiful, pleasant, can gather a kind of momentum. That's really, really beautiful for us.

But interesting to notice, that initial thought was, *oh, this isn't going to work.* It's just an example of how we can deliberately train ourselves to notice particular things, as a way of cultivating the wholesome that has not yet arisen.

Sustaining Wholesome States

Then when the wholesome is there, there are many things we can do.

The classical practice of metta, or friendliness practice, is a really skillful way to do that. There may be some degree of friendliness around. But by doing that practice, by bringing to mind people who embody that friendliness, people who are good friends, people we don't know very well, and even more difficult people in time, there can be this feeling in metta practice of a real kind of expansion.

You feel this sense of widening, and a whole field of friendliness that can be there. So we can take the sense of something wholesome, that's present, and really allow it to grow in our practice.

Unwholesome States that Have Arisen

And then there's the unwholesome states that have arisen, what do we do there? So again, this makes me think of the window of tolerance. What do we do in these places when we're overwhelmed by a sense of anxiety or anger, or when we're spacey, numb, zoned out?

In my experience, I've had a kind of inner dialogue around these different traditions. Sometimes, I feel that the Buddhist language of the unwholesome needs a little care. It's very skillful language and technically what it's referring to is a state of mind that is colored by greed, hatred, and delusion.

But certainly, in my early practice, despite probably being told other things, when I heard words like unwholesome, unskillful, defilements—in my mind, these definitely triggered a sense of, *oh, I need to get rid of this. I need to push this away.*

Or I take it very personally, *this means I'm not a very good meditator;* or there'd be a whole story of self around it, and ineffective—this is the key term—strategies to respond. So I would meet these states with more tension, more aversion, more self criticism.

One of the thoughts that I think some of the contemporary approaches offer, that I really feel are rather helpful are emphasizing words like vulnerability, and validation. I'll say more about both of these words.

So when there's a state of mind that we might say, classically, is unwholesome, I'm also feeling quite vulnerable. When there's a lot of anger or anxiety or worry around, there's also a vulnerability there. Or there's something painful that, in whatever way, I'm wanting to express. Something has crossed the boundary or felt threatening.

And there might be some of those feelings there that, in a sense—this is a psychotherapeutic language—but those feelings need to be met and held and heard.

Skillful Ways to Approach Unwholesome States

There's something about validating those feelings. This is not about believing the thoughts that accompany them. This is where it gets quite subtle, but I think most of us have seen this interpersonally.

To give you an example, imagine a time you've been really distressed about something. If somebody tells you to calm down, it's usually quite annoying. What happens when someone says, “calm down, you're making such a big deal of it,” is that you feel worse, that feeling grows. But why? It's a good question to ask.

My sense is that the aspect of us that feels threatened, that feels hurt, is now also feeling unheard. And because it's unheard, it shouts even louder.

So this, again, is pointing to skillful methods that are helpful within us. Rather than meeting these things with aversion or self judgment, we can start to meet them with wholesome qualities of friendliness, of curiosity. What's happening right now in the body, in this state?

You're dropping below the stories. It's happening in the throat, chest, the belly, and you really start to explore, not so much why we're feeling like that, that can be a rabbit hole, but how it feels here and now bringing awareness right into the body.

Then we may also meet that with some friendliness. There are many ways to do that. Some people practice placing a hand on their chest, on the heart, a physical embodiment of that sense of care. Or we may use words, *may I be kind to myself, in the midst of this*.

When these things are very strong, there are other methods you can learn about. One where you

notice five things around that you can see. This very much grounds the attention here and now when overwhelming thoughts are taking us away. You can apply something similar to the other senses, what can be smelled, touched, heard, even tasted in the moment.

These kinds of methods where we come back to our senses, can withdraw energy from the spiraling and repetitive thoughts that can be around in these more difficult states of mind.

Unarisen Unwholesome States

Then finally, to reflect a little bit on the unarisen unwholesome. Sometimes this is a little tricky to get your head around. There aren't any unwholesome states present, but what might we do to prevent their arising in the future?

One of the things I've noticed in the last few years of my practice is a real widening of what that might mean. You look at all kinds of factors in our life that can support preventing the arising of the unwholesome, including some things that are really quite physical.

What's happening with sleep? I notice if I haven't slept well, there's more tendency for wholesome states of mind to arise. Nothing personal about that. It's just a condition.

I've definitely had times where I feel myself in a more difficult state of mind and then maybe have something to eat and sleep, and I wake up and the world looks different.

So it's interesting to see that there are biological factors at play in all of this. Some people will notice eating certain food or things also has an effect. This is something to be explored.

Daily Habits and Relationships

There may also be our daily habits. A big one for many of us these days is that question of, on the one hand, I want to be informed and engaged with what's happening in the world. And on the other hand, I don't want to be perpetually, completely overwhelmed with a 24-hour news cycle.

It's a big question for many practitioners, I think. How do we find that? How do we stay engaged and informed without being perpetually overwhelmed?

Again, sharing my own mistakes and history, but if I notice I'm scrolling the news, after a certain point, this becomes a condition for the arising of the unwholesome. So you can explore different ways to engage with that, maybe different ways to be informed that can be skillful.

It's also really interesting to look at this on a relational level. What impact does contact with other people have on our states of mind?

Wise Speech and States of Mind

Just to mention another aspect of the Eightfold Path briefly, which is right or wise speech. Now, like so often with the path, when we're dealing with one factor it affects another, which in turn, affects the other way. To put it in another way, the arrows point both ways. Wise speech affects our states of mind, and our states of mind affect the quality of our speech. There is a two way connection there.

So you can really see that in more difficult states of mind, there may be strong impulses to speak in a way that's unwise or unhelpful. And when you see that, and you notice you are mindful of yourself in these states, you can start to see why.

The mind goes into a place where it's much more simplistic, it's much more all or nothing. You can see this kind of thinking that is expressed in speaking. So you may say something to somebody like, "You never help me out, you're always letting me down. Nothing ever goes right."

These generalized thoughts, when you start to notice them, they're a clue that something more difficult is around. They are a real sign of what we might classically call a more unwholesome state of mind, or a more painful, difficult state of mind.

You can see them as thoughts in your own mind. And you can see them expressed in speech. And so the more we practice this wise effort, we can see that can then be expressed in speaking more healthfully.

The Impact of Being with the Foolish or the Wise

But the other part of that is to look at the impact of the people that we're spending time with. The Buddha didn't quite phrase it like this. But there are aspects of the teaching that imply something like look at who you're hanging around with.

There's a famous teaching on the blessings, which again, is talking about the impact of being with what are called the foolish or the impact of being with the wise. We can notice that if I'm with certain people who are in states of mind that are peaceful, friendly, compassionate, wise and sharing reflective thoughts, I pick that up.

If I'm around people who are arguing, criticizing, blaming, full of hostility, again, we pick that up. We're very sensitive relational beings in that way. This doesn't mean that we need to say, *right, I'm never associating with anybody who's in any way difficult*. Because we hold this together with the Buddhist teachings on friendliness, which includes difficult people, essentially

includes all beings, of course.

But it is saying that we can take care with our boundaries, how long we want to spend with particular people. What's enough, and we can notice the impact of that on the states of mind, and practice wise effort. With regards to boundaries, how much is okay, how much is too much, and finding skillful ways to respond.

Summary

To summarize, we've begun to explore the connection between this contemporary teaching of the window of tolerance, how we're okay a lot of the time, well within our window of tolerance. And how we get pulled out into states of hyper-arousal or hypo-arousal. And exploring some connections—again, to emphasize not saying it's the same but some connections—with the classic Buddhist idea of wholesome and unwholesome states and how we work with those with wise effort.

As I come to an end I really want to offer to you a sense of the plurality, the diversity of ways we can respond to this.

Some of this is on a cushion doing practices on friendliness, metta, some of it is about looking at our lifestyle, patterns, and habits in our daily life. Some of it is about really exploring our relationships, connections with others in speech. And some of it is about how we are with the wider challenges in the world that touches so many of us deeply.

And finding ways within all of this, to be sensitive, to be engaged, to be touched, without being continually overwhelmed.

I really hope that these reflections offer you some food for thought and help you to skillfully navigate the different states of mind that arise and pass.