

# 2015-02-15 Discerning What Is Helpful Useful And Skillful

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## SPEAKERS

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Good morning. One of the great guiding questions for any life, but certainly for a Buddhist life is the question. Is it helpful? To carry that question with you and, and ask that, you know, you have to make decision when you have to make a choice, do something to ask, is it helpful, or is it useful? And this kind of self reflection with that kind of question is kind of a little bit behind the whole teachings of Buddhism. But Buddhism offers it in a different word than helpful or useful. It uses the word skillful, is it skillful, what we're about to do? And what's kind of finished more simply helpful or useful, makes it more kind of immediate for us. There is a Famous little poem that comes from the earliest periods of Buddhism, that encapsulates the Buddhist teaching in three lines. And those are, refrain from doing evil and engage in be engaged in what is skillful, purify the mind. This is the teachings of the Buddha. So, avoid doing evil means don't harm anyone intentionally. I think the intentional causing of harms in the Buddhist tradition is under the evils the best translation of the Buddhist word word, but but it's a strong word for the intentional causing of harm. So avoid causing harm, and then engage in what skillful, purify the mind. This is the teachings of the Buddha. So they are being skillful. The other place with it concept of skillfulness is very important in Buddhism is in the area of ethics rather than judging something as being good or bad, it discernment devaluation is is what we're doing skillful. And the most common list of ethical guidelines in Buddhism in the early tradition, are not the precepts, but rather are something called the 10 skillful actions. So 10 actions, actions, if you do these things, they're helpful. They're useful. they overlap with the precepts because the idea is that it's skillful and helpful and useful, not to kill anyone. It's skillful not to steal, it's skillful not to engage in sexual misconduct. It's skillful not to lie, it's skillful not to have harsh speech is a useful skill for not to have frivolous speech or idle speech. Sometimes it's said it's skillful not to slander anybody. It's skillful not to have, be specific, be covetous, covetousness, to have greed to want things that other people have. It's skillful not to have hate. And it's skillful to have what's called right view, to understand basically, what is skillful and what is not skillful. So, even though they overlap with the precepts, the rationale or the background for these 10 skillful actions, is this idea, is it helpful? And then the idea of helpful, skillful begs the question for what purpose? And so purpose in that three line poem is to purify the mind and this is a one way of talking to the ancient world with purity was very important concept of saying, having a mind which is not agitated, in an agitated mind is said to be a mind which is on the brink of awakening or becomes awake becomes free. And you know, in some ways there's certain purity, purity from agitation. And so the goal or the direction, how do you have a peaceful mind or a peaceful heart and an agitated heart? So it's so radically and agitated, so settled and peaceful, that it leads or is itself an experience of radical freedom or liberation or awakening. So that's kind of the guide. It's that what is it skillful for attaining this peaceful, happy heart?

Another way of saying it, that the tradition says is that you want to do what skillful, that brings you the high benefit, the greatest benefit. And so that takes some evaluation, you know what is beneficial, what's onward leading what's supportive of really benefiting you. In some ways, this kind of evaluations kind of discussion might not seem particularly spiritual, especially here in the West, where spirituality sometimes is more in reference to some spiritual reality or to spiritual beings or something, beyond oneself outside oneself. And this, this kind of Buddhist approach is so internal with yourself, understanding yourself working with yourself and all this. And, but it's remarkable what happens when we develop this skillful heart, disco for mind, and we become an agitated and experienced sense of wholeness and peace, where the whole world somehow is held in this field. Have a consciousness field of the heart. It's a wonderful thing. The skillfulness I'm fond of this word skill, because it's in the Indo-European origins of the word means to separate things apart. And in fact, in Norwegian, the word skill, because of this, you know, the how the K and H sounds and the Indo-European languages are interchangeable, is to Shin skille, which means to separate. And so the kind of one of the original background meanings for trading skill is to make finer and finer distinctions. In fact, people who develop great skills from repetition swimmer who swims over and over and over again, they get so familiar with the simple, repetitive strokes that they make in the water, that they're start making finer and finer distinctions in order to become really skilled. And every little teeny little muscles become more and more efficient just kind of putting the hand through the water, playing musical instruments, all kinds of things by making finer finer distinctions to kind of perfect it.

I've had people tell me that they watched Zen masters and teacher vow to the altar, and they were blown away at somehow the full presence and engagement and just the act of bowing. Now this person, Zen master comm probably has about, I don't know, hundred thousand times in their life. I want to count counted how many times I bowed when I was in this monastery before 10 o'clock in the morning. And I think I got something like 50 times, you know, just, you know, there's just until 10 and so as headmaster who has bowed and bowed and bowed, it becomes a vehicle For making, you know, a developing skill, finer, finer distinctions so that he's completely or she's completely engaged in the act of bowing, no distractions, everything all everything's there just for that one activity just about. So this ability to give oneself over fully to do something in a skillful way is often very inspiring for us. Because I'm most loved to watch athletes or dancers or different people who are masters of their skill. It just seems so beautiful, so elegant to watch. So in Buddhism, the idea is to develop a skill. The difference between using the word skill and usefulness, skill and helpfulness, what's helpful and what's skillful? Is that helpful kind of implies an activity whereas the word skill has dual implications, I believe, between the skill that we Do and then a quality of training that we have, we develop a skill. And so we might not be developing a skill if we do something helpful. It might be helpful just for today and never again what we do, but, but to have a skill is to have a capacity to have an ability that we cultivate and develop and, and skills and abilities are portable. We can take them with us all over the place.

As in contrast to experiences it's been it's been observed that many people in the West who are interested in Buddhism, tend to have an over, over over done attraction to having experiences, spiritual experiences, states of calm peace, bliss, love, whatever the variety of things as if having the experience is the thing that's really going to count really, you know you've arrived or to really play. And it's really nice, it's confirming it's meaningful or something. And certainly experiences are important and in Buddhist training, but historically what's important more than experiences is the skillfulness. The skill as we develop skills and mindfulness skills and concentration skills and kindness, skills in honesty, skills and patience, skills in wisdom. And here with this topic of skill, some people the word is translators wisdom, some translators translated as discernment. And that goes along with the idea of skill to be discerning again means to make distinctions to see clearly. And the primary distinction that we want to

make, is this things, is it helpful or not helpful? does it lead us to greater happiness and well being? Or does it bring us down? Does it somehow cause us more stress? more anxiety, more agitation, and to become discerning and skilled at recognizing this distinction is something that becomes more and more important. The deeper a person goes, for example, in deep meditation and deep meditation, you have to become your own your own guide your own teacher, to find a way the path of meditation. And at some point, what becomes the guide is you really can feel and sense that those movements of the mind which are deleterious that or stressful or kind of lead you to more agitation or contraction or, or you know, close things down without movement about mind that opens you up that relaxes you that creates more peace for the mind. And that simple distinction between what is kind of what discernment or wisdom is at the heart. So rather than reading a lot of books, to get Buddhist wisdom, the idea is for you to develop the skill, the capacity to really invest And see clearly what's actually going on here. What's the impact what I'm doing have on me? Is it helpful or not helpful? And to kind of ride that, if you do that carefully through the day, chances are that by the end of the day, you'll feel more at ease with your life. Maybe you did at the beginning. When I first I first started doing this many years ago, I was so surprised that that rather than being tired by the end of the day, I was energized in a very nice way. Because I started to watch and my choices what I said what I did how I was. So the idea of a skill. In one of the ways that it comes out in Buddhism is the concept of skillful means. The means out here, it means skillful activities, those useful things we can do, and it's summarized in a very succinct way which I'll give you the colloquial You'll expression first because I think that'll be more meaningful than the technical wording of it. And that is avoid danger. If you're in danger, get out of it.

Stay safe, though. Bring yourself into some safety, and then stay safe. So this is a good really good. I first heard this idea as someone who was a kayaker in Alaska. Actually, it was a little different. They said, stay out of danger when you're kayaking and Alaskan waters. If you're in danger, get out of danger. develop skills to stay safe and then maintain those skills. Pretty basic right? So in Buddhism it said in this more convoluted way it said avoid unskillfulness, things that are unskillful unskillful states of mind. If you if you have unskillful states of mind or doing something unskillful Stop it. Cultivate skillful states skillful activities and then maintain them, keep them going. So, it requires making these distinctions to recognize when what you're doing is not skillful. So, notice you're caught So, if you're caught in agitation caught in anger, caught in anxiety caught in greed, kind of stressing and can be as simple as how you drive your car. To make distinctions to drive skillfully in a Buddhist sense, is to makes maybe subtle distinctions maybe gross for you, between how you engage in driving your car. Are you? Is there any tension? are you pushing? Are you leaning forward? Or you're in a hurry and kind of zipping in and out? Are you angry the other drivers, because they're interfering with the course of human development. They realize that you have important things to do in this world. And if you stop and feel it, or just kind of feel and sense that this is unskillful, and useful states of mind to have, it doesn't lead to your own betterment. It doesn't lead to less agitation to peace to well being to being settled. It actually leads to more stress and build stress over time. And sort of feel that and say, Well, maybe I don't have to do this. How can I stop doing it? Maybe it's not easy necessarily because there's a lot of compulsion there. Or maybe it is maybe with driving maybe if it's subtle kind of pushing and stress around it. Maybe you can just relax one of the fun places that I've experienced this is just waiting for the light to turn green you know, we the light has the red light has nothing personally against me. And am I going to let my well being my stress, my anxiety, my my, well, you know, be held hostage redirected by that traffic light, you know, waiting in, turn green, you know what's going on here and, you know, it's not going to help me whatsoever to be anxious to be eager to be impatient while the light is waiting to turn green. Right. I mean, so why would you know why? Why stay greedy? Or why stay anxious or why stay in those moments when you can't do anything about anyway? So I've seen myself away and I kind of when I finally notice it, I smile and Okay, this is my chance to breathe and relax, and then it turns green eventually. And then I can get anxious again. The so you said, This involves making

distinctions and those and learning to recognize stress learn to recognize constriction is a skill that you get better and better at becomes a habit becomes something be more sensitive to, and the more sensitive we are to it, the more we're informed by that so we can make a difference. So I choose the example of driving. To give you examples make very, very simple and basic that is inherent in our life, and so many different activities. We can develop greater skill in mindful awareness of what we're doing. The quality of our mind, and then we can start using the quality of our mind to make choices to move towards a higher quality, better quality of mind.

So the word skill, the word in Pali is kusala, is, as I said, it's both an activity that you can do and ability, but it very much refers to the quality of the mind to have skillful states of mind, useful, helpful states of mind. So, to have to have mindfulness, to have ability to investigate, to have engagement with what you're doing, to have joy, to have a certain degree of calm, to be concentrated and focused in what you do, to have certain degree of equanimity and balance in what you do. These are all skillful states of mind that tradition champions is really important to develop to have contentment Have a few wishes, not have too many wishes not be too you know, greedy for things. To be honest, these are all skillful states that can be developed. And so Buddhism keeps pointing back to your own heart, your own mind, the quality of it, the character of it. And that the idea of skillfulness finding the path developing yourself has a lot to do with the ability to keep track of what's going on for you. So it takes mindfulness. This is one of the reasons why we cultivate mindfulness, not mindfulness for its own sake, but mindfulness. So it becomes a window for greater self understanding. This is what's going on for us. Now, some people, maybe some of you, when they hear this kind of teaching, just hearing it, they get exhausted. It seems like there's a lot of doing not to pay attention though and I have to make choices and have to kind of you know, know, not to Certain things, but after to do other things, and my God, I know it's good. Buddhism is busy. But in order to do this well, the skillfulness, this discernment to look carefully, is to also be discerning about how we practice how we engage ourselves with activities we do. And so if it's stressful or tiring, or a burden to practice mindfulness, then probably your mindfulness is somehow a little bit off. It's not your mindfulness practice is not being skillful. So the whole idea of skillfulness means you look at how you're engaged as well. You look at how you're doing your thing. Whatever you're doing, how you're doing your practice, and you see it can you find a skillful way of practicing, so skillful way of practicing as a way of practicing where you don't get tired or exhausted? Well, you don't feel like it's a burden. One more thing on top of your life that you have to do and It's kind of stressful to add it. You look and see how can I be mindful? How can I pay attention so that it's something you want to do? So it's a delight. It's a joy to do it. And for different people, there's different answers to that question. I've known people who bring a sense of playfulness, into their mindfulness, they just, you know, it's kind of just play for them. I've known people who like to do puzzles. They love puzzles, crossword puzzles, stuff. And so they found actually helpful to do mindfulness practice as a puzzle, like these curious, you know, how does this work and let's try this out and kind of try and figure out and then engages them. I know other people who would that wouldn't work at all. You know, just like too much doing. And I know people who would they like to have techniques, they really like to have a set of directions, you do X, Y, and Z. And then they can kind of put themselves in wholeheartedly to it. And so there are instructions in meditation, for example, that can be that way. And other people just bury themselves. In a grave, if they start following, you know, a set instructions, you do A, B and C, it's better to have a much broad field wide, relaxed approach. And let the practice kind of grow on its own. To do less than maybe for them, the most useful thing is, is to because there's so much maybe you internalize it doing or being self conscious or self critical. It's best not to do anything at all and you meditate and just kind of like do less and less and less. And like mindfulness gets stronger because the less you do actively, you can't help but to become more and more aware, more and more in the present moment. It's the doing that takes you out of the present moment to doing the mind thinking about the past in the future. And so just do less and less and less and find out what kind of heightens and shows them

what's what they're actually doing. Some people find that what's helpful is when they do their practice, do this mindfulness

Making skillful choices. It's best conceptualized or couched in a lot of love. And a lot of goodwill and friendliness, to approach it is something that is a loving thing to do a caring thing to do a compassionate thing. It's not like a duty, it's not like, you know that there's a high like awesome order from high high up that says, you know, you shall be mindful or else but it's an act of caring, it's acts of love and, and self respect and, and, and, you know, caring for oneself. And some people that's kind of a skillful thing to do. So all this points to the idea that you're supposed to become your own teacher. You're supposed to be able to learn to read, monitor yourself, carefully, and not read so many Buddhist books. They're good to read, but by You know, you don't want to race through the day it is that the mirrors for yourself these books, these teachings, so that you can kind of turn back and start reading the book of your own heart, your own mind. So, you know, how does this work for me what goes on in there? What is skillful, what is not skillful? What is helpful? What is not helpful? Is it helpful? That's the question. Is it useful what I'm about to do?

I have a friend who used to go up to see Ajahn Amaro wonderful Buddhist monk, used to live in California. And she had all kinds of eclectic practices she did were not Buddhist. And but he was one of her teachers. So she'd go up to him and bring her bring him. Her eclectic practice as she did and make like For Buddhists, you know, so for example, she did okay that she was very much involved in Christianity. So she would come and talk about her Christian practices to this Buddhist monk who was a teacher. And she would ask him, Is this okay? And she told me that inevitably, his response always was, is it useful? Is it useful for you to do that? So she kind of put it back to her. So then she had to kind of look at herself and reflect, you know, well, is it useful? is it helping? But if you ask yourself, Is it useful or helpful, you have to have criteria basis for deciding useful for what purpose helps with purpose? And if you ask that question for yourself, that requires or that involves, I think, some deep inner reflection, what is most important for you? What is the most important values? What's the important direction for your life purpose of your life? What is it that's really valuable that you want to do with this precious life of Yours and, and it is your life skillful you are, where you live your life skillful or helpful or useful to align you to help you support you, in the values that are most important for you the direction you want your life to be in. And I think that kind of reflection, reflecting on what is our deepest intention, our deepest values, our deeper sense of purpose is really skillful. Because we have a society that often gives us all kinds of messages about what society thinks it's important. That might be pretty superficial. You know, so, you know, might not be something has lasting value. You know, for example, consumerism. You know, when you come to your deathbed, are you going to be look back over your life and be really glad, really happy, contented, divided Buy all the shopping you're able to do. Wow, that was great. I shopped and I shopped It was great. Having things buy probably not probably that when you're in death, but deathbed that's not what you're going to look at as being what's going to nurture you. So what nourishes you what nurtures your heart in a deep way? What is helpful? What is skillful is the Buddhist question. So, what would it be helpful, useful, skillful to talk about now we have some minutes if you have any questions or comments you'd like to make.

This talk was so beneficial, useful. To me, and I just came from a conference on learning in the brain. And they're saying some of the same things you were saying about flexibility of thinking is the way they describe what sounds like the same thing, the more we can use our higher level thinking abilities, and the more our thinking remains flexible. The younger our brains physically remain.

Hmm, nice. That sounds good, but I wasn't so wise when I was really young. I'm just sorry. The I agree. reminds me that I read a study once of they did an experiment with kids, children. And they kind of been



maybe maybe I can't remember so well, but maybe they had like a lesson for the kids and No, no, they had, they didn't experiment the kids were they had them look at photographs of people. And choose, choose something like to differentiate those people. They somehow sorry, I'm sorry. They kind of pre dispose the kids in one way to appreciate or look at people, as, as people, whatever that is. And the other way to look at people for their qualities that they had, the capacities they had. And then they had them pick teams who they would choose to be on their basketball team or their sports team or something. And they found that the ones that had looked at people as a whole somehow tended to discriminate more between different people's abilities or something. But the people who the kids who looked at particular qualities didn't do didn't discriminate so much between, like someone in a wheelchair wasn't seen as somebody who couldn't do basketball, but they had certain abilities. So I messed that up, I apologize. But the idea, the idea to look at the qualities that people have, rather than to kind of discriminate or judge them by the overall set of what you see. And the kids were judged, you know, work that can be so easily manipulated with the kids, that they either kind of judge people from what they first saw, or they're able to judge or evaluate people by their abilities. And this is what the Buddhists emphasized a lot, which was kind of radical, apparently in ancient India, was he when he said, You're not who you are. You shouldn't shouldn't be judged. About how you're born, which in ancient India means born into a caste into a race, but rather by what you do, and the qualities of you the skillful qualities that you develop. And that's what makes you a great person is the qualities of your heart, not you know, your race or your caste or things like that. So I'm sorry, I went on and on. So other questions or comments?

I have a comment here. You know, you can I can get so caught up in my mind, oh, my mind can tell me that I really have these very, very important things to do. And if I get them all done, then I'll be very skillful, then I later accomplished a lot. So I think the most skillful thing for me to do at that point is to realize how agitated I am or how, you know, and to, and then to make that discernment about what would be What would open my heart I'd be most, I guess relaxing would be the most helpful thing.

Yes, I think so. It's great. It's wise what you said. What gets in the way from that wisdom operating.

And being realizing it kind of stopping the chattering and stopping the half twos and the fear in the kind of the drive.

There's, there's the half twos that you have the drive. Does it sometimes come with a lot of authority? Yeah. Yeah. So what wisdom you have about that authority that it comes with?

Well, that is not helpful that it's actually kind of rally my, you know, revving me up and that I'm not relaxing, but I, you know, just go go go and agitating. And, yeah,

great. This is great. You're talking about this because this is an example of the kind of skillful mindfulness in in noticing the effect that our activities have what we're doing the effect Of what drives us and feeling that it's not a good quality to be in. And there can be a lot of authority sometimes arguments that something is so important to do that will sacrifice our our inner well being or sacrifice our peace or relaxation. And to question the authority that says it's important to be anxious, it's important to kind of get tight and you know, what, why do you believe that? Probably you've never actually thought about that there's a belief system, and it's so authoritative that causes you to sacrifice your peace. Because something seems so important. But you know, it's a question Why is it what is what is so important that you're willing to sacrifice your piece for?

Is that a pun? Great. Yes. Nothing is worth sacrificing it. So yes, please

add an interesting mindfulness experience while you were talking. So I always enjoy your talks. But when you first started talking, my mind kept going to a very stressful situation I have right now. And I realized that I kept missing like several of your sentences, and I would have to catch up. And I got really agitated by this because I enjoy your talks. And I knew that I didn't want to be in this place that it wasn't useful for me to be in this place. But I couldn't get out of it. And I struggle with that. And I was getting mad at the same time. And what I found is that I don't know exactly what happened. But 1015 minutes later, I realized I had been listening to you that whole time. And I realized I wasn't in that state anymore. And it was a good mindfulness thing to realize that the state laughed and at the time, it seemed like it was never going to go struggling and get somehow you know, it did go away. So I think that was a really good,

great, great, great, great to see that. Again, a distinction of discernment between two different states when there wasn't so useful for you and one that was more useful. Right? It's great. Thank you. Yeah.

Thank you so much for sharing this. It reminded me of I don't know, if studied this much, but the stoics used to ask always, is it good? And is it useful and the theory in stoicism is that the good things in life, the good decisions are also the ones that are useful. And I wonder you have some comments around how Buddhism and stoicism maybe relate on that?

Not sure what to say about that. But yes, there's a there's a the stoics. Be curious. Be curious. And there's a variety of down through time, philosophies, religions, that are not theistic Li based on the stoics mostly part we're not Epicurus was not and And utilitarianism Mills was kind of in this category. And more recently, sigma, Sigmund Freud was this, this, and Buddhism, where, because it's not the mystically based, there's not the tendency is not to look externally for some reference point of what thou shalt do and what is right and wrong, but rather all those kinds of philosophies or approaches have turned towards oneself that one becomes one own teacher own has to measure for oneself, what is useful, what is what is helpful to do. And so all these are kind of much more human centered approaches, and they all have something, if I say this word, you might kind of be dismayed. But I think it's a profound word, concept. Just you know, it comes across maybe wrong. And that is, you know, Freud had to do the pleasure principle. All of all of these kinds of approaches the stoics, Epicurus, utilitarianism, Freud and Buddhism, all have something to begin called magenta, like the pleasure principle in that, that what the, the, one of the really important teachers for us is our own ability to discern whether something is pleasant or unpleasant or something feels, feels, brings brings in an internal feeling of well being, or ill being so that kind of that, that being the owner or the owner, being their own judge of that in the field or sensing of that. And we know what Epicurus had this idea, but then the people there was other religious traditions in Europe that didn't like Epicurus. So they kind of distorted his teachings and so the idea of becoming hedonists, for example, the curien became something very different than what he had in mind. But so they were using their sensitive on set calling that present the pleasure principle, that kind of Freud's idea is that it might seem reductionistic or might seem hedonistic, you know, that's what all comes down to. But the idea is that it's our own, have to have something inside some criteria to really be able to discern and feel what leads us to higher quality, better quality and more useful way of being. And so the idea of, is it useful? Is it it? Is it conducive to well being is something we measure for ourselves? That kind of,

yeah, I think that's nice. I think I think maybe the word eudaimonia would maybe kind of describe, again, more state of pleasure, it could be more like temporarily like a good food, but then eudaemonia bit like the more than the well being talking about so is there a higher level and yeah, so is it good for That eudaemonia versus just good for pleasure. So, thank you.

Okay. So Oh, it's time to stop. But you are so enthusiastic that I, maybe we can take one more if you think I can. I'll try to answer quickly.

But it's just noticing that I'm asking myself like, Is it useful or not? And thinking of like, agitated state I feel often at work. And but it keeps on happening. And I know that agitated states not useful. But I'm wondering like, why this sort of so dichotomous set of questions, because it kind of makes me think it must be useful somehow, but I just don't know how so like, What's your thoughts on asking the question, how is this useful? Even if it doesn't seem to be useful?

I see. How about if we ask rather than asking that question asking, when was it useful? So for example, anxiety was probably They useful when you're getting close to the mountain lions layer, you know, having a little I need to build an extra cautious and all that. But, you know, so fear has its place, but to have chronic fear, you know, it becomes a habit and the mountain lions not anywhere nearby. And so there probably was a time that being anxious or being, you know, heightened concern was useful I in terms of finding your place in your society, your place, but when it becomes a habit, when there's deep underlying feelings of anxiety, or ambition or fear or hostility, that that become kind of like deeply ingrained in who we are, then it loses its usefulness. So there might be it might it might be particular times when the state you're in might be useful. But to have a chronically, I think means that we've left the realm of usefulness. Okay, well thank you all and