

Kusala (8 of 10) Skillfulness

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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We are continuing our discussion of *kusala* as a skill: doing what is skillful. The Buddha used many analogies, similes, and metaphors to describe the development of meditation skills along the path of liberation. They had to do with craftspeople, farmers, musicians, and elephant trainers. In that context, “skill” seems a better translation for *kusala* than “wholesome.” But the two meanings are closely connected.

Mindfulness is a skillful practice and a skillful state. A metaphor for mindfulness practice is becoming a skilled cook. Bringing together all the ingredients means bringing yourself completely here. Perhaps, you are the pot, and you are bringing all your good qualities together. You are here, cooking something wonderful.

The idea that mindfulness is a wholesome, skillful craft suggests that it slowly grows and develops over time. The Buddha gave a wonderful teaching about this. He said when based on ethical conduct, you develop the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, then you may expect only growth in skillful states, not decline. So, developing the skill of mindfulness leads to the development of other skillful states. The Buddha emphasized personal growth and the development of helpful, beneficial qualities.

In the early Buddhist tradition, there are many lists of skillful states, much more than that of unskillful states. There are relatively few unskillful or unwholesome movements of mind that we can have and many options for skillful ones. Unfortunately, we spend a lot of time with the few unskillful states and do not explore the full range of wholesome qualities we can cultivate.

I find it delightful that the early texts list many more positive human states and qualities than negative ones. In the later tradition of the *Abhidhamma* (texts on Buddhist psychology), the unwholesome, unskillful states are called *akusala*. Skillful, wholesome states are called “beautiful.” There are more beautiful states of mind, mental factors, or movements of the mind than unskillful ones. So we have a great capacity for beautiful states, which is underutilized to some degree. Part of our practice is to cultivate this underutilized part of our mind.

There is a wonderful list of skillful states that the Buddha taught his foster mother. She is the one who raised him, and later became his student and a nun. She asks the Buddha to teach the Dharma in brief.

The brief statements that the Buddha makes encapsulating the Dharma are very interesting. There is a particular orientation that gets repeated over and over: practice and the immediacy of our experience now. That is what the Buddha emphasizes.

The Buddha’s foster mother asks him to teach her the Dharma in brief so she can practice alone. She wants practice instructions. The Buddha tells her:

As for those mental qualities of which you may know, “These qualities, these states, lead to dispassion, not to passion; to being unfettered, not to being fettered; to shedding, not to accumulating; to fewness of wishes, not to many wishes; to contentment, not to discontent; to solitude, not to crowded company; to arousing effort, not to laziness; to being unburdensome, not to being burdensome.” You may definitely and definitively hold, “This is the Dharma. This is the Teacher’s instructions.”

What is interesting about this list is that the qualities are both mental states we can practice, *and* they are the result of practice. Dharma practice leads to these skillful mental states. Rather than just practicing breathing and ethics to reach those states, the idea is to practice the states as well.

We realize that the goal of practice is integrated into the means of practice. The means and the goal are not

separate in the Dharma. If the goal is to be peaceful, then we practice peace. If the goal is to be compassionate, we practice compassion. If the goal is to be content, we practice contentment. If the goal is to not be caught in the grip of many desires, then we practice having few desires or few wishes.

Some of these states or qualities are interpersonal, such as “being unburdensome.” Do not be a burden to other people if you can. We need to be careful about how we understand this. Certainly, we do not want people who need support to feel they cannot get it. But, expecting too much from people or depending on people when you do not need to can be burdensome.

The state of solitude – “not in crowded company” – is the ability to be alone and content. It is very skillful to develop this wholesome capacity: to be at ease and comfortable with oneself, to be content when sitting in a room by oneself, to be one’s own friend. It does not mean we have to live as a hermit. But, when we are with people, we do not bring our neediness and grasping – our wanting others to provide us with companionship, support, praise, and love because we have a lack within us. We cultivate our capacity to be comfortable with solitude.

It is fascinating that the Buddha highlighted these skillful states to his foster mother as essential for practicing alone. As we cultivate these states, they lead to more of the same. These states are our guide to the direction we are going. When we understand where we are going, we start practicing the states that lead in that direction.

When we practice mindfulness of breathing, we can keep in mind that it is leading us to be content – so let’s start finding contentment now. Meditation practice is leading us to have few wishes. As we sit in practice, can we tap into this quality and allow it to support our meditation practice? Practice is leading us to the capacity to feel at home when we are alone. Can we cultivate meditation with that in mind? Can we feel the deep sense of settledness within ourselves?

The overarching character of many of these virtues that the Buddha emphasized is peace. In the discourse on loving-kindness, he talks about being upright, straightforward, easy to speak to, gentle, not proud, contented, wise, and calm. Another list has these skillful states: respect, humility, contentment, gratitude, patience, and gentleness. There are many lists of skillful states to cultivate.

So we cultivate and allow for the growth of skillful, wholesome qualities. These states are skillful to develop because they are onward leading. They lead to the growth of other wholesome states. For example, mindfulness brings along other wholesome states as companions. It is wonderful to feel the momentum of wholesome, skillful states growing in us. They offer energy and inspiration for our lives.

May you explore the idea of skillfulness. Consider orienting your life today around this question: What would be the skillful thing to do? What would be the skillful thing to do to support qualities of contentment, fewness of wishes, unburdensomeness, and freedom? Thank you all very much.