

Dharmette: Wholesomeness (2 of 5) Skillfulness

Gil Fronsdal

September 02, 2026

Keywords: *kusala*, *samādhi*, *Dharma*, *Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, mindfulness, concentration practice, *kalyāṇa*, Pāli Canon, Ravi Shankar, Coben Chino

Hello and welcome to this second talk on the topic of *kusala*, the ancient Buddhist word that can be translated in different ways. As I said yesterday, one way of translating it is wholesome, wholesomeness. Another is skillful, skillfulness. Another way is ethic, ethical. And maybe some others.

What I like about these multiple choices for how to translate this word is that it encompasses much of what we are as human beings, in terms of how we engage in the world, how we are present for the world, and how we act in the world. It is meant to be comprehensive. Any one of these translation choices limits it somewhat. But to get a full sense of how it applies to the fullness of a life, we need all the words. In some way, in our hearts and minds, we somehow hold them all.

But the translation word I want to focus on today is skillful. There are clearly places in the teachings of the Buddha where that is the best translation of the word *kusala* for an English audience. It is when the Buddha talks about meditation, meditation itself, and *samādhi*: to become skilled in *samādhi*. To develop a skill, the craft of meditation, to cultivate and develop ourselves in particular ways, to grow inner qualities of *Dharma* practice.

He uses metaphors that are like having a skill. For mindfulness, he uses the metaphor of a good cook who knows how to cook different meals and knows how to select different meals for different times. This is used for the *Four Foundations of Mindfulness*. Part of how I like to interpret it is that the cook knows which of the foundations to focus on, given the conditions of the particular day, activities, and what is happening for us. Sometimes we focus more on the body, sometimes more on feeling tones, sometimes more on mind states, and sometimes more on the mental processes and activities going on in our lives.

To have skill is to know how to pay attention to this, to recognize what is happening, and to be present for the different component parts: body sensations, feeling tones, mind states, and these mental processes. You have a skill like a good cook. Maybe some of you really enjoy cooking. It is nice; it makes you present. It is de-stressing. The busyness of life kind of quiets down, and we are just absorbed in this wonderful activity. It can be a reference point for how we are in meditation: that we are being the cook.

Sometimes he uses the metaphor of a musician, and the famous metaphor of the lute. The lute has five strings, maybe because he associates it with the five faculties. Each of those strings has to be tuned just right. Part of being a good musician is knowing the craft of tuning and knowing how to tune the strings in relationship to each other. It takes a certain kind of attention.

I have known some stringed-instrument musicians who seem to enjoy the tuning. This famous sitar player, Ravi Shankar, was well known for spending a tremendous amount of time at the beginning of a performance, as people were arriving, just tuning his sitar carefully and being absorbed in that work. Some people interpreted this as meaning he was really tuning the audience. Sometimes the craft is training horses or training elephants. There is a skill in knowing how to do that.

How do you approach an elephant in order to train it so it respects you, cares for you, and is not afraid of you? You know, maybe training it in the ancient world. There are all these craft references that the Buddha uses. There are other ones as well. For those of us who do a kind of craft or skill, play a musical instrument, or play a sport, there is something about cultivating the skill there that maybe can be applied to meditation itself, to mindfulness itself, and to concentration practice.

Certainly, there is a lot of patience, the importance of repetition, and the importance of how we do it. Sometimes what is needed is to learn to let go of all the extra baggage we bring along: the actual extra tension, stress, judgments, and self-consciousness that trip us up. “I’m not doing it right. I have to do it better.” In meditation, sitting quietly, there can be a lot of room for self-conscious ruminations about the meditation that interfere with it.

Maybe this is because we do not get the same in-the-moment feedback loops that we get when we are doing a craft, a sport, or playing music. Or we are not using the feedback loop that can support us in getting involved. It is good to take meditation as a skill, as a craft we are developing. It helps if we can be attuned to what is happening in the present moment as we are being mindful, to see if we can gently take in the feedback loop.

“Oh, this works. Now I’m present. That breath, I was really there. Oh, I missed it. Let’s try to go back and do the next one more fully. Oh, I was pushing too much. I was too complacent. I was too lackadaisical, and no wonder I slipped off. Can I do the next breath in a gentle way, in a determined way? Can I ride the whole in-breath and whole out-breath?”

And so, if you are too busy looking for the feedback loops, then, of course, you stress and do not really learn it. How do you learn to be engaged in the present-moment process? Built into this is a feedback loop. Let’s stay here. Let’s stay and see, and allow the whole system to develop the skill through repetition, through doing this over and over again. That can happen throughout the day.

Simply the act of showing up and being mindful, and getting the feedback loop: “Oh, this is good, to be present. There’s a little bit of aliveness, a little bit of alertness. It feels good to be fully present and clear, as opposed to being distracted and reactive.” There is a positive feedback loop that reinforces the very skill of mindfulness, the craft of mindfulness. We want to be here. It is good.

Part of the emphasis on skill also has this idea that we are developing a skill for a purpose. For some people, the idea of purpose is very helpful. If we do not have a purpose—if the purpose is to swim to the other side of the pool and do that in a clear, fast way, or to win a race or something—there is a purpose. We then give ourselves fully to the activity. It can absorb us, and this is all we are doing: just swimming. That is the craft we are refining.

The purpose is to play the music in a lively, engaged way. The purpose is to become stronger in how we can walk up steps, so we give ourselves that exercise of walking a lot up steps, and slowly we develop it. To develop a skill often has a goal that is a little more than just being present for it in the moment. That is part of being human. It is an ordinary part of being human to have a little bit of a goal, a purpose, and a direction that it is going.

The art of it is to do it in a wholesome, skillful way. We cannot do it in a way that makes us tense. If we strive and get tight, then we interfere with the very craft, the beautiful craft, we are trying to make. One of the words that I love in the Pāli Canon is the word *kalyāṇa*. *Kalyāṇa*, its first meaning, is beauty, beautiful.

Can we engage in a practice of mindfulness so that the practice is beautiful? So that there is something about the simplicity of it, the untroubled nature of it, the unfettered nature of it, the simplicity, the clarity. Yes, it has a goal. Yes, it has a purpose: to become freer, to become more present, to become kinder. But the very way in which we engage in that process, as we are on that path, in and of itself feels beautiful, feels nice.

This is the feedback loop that I talked about last week, without calling it a feedback loop. The *Dharma* that is onward-leading, that welcomes us here and invites inspection, is right here in the present moment, in the meeting place between our sensations and our awareness of the sensations. That meeting place is also present for the sensations involved with how we do what we do, how we walk, how we chop vegetables, and how we are with our breathing. Really stay there and feel: is there a skill? Is there something beautiful we are cultivating here and developing here?

Maybe we are not. Maybe it is not beautiful. But if we really tune in to it, how is it more efficient? How is it simpler? How is it less complicated, with all kinds of extra stuff? How can we be there and receive, take in, the invitation to be present, and let this be onward-leading to something marvelous, something beautiful, something peaceful?

Trust and be patient that we are developing a skill slowly over a long time. We do not have to see the results in the moment, in the day. A good craftsperson does things over and over and over again, until the doing of it becomes the beauty.

So I will end quickly with a story that I have maybe said enough times before. There was a Zen teacher, Zen master, in America named Coben Chino. He went down to Esalen, a human-potential kind of retreat center, famous here in California, right on the Pacific Coast, on a cliff on a beautiful big surf coast overlooking the vast ocean there. He practiced the art, the craft, the path of archery, and so he was going to do a demonstration.

A big crowd of people gathered on the lawn there on the cliff. He got all his archery gear ready. He spent a lot of time preparing, getting all set up, getting everything right, wearing his archery kind of robe. He was completely absorbed in the preparations, getting in his position, getting the arrow just right, and getting everything prepared. The audience just watched. It was a long time, and for the audience, they were absorbed in his absorption.

The actual art, the actual sense and purpose of what he was doing, the whole thing, was the preparation. He was so into it, so present. The preparation maybe was necessary, but for him it was a whole meditation practice, just to do all the little things. At some point, he was standing well and absorbed, and began pulling back the string, with the arrow in it, taking a really good aim, getting focused, getting centered, really maybe becoming one with the target. Maybe, who knows? Really present.

Finally, when he was fully there—I mean, the whole thing had drama to it—people were absorbed because he was so present, so concentrated, so intent. It was kind of as if people's mirror neurons, or something, were operating. It pulled people into what he was doing. Fi-

nally, he released the arrow, and, of course, it hit the mark perfectly, right in the center. He shot the arrow into the Pacific Ocean off the cliff. Perfect shot.

So preparation can be the purpose. The purpose is to be mindful, fully here. And by doing that, may you hit the perfect mark, perfectly arriving now, here. So, thank you.