

Kusala (7 of 10) Growing the Wholesome

June 1, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

skill, skillful, happiness, non-afflictive, non-harming, beneficial, healthy, onward leading, Zen, growth, weeds, shortcut, *schiller*, distinguish, distinctions, contact lens, cooking

Gil Fronsdal

We are continuing our discussion of *kusala* – the wholesome and the skillful. One definition of *kusala* is that which results in happiness and is non-afflictive. This idea of not causing harm in any way is one of the requirements for what is wholesome. Because *kusala* results in happiness, there is a movement towards greater well-being and happiness.

Wholesomeness is considered beneficial, healthy, and good in and of itself. It is also onward leading towards happiness. Sometimes what is wholesome does not automatically result in happiness. We are practicing and making space and allowing for the growth of happiness over time. We want to create a stable, strong foundation

for happiness, so we are not dependent on the changing nature of our experience, our life circumstances, or physiology – our hormones, energy level, diet, and other things that affect our mood. We gain stability from the strength of the good qualities we have developed over time.

When I first came to Zen practice, there was very little discussion about the fact that we were maturing, developing, and growing through the practice. There was a very strong tendency to point towards what was considered the absolute – that which is ultimately true. For example, to see into the nature of emptiness. Or to see into the nature of enlightenment here and now, and experience some non-dual state. It was felt that as soon as we talked about growth, we were into dualism or “gaining” ideas. Or we were missing the boat of really being here and discovering freedom right here and now.

There is some wisdom in that kind of direct pointing to awakening or ultimate state of being. But, it can miss or shortchange a hugely important, natural part of being human: whether we want to or not, we are constantly changing and growing. Sometimes what is growing and developing is not healthy. If someone has a habit of complaining or being angry or irritated, this grows inside us. A lot of unhealthy stuff can grow when we repeat it. But, if we keep making space for what is good, something different will happen.

Even when we practice non-dual direct pointing to reality, our whole psychophysical system will begin to shift and change. It is possible to track that and see how people change and develop over time. It is also possible to support that growth and move it along.

When I was doing Zen practice in the monastery, I was made the gardener. Part of the job was to weed. The instructions were to weed and let plants grow. At some point, I wondered whether it was okay to also weed the weeds of the mind. I wondered if that was a kind of dualism or if there was any gaining idea. Was noticing that there were weeds in the mind a kind of conceit or missing the boat? I did not see a reason to view my mind as any different from the garden. In the garden, I took care of weeds. If I was angry or greedy, why not take care of these weeds as well?

As we take out the weeds, this makes room for something else to grow and develop. In the teachings of the Buddha, we find a great emphasis on development and growth. I cannot value or emphasize enough that this growth process creates a strong, stable foundation that can carry us through all kinds of challenges in life.

I have known people who relied on shortcuts to mystical experiences, great states of consciousness, or what felt like states of freedom. But they did not really have the

inner strength to hold them, rest in them, and be influenced by them. They would usually succumb to their old habits, which were somewhat unhealthy. So they would swing between those great states and then go back to where they had been.

For Buddhists, the idea is to cultivate and develop these inner capacities so that we can hold some of the higher experiences of realization and freedom that come with practice. If that does not interest you, it is also true that as we develop healthy qualities, we are more able to hold the basic human experience of love. Our love is much healthier, more stable, and less fragile when all the other wholesome qualities have developed and grown within us.

The Buddha said:

Abandon what is unwholesome.

This means to weed the mind of its weeds – the things that are not helpful. What is unwholesome is afflictive and leads to the opposite of happiness. It leads to suffering.

Abandon what is unwholesome, and devote yourself to wholesome conduct.

This means to actively behave in beneficial, skillful, and wholesome ways, for that is how to grow and come to fulfillment in the Dharma. So we are changing not only the quality of our inner attitudes and hearts, we are

making behavioral changes. We are making choices about how to behave differently and choosing behaviors that are wholesome and beneficial. Yesterday, I spoke about the list of Ten Skillful Actions that help this inner growth happen.

The second translation of *kusala* is “skillful.” Translating it as skillful has a wonderful benefit – this word tends not to have as much moralistic weight as “wholesome.” Some people may be unwilling to use “wholesome” because it feels a little oppressive. But “skillful” is relatively free of that.

We can then ask the question, “skillful for what purpose?” It might be skillful for cultivating the path of liberation or for developing the practice.

We develop a skill by repeated engagement over and over again. It takes a lot of small movements to learn a skill. The English word “skill” comes from a Germanic word. In Norwegian, it is *schiller*, which means “to distinguish or separate out.” That is the original Germanic source of the word. So skill means to make distinctions or to separate out.

Recently I have been learning a new skill. For the last few months, I have been wearing a contact lens on my right eye. I am surprised that I am still learning the art of putting it in. At first, it seemed very simple. But I am

learning very subtle distinctions that make me more skillful.

Sometimes putting the contact in was a real challenge. It would fall out or not go onto my eye right. But over months, I improved by doing it day after day, while paying attention to what I was doing – all the important little details, like the position of my fingers and where the contact fit between them.

Now, the contact is surprisingly easy to put in when done correctly. It is a beautiful, smooth, graceful action. The contact slides right up on the eye and sits there with no effort on my part – almost like it wants to sit on the eyeball. So, in my old age, I am still learning skills. Making subtle distinctions is a wonderful skill.

The same thing happens in Buddhist practice. We learn subtle distinctions in our posture. As we develop our meditation posture, it becomes more skillful, wholesome, and beneficial. We develop many little skills in being with and paying attention to the breath.

We learn about all the little movements of the mind. Slowly and incrementally, we learn what it is like to be mindful, what it is like to let go, where to focus, and how to focus. How to concentrate and how to be equanimous. What kind of effort to make, and how

much energy to apply – just the right amount of effort – not too much and not too little.

These skills are not learned by reading a book and deciding, “This is the formula; this is what you do.” They are learned through engagement over and over again, like an athlete training for competitive swimming.

Swimmers learn ever more refined distinctions, such as how to move their arms in the water to create the least resistance and get the most push off the water.

It is the same way in meditation. There is growth and development of skills in the body and the psychophysical system. So when we talk about meditation practice (rather than our interpersonal lives), *kusala* is sometimes better translated as “skill.” We are developing certain kinds of skills.

The Buddha clearly uses metaphors that have to do with skills that people develop. For example, the metaphor used for the Five Faculties was tuning and playing a five-string lute. We learn better and better how to tune and play the lute. With the Five Faculties, we are learning about the five strings inside of us. Slowly we learn to tune and play them.

The metaphor for mindfulness practice is developing the skill of cooking. According to the Buddha, a skilled meditator or mindfulness practitioner is like a skilled

cook. Cooking is a skill learned over time. The more we cook a dish, the simpler, easier, and more creative it can be. We were awkward when we first began using the recipe – trying to put it together and figure out how it worked – but we developed the skill.

One theme today is that of developing a skill. A skill grows through time. As certain skills develop, they make room for other good qualities to grow.

The other theme is the growth of what is beneficial – an inner growth of good qualities, abilities, mental capacities, and mental attitudes. Growth is a little different from making something happen. It means allowing this natural process of growth that is gradual and comes from repetition. We do the same thing – kindness, friendliness, generosity – over and over again.

As we develop these skills, we make finer and finer distinctions in ways that benefit us and hopefully benefit others. In this way, over time, positive qualities grow and thrive abundantly. Something marvelous fills out within us, and we make room for it. We recognize that growth is part of what we are doing here, so we have the patience to continue. We also recognize that the practice is not just about experiencing emptiness or strong states of concentration. There are many other

qualities we are cultivating and becoming skilled in, which will support us.

I will talk more over the next few days about the wholesome skills that develop. May you study and reflect on the ways that you have grown in wholesome qualities over the last five, ten, or twenty years. How have you changed in beneficial ways, both in your inner life and daily life? How did that steady, slow growth happen for you? Thank you.