One Who Sees Danger

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One of the lines in the chant just now, “One who sees danger and respects being heedful.” This is an important background to the practice, because life has lots of dangers. One of the things we come to the Dharma practice for is to gain security from those dangers, which we also realize that most of the dangers come from within. This mind we have that keeps churning up all kinds of thoughts, all kinds of elaborations on top of it, whatever we experience, has a tendency to add all kinds of complications. There’s a passage in the text where the Buddha talks about how the “I” meets up with the form. Consciousness arises from the contact that comes feeling. And from the feeling you start to think. There’s a “you” in there. Then you get assailed by all these complicated elaborations that you build on top of things. From being the agent you become the object, the victim of your own mind’s thoughts. One of the purposes of the practice is to not be a victim. In other words, how to learn to take apart the processes in the mind which really cause danger, which cause stress, which cause distress, which cause sorrow, lamentation, despair, the whole list that they have. So that whatever the habits that leave the mind open to these forms of suffering, you can learn to undo those habits. Because the mind is constantly churning out this kind of stuff, churning out all these complications for itself, you have to be vigilant. Sometimes just the thought of being vigilant makes everybody get weary. So one of the important strategies of the practice is to learn how to be in the present moment in a way where you feel comfortable with the present. It feels good to be here. Once you’re here, then you can keep watch over things comfortably. It’s like being put out in a forest lookout station, in a place where fires tend to happen. Now, if it’s a miserable station, nobody wants to live there. So we learn how to fix up the station so it’s a nice place to be. That way there’ll be somebody there all the time, so that whenever a fire breaks out, you’ll be there, you’ll be ready. So when you come to the present moment, try to make friends with the present moment. Make it a comfortable place to stay. One way of doing this is to play with the breath. Learn how to get yourself interested in the process of breathing. What effect does the breath have on the body? We mentioned this a little bit this evening. Where are the areas where you tend to be tense, where you tend to be tight? Does the way you breathe have an effect on those? Is it maintaining that tension? Is it keeping up the tightness? Is there a way to breathe to help relieve the tension and tightness? This may not be the ultimate cause of your suffering, but at least it gives you a handle on the present moment, gets you interested in the present moment. So you start looking. As you start looking at the breath, you find that your sensitivities in the present moment get more and more refined, more and more developed. You start noticing other things as well, more subtle sensations in the breathing, more subtle movements in the mind. That’s when you’re ready to keep watch. To notice exactly what it is the mind does, to create suffering, to elaborate on issues and to make things more and more complicated all the time, to the point where you become a victim of your own thoughts. So the first task is to feel at home in the present moment, to be on friendly terms with the present moment. That means being at home, being on friendly terms with the breath. Notice what exactly does the sensation of breathing feel like right now. What sensations tell you, “Now the breath is coming in. Now the breath is going out.” Are they comfortable sensations? If they’re not, other ways you can change them. So you’re not just forcing the mind against its will to stay here, but you’re giving it something to study, something to look at, something to play with. This way it settles down. Then you can watch what goes on in the mind. This is really very important because if you’re not alert to what’s happening in the mind, a mood can come in and take over. Sometimes it can last for whole days, sapping your energy, sapping your strength. You look at your life and nothing seems to be worthwhile. People can get in really deep depression simply from not being vigilant about what’s going on right here, right now. Anger can come in and take over. All kinds of emotions can come in and take over if you’re not careful, if you’re not watchful. This is another way in which the breath is useful. On the one hand, you notice one way of attacking these emotions, one way of undoing their powers, to notice what they do to the breath energy in the body. When they come on, what are their warning signals in terms of the way you breathe? Sometimes you can abort them by changing the way you breathe. If you see it’s getting into a pattern that’s associated with anger or a pattern that’s associated with depression, change the pattern, change the rhythm, change the texture of the breathing so that emotion doesn’t have any foothold in the body. When it doesn’t have a foothold in the body, it finds it more and more difficult to hang around. Staying with the breath gives you a place to be instead of just floating from one thought to the next. Many times we live in our heads. Since we don’t have anything solid to stand on, when a really strong thought comes in, it just blows us over. But when you’re with the breath, you have a more solid foundation, a place where you can get outside of your head, get outside of your thoughts, and be with a purely physical sensation. From here, it’s easier to see the thoughts coming and going like clouds. If you’re just up in the clouds and a good strong wind comes along, it blows you over. But if you’re standing on the ground, you watch the clouds come and go. You watch the winds blow them around. But you don’t get blown around. You have a more solid place to stay. And you have a vantage point from which to observe things. If you’re just up in the clouds, sometimes it’s hard to see who’s moving. Is this cloud moving or is this cloud staying still? It’s like two trains in a station. There’s no post between the trains. You look over and it’s either that train is moving back or your train is moving forward. But if there’s nothing that’s planted firmly in the ground for you to compare the motion to, you have no idea which is which. But if you stay with the breath, it’s like being on the ground and having a peak of a roof or the top of a telephone pole. You can focus on something you know is solid, and then you can see what’s moving and what’s not. You can be more alert to what’s going on in the mind, more alert to which movements in the mind are benign and which movements in the mind are not so benign. So it’s important, this foundation we’re building here, this solid spot, so our awareness can stay settled in the present, can stay firmly planted in the present. Dangers come along, dangers like greed, anger, and delusion. You see them for what they are, and you’re there, right on top of them. You don’t have to wait until the fire burns down 60,000 acres before you put it out. You see the fire just as it’s beginning to start, and you put it out right there. This is what it means to be heedful, realizing that the parts of your body and your life that you really regret are not things that come from the outside. They’re things that you do, decisions that you make that you later realize were the wrong decision and you should have known better. This can vary from little tiny things to more major decisions in life. But if you’re right here in the present moment, and you’re alert to what’s happening, then there’s a sense of well-being in the mind. So you don’t feel driven to do things that you know deeply down inside, or really not in your own best interest. A sense of well-being helps protect you from those urges. If you have a sense of well-being right now, why would you want to get involved in anger? What’s good about anger? Where does it feel good in the present moment? It feels good only for people who are otherwise miserable or bored, and want a little hot sauce in their life. When there’s a strong sense of well-being right here in the present moment, you look at it and it just holds no appeal at all. The same with lust, the same with fear, the same with greed, all these things that make people do things that they later regret. They just start losing their appeal. You begin to see where the appeal was. After all, who would latch on to anger unless there was some sort of satisfaction in being angry? You begin to see where that satisfaction was, and it’s pretty miserable satisfaction. You now have something better. When you have this kind of foundation, you really get yourself in a greater position of security, a position of strength. And that’s a lot of what Dharma practice is about. It may not be the whole story. But it’s certainly a good step in the right direction.

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