Heedful of Small Dangers

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Those who see danger and respect being heedful. One of the passages in the chat just now, “What are the dangers?” Most of the dangers come from within. Greed, anger, and delusion, all the unskillful mental states that can lead to unhappiness for ourselves, unhappiness for other people. Those are the dangers. To respect being heedful means that you realize you can make a difference. If you couldn’t make a difference, there wouldn’t be any need to be heedful. You just have to accept the fact that there are these dangers that could hit at any time. There’s nothing you can do about them. Try to accept that. But the Buddha says, “Don’t accept that. The dangers are there, but we have the power to ward them off by developing good, skillful qualities in the mind.” The Buddha once said that heedfulness lies at the base of all skillful qualities. So when you respect being heedful, it’s a respect for the skillful side of your mind, the side that can lead to true happiness. So you have to have respect for that ability. What does it mean to respect? We’re a culture that’s pretty bad at respect. Everything gets trashed. And if you pick up that attitude, it’s impossible to practice. Respect means valuing it. What heedfulness speaks in your mind, you want to listen. Decide this. Watch out for this. Watch out for that. Encourage this. Encourage that. You want to learn how to listen to that and then implement it in your life. The Buddha once said that the sign of wisdom is a person who sees something that they like to do, but they know it’s going to give bad results. And so you’re able to talk yourself out of it. Something that you don’t like to do but gives good results, you’re able to talk yourself into following that action. It’s a very pragmatic definition of wisdom, and it’s the wisdom that matters. Having respect for your long-term happiness and then showing that respect in the way you manage your mind. After all, if you can’t respect your own long-term happiness, how can anybody trust you? You can’t trust yourself. Other people can’t trust you. Because, like the rest of society, you just trash everything. So this is an important first step in the practice. And Jon Swat would often emphasize this. You ought to practice with a sense of respect. A sense of conviction that the training of the mind really is important, that it really does make a difference, and that you value the good qualities of the mind like you would value gold. Of course, this takes energy, so you have to watch out for ways in which you squander your energy. And look for ways to strengthen the mind, which is what we’re doing right here, right now. It’s giving the mind strength, trying to get the mind to be still. And give it at least a square inch of stillness inside. There may be a lot of chatter going on in the mind, but you have to learn how to treat that chatter with less respect than you do with this little spot of stillness. It’s a lone intention that says, “Stay with the breath. Stay with the breath. Be quiet. Breathe quietly.” Give the mind a spot to be still, because it’s in stillness that the mind gains its strength. It’s not like the body. The body has to move around a lot in order to keep its strength up. If the body were to lie still all the time, it would get weak. But the strength of the mind comes in stillness, because otherwise it fritters all of its energy away, thinking about this, thinking about that, wondering about this, doubting that, angry about this. That doesn’t give any strength to the mind at all. The strength comes from letting it be still. Then you develop your first level of wisdom in the practice of concentration as you learn to sidestep the distractions that would pull you away. The thoughts that say, “You’ve got to think about this. You’ve got to worry about this. Now we’ve got a whole hour. Let’s think about this.” You’ve got to treat those with a measure of disrespect, skepticism. Because if you’re not skeptical about your own unskillful thoughts, then other people can insert unskillful thoughts into your mind and just sort of slip in the footsteps of what you’re already doing. You may have noticed that angry people find it easiest to pull other angry people to their cause. Greedy people find it easiest to dupe other greedy people. They take advantage of their weaknesses. They take advantage of their unskillful qualities. If you let these qualities have an influence in your mind, there’s no way you can withstand those wounds from outside. But if you can learn to be skeptical about your own thoughts and opinions, it’s a lot easier to be skeptical about other people’s. Skeptical in a healthy way. In other words, you have to examine things that come into the mind to decide whether you want them in there or not. Then you’re in a position, if you find something that’s not skillful, you can say, “No.” Because you’ve got something better. You’ve got this spot of stillness. And the reason why the Buddha emphasizes this in that chant, not only being respectful of being heedful, but also having respect for concentration, respect for the training, all this points at having respect for this spot of stillness in the mind. Because it seems so little to begin with. It doesn’t seem very powerful at all. But you’ve got to give it space. You’ve got to work at it. Because it has the potential for helping you a lot. It has the potential for a lot of power. Just as the Buddha said, you can’t be careless about small snakes, because small snakes can have a lot of venom. You can’t be careless about small fires, because small fires can become big. You can’t be careless about little princes, because little princes can grow up and they can bear grudges. In the same way, you can’t be careless about this little spot of stillness in the mind, because it’s your only hope. And it can become larger if you work at it. So give the mind a good place to settle down and show respect for that spot for settling down. You’ve got the breath. Try to make the breath as comfortable, as calm as possible, to calm the mind down when it’s agitated or is energizing, when you need energy to learn. Learn how to use the breath as a balancing medicine. In the old days, they would talk about medicine as balancing out the different humors or the different potentials in the body. That’s precisely how the breath works with the mind. So look at your mind. If it’s too agitated, think of breathing in a very calm, still way. If you’re getting sleepy, energize the breath. Show respect for your breath. It can form the basis for a lot of skillful qualities. And those skillful qualities can make a lot of difference if you give them the chance.

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