Heedful & Alert

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One of my duties during my time with Ajahn Phuong was to keep his hut clean. It meant not only sweeping and wiping down, but also putting everything in its right place. The trick was that he never told me what the right places were. If I put things in the wrong places, he’d tell me, but he wouldn’t explain where the right places were. It was frustrating. It took me a while to realize this was part of the training. Not that he wanted to frustrate me, but he wanted me to learn how to be observant. He had told me early on that if I wanted to be a good meditator, I had to learn how to think like a thief. Suppose you’re going to steal something from someone’s house. You don’t go up to the front door and knock on it and ask them, “When are you going to be away? Where do you keep your valuables?” You have to observe. Basically, you have to case the joint until you notice when they tend to come, when they tend to go. When they get some money, where do they put it? In other words, you have to use your ingenuity. If you want to see things, gain things that are hard to gain. When I realized this was that lesson being put into practice, I tried to observe. Again, as unobtrusively as possible. If it was obvious that I was watching him, he wouldn’t do anything. But through the corner of my eye, sometimes I could see him place his teacup where he wanted his teacup placed. Or his spittoon where he wanted his robes folded. That kind of thing. I finally got to the point where I knew where everything belonged and put it there every day. The purpose of all this was to train my powers of observation and to learn to be willing to make mistakes and learn from the mistakes. Mistakes of which are important skills in the meditation. When you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, there’s nobody in your left ear telling you what to do, watching over you. You’re the one who has to be responsible for what you’re doing and the results you’re getting, particularly when you’re off meditating on your own. There are several qualities. One is alertness, just noticing what you’re doing. Most of us are very unalert. We go through life doing and saying things and wondering where the problems come from. Many times the problems come from precisely what we did and what we said, given the context. We weren’t sensitive to the context. We weren’t really paying careful attention to our actions. So when things go wrong, you don’t know what to do. You don’t know what to change. If you’re clear about what you’re doing and then you see that the results are not coming out the way you want them, then it’s easy enough to ask yourself, “What could I do differently?” This is why in the Buddha’s instructions for developing mindfulness, it doesn’t tell you just to be mindful, i.e., to keep the breath in mind, but also to be alert, to notice what you’re doing, how the breath is going in, how the breath is going out, how you’re influencing the breath, and what the results are. If you don’t like the results, change what you do. The more you do this, the more observance you get. The more observance you get, the more you realize there are things that you’re doing that you hadn’t even realized that you were doing them. The other day we were talking about perception, the labels we put on things. Someone said that these things seem to be hard-wired, but they’re not. We make choices in how we label things. Even something as familiar as the breath. There are various ways you can label the sensations in the body. There are various ways you can understand the process of breathing, all of which are decisions we make. Many times we made the decision a long time ago and ever since then everything has been on automatic pilot. But that doesn’t mean we can’t change and that we’re not still doing things and making decisions. It’s just that they get less and less attention, which is a problem. What we’re learning here as we meditate is to give more attention to things that we thought we understood a long time ago. Go back and relearn how to breathe, how to walk, all the other basic functions in life. Do them with more alertness to see exactly what’s going on. Coupled with alertness is the principle of heedfulness, realizing that your decisions, your choices, really do make a difference. And so you’ve got to be careful so that you don’t go jumping to conclusions that later turn out to be false. The Buddha’s introductory instructions to his son, Sri Yudhisthira, soon after his son became a novice, was to focus on his actions. First, focus on his intentions when he was planning to do something, and then focus on the actual action as he was doing it to see what results he was getting. If while he was intending the action he could foresee that it was going to be harmful, don’t do it. If he didn’t foresee any harm, go ahead and try. But while you’re doing it, watch to see if there’s actually any harm coming from it, he said. If there is any harm, stop. If you don’t foresee any harm, if you don’t see any harm happening, keep on with the action until it’s done. Then, when it’s done, reflect on the long-term consequences. And if you see that something unexpected came out that was harmful, go and talk it over with someone else. And then resolve not to repeat that mistake again. This is one of the important things to do. There are some really interesting things about the Buddha’s instructions to children. They tend to contain the seeds for all of his more subtle teachings. These instructions apply not only to external actions but also to thoughts in the mind. And not just to thoughts. It applies to your meditation. When you’re sitting down, be very clear about what you’re doing. Notice the potential for harm and be careful to avoid it. One of the things that can easily happen in meditation is that you have some pretty impressive experiences. And it’s easy, if you’re not alert and heedful, to misinterpret them. One common one is a very strong sense of oneness. First, it starts out feeling one with the breath. It’s hard to see any difference between your awareness of the breath and the sensation of breathing itself. It extends out. We start feeling one with everything around you. And it’s easy to assume that you’ve gotten in touch with some metaphysical ground, the ground of being, that we all share. Sometimes it’s the sense that this is the oneness from which all things come and to which they all return. But if you’re alert, you begin to realize that that sense of oneness is a perception. There’s a label you place on it, something you’re doing, assumptions you’re making. You want to back up and remind yourself that it’s what you did to get there. That’s important. That’s what you really want to see. How did you focus the mind? How did your sense of being separate from the breath dissolve? What did you do? And what are you doing to maintain that sense of oneness? Back in high school, there was a period, in the summer between my sophomore and my junior years, when I had a kind of a religious opening, a strong sense of oneness with everything. It lasted for a couple weeks and then began to fade. For the next year or so, I was trying to do whatever I could to regain that sense of oneness. Years later, it hit again while I was meditating. While I was meditating, I was in a very different state. Instead of having a sense of this oneness that came from outside, I saw that it was something I’d done, something I’d brought about by the way I was focusing on the breath, by the way I was relating to my meditation. This meant that I came out of the experience with very different assumptions about what it was, what it meant. A lot of how we handle these experiences depends on how we come into it, what we’re alerted to beforehand. If you look at what you’re doing, it’s like you keep aware of what you’re doing. You’re a lot less likely to, one, misconstrue the experience, but you’re a lot more likely to be able to tap into that experience again as you realize that there were choices that were made that got you there. The next question is, why are you there? Is there something that’s there? Is there still some stress? Is this still conditioned? Anything that’s conditioned is not the ideal. It’s not the goal. We’re looking for something that’s totally unconditioned, something that you don’t do. But you get there through doing. It’s like going to the Grand Canyon. You take the road to the Grand Canyon, you’ve got the map, and the road doesn’t cause the Grand Canyon to be there, but it gets you there. If you’re mindful and alert, you remember how you got there. So the next time you see the road heading to the Grand Canyon, you can turn down that road, and there it is, the Grand Canyon again. It’s this quality of alertness and heedfulness, being clear about what you’re doing and having a strong sense of the importance of the choices you’re making. This is one of the most important set of qualities you can bring to the meditation. It helps keep you on track. Remember, a lot of the Buddhist teachings place a lot of responsibility on you. Here you are given a path that’s meant to aim to your true happiness. You’re not asked to sacrifice your happiness for any other higher purpose, but you are warned that there are various ways of sacrificing happiness, some of which end up in misery, some of which end up in a happiness that you may enjoy but causes harm to others. That’s not what you want. The happiness that doesn’t seem harmful to anybody but it’s still conditioned, that’s not what you want. You want something totally unconditioned. So you have to be responsible for what you’re doing. You have to be responsible to make sure that you’re not settling for second best or third best. So try to be as observant as possible, not only while you’re sitting here meditating, but in all of your activities. Because that’s what makes all the difference in the world.

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