Every Little Bit Counts

September 6, 2021

Buddha never says that our goodness comes from innate goodness in the mind. At the same time, he never says that the mind is innately bad. If the mind is innately anything, it’s innately changeable. There was one time when the Buddha was a master of analogies and similes. He said there is no comparison, no simile he can think of, for how quickly the mind can change direction. But it can be developed. Goodness is something that can be developed. The opposite of goodness can also be developed. And the reason we choose goodness is because we’re heedful. The Pali word Appamada is used in two contexts. One is that you’re heedful of dangers. You see that aging, illness, and death can come, will come. And if you’re not prepared, you’re going to suffer. But the Buddha also talks about being heedful of goodness. There’s a passage in the Dhammapada where he says, “Don’t be heedless of acts of merit. Even if water drops, drop by drop by drop, it can still fill a jar full.” It’s good that we pay attention to even little seeming acts of merit. This is not just generosity, virtue, developing thoughts of goodwill. Any kind of goodness, any little way in which you can go out of your way to help other people, to show that you care for them, you respect them, anything you can do to develop harmony within the group, don’t regard it as too small to think about. Don’t be heedless of the goodness you’ve done, or the goodness that you can do, sometimes with little actions. This comes in two contexts. One, just on a day-to-day basis, the little things you can do to brighten the day for yourself, for other people. Don’t regard it as too small. I know of people who’ve gotten themselves out of depression simply by saying, “Okay, I’m going to make up my mind. I’m going to do something good, even if it’s just a little thing.” And then from one good thing it becomes two, and then four, and then sixteen, and 256, and keep expanding. It lifts the mind. And it lifts the mind of the people around you. So always look for the little opportunities to do something good. They’re there. They’re all around us. And don’t regard them as too minor to think about. The other type of goodness that you shouldn’t be heedless of, or you shouldn’t underestimate, is the goodness you’ve done in the past. And John Lee has a whole Dharma talk on this topic. He gave it at the end of the reigns, at a time when a lot of the monks were going to disrobe, a lot of the laypeople were going to go back home. He told the story of a monk back in the time of the Buddha. It’s a story in the commentary. I’m sorry Buddha had a student who was able to get the first jhana in his practice, but then it deteriorated. And then he got so upset with himself that he disrobed. And he couldn’t find a decent livelihood, so he entered the life of crime. And he was caught. And the king at the time decided to make it an object lesson for others. So the idea was, they’re going to make this band of spears. And three times a day, for seven days, he’d have to get up and lie in the bed of spears. The spears were all lined up so their points were up. And he was lifted on top of it and had to lie on the points. Of course, the points penetrated his flesh, penetrated his body, bleeding all over the place. And so he didn’t die before the seven days were up. Meanwhile, on the sixth day, sorry Buddha happened to enter jhana early in the morning, and he checked up on where his students were, where his former students were. He saw that this one student was about to be executed. So he wanted to see if he could get anywhere near him. But he couldn’t get near. He went in his alms round that morning. And there was a huge crowd of people. Some of the people were excited to see the student and the shape his body was in on the sixth day. Others were excited to see sorry Buddha on his alms round. There was one point where the crowd parted a little bit, so the student about to be executed could see the edge of sorry Buddha’s robe. Sorry Buddha went back to the monastery, and the student was thinking, “Before I die, I’ve got to say farewell to my teacher.” So he started thinking about dying. “Where do you die?” “You die right at your nose, when your last breath, that’s where it goes out.” So he decided to focus there, to focus on his breath. And his mind was so intent that he entered the first, second, third, fourth, even the fifth jhana. When he entered the fifth jhana, all his wounds healed. He was able to sit on top of the spears, sit cross-legged. And the spears didn’t penetrate his flesh because of the power of the concentration. And he told himself, “I’ve got to go say goodbye to my teacher now.” So he levitated up off the spears and went to say sorry Buddha. Sorry Buddha made him swear off his life of crime. He didn’t gain any noble attainments, but he was able to escape death at that point. And John Lee gives us an example, even though the good you’ve done may have been way in the past and it wasn’t as much as you wanted it to be. Don’t underestimate it. It’s there as a seed, and the seed can be developed again. So when I think of heedfulness, remember that it goes together with the right view, the right view that our actions really do make a difference. And so when you’re heedful, you pay careful attention to what you’re doing, both avoiding what’s bad and doing what you can that’s good. But regardless, no matter what’s bad, don’t regard little tiny bad things as too small to care about. And the same thing with what’s good. Don’t regard good little things as too small to care about. Don’t underestimate your actions. And with right view and heedfulness, it’s hard to tell which comes first. We develop right view because we’re heedful, and then we’re heedful because we have right view. They go together. Because right view is not simply an interesting set of theories about action. It tells you which kind of actions will lead to happiness and which will lead to pain. And that kind of knowledge is meant to be put into use, to be put into action. That’s why the sermon “Aggregate of the Path” has not only right view but also right resolve. Right view has its duties, and right resolve is to follow through with those duties. So if you’re wise and heedful, you can keep yourself safe. Because the biggest dangers in life are our own actions, our own decisions. The biggest source of comfort and refuge in our lives is also found in our actions. The difference, of course, depends on what kind of actions we do. So we have to pay careful attention to our thoughts, our words, and deeds, in particular to the intentions behind those thoughts, words, and deeds. Always make sure that that stays solid. That you want a happiness that doesn’t harm anybody. Because only a harmless happiness is going to be safe. And when you look around at the world, that’s the only safety there is.

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