The Strengths of Heedfulness

January 29, 2022

All skillful qualities are based in heedfulness, the recognition that there are dangers—both dangers outside, but more importantly, dangers inside. But there are also ways to avoid those dangers. Right view has a little bit of right view and right resolve in it. Right view in the sense that it sees that your actions can make a difference. You are free to choose what you’re going to do, what you’re going to say, what you’re going to think. And you want to act and speak and think in ways that minimize your suffering. That’s basically resolve on non-ill will. At the very least, you have good will for yourself. Everything else that’s good in the mind, the Buddha says, comes from this realization. So you want to cultivate it as much as you can. It forms the basis for the strengths. The Buddha gives two different lists of strengths, five in each list. There’s an overlap. So you come out with seven strengths altogether. But we need these strengths to overcome the unskillful parts of the mind. The ones that don’t care. The ones that are apathetic, or indifferent, or just lazy, saying, “I want what I want right now. I don’t want to have to wait. Even though the pleasures I can get right now may not be the best, still they’re immediately available.” That kind of attitude is heedless because it forgets that your actions will have long-term consequences. It doesn’t really show much good will for yourself. So you try to cultivate as much heedfulness as you can, both in seeing the little dangers that can turn into big dangers, and also the little good things that can turn into big good things. There’s a pair of verses in the Dhammapada where the Buddha says, “Don’t be heedless of acts of merit. Don’t be heedless of bad actions.” He says it’s like a big water jar being filled with water, drop by drop by drop. Eventually it gets full. And the image applies both to the good things you do and to the bad things you do. So which kind of water do you want in your jar? The attitude that says, “The little things I can do that might not be the best things in terms of my long-term true interests, it doesn’t matter.” That attitude, that’s the opposite of heedfulness. And the attitude that says, “Well, the little things I could do that might be good, they’re just so little, they’re not going to amount to much, so I shouldn’t even bother.” That attitude is also heedless. So look for the little good things in the mind. As the Buddha said, “Simply making up your mind your way to do something skillful.” That wish right there is the beginning of what’s going to be skillful for the mind. And then you can build on that. Now, to strengthen the heedfulness, you want to cultivate your conviction. Traditionally this is conviction in the Buddha’s awakening, that you really did awaken to the truth, particularly the truth that puts an end to suffering. He is a truthful person. What he taught is a true account of what can be done. How does that apply to you? Well, in terms of the teachings on karma, your actions do make a difference. Sacrificing immediate pleasures may not be lasting for the sake of long-term pleasures. Things will be lasting, things that don’t harm you in any way. That’s wise. Then you back that up with a sense of shame and a sense of compunction. The shame here, of course, is a healthy sense of shame. Not the sense of shame saying that you’re a bad person. You want the sense of shame that says you’re a better person than the common person. You’re a person who would do unskillful things. You want to look good in the eyes of the wise. You want to look good in the eyes of the people you respect. Think about their attitude. What would they say if they saw your behavior? The people you respect would be compassionate. But that doesn’t mean they’d say, “Well, it doesn’t matter. We’ll just let him do as he likes, make life easy for him.” The people who are really compassionate are the ones who say, “Look, you can do it. You’re going to suffer if you don’t get your act together.” They have your true best interests at heart. The question is, do you have your own true best interests at heart? This builds on the principle the Buddha said is the most important external principle for awakening, and that’s admirable friendship. You live with good people. You want to look good in their eyes. And, of course, the best way of doing that is emulating their good qualities. Their generosity, their virtue, their conviction, their discernment. Paired with shame is compunction. This is when you just think to yourself, “I don’t want to do things that would lead to harm down the line.” This is the attitude that’s the opposite of apathetic or indifferent. It corresponds with the quality of the Buddha says is the most important one, the most important internal quality for awakening, and that’s appropriate attention. Wanting to avoid doing things that will cause harm and wanting to do things that will lead to good results. Building on that comes persistence. You actually do the work. You look at the images that the Buddha gives for people who practice in the canon, and none of them have to do with people who relax their way or slide down the hill to awakening. It’s always people who are working, people who are struggling, people who are searching, people who are mastering skills. Look at the Buddha himself. What were the qualities, he said, that led to his awakening? There was not only heedfulness, but also ardency and resolution. So you want to do what work needs to be done and see it as good work. After all, the Buddha doesn’t tell you to do anything that’s shameful, anything that’s lowly. It’s all noble. He calls it the noble path. That’s because both the path itself inspires noble actions and it leads to a noble goal. So it’s worth the effort. And then based on that effort, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment are the qualities we develop as we meditate, keeping in mind all the lessons you’ve learned about heedfulness, all the lessons you’ve learned about what really does lead to long-term welfare and happiness. I’m trying to center your mind in a way that makes it easy to keep these lessons in mind. Look right now. Focus on the breath, the body in and of itself. You’re ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. You’re focusing on what you’re doing right here, right now. And you want to do it well. Because the more you find this internal center that’s calm and well-established, the easier it is to remember the lessons the Buddha taught and the lessons you’ve learned from your past mistakes, the lessons you’ve learned from the past things you’ve done well. Because having this solid center inside makes it a lot easier to admit to yourself, “Yes, that was a mistake. I really don’t want to repeat it.” Then you have the strength to stick with that resolve. As the mind settles down, you get into states of concentration where everything gathers together right here. When the mind is gathered, that’s when it has real strength. And you begin to see, when the Buddha defines it as, “penetrative discernment of arising and passing away, noble leading to the right ending of stress and suffering,” he says, when he talks about these strengths. You’re not just watching things coming and going and saying, “Well, it’s interesting to watch this come and go.” For your insight to be penetrative, one has to see, when things arise, where do they come from? When they arise, are they for good or not? Are they helping you with your hatefulness? Are they getting in the way? So you want to recognize what things in the mind you can trust and what things you can’t trust. And you also discern how to abandon what you can’t trust and to develop what you can. So you can see that hatefulness underlies everything here. Seeing the importance of your actions and seeing that even little things can make a big difference, you’ve got to be careful. And as you nurture those little things, they grow. It’s like a little fire. You light the fire. It’s a windy day. And if you’re not careful, the wind will blow the fire out. But you cup your hands around it, protect it. After all, the fire takes. It ultimately gets to the point where even the wind can’t blow it out. In the beginning, you have to be very, very careful, because the fire can get blown out so easily. They’re the winds of the world. They’re the winds of your own mind. Don’t let them blow out the goodness that you’ve been trying to develop. Value the goodness. See that it really is your most important possession. Because if you don’t value it, who’s going to? You look at the way the rest of the world treats us. They’re concerned about what they can get out of us. And as for whether it’s going to be good for us or not, that’s nothing of their concern. So we’re the ones who have to look after our true best interests. If we do it wisely, we’re not going to be harming anybody. As Ajahn Suet once noted, there’s a drawing they have in Thailand where they take the Thai phrase “yahin kathua,” which means “don’t be selfish,” and they make it into a little Buddha image. “Don’t” is the head. “Be” is the neck. “Selfish” is written in such a way that it looks like the rest of the body, the Buddha image. Ajahn Suet says that they’ve got it all wrong. It’s not that you shouldn’t look after yourself. The term “yahin kathua” in Thai can also mean “don’t look after yourself” or “don’t be concerned about yourself.” You have to be concerned about yourself. You simply learn how to do it in a wise way. If you really are concerned about yourself, you’ve got to be heedful. And there’s nothing wrong with that. In fact, that’s the beginning of everything that’s good in the path. So show some concern. Because if you don’t, nobody will.

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