Confident Heedfulness

August 15, 2023

As the Buddha said, heedfulness is the root of all skillful qualities. It’s the quality of the mind that sees that there are dangers, but is also confident that you can overcome those dangers. After all, if you couldn’t overcome the dangers out there or in your mind, there’d be no use in trying to make any effort at all. You can see this in the role that heedfulness plays in developing the five faculties and the five strengths. You start out with conviction, conviction in the Buddha’s awakening. A part of that awakening did show the Buddha that there are dangers in samsara, people can very easily get complacent, start acting in unskillful ways, and suffer a lot. But the awakening also taught that it is possible through our efforts to attain total freedom. And that’s the main emphasis of the awakening. It was through the freedom that the Buddha discovered that he was able to guarantee the truth of the other realizations that led there. So based on that conviction, then you have the energy to develop persistence. In other words, focus on the causes that will lead to skillful qualities. Abandon the things that will lead to unskillful qualities or unskillful behavior. But remember, you’re doing something positive here. The heedfulness here also means looking at the results of your actions and not being too easily satisfied, but also not being too easily discouraged, because that’s a danger too. If you get too discouraged in the path, it saps your strength. So remember that heedfulness contains confidence. And it’s through that that you develop the other strengths. Mindfulness, concentration, discernment. Because you realize that if you’re forgetful, you’re going to lose on the advantages that could come from the various lessons you’ve learned. If your mind is not concentrated, you don’t get much rest, you don’t get much sense of well-being out of the path. And you also don’t get the opportunity to see things clearly, because your mind is running around, focusing a little bit here, a little bit there. You’re not giving the perceptions of concentration a chance to make a change in your mind. Because after all, that’s what we’re doing here. We’re training the mind so we can change it. It’s got a lot of unskillful qualities, and you want to be able to overcome them, because they have a lot of power in the untrained mind. And so you want to give power to your concentration. You hold on to one object. One perception. Here it’s going to be the perception of the breath. And learn that there are different skillful perceptions that you can use. When you get interested in the breath, you start to forget about how well you’ve been doing in the past, or how well you have not been doing in the past. Because you find there’s something intriguing in the present moment. This is an important element in the concentration. You have to find it interesting. You set the mind on one object, and then it goes wandering off someplace else, as if it weren’t even your own mind. How is that? That’s one thing you might want to explore. You might want to explore this breath energy in the body. How is it that your feelings through the nerves, the blood vessels, are related to the sense of the breath coming in and going out? How can you adjust things so it feels really good being here? After all, this is the force of life. And if it feels tight and constricted, it’s not going to be good for the body, it’s not going to be good for the mind. So explore this. Take an interest in this. Because when you’re focused on concentration, you’re not even thinking about the word “concentration.” You want to be focused on the object, and find it interesting, find it refreshing, a pleasant place to be. So if it’s not pleasant right now, how can you change it? Look into that. Take an interest in that. That’s where the concentration comes quickly or slowly. The fact that you’re not worried about it allows it to come. You’re just fascinated by the breath, fascinated by what’s going on in the present moment. Here’s where all the decisions in your life are being made. In some cases you’re present, in some cases you’re not. You’re only partially present. Old habits kick in. And sometimes they rule everything, and ruin everything. So you want to find a way of stationing yourself here. You can see clearly what decisions are being made. And it’s in this way that concentration gives rise to insight. Insight into the relationship between the body and the mind in the present moment, insight into the relationship between your various desires, your various decisions, your various intentions. It’s all happening right here. And the Buddha’s not asking you to look someplace far away. Because all the important work is being done right here. The cause of suffering is right here. But the qualities you can develop to put an end to that suffering, they’re right here too. So everything you need is right here. It’s just a question of putting it together in the right way. At this point, thoughts of heedfulness begin to fade into the background. But they’re there. You’re doing this because you realize if you don’t understand your own mind, if you don’t get some control over your own mind, there’s going to be trouble. The Buddha uses several terms that are very close to heedfulness. He defines them in ways that are close to heedfulness. One is a sense of compunction. We talked about it last night, “ottapa.” The simple desire not to do things that are unskillful, and an actual fear of doing things that are unskillful. Because you know they’re going to have bad results. Related to that is discernment, which comes from that question, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?” These qualities are all related. Simply that heedfulness and compunction, as they work together, yield discernment. Because they strengthen discernment with your mindfulness, your concentration, all the strengths. They give the mind the energy it needs, the strength it needs, to make changes in itself. Fortunately, you don’t have to focus on the mind directly to change it. You focus on your actions. What decisions are you making? And you try to make them more and more consistently skillful, heedful, wise. And as you get used to making more skillful decisions like this, the mind changes. It grows stronger. The balance of power inside changes. The part of the mind that says, “I don’t care about the results of my actions. I just want to do what I want to do,” that gets weakened. Because you can see, bit by bit by bit, that you are more able to focus on the long-term. And you find that really is pleasant. Because the Buddha is not saying, “Do horrible things in the present moment, but then the reward will come at the end.” You have to do good things. You’re being generous. You’re being virtuous. You’re developing the qualities of the mind that can make you see clearly, “Oh, these are good things.” And there’s a sense of well-being that comes simply by doing them here in the present moment. So remember that heedfulness has this positive side as well, in the confidence that, yes, you can master skills, you can train the mind, train your actions in such a way that you can avoid the dangers of your own defilements, the dangers of getting influenced by the defilements of other people. So when you think about being heedful, it’s not just trying to overcome your complacency and overconfidence. It’s also a matter of reading your own mind and seeing when it’s going in the other direction, lacking confidence. Then it can remind you, “Well, that’s not the right path either.” As the Buddha says, you want to develop a sense of yourself that you are confident and competent to do it. The conceit that Ananda talks about, realizing other people have done this, well, they’re human beings. They didn’t start out perfect. Even the Buddha didn’t start out perfect. They were able to do this. Why can’t I? That’s a heedful thought, because it means you’re leaving open the possibility that, yes, as the Buddha said after his awakening, it is possible through human effort to find something doubtless. So remember both the stern side of heedfulness and the confident side. Because as they act together, they’re what makes your skillful mind states a complete set.

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