Heedful & Mindful

October 10, 2023

The Buddha said that all skillful qualities come out of heedfulness. Heedfulness is the recognition of danger. There are dangers in the world outside. There are dangers in the mind. We have greed, aversion, delusion. We give in to these things. They can make us do things we’re going to regret. But it’s not the case that we have to give in to those dangers or that we have no recourse against them. If we didn’t have any way to avoid them, there’d be no need for heedfulness. It wouldn’t do any good. The fact is that we can overcome those dangers, make ourselves safe from them, by training the mind in its good qualities. That’s why heedfulness is important, why it’s worthwhile, a good attitude to develop. We sometimes like to think that our good qualities come from a natural goodness inside us. We do have good intentions, but the mind, as the Buddha said, is very changeable. It’s capable of all kinds of things. It can change direction very quickly. So we can’t depend on it. That’s why it has to be trained. That’s what we’re doing right now, giving the mind a training for the sake of being able to avoid those dangers. This is our motivation, one of our motivations. It goes together with compassion. We have compassion for ourselves, compassion for those around us, realizing that if we’re careless, we can do a lot of harm. So when you say that all good qualities come out of heedfulness, it may sound a little harsh. But it does have its emotional plus side, as one might say. Discernment comes out of heedfulness. Compassion, purity, all the Buddha’s virtues come out of heedfulness. Discernment is basically what comes from the 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 questions are motivated by heedfulness. You realize that what you do will make a difference. But you want to know how to make that difference and how to make it in the right direction, leading away from suffering. As for compassion, you realize that if your happiness depends on other people’s suffering, it’s not going to last. They’re going to do what they can to destroy it. So to keep your happiness safe, you have to think about the happiness of others and take that into consideration to make sure you don’t cause them any harm. And finally, purity. You want to make sure that your actions really do fall in line with the principles of what’s skillful and what’s not, what’s wise and what’s not, what’s compassionate and what’s not. You don’t trust yourself just to go on good intentions. Good intentions need to be trained. There’s a training that the Buddha recommended to his son, Rahula. You look at your intentions and you ask yourself, “Do you expect any harm?” If you expect any harm, either to yourself or to others, you don’t do it. You don’t act on those intentions. You act only on intentions that you expect to be harmless. These are the intentions that are easiest to learn from. If you intended harm and you ended up causing harm, it’s very easy for the mind to hide that fact, hide the fact of its original intention from itself. But if you’re clear that your intention is not to cause any harm and yet you do end up causing harm, you’ve learned something. What you thought was good was not. What you thought was okay was not. So when you’re acting on a good intention, you have to watch, one, the results that are coming out right as you’re doing the action, because some things happen immediately. Some actions give rise to their results right away. If you see that you’re actually causing harm when you thought you weren’t going to be causing harm, you stop. You wait until the action is done, if it doesn’t cause any harm. But then you look for the long-term consequences, because sometimes the consequences don’t come right away. If you see that you’re causing harm, then you go talk it over with someone else and you determine that you’re not going to repeat that mistake. That’s how you train your good intentions to be skillful. It’s based on the principle of heedfulness that you can’t trust every good intention or well-meaning intention that comes into the mind, because the mind does have its own delusions. Some of its biggest delusions are not its basic goodness, or what it thinks to be its basic goodness. So this is where heedfulness leads to skillfulness. You realize that there are a lot of things in your own mind that you can’t trust. So you develop what qualities you think are good, and then you examine them as you act on them. And then as you learn less and less lessons from what works and what doesn’t work, what’s harmful and what’s harmless, that’s how you stock your mindfulness. Because mindfulness is the ability to keep something in mind. You learn these lessons, you don’t want to forget them. So mindfulness is inspired by heedfulness, motivated by heedfulness. It’s not the case that each present moment is a wonderful world of possibilities that we should be open to. It’s the freshness and the newness of the moment. That’s a very heedless way of approaching life. The right way is to realize that there are patterns out there of what’s skillful and what’s not skillful, and you can learn from them. You don’t want to keep asking that question. Given the situation right now, what would be the most skillful thing to do so that the consequences of my actions will not cause harm either right now or on into the future? It’s good to remember some basic principles. This is what the Buddha taught. We hear so much about mindfulness being simply being present, open to the present moment. But if that’s all it was, the Buddha wouldn’t have taught so much. There’s a passage about the Buddha’s set that he lived to a hundred years, and there were people to ask him questions about mindfulness every day, all day long. They still wouldn’t come to the end of his knowledge about mindfulness. They’d die beforehand, his knowledge about mindfulness. So there’s a lot to know. There’s a lot to remember. Fortunately, you don’t have to remember everything all the time. It’s more a case of learning lessons from your actions and then filing that knowledge away. And you’ll find that you get the mind quiet and in concentration. The things that you’ve learned from the past that are relevant to what you’re doing right now will come to you. It’s simply because the mind has so many ins and outs, so many different ways that can combine its defilements. Even though there are only three big ones, they have lots of little versions. And they can come in all kinds of combinations and very easily fool you, because a lot of them depend on delusion. So you do have to keep in mind the lessons you’ve learned. Based on the principle that actions do follow a pattern, the Buddha gives you the general principles of that pattern. But for the precise working out, you’ve got to use your own powers of observation. As he said, you act and then you reflect. You did this, what were the results? Were they satisfactory? If not, what would you change? Then try that again. And over time you develop skill. You develop things that are worth remembering. So this way you’re not coming into the present moment with totally new eyes every time. You’re alert to the fact that there may be new situations coming up. But the basic principles apply. And it’s because you’ve learned those basic principles that you don’t have to suffer from what you’re going to do. I was reading someone saying that we have to let go of all preconceived notions and approach the present moment in its infinite possibilities. A lot of those infinite possibilities involve suffering. And our gift from the Buddha is his guidance. He gives us guidance as to how to avoid that suffering and how we can train ourselves so we don’t have to depend on his guidance. We can take his basic principles and learn how to apply them ourselves for the particularities of our own experience. So it’s in this way that mindfulness is heedful. It’s constantly alert to the fact that there are dangers, but they can be avoided. If you take care, if you’re observant, if you’re honest with yourself. This is why the Buddha said that the qualities he was looking for in a student would be that the student was honest and the student was observant. Because those are the qualities by which you learn. And those are the qualities that are developed by the training that he taught Rahula. So be alert to the fact that your mind can lie to you, but it’s also possible to see through the lies. If it weren’t, the Buddha wouldn’t have bothered teaching us. So the fact that he taught means that he has confidence in our ability to take his teachings and make good use of them if we’re heedful. And that we develop mindfulness in the context of that heedfulness.

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