

Heedfulness is the Path

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Tonight is Visakha Puja, the night that marks the full moon day in the month of Visakha, which straddles May and June. The Buddha was born on the full moon day in Visakha, and thirty five years later on the same night he gained awakening, and forty five years after that on the same night he passed away into total nirvana. So we're commemorating a lot of events tonight, and there are a lot of things to keep in mind in connection with those events. But one very useful teaching connected with them comes from the Buddha's last words before he passed away: "Obtain completion in the practice through heedfulness." He could have ended his teaching career with some nice platitudes about emptiness or nirvana, but instead he emphasized heedfulness as the essence of the practice, the most essential part of the practice. When you look back through the Canon, you find many places where he said that heedfulness is the quality that underlies all the other skillful qualities you develop in the mind.

Heedfulness, *appamada*, can also be translated as vigilance, wariness, non-complacency. In other words, it's the realization that there are genuine dangers in the world and you have to be careful about them. The most important dangers are the ones you create for yourself. Now, this emphasis on being careful is an interesting thing to think about. It means that our actions really do make a difference: You have to be very careful that you don't do things that pose a real danger to yourself. And because your actions come out of your intentions, you have to look at the qualities in your mind that shape your intentions. Those are the real dangers in life.

So, you can't even trust your own mind, or rather, you can't trust everything that comes into the mind, let's put it that way. The question, then, is who can you trust then? It's interesting the Buddha didn't say to trust him or trust his teaching without testing it. In fact his response to the fact that a sense that there is danger in life and that there are dangers inside your own mind is to give you guidelines on how to test your own mind. And in the course of testing it you make your mind more and more reliable, so that you don't give in to laziness or lack of mindfulness, you don't give in to complacency. You realize there are urgent things that need to be done in this life. Our own actions shape so much of our lives, and it's so easy to do things that are careless, so easy to do things that are just the quick way out. So we have to be careful. We need to have a sense of urgency, a sense of heedfulness in order to protect ourselves from those qualities.

The most disconcerting of all the qualities in the own mind is our own delusion, our tendency to lie to ourselves and to believe our lies. This is not an issue of being deluded about truths that are far away. It concerns very simple things, things close at hand. Many times we're out of touch with our own intentions. We're out of touch with what we are actually doing. We're out of touch with the results of our actions. And it's precisely here in these areas that we can create the most danger for ourselves. We can lie to ourselves about our intentions. When we do something that causes harm, we can lie to ourselves that it wasn't really harmful, or doesn't really matter, or we really didn't do it to begin with. Those are the qualities in the mind you have to watch out for, to be the most careful about, the most heedful about.

This is why when the Buddha gave his most basic teachings to his son, he started with precisely this issue: first, being honest with yourself, being truthful to yourself, and then, second, being careful to focus your attention on your intentions, on your actions, and on the result of your actions. He said to look at intention every time you act. What results do you expect from this action? If they're going to be harmful, don't do it. Here the important point is to be very clear that what you're going to do is sure to have consequences. Many times we tend to forget: We do something because we like to do it and would rather not think about the consequences. Sometimes we insist that we're not responsible for the consequences. But every time you choose to act there has to be a purpose, there has to be something you hope to attain by the action, so ask yourself precisely what do you hope to get out of this? What results do you expect? If they're results going to be harmful, don't do the action, don't act on the intention. If they don't seem harmful then you go ahead and act.

While you are acting, you watch to see precisely what results are beginning to come from the action, because many times those results will come right then and there. You don't have to wait until your next lifetime to see the results of your actions. Many of them come up right away. So watch for that. If there are some unexpected harmful results, stop, don't continue with the action. If you find no harmful results, you can go ahead with the action.

Then when the action is over, you look for the long term results. When you've seen something that may have seemed harmless while you were doing it but it actually did cause harm over time, you consult other people on the practice to make sure your perception is correct. At the very least, get their perspective on the matter so that you're not operating only on your own perspective. Then, when you've seen both from your own and from the perspective of the wise that your action was a mistake, then make up your mind that you're not going to do it again. This applies to your thoughts and your words as well, not just to your physical actions.

The same pattern goes all the way through the practice. There are other discourses where the Buddha says to look at the way you relate to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. If the way you relate is causing harm, then don't relate in that way. Watch what you are doing to see where you're causing harm simply in the way you react to your sensory input. When you're practicing meditation, once you settle in to a stage of concentration step back a bit and see what you're doing in this process of concentration that's still causing a disturbance or placing a burden on the mind. When you catch sight of the perception that's causing the burden, you drop it.

In this way the Buddha teaches us to cut through our delusion by watching precisely these things: what our intentions are, what our actions are, what the results of our actions are, both immediately and long term. In this way—as we apply this test to our actions and resolve not to repeat any mistakes we've already made—we find that the process of testing ourselves in this way makes us more and more reliable, turns us into people of integrity, people that we can trust.

One of the biggest dangers in life is not being able to trust yourself. If you're a good person as long as things are going comfortably and there are no great disturbances, the Buddha says that that's not enough to know if you are really reliable. But when there are difficult circumstances and you see that you can still maintain your precepts, maintain your integrity, that's when you have a sense that you can begin to trust yourself. Once you can trust yourself, you have an inner standard that helps you know when you can trust other people. When you're choosing a teaching to follow, you can become the best judge of whether the teacher is good or his teaching is good when you yourself become more and more a person of integrity. As the Buddha said, a person of integrity can tell when someone else has integrity or not. People without integrity can't tell. They themselves are used to lying to themselves and believing their own lies, so it's easy for them to lie to themselves about other people. But when people are truthful, when they have that element of integrity inside, they can sense its presence or absence in other people. In this way you can develop a reliable sense of which teachings are reliable, that you can follow with confidence, and which ones you have to be wary of.

So this is what heedfulness teaches us. When the Buddha counsels heedfulness, he's not teaching you simply to be wary and skeptical. He's giving you precise tests for how you can test things, guidelines for how you can test things, so that you can find what within you is reliable. Once you find what's reliable within you, then you can look around to other people you're hoping to learn from and see what's reliable in them. In that way heedfulness is not simply

a wariness; it's a wise way of gauging the different approaches we might possibly use in living our lives.

And this is also why heedfulness is the number-one basic quality for developing what's skillful within you. To begin with, it gives you a sense of the importance of your actions and of the potential dangers of acting in unskillful ways. Once you have a sense of the dangers and some good guidelines for testing your actions so as to root them out, then you find that you develop more and more integrity as a person. You sense the importance of being skillful in everything you do, say, and think—and that means that you're going to be more careful in what you do, say, and think.

It's in this way that the practice achieves completion. Heedfulness is a basic teaching but—as the Buddha pointed out in making it the topic of his very last sentence—it's essential to all the practices we undertake to find true happiness. That's what the story of the Buddha's awakening, the story of his passing away, was all about: the serious search for true happiness—realizing that there are so many forms of happiness out there that seem desirable but are not really reliable, and then looking at the actions that we do in quest of those forms of happiness, to see which ones we can trust and engage in with a sense of confidence, and which ones we have to abandon, to drop.

So those were the Buddha's last words, his final recommendation for how to practice in a way that you really do develop a true happiness, a reliable happiness, a happiness that's not dependent on conditions. And to find this happiness, you don't have to look very far. Look at what you're doing. Keep the practice close to the ground. Look at your intentions, look at your actions, look at the results of your actions, and be very truthful to yourself about these three things. If you're truthful right here, then you'll find the truth, and the truth of the Deathless will be attainable. Truth is not a quality of statements—"Is this statement true? Is that statement true?" Ultimate truth is quality of the mind: the mind's truthfulness with itself, its willingness and its ability to admit the truth and to act on the truth. And that's how the truth is found in other ways as well.

So we don't look for the truth outside, we start looking for it within. Once you gain this touchstone for testing the truth within yourself, then you can recognize it when you see it outside yourself as well. This is important. If we don't find this kind of truth, we're subject to all kinds of delusions, all kinds of misunderstandings. We don't really have any sense of who outside we can trust, and that puts us in a dangerous situation. There really is danger in this world. But the potential for security is not something that lies outside; it lies more within ourselves. It lies within our capacity to overcome that danger, to provide ourselves safety from that danger.

So you can imagine the monks at the night of the Buddha's awakening: They're expecting some special, exoteric teaching on the wonders of nirvana or the wonders of the deathless and they get this teaching instead. It turns them back on themselves, what they're doing right now. So the teaching should also make us also reflect on what *we're* doing right now as well. The teaching comes across two thousand six hundred years and points right at your nose, right between your eyes. Of all the things the Buddha could have said on the last night right before he entered total nirvana, this is what he left as his final legacy for the human race: the reminder to be heedful. As he said, all fabricated things are subject to change, subject to passing away. It's through heedfulness that we find what's not subject to change, what's not subject to passing away, something that's not fabricated. As he said, "Heedlessness is the path to death, but heedfulness is the path to the deathless." And it all starts right here within our own minds.