

## *Heedful of Small Dangers*

*March 26, 2005*

*Those who see danger and respect being heedful:* one of the passages in the chant just now. What danger is it talking about? Most dangers come from within: greed, anger, delusion—all the unskillful mental states that can lead to unhappiness for ourselves, unhappiness for other people. Those are the dangers. To respect being heedful means that you realize you can make a difference through your actions. If you couldn't make a difference, there wouldn't be any need to be heedful. You'd just have to accept the fact that these dangers could hit at any time, and there'd be nothing you could do about them. The Buddha said not to accept that. The dangers are there but we have the power to ward them off by developing good skillful qualities in the mind.

He once said that heedfulness lies at the base of all skillful qualities. So when you respect being heedful, it's like having respect for the skillful side of your mind, the side that can lead to true happiness.

So have some respect for that ability. What does it mean to respect? We're a culture that's pretty bad at respect. Everything gets trashed. If you pick up that attitude, it's impossible to practice. Respect means valuing something. When heedfulness speaks in your mind, you want to listen. The side that says, "Watch out for this, watch out for that, encourage this, encourage that": You want to learn how to listen to that and implement it in your life.

The Buddha once said that the sign of wisdom means, when there's something you'd like to do but you know it's going to give bad results, you're able to talk yourself out of it. It also means seeing something that you don't like to do but gives good results, and you're able to talk yourself into wanting to follow that action. It's a very pragmatic definition of wisdom. It's a wisdom that matters—having respect for your long-term happiness and showing it respect in the way you manage your mind.

After all, if you can't respect your own long-term happiness, how can anybody trust you? You can't trust yourself. Other people can't trust you. You're like the rest of society: You just trash everything. So this is an important first step in the practice. Ajaan Suwat would often emphasize this: You've got to practice with a sense of respect, a sense of conviction, that the training of the mind really is important, that it really does make a difference, and that you value the good qualities of mind as you would value gold.

Of course, this takes energy, so you have to watch out the ways in which you squander your energy. And look for ways to strengthen the mind, which is what we're doing right here, right now: giving the mind strength, trying to get the mind to be still and provide it with at least a square inch of stillness inside. There may be a lot of chatter going on in the mind, but you have to learn how to treat that chatter with less respect than you do this little spot of stillness, this one lone intention that says, "Stay with the breath, stay with the breath. Be quiet. Breathe quietly. Give the mind a place to be still."

It's in stillness that the mind gains its strength. It's not like the body. The body has to move around a lot in order to keep its strength up. If the body were to lie still all the time, it'd get weak. But the strength of the mind comes from stillness. Otherwise, it fritters all of its energy away thinking about this, thinking about that, wondering about this, doubting that, angry about this or that. Those activities don't give any strength to the mind at all. Strength comes from letting it be still and protecting its stillness.

You develop your first level of wisdom in the practice of concentration as you learn how to sidestep the distractions that would pull you away, the thoughts that say, "You've got to think about this, you've got to worry about this, now you've got a whole hour, let's think about this. You'll enjoy it." You've got to treat those with a measure of disrespect, skepticism, because if you're not skeptical about your own unskillful thoughts, then other people can insert unskillful thoughts into your mind, slipping into the footsteps of what you're already doing, and you don't suspect them of anything at all. You may have noticed that angry people find it easiest to pull other angry people to their cause, or greedy people find it easiest to dupe other greedy people. They take advantage of their weaknesses. They take advantage of their unskillful qualities. If you feel that these qualities have an influence on your mind, it's hard to withstand the same influences from outside.

But if you can learn to be skeptical about your own thoughts and opinions, it's a lot easier to be skeptical about other people's—skeptical in a healthy way. In other words, you have to examine things that come into the mind,= to decide whether you want them there or not. Then you're in a position where, if you find something that's not skillful, you can say No, because you've got something better. You've got this spot of stillness.

The reason why the Buddha in that chant emphasized not only being respectful for being heedful, but also having respect for concentration, respect for the training: All this comes points to having respect for this spot of stillness in the mind. It seems so small to begin with. It doesn't seem to be very powerful at all.

But you've got to give it space, you've got to work at it, because it has the potential for helping you a lot. It has the potential for a lot of power.

As the Buddha said, you can't be careless about small snakes, because small snakes can have a lot of venom. You can't be careless about small fires because small fires can become big. You can't be careless about little princes, because little princes can grow up and they can bear grudges. In the same way, you can't be careless about this little spot of stillness in mind, because it's your only hope. And it can become larger if you work at it.

So give the mind a good place to settle down and show respect for that place. You've got the breath. Try to make the breath as comfortable, as calm as possible, to calm the mind down when it's agitated, or to energize it when you need energy. Learn how to use the breath as a balancing medicine. In the old days, they would talk about medicine as balancing out different humors or the different potentials in the body. That's precisely how the breath works with the body and mind.

So look at your mind. If it's too agitated, think of breathing very calm and still. If you feel getting sleepy, energize the breath. Show respect for your breath, because it can form the basis for a lot of skillful qualities, and for those skillful qualities to make a lot of difference if you give them the chance.