

Goodness Comes from Heedfulness

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One of the first lessons you learn as you meditate is how tricky and disobedient your mind can be. You make up the mind you're going to stay with the breath, and five minutes later you find yourself someplace else, thinking about the past, thinking about the future, anything but the breath. If you try to trace it back, it's hard to remember the point where the mind left the breath and got involved in something else.

The mind does have this tendency to blank out when it's switching from one thought world to the next. It's almost as if the blanking out is intentionally meant for you to forget the old world and be in the new one. So when you realize this has happened, you bring the mind back to the breath and you make up your mind you're going to be observant and very wary. What usually happens is that the mind is with the breath, but there's a part that gets bored, that wants something new to think about, that wants a little entertainment, and even while you're with the breath, it starts feeling around for someplace else to go.

So you've got to watch for that. This quality of watchfulness is probably one of the most important skills you're going to have to develop as you meditate, realizing that just because you've made up your mind you're going to do something good doesn't mean that all the mind is going along with the decision. It's as if you've got to committee in there—or it's more like the Chicago City Council. Some of the people will go along for a little while and then do what they can to subvert your decisions. So you've got to watch out for this.

And be watchful. The Pali word for this is *appamada*, heedfulness, realizing that there are dangers not only outside but also in your own mind. This is why we suffer from our own lack of skill, from our own lack of discernment as to what we can do that will lead to happiness. We have other ideas that pull us away someplace else.

So we can't be complacent. The Buddha's last instructions were to achieve completion through heedfulness—in other words, sensing that there's danger, but also trusting that there's something you can do about it. You're not totally helpless in the face of danger, but you must have a very alive sense of where dangers lie.

The primary ones lie inside. This is important. Sometimes you hear that the Buddha says we're essentially good, that we have a very trustworthy good nature that somehow has gotten distorted, but we can trust in our good intentions and in

our basic goodness. The Buddha never taught that. We've got all kinds of potentials in the mind. There are good ones, there are bad ones, skillful ones and unskillful ones. You can't trust that the good ones will always pull you through. You've got to be alert, you've got to be mindful, but simply being alert and mindful will not make you do the right thing. You also have to keep in mind the fact that what you really want is a lasting happiness and not just a short-lived one. This means you have to learn how to look for cause and effect, because this is the ignorance that keeps us suffering. We don't see the connection between what we're doing and the suffering that we meet up with in life.

We need to develop our discernment so that we can see these connections. It's only when we really see these connections in action that the lessons go to the heart in a way that we don't forget. We can hear about them, we can read about dependent co-arising on how ignorance gives rise to all these forms of suffering, but unless we actually see it happening, it's going to be just words. So you have to learn how to watch and be wary.

Remember, Buddhism was found in the wilderness. The Buddha went out and practiced in the wilderness, an area where people have to be wary because there are dangers all around and you can't let yourself be complacent. You can't just trust in things. You've got to watch, see what you're doing, see what the connections are between your actions and your happiness, your actions and your suffering. Do your best in this way to chip away at your ignorance.

In the course of doing this, you have to develop four qualities: goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. Limitless goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. You realize that if you do anything unskillful, if you harm anybody, it's going to cause trouble down the line. You want to develop the attitudes that will help protect you from being careless in your actions, heedless of other people's needs, heedless of their well-being, and heedless of your own needs and well-being.

These attitudes don't come naturally. I was reading today someone saying that all you have to do is make your mind clear, and your natural good nature will come out and make you benevolent, compassionate, and appreciative. But it doesn't always work that way. Some people can be very clear-sighted and still very narrow minded—clear-sighted in a narrow way. The sublime attitudes are attitudes you have to consciously develop. You have to work on them so that they get more and more dependable, so that they can inform your actions based on the realization that goodwill is in your own best interest. If your happiness depends on oppressing other people, they're not going to stand for it. They're going to do

their best to end your happiness. So if you want to be happy, you have to take their well-being into consideration. Keep that in mind.

Then develop qualities of the heart that make it easier to act on it. There are actually three elements in the qualities of the heart that we develop, three different kinds of what we call fabrication. There's bodily fabrication, which is the in-and-out breath. This plays a huge role in your emotions, the way you breathe. If you breathe in ignorance, it can be a cause for suffering. This is one of the reasons why we focus on the breath as a primary form of meditation. If you can breathe with awareness, with a sense of ease and well-being, it's a lot easier to think good thoughts about other people's happiness, other people's well-being as well. If the way you breathe is causing you to suffer, it's going to put pressure on the mind. It's going to squeeze the mind into an uncomfortable corner. When the mind feels ill at ease in the present moment, you start getting cynical about other people's well-being, too. So when we focus on the breath, making the breath comfortable, it's not just for our own good. It helps lead us to have an attitude that's a lot more conducive to other people's well-being as well.

That's bodily fabrication. Then there's what's called verbal fabrication: the way you direct your thoughts and evaluate things. On the one hand, this applies to the breath. You evaluate the breath and try to make it more comfortable. You also learn how to evaluate the situation around you when you're going to act in ways that affect not only yourself but other people, too. Keep in mind the principle of karma, that if you harm someone else, if you act on unskillful intentions, it's going to come back to you. So you have to learn how to think in that way and start looking at all your actions in this way as well.

Then there are mental fabrications: feelings and perceptions. Again, this applies both to the breath and to situations outside. Applied to the breath, it means looking at the way you breathe, understanding the breath in a way that enables the breath to be nourishing throughout the whole body, so that you can give rise to feelings of ease, rapture, serenity throughout the whole body. Think of the breath as a whole-body process. It's the energy that comes in and out of the body, or moves throughout the body, through all the nerves, through all the blood vessels.

When you take this into consideration, when you have that perception in mind, you look at your sensations in the body and you begin to see that there are areas of the body that you thought were blocked because they were solid, so they had to feel blocked. But they're not solid, so they don't have to. Think of them as breath. You're going to open them up, release the blockage, and the body becomes a much more comfortable place to be.

Then you take that same principle and apply it to other people, other beings. Learn how to perceive them as your companions in birth, aging, illness, and death. They're suffering, too, so why would you want to add to their suffering? What do you get out of their suffering? You learn to perceive that other people's suffering is not helpful to you at all. Even when they've been bad to you, nasty to you, the idea of wanting them to see them get theirs doesn't accomplish anything for you. The more they suffer, the more they're likely to act in unskillful ways.

This line of thinking can give rise to feelings of empathy. When you sense they're suffering pain, you have compassion for them. When they're happy, you learn not to be resentful of their happiness. When you realize that their pain is something you can't help, okay, that's when you learn to develop equanimity. You develop that perception and keep it in mind, that you want to focus on areas where you can be of help, where you can make a difference. If you waste your time fretting over areas where you can't, you're missing some important opportunities. You're draining your strength and you become less effective in the areas where you could have been of help.

In this way, you learn how to develop the fabrications that give rise to attitudes of goodwill. It's not natural. It's not part of your nature, but you can develop these attitudes through being heedful, through being mindful and alert, through gaining discernment about cause and effect, and understanding about how true happiness comes about. You can start developing the bodily fabrications, the verbal fabrications, and the mental fabrications that lead to greater compassion, that lead to greater happiness, that enable you to feel unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity, when these things are appropriate.

These are just a few of the ways in which heedfulness helps you develop the right attitudes, not only in the meditation, but also in your dealings with other people. You have to realize you can't just fall back on what you think may be good intentions, your good nature, because sometimes your good intentions are blinded by delusion. What you think is a good intention may not be so. What you think maybe a good action may not be so. You've got to watch, learn from your mistakes, see connections. Always keep in mind the fact that if you don't see these things, you're going to cause yourself trouble, or you're going to cause trouble for other people. You've got to be heedful. You've got to be alert.

The more you see these connections, the more this committee of the mind begins to work together. After all, all the impulses of the mind are aimed at happiness, it's just that some of them are more blind than others. So you develop heedfulness to work through the blindness, the carelessness, sloppiness, and laziness that make you do things that are harmful.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha boiled everything down in his last instructions to that word heedfulness. So always keep that in mind. And think about its implications, because they permeate everything in the path.