

Looking After Yourself

October 19, 2010

The Buddha's last words were to reach completion in the practice by being heedful, which focuses attention on the word *heedful*. It's important to notice who he was talking to. The text tells us that all the monks in the assembly were at the very least stream-enterers, in other words, people who'd had their first taste of awakening, their first taste of the deathless, and were guaranteed full awakening sometime in the future. And even they, he said, had to be heedful. That's not the only place in the Canon where he makes that statement that stream-enterers have to be very heedful—to say nothing of people who haven't yet gone that far in the practice.

There's a school of thought saying that the practice is not a practice of doing, it's simply a matter of allowing things to happen, allowing the mind to unfold in its natural direction. But if that were the case, the Buddha wouldn't have stressed heedfulness so much. He said it's the basis for all skillfulness, the basis for the skillful qualities we need to develop on the path—which means we have to be very careful.

On the one hand, the mind does have its own rhythms. There are times when you can't push it too hard. But at the same time, you have to watch out for that, because sometimes the rhythm may be just the rhythm that's going to go back to its old ways. So you have to be very careful. You have to use your discernment.

And you have to learn how to watch out for yourself, look after yourself as you practice. It's not the case that you're going to have a teacher around all the time to point you in the right direction. Even if there is a teacher around, sometimes you don't listen to him because the mind has a mind of its own.

I remember once when I was up in Northeastern Thailand, I met a monk who said he'd been to see Ajaan Maha Boowa. He had told Ajaan Maha Boowa that he knew his own personality traits and he knew he couldn't live with an ajaan, so he was going to have to practice on his own. He asked Ajaan Maha Boowa for a teaching that would help keep him on track. And Ajaan Maha Boowa told him a classic teaching in the Canon. In Thailand they call it the three teachings that can't be argued with. I forget the precise Pali term, but it's basically three ways of looking after your life. One is knowing moderation in eating. The second is devoting yourself to being wakeful. And the third is restraint of the senses.

Moderation in eating is something that each of us has to figure out for him or herself: how much food is too much, how much food is too little; how slowly you should eat, how quickly you should eat. This is something you have to experiment with. Ajaan Chah has an interesting standard to set for yourself, which is that if you know that within five more mouthfuls you're going to be full, stop and then fill yourself up with water. That requires a lot of sensitivity. Usually we realize that we're full well after the point where the body's had enough.

So you have to be very sensitive to how the body feels as you're eating. This is why it's important to have a good sense of how the breath is going, how the other elements or properties of the body are going as you're eating. Try to maintain a full-body awareness and you'll find that you begin to sense, "Okay, I'm about to get full." That's the point where you should stop, fill yourself up with water, and there you are.

Similarly with wakefulness: Each of us has his or her own bodily rhythms. Some of us require more sleep than others. But try to test to see how little sleep you can get by on and still maintain your focus, still have a sense of ease in the concentration. We're not here to push you into a neurotic breakthrough by denying you sleep. That doesn't get you any closer to awakening. But you do want to learn how to use your concentration as a substitute for sleep, so that when you're tired, your first thought isn't always the pillow. You want to think more about how you get a sense of ease, rest, refreshment from the breath; how to use the breath so that it's healing for the body, healing for the mind. That way, you find you can make do with less and less sleep.

The third teaching is on restraint. And even though the passage focuses on restraint of the senses—in other words, showing restraint in what you take in—it's also important that you have restraint in what comes out, i.e. what you talk about. Both directions can have a huge impact on the mind.

In terms of restraint of the senses: This doesn't mean that you don't look or don't listen to things. It means simply that if you notice that the way you look at something is giving rise to greed, aversion and delusion, you've got to look in another way. The same with your listening and all the other senses.

Think about your motivation for why you're looking at something. Is it to excite greed? Is it to excite anger? It's not the case that the mind just sits there perfectly fine, perfectly clear, and all of a sudden something comes in to stir it up. If it didn't have the desire to get stirred up to begin with, it wouldn't get stirred up.

Ajaan Lee calls this the effluent, the *asava*, that flows out toward things, that goes looking for things to get excited about, passionate about, lustful for, angry about, the whole range of defilements. There's part of the mind that enjoys them. You get bored so you start looking for trouble. That's the first thing you've got to watch out for.

If you notice that you're already looking at something in a way that's giving rise to greed, aversion, or delusion, learn to look at it in a different way. When you look at a body, if you find yourself getting lustful, think about all the parts of the body that would *not* excite lust. Or if you're angry, think about other people you've seen who've been angry: Remind yourself that if you allow yourself to get angry, you can't really trust yourself to act in a skillful way.

Sometimes it's hard to feel goodwill for other beings because you think they don't deserve our goodwill. You can think of all the evil they've done, and there are plenty of evil people out there who fit that description. But what you've got to remember is that if that's all you can

think about, you're probably going to start doing unskillful things yourself. So it's not just for them that you want to extend goodwill and to think about their good side or wish them well. It's for your own sake, so that you can trust yourself.

So you have to be very careful about what you're taking in, because when you sit down to meditate, you find sometimes you've taken in stuff you've got to clean out—and some of it doesn't want to be cleaned out. It's like allowing pests into your house and realizing too late that they're pests and they don't want to leave. You allow a mouse into the house and all of a sudden it's in the walls, starting a family, and it's not going to leave easily. So you've got to be very careful right there, as they say, at the sense doors. Don't leave the doors open so that pests come in. At the same time, don't allow outside agitators in.

That's thinking about things coming in.

As for things going out, you've really got to be careful with your mouth, what you talk about. Because the things you say can set your own mind on fire, to say nothing of causing trouble for other people. Then, when you sit down to meditate, there you are: Your mind is on fire. How are you going to put it out? It's creating more trouble for you. So you've really got to be careful about your mouth.

These are ways of looking after yourself, ways of being heedful, realizing that the practice is not just what you do when you're sitting in concentration or sitting with your eyes closed or doing walking meditation. It has to do with how you interact with your senses, how you eat, how you sleep, how you find your pleasure, how you find your rest. All of these things have a huge impact on the mind.

And it's a way of training yourself to be your own teacher, your own coach, your own trainer. So even when there's no one else around to look after you, you know the basic principles for looking after yourself. They're all very basic.

We tend to want to hear about wisdom on much higher levels, but the Buddha kept talking about really basic things. Even his definitions of wisdom are really basic. Even something as basic as knowing what's your business and what's not your business: That right there takes a lot of discernment. Knowing that if there's something you like to do but it's going to lead to bad results, knowing how to talk yourself out of it: That's an important kind of discernment as well. It's strategic. Or if there's something you don't like to do but you know that it has to be done, it's going to give rise to good results, you learn how to talk yourself into it. These are the qualities you need in order to look after yourself: basic wisdom, basic heedfulness.

And as always is the case with the basics in the practice, they're basic not because they're kindergarten issues. They're basic because they underlie everything. You can't forget them. You can't lose touch with them. Like that business of learning what's your business and what's not your business: That evolves into understanding which kinds of stress you have to let go of, which kinds of stress you're responsible for, and which ones you're not. And then further, it

develops into the teaching on not-self: what you're responsible for and what you're not responsible for; what you should claim as yourself in a provisional way and what you should learn how to let go of, and the point at which you finally let go of everything. That requires a lot of discernment, and it starts with this basic principle: learning what's your duty and what's not your duty.

And the same with these basic teachings that can't be argued with—knowing moderation in eating, being wakeful, exercising restraint over the senses: You can't forget them if you want to make progress on the path.