

## *The Positive Side of Heedfulness*

*December 25, 2015*

If you could boil the practice down to one word, the word would be heedfulness, *appamada*. As the Buddha said, all skillful qualities have their foundation in heedfulness. They're rooted in heedfulness. And even the Buddha's last words were to obtain completion through heedfulness. When we hear the word—*appamada* could also be translated as being uncomplacent—we tend to think of its negative side. It's basically a warning that there are dangers out there and in here, in the mind, and you've got to be really careful. If you make a misstep, you could get yourself into really deep trouble.

But heedfulness also has a more positive side. After all, the Buddha's pointing to the fact that your actions do make a difference—and they can make a very positive difference. There's that reflection about the heedful monks who think of death with every in-and-out breath, not to be afraid of death or to get morbid, but to remind themselves, "I could do a lot with this one breath I may have left. Or in the time it takes to chew a mouthful of food, I could do a lot in the practice."

What this attitude does is to focus your attention on the positive things that could be done with the little amount of time you might have. And this doesn't have to be just the little amount of time before death. It can also be the little amount of time you have where you've stopped at a stop light, taken a small break at work, when you're waiting in a doctor's office, when you're waiting for the meditation session to begin. It seems like just a little bit of time, but often with little bits of time like that we tend to kill them. "There's nothing much I can do now," we tell ourselves, "so I might as well just relax for a bit," or whatever. But actually there's a lot that can be done in a little bits of time.

Insights can come very suddenly and unexpectedly. So try to create the conditions for them, even if you have only small amounts of time. Don't underestimate what you could do. In Thai, when they took over the word for heedlessness, *pamada*, from Pali, they turned it into *pramaat*, which developed its own meaning in Thai. *Pamada* means heedless. *Pramaat* means to underestimate someone or something, but it has the same double meaning, negative and positive, as heedfulness.

On the one hand, don't underestimate your enemies or the dangers you face inside, but also, on the other hand, don't underestimate yourself. You've got potentials that you can develop and you can do a lot of good with your potentials. This applies not only as you're sitting here meditating, using your ingenuity and

your powers of observation to get to know the breath and to figure out what you can do with the breath energy, but also when you use those same qualities as you go through the day.

All too often, we think of the practice as simply what we do when we're sitting with our eyes closed. But practice is practice everywhere. It's the same mind, the same qualities of mind, that you want to develop, simply in different circumstances. When you're at work, you have opportunities to develop all the perfections. That's practice as well. You can focus on developing powers of patience and endurance, or you can focus on your discernment—because work does require discernment. We had a question today about whether creativity was in line with the Dhamma as you work. Of course it is, it's an exercise of your discernment. Again, all too often, we think of discernment as simply observing things as they're happening. But you don't observe things, really, by just watching them. You have to get involved with them. You have to create good things out of them—as we're doing with the mind right now—and then observe to evaluate what you've done.

If you want to observe the mind, you have to put it into a state of concentration. You don't just sit here watching it as it's doing willy-nilly whatever it's going to do. You have to direct it to an object. Bring it to oneness—*ekaggata*. *Ekaggata* is sometimes translated as one-pointedness: *eka*, one; *agga*, point, *-ta*, -ness. But the word *agga* in there can also mean “gathering place.” Give the mind one gathering place where all of its activities can focus, and try to figure out what will get the mind into a place where it really likes to be. Where would you really like to gather right now? And once you've gathered there, what's good about it and what's not so good about it? If it's not good, what can you change? Use your ingenuity. Change the breath. Change the way you focus. Change the way you adjust the breath.

There are lots of different ways of adjusting the breath. Sometimes you put a little pressure on the breath. Other times you just pose an image in the mind and see how the breath responds. Then you pose another image to see how it responds then. Then for the fun of it, reverse the images to see if that's any better. For instance, after imagining the breath going out to the hands as it comes in, think of it coming into the hands and going up your arms.

This is called using your ingenuity. You encounter things you don't like in the meditation? Okay, how do you work your way around them? How do you live with them? You've got a pain in some part of the body? Okay, you work around on it. You don't focus directly on it. As you work with it, you begin to realize that the extent to which a pain has an impact on the mind has an awful lot to do with

how you engage with it. It's not just a brute fact that has nothing to do with your own involvement.

There are potentials coming in from your past karma, but you've also got your present karma. Make the most of that fact, so that even when you encounter situations you don't like—whether in the meditation, your work, your family life, or your responsibilities around the monastery—see what you can do not to suffer around them.

When I was with Ajaan Fuang, it always seemed that his bouts of psoriasis came at really inconvenient times. Not that I ever wanted him to have a bout, but it sometimes seemed that it was the worst timing in the world in terms of other projects I had to do around the monastery. So whatever else I was doing at the time, I just had to drop it. Then I began to realize that the timing that I thought was bad timing was simply a matter of his disease getting in the way of what I wanted to do. So I had to figure out what it was that was making me miserable around that and learn how to drop it. When you learn to do this, you can live with a lot of situations that you couldn't stand otherwise. As Ajaan Fuang himself would often say, "What do you mean, you can't do this? Is it going to kill you to do it? Well no. Then you can do it."

You have to be up for whatever is presented. This, too, is a development of the qualities you need in the practice: your powers of patience and endurance, your powers of equanimity. And learn to think of these things as powers or strengths. Equanimity is not just a weak indifference. It's being strong enough to be okay with whatever comes up, ready to deal with whatever problems come up as they arise, even when they're coming at really bad times and going against what you would much rather do. But it's a strength to have equanimity.

So look at all the perfections that you could be developing in different ways throughout the day. These are your opportunities. For example, with this one breath here, what's the opportunity right now? For one thing, you're meditating formally. Work at that. Make the most of what you've got. Make the most of this breath and then this breath. Really give each breath your full attention. As for other moments when you're not sitting here with your eyes closed? Make the most of them, too. Realize that there's a lot of good that could be done each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out.

Look for those opportunities. That's also what it means to be heedful. You're not just looking for dangers. You're looking for opportunities, and you try to make sure not to miss them. Sometimes the opportunities are really challenging, but you want to be up for the challenge. That's the positive side of heedfulness.

So don't underestimate yourself. Don't underestimate the dangers out there, but also don't underestimate the possibilities in here. The opportunities are out there and in here as well.

A lot of good can be done in the world. A lot can be done inside. We don't have much time. Even when people have had a long life, a hundred years, at the end of the life, it's not that they have all hundred years present right there. All the hundred years have gone, gone, gone and there's just this moment, this moment. It all seems so small at that point. Realize that you've got this moment right now. It's an opportunity right now. Don't be heedless of the opportunities. After all, little moments can open up large areas inside the mind, large areas of goodness inside the mind, large areas of goodness in the world. Keep looking for those potentials.