

## *To Take Danger in Stride*

*June 28, 2017*

All skillful qualities, the Buddha said, are rooted in heedfulness. Heedfulness is a recognition that there are dangers. The world is a dangerous place. Your mind is a dangerous mind. But it also learns how to take those dangers in stride, realizing that there are skills that you can develop to minimize the dangers. And even though outside dangers are always there, you can learn to overcome the dangers inside the mind—and that's what really counts.

Virtue, concentration, and discernment are basically survival skills. Attitudes of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, learning how to develop those in all situations where they're needed: Those are survival skills, too. As a famous philosopher once said, we live forward but understand backward. We're going to live in the world and we're going to have to make choices about what to do. And a lot of those choices are based on what we've seen in the past. Sometimes things in the past can give us guidance as to what we're facing right now, sometimes not.

So we're always taking a chance but we try to minimize the chances. At the very least, approach every situation with an attitude of goodwill so that if you make a mistake, it's not from your own ill will. It's simply because your goodwill was not well enough informed. That kind of mistake is a lot easier to live with. If you come at a situation hoping to harm somebody else and then you get harmed, well, in one way you got what you deserved. But if your basic underlying intention was good, then if it turned out that it was misinformed, there's a lot less to criticize yourself about, and it's a lot easier to talk it over with somebody else.

So think of goodwill as a survival skill. Concentration is a survival skill as well. When the Buddha was teaching his son how to practice concentration, he started out by saying, "Make your mind like earth. Whatever gets thrown on the earth, the earth doesn't react." If you're going to meditate, you have to have that kind of solidity inside because that's what allows you to see what's actually going on, to recognize when something is not going on well and not get too upset about it. Instead, you keep your cool as you face: "What's wrong here? What can I do to change it? And if I can't figure out how to change it right now, how can I sit here and watch it?"

Part of your ability to live with a mistake or difficult situation is to have something inside that's a safe place you can turn to. Having that attitude of

keeping your mind like earth is one thing you can do to provide yourself with that place.

Another is to learn to be on good terms with your breath so that you have a sense of well-being simply through the way you breathe. This is your center; this is your home. No matter where you are, this is your home. That way, when situations outside are difficult, you remind yourself, “Okay, they can’t take my home away from me.” That’s your safe place. When you’re operating from a safe place like that, it’s a lot easier to try new things out. It’s a lot easier for you to be more ingenious in thinking up new solutions to problems that present themselves.

This is why we keep returning to the breath and learning how to be on good terms with it. Have at least some spot in the body that’s your home, where there’s a sense of well-being. Then learn how to maintain that sense of home and that sense of well-being as you go through life. That way, when something unexpected comes up, at the very least you’re not too far away from home.

It’s like rabbits and ground squirrels. You drive along at night, they’re on one side of the road and their home is on the other side of the road, so they go running in front of the car to go home, and sometimes you can’t help but run over them. That’s what happens if your home is too far away. But if your home is on this side of the road, you stay on the safe side of the road. You don’t go running out in front of the cars. You want your home to be right here, as close to the mind and as close to the body as possible.

And the breath is the closest thing to the mind there is. It’s your basic experience of the body. Even before you experience the solidity of the body, there’s the energy of the breath that gets you in touch with it. Make that energy your home so that you’ll always have a safe place.

Then reflect on that chant that we had just now: Aging, illness, and death are normal. Separation is normal. What you have to hold onto is your karma, the actions you do.

For most of us, aging, illness and death are not normal. Separation is not normal. We’re caught like the deer in the headlights when these things come. There’s a Thai expression: When somebody gets surprised or startled by something, or something really disastrous happens, they say “I’m dead, I’m dead,” which is absolutely the wrong attitude to have. You’re not dead. Or as in English we say, “I’m finished.” You’re not finished. There’s always some way out. And the Buddha gives you a skill here with the meditation so that even if you do die, you know what to do. You don’t go latching onto anything unskillful that comes up in the mind.

So you're not finished. There's always some way out. Always have that attitude. There's always a skillful way to approach things, and you have the right to take that skillful approach. Now, it's up to you to learn the internal skills: the equanimity, the goodwill, all the other qualities that give you a firm foundation so that your mind can be like earth, so that it doesn't have to react, and so that you can take dangers in stride. Because all too often, our way of dealing with dangers is to ignore that the potential is there. Then, of course, when they show up, we're startled. We're caught off our guard. But the Buddha always has you have your guard up. This is what we learn as we sit here with the breath and are watchful.

Because you remember that the real dangers are not so much the dangers outside, they're the dangers in your own mind. A little thought can sneak in and take over and push you in all kinds of directions if you're not careful. So try to be with the breath, try to get a sense of the breath filling your body, your awareness filling your body, and then find a spot to rest someplace inside. Be like the spider on a web. The spider stays in one spot, but as soon as something hits the web it goes over and checks it out, takes care of it, and then goes back to its spot. So if you see the stirring of any kind of thought anywhere in the body at all, breathe right through it, zap it, and then return to your center.

In the beginning, there may be a lot of zapping going on, but as time goes on the mind can spend more and more time in its center just being watchful, having that sense of being solid like the earth. You're in a place where you belong. This is your home. You're coming from a safe place. And even though the world outside may be a dangerous place, you've learned how to make your mind safe. And that will enable you to deal with any danger outside at all. Because remember what you need to preserve more than anything else is in line with that fifth reflection: *kammassako'mhi*, "I'm the owner of my actions." Don't let outside circumstances push you into doing anything unskillful.

Now, you may have to make sacrifices. It's like playing a game of chess. We all want to win at chess and keep all our pieces at the same time, but that's impossible. As you live in this world, there are sacrifices you have to make. So have a clear sense of which sacrifices don't matter all that much and which ones would be really, really detrimental.

As the Buddha said, there are two things you want to maintain: your virtue and your right view. A loss of those, he says, is serious. As for external losses, those are not nearly as serious, because when things outside are lost, they can be regained. But if you lose your virtue and your right view, it's going to be a long, long time before you can get those back, and you can do a lot of damage in the meantime.

So have a sense of your home, a sense of where you're strong and a sense of what your valuables are: your virtue, your concentration, your discernment. And you find that if you're not too eager to hold onto any other thing, you can protect your genuine valuables. Even though you'll make inevitable mistakes in life, you can take them in stride. And even though there are inevitable losses in life, you're still holding onto things of real value.