

Trust in Heedfulness

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The Buddha's last words were to become consummate through heedfulness. Being consummate, of course, means developing the path to its fullness, so that it can take you all the way to release. And the way to do that, he said, is through being heedful. The Pali word is *appamadena*.

It's interesting, that word "heedful." It's not one we use very much in ordinary everyday language. And all the other words that could be used for translating *appamadena* – "by being vigilant," "by being non-complacent": These aren't words we use in everyday language, either. They're perfectly good words – we know their meaning – but in terms of our active vocabulary, they tend to disappear. We'd much rather hear the word "trust," "being trustful." We'd like to be able to trust in certain things: trust that our innate nature is wise, our innate nature is to be awakened, and that we can trust in our nature to take care of these things for us.

But that's not what the Buddha taught. He didn't say anything about innate nature at all. The only thing he assumed about people is that they want happiness but are ignorant in how to go about it. This is why he said that you have to be really careful; you have to be watchful; you can't be complacent. There are dangers to your happiness out there. And there are dangers in here as well. In fact, the dangers out there come from the dangers in here. If you're not careful, the dangers in here are going to take over and drown you. So you have to be heedful, you have to be watchful.

The Buddha once said that all skillful mental qualities are rooted in heedfulness and have heedfulness as their leader. It's because we're heedful of the dangers that we arouse the energy needed to develop skill in the mind. We see that we're suffering, that we're surrounded by suffering, and a lot of suffering lies ahead of us if we're not careful. It's through being careful, through being heedful, through not being complacent, that we can do something about it. That's the important message here: We can do something about this suffering.

Aging, illness, and death are lying in wait, and they're not pretty things. Sometimes you hear people saying that we shouldn't bad-mouth aging, illness, and death, that there's a beautiful side to them as well, like a lovely flower that's wilting. It has its own kind of beauty. But being a person isn't like looking at a flower. It's a miserable experience being an aging person, being an ill person, being a dying person. Look at all the indignities, all the suffering, all the pain and anguish that serve no purpose at all. They just load you down.

It doesn't seem to serve any purpose that we have to die with a lot of pain, or have our bodily functions leave us one, by one, by one, so that we're totally dependent on other people. It serves no purpose, but that's the way things are. Some people might say that trying to get out of this suffering is being aversive to life, but it's being realistic. And it's being true to our hearts. We don't want to go through all that needless suffering. And the Buddha says there's a way out. When there's a way out, that means that trying to find the way out is not being aversive; it's being intelligent. As with any danger in life, if you see a way out of the danger, you take the way to safety. Here, though, the safety is something we have to find in our own minds in the midst of the qualities that we can't trust within ourselves: our laziness, our complacency, our willingness to put up with second-best, our desire to turn the responsibility over to somebody else – either a great teacher, some divine being – or just hope that the way of the world will take care of us. But look at the way the world is.

I went to Alaska years back – one of the last real wildernesses remaining in this country – and was impressed by how implacable it was. The wilderness would not give one damn if I died. If I died nicely or if I died a miserable death, it wouldn't care. Being surrounded by all that indifference was a sobering experience. That's the way of nature. Animals die. Before they die, sometimes they go through a lot of pain and anguish and terror, all alone, with no one to sympathize, no one to comfort them, no one to help. Nature doesn't care about any of us at all.

So it's up to us to make the difference, to make sure that we're not going to suffer from those things, and that means we have to be very watchful, very heedful, because as I said, the danger comes from within.

We have this tendency to get sloppy. We're meditating and things get good for a while, and so we get careless. Inattentive. Complacent. These are precisely the qualities that are going to do us in. When things go well, we have to keep reminding ourselves that they could get worse, but they can also get better. How do they get better? Well, for one thing, when you get a good state in concentration you try to maintain it. Do what you can to keep it going. This requires skill, knowing how to hold onto it not so tightly that you squeeze it to death and not so loosely that you lose it. Like holding a hummingbird in your hand: If you hold it too tightly, it'll die; if you hold it too loosely, it'll fly away. You have to watch and see precisely how much pressure is just right.

It's interesting: The Buddha never defines the term "heedfulness," or *appamada*, in the Canon. But he does give instructions on how to be heedful, how to develop heedfulness. Realizing that the problem comes from within, he says that the first place you've got to look is in your intentions. Before you sit down to meditate – before you do anything at all – he says, look at the quality of the intention. Is it going to be skillful or not? If it's not a skillful intention, don't act on it. If it is skillful, be clear about it. As when you're meditating: Sit down and remember that you have a purpose for being here. Remind yourself of that

purpose every time you meditate. This is why we have the chanting in the evening before we meditate as a group. When you're meditating on your own, take the time to remind yourself, "Why am I meditating?"

There are a lot of dangers here in the mind. You've got to learn how to sidestep them, how to cut through them. So be clear about what you're doing. Don't just go through the motions because you've scheduled x number of periods to sit during the day and you're just putting in time. Be careful. Be diligent. Be scrupulous in what you're doing.

And scrupulous in checking for the results – that's the other side of heedfulness. When you do something that you think is going to work out well, look at the results while you're doing it and after it's done. Be honest about the results. What kind of results are you actually getting from the practice? What could you change to get better results? This principle applies all the way from initially getting used to the principle of karma, getting used to the principle of being a responsible person on the external level, and going all the way through into the very refined states of concentration. Even when the Buddha talks about emptiness, what he says follows the same pattern: Be clear about what you're doing. Once you can maintain a good state of concentration, the next step is to look at what's going on. In what way is this concentration empty of prior disturbances? In what way is there still disturbance in it? And where? If you look carefully enough, you find that the disturbance is related to something you're doing: the way you're creating that state of oneness in the mind. The oneness itself is a disturbance; it's an intention based on a particular perception.

So what do you do? If you let go of the oneness, if you go back to having your mind scattered all over the place, that's not skillful. The skillful thing is to go forward to more subtle states of oneness, based on more subtle perceptions. In other words, when you see that the way you're focused on your object is causing stress, learn to focus in a way that's less stressful, that causes less disturbance to the mind.

You can pursue this principle all the way through the various levels of concentration, even to the objectless concentration of awareness, where you've let go of the oneness, where there's no specific perception at all – it's almost as if you're not intentionally meditating – but the mind is centered. It's simply that it doesn't have a particular theme or object for its center, not even a formless one. And even there, the Buddha says to watch it carefully. If you look at it really carefully – and this takes very subtle, very intent powers of observation – you begin to see even there there's an element of fabrication. Intention. It's willed. So you learn how to drop that, realizing that it wasn't the underlying principle of the nature of – the underlying awareness of – reality that you thought it was.

To see this requires that you be wary about what's going on. That's another translation of *appamada*: wariness. Not so wary that you're not willing to get into the concentration and work at developing it. Wariness here means that once you've done the work to get into concentration, you don't get complacent about

it. You don't allow yourself to be deceived about it, to think that it's more than what it is. This is your protection in the practice, to make sure that you don't overestimate what you've got, you don't settle for second-best, you don't leave yourself open to the dangers out there and in here.

So what heedfulness comes down to is being very clear and very scrupulous about your intentions, about what you're doing, and the results that you're getting. If you see that the results are not up to par, ask yourself: What can you do to change what you're doing? Be honest about it. This principle of honesty is what underlies the whole principle of being heedful and non-complacent. The Buddha once said this was his one prerequisite for someone he would take on as a student: "Bring me someone who's honest," he said, "and no deceiver, and I'll teach that person the Dhamma."

So we have to learn to make ourselves trustworthy people, because no matter what promises you get from outside, the test is inside. This is another function of being heedful: learning to test things, test yourself, test particular practices as they're recommended to you. When insights arise in your meditation, you can't be complacent, believing that everything that arises in a still, expansive mind has to be true. You've got to test all your insights. No matter how impressive the insight, the vision, whatever: Only when things pass the test can you have a really secure sense of what you can trust and what you can't.

We'd like to think that all the teachings out there are simply different ways of getting up to the top of the same mountain. You can choose whichever you like because all of them are guaranteed to work. But they're not. Just as all rivers don't flow into the ocean. Some of them – the Severn, the Humboldt – flow into the Great Basin and just disappear.

So how are we going to know what works? We have to test things. We have to put ourselves to the test, and keep reminding ourselves that no matter how good things get in the meditation, we have to be wary, we have to watch out, because the ability of the mind to deceive itself is so pervasive, so prevalent. The only way we can get beyond that self-deception is by being very scrupulous, very careful, very clear about what we're doing. It's a quality the Buddha called by different names: ardency, alertness, intentness. But it all comes down to being heedful. This is what sees us through. This is why the Buddha made heedfulness his last message, because this quality will get all the good results we want. He could have ended his teaching career with some nice platitudes about emptiness or nirvana or the Deathless. But there was no need for that. He said that if you work on this quality of non-complacency, *that's* what's going to get you there, and then you can know nirvana and the Deathless for yourself.

So heedfulness is the heart of the practice, the heart of the teaching. And it's aimed at giving our heart what it really wants. The heart doesn't want to be life-affirming; it wants to be happiness-affirming – affirming that there is a true happiness, that there is a Deathless happiness, something we can really trust. That's what we really want. So this quality of self-honesty – willing to test, test,

test things over again because you're not complacent, because you're wary and heedful and vigilant – is what's going to see you through. It's what's going to deliver release.