

Take Care

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

November 25, 2003

People here in America are always telling one another, “to take care.” When you say goodbye to someone you say, “Well, take care.” You sign off a letter saying, “Take care.” What does it mean, “to take care”? It’s actually very close to what the Buddha had to say in his last words: “Be heedful.” If we interpret it in that way, “take care” is a really useful salutation. Often we interpret it to mean don’t get your self in danger in obvious ways. But there are lots of dangers that we create in ways that are not so obvious.

What we do, what we say, and what we think have lots of repercussions. It’s like throwing a stone into a pond: the ripples head off in all directions and they bounce off of the shore and head back to create all sorts of interference patterns. Our actions are like that. Once you throw the stone into the pond you can’t stop the ripples. Once you intentionally act in any way, once the action is done, the results are going to have to ripple out and ripple back. So that’s the way in which you should take care: Be careful about the stones you throw. Be careful about what you say and what you do and what you think, because the ripple effect can go on for a long time, and in ways that you might not foresee.

In fact, the Buddha said that the question of how karma gets worked out is so complex that if you tried to follow every little strand of influence you’d go crazy. But if you stick by the basic principle that the quality of your intention determines the sort of results you’re going to get, you don’t have to trace things out. You just keep focusing on the quality of your intention, right here, right now. Be careful of what you do, careful of what you say, and careful of what you think. As when you’re sitting here meditating: Be very careful to stay with the breath. Be very careful to notice even the slightest hint that the mind is going to wander off. Catch it and come right back. The more sensitive you are to that potential, the more solid your concentration’s going to be. The more solid your concentration, the more you can see. The two go together.

So, as you’re meditating, take care. And even when you get up from the meditation, take care again. We’ve been receiving some Dhamma magazines recently, and they show lots of evidence of carelessness. A chance remark that one teacher makes in a magazine can affect people’s lives for a long time to come. It may strike them in a certain way, and then they think, “Gee, this must be the Dhamma.” Then they take it to heart and live in-line with it. They may be totally off, yet they have no way of knowing, if they’re not observant. Or you see some

people quoting the Buddha and they're a little off in their quotes: careless, sloppy. When they try to draw inferences from those sloppy quotes, then the telephone game sets in: A little switch here, a little consonant change there, a little vowel change, and all of the sudden the meaning gets totally screwed up. And then from that screwed-up inference another can come, and then another and another and the message gets further and further away from the truth. People assume that's what the Buddha taught. They can take it to heart and who knows what's going to happen as a result — all kinds of strange things. There's an old Chinese teaching that if you mislead people in your teaching you're going to be blind the next time around. It's that serious.

So, this is why in our daily life we should be very careful about what we say, what we do, what we think. It affects us, it affects the people around us. The more careful you are, the less damage you do. This relates to several qualities that the Buddha taught: *citta*, being intent on what you're doing, really paying attention. When you listen, pay attention; when you talk, pay attention. In other words, pay attention both to the things that come into the mind and to the things that go out, and exercise restraint.

One of Ajaan Suwat's most stinging ways of criticizing somebody was, "This is a person who, as soon as something comes into his mind, it comes right out of his mouth." In other words, there's no filter, there's no quality control, in what you do and what you say. This is because there's no quality control in what you pay attention to. That's why appropriate attention is so important. It's another part of being very careful: noticing what's worth paying attention to and what's not. If you focus on the wrong kinds of things, they can give rise to anger, greed, delusion; and then the ripple effect goes rippling out.

So, we're learning a very important skill here as we're meditating: being very careful to stay with the breath, not letting the slightest thing pull us off, not letting the slightest thing interfere. This is precision work, because our wellbeing is precision work as well.

After I'd been ordained a couple of years, Ajaan Fuang had me translate some Ajaan Lee. He said it was for the sake of my own meditation. One of the first questions I had for him was whether he wanted me to be literally accurate or to get the basic meaning, and he said, "*Both*." He wanted me to push the envelope both ways: not to be too casual about throwing away the literal meaning, but not to obscure the deeper meaning, either. He once said that when Ajaan Lee gave sermons he would be speaking on three levels at once, and it was important to get all three levels in the translation.

What this required was that I read Ajaan Lee a lot more carefully than I'd read him before, paying attention to the little phrases that I'd originally thought were little throw-away phrases, idiomatic, a peculiarity of Thai that didn't really

have much meaning. I began to realize that in some cases there was a deeper meaning there. Then I had to learn to be sensitive to what was merely idiomatic and what was to be taken literally. That required sensitivity, and the sensitivity that I developed as a translator translated back into my meditation.

So, as a mediator, whatever your jobs are, whether they're sitting here watching the breath or whatever you're doing, always take care to be precise, to pay attention to the little details, because a lot of the details can have ripple effects if you're not careful. If you're careful they can also have a ripple effect in the right direction.

Treat life as precision work. Treat the meditation as practice for the precision work, your laboratory for making your awareness more and more precise, developing the intensity of your intentness, so you really can sense the little things. That's one of the reasons why life in the monastery is kept to a very simple level. The interference patterns of a lot of different duties don't block each other; there are very few things that have to be done, so we learn how to do them precisely, do them well, even if they seem trivial or minor. The act of doing them is an opportunity to develop good qualities in the mind.

So the intentness that you bring to all of your activities is a part of the practice. It helps your meditation and the meditation helps the precision of your day-to-day life. If you put the two together, then everything that's a part of your life here at the monastery becomes a part of the practice, a part of the development of the mind. I noticed that Ajaan Fuang's best lay student meditators were the ones who took everything in their lives as a lesson for the practice. Living here at the monastery the principle holds even more so.

So, whatever you do, take care.