Mindful All the Way

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The Buddha says that among the rewards for generosity and virtue are rebirth in heaven. But then we read that rebirth in a good destination is guaranteed only in the case of a stream enterer. In other words, someone who’s had their first taste of awakening. That sets the bar a lot higher. So the question is, what about those earlier promises? The Buddha says there is a tendency to lead in those directions. Generosity tends to lead to heaven. Virtue tends to lead to heaven. But they depend on a lot of other conditions as well. One is the condition that I mentioned this morning. One of the Buddha’s discoveries about karma is that you can do a lot of good karma in this lifetime and then have a change of heart, either afterwards or right at the moment. You’re no longer confident in the goodness you’ve done. You no longer believe the teachings of the Buddha. And that change of heart can pull you down. Now your good actions earlier will someday lead to good results. But in the meantime, the fact that your mind has been pulled down will get in the way for a while. Conversely, if you’ve been doing bad things in this lifetime but have a change of heart toward the end, that can pull you up. The bad things you’ve done will still yield their results at some point. But the fact that you’ve pulled your mind up at the last moment, or the last section of your life, will tend to take you to a good destination. Which shows the importance of training the mind. The mind is so changeable, so quick to change its direction. We have to train it to be mindful, to resist that tendency. Especially if the direction you’re going in has been good, you want to make sure it doesn’t turn around and go someplace bad. So work on your mindfulness. What is mindfulness? It’s the ability to keep something in mind. Alertness is what watches what you’re doing. And ardency is the desire to do this well. These are the three qualities you need to get the mind into concentration. It’s to get the mind to settle down and be one with its object. So for the Buddha, mindfulness practice and concentration practice are not two separate things. They’re one and the same. The instructions in “Mindfulness” are basically telling you how to do it. And then the descriptions in “Right Concentration” tell you the different stages you go through as the mind begins to settle down. So it’s the “how to” is important. You remember to remember good things, useful things. Like right now, what’s useful? Remember what’s worked in the past to get the mind to settle down. Where in the body you’d like to stay focused, go right there. Make a survey through the body first to make sure that everything is calmed down. Any obvious patterns of tension or tightness, you’re going to allow them to relax. And then find your favorite place to settle in. When you settle in, you don’t just sit there doing nothing. Because the mind, if it’s doing nothing, will either think of other things to do or will just fall asleep. So we’re trying to give the mind good work to do. Go through the body again and again and again, ferreting out any little patterns of tension that you missed the first time around. Or you can think about the bones in the body. Where are the bones inside the tips of your fingers right now? Where are the bones in the second joints, the third joints? Try to be sensitive to those parts of the body as you visualize them. And if you feel any tension or tightness in those parts of the body, allow it to relax. Then go up your arms and start again at your toes. Work up through your feet, ankles, legs, pelvis, up the spine, one vertebra at a time. Up through the neck, up into the skull. In other words, as the mind settles down, give it work to do. Then when it finally does settle down in a big way, it’ll be really solid, alert, mindful, ardent. And as you train the mind in this direction, it’ll be more and more likely that as you go through life, it’ll maintain these skills. Now they can be lost. You have to be careful not to get heedless. This is one of the reasons why I ask people approaching death. The people around them in Thailand say, “What do you do?” I try to remind them of all the good things they’ve done. Not the good things they’ve had or the good things they’ve enjoyed, but the good things they’ve done. In terms of being generous, being virtuous. Because that lifts the mind. Because you can imagine what it’s like when you’re dying. You can’t stay in this body. You think ahead to the future and the future seems to be a big blank wall. So they have a very strong tendency to start thinking about the past. Old issues can come up. Old resentments, old nostalgic memories, all kinds of things can come up in the mind at that time. And it’s very easy for the mind to latch on to those things. But you have to remind yourself, where you latch on to is where you’re going to be reborn. And you want to make sure that you’re reborn in a place where you can practice the Dharma. You want to make that your determination. And then try to stay with the breath as best you can. Stay with your present awareness as much as you can. Realizing the choice is what has to be made. Some people as they approach death just give up and let things take their course. Who knows where they’re going to end up. But if you are determined that you want to practice the Dharma to the very last breath and beyond, it points your mind in the right direction. Of course, a lot of people as they’re dying have trouble maintaining mindfulness, which is one of the reasons why you want to practice it as much as you can ahead of time. This ability to keep things in mind helps you maintain the right direction. So when you think about places to practice the Dharma, don’t just go by appearances. Sometimes you can be reborn in very comfortable circumstances, very wealthy, but there’s no opportunity to hear the Dharma. There are lots of places like that in the world. Think back on the Ajahns of the forest tradition. Many of them were born in very poor places in terms of material things. But in terms of the Dharma, the Dharma was available. The true Dharma was available. There were people who were practicing it, happy to teach it. And the Ajahns took advantage of that. So don’t go by appearances. Just ask yourself, “I want to find a place where I can hear the true Dharma and practice the true Dharma.” And as long as you focus on that, you’re bound to go to a good place. And ideally, of course, if you can develop the qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and discernment, you can decide you don’t want to come back at all. But failing that, come back to a place where you keep on practicing. And the best way to create the opportunities to do that, of course, is just to keep on practicing as you go through life. So we’re staying here in the present moment. It’s not just to be in the present moment. We’re here to develop good qualities that will stand us in good stead, to make sure that we don’t change direction in our minds with the passage of time and the passage of the body. So we’re not just here to be here. We’re here to develop good qualities in the mind. Because this is where they’re developed, right here, right now. When I was in France, I was talking about how mindfulness means keeping in mind good lessons from the past. I was being interviewed, and the interviewer said, “Well, aren’t you supposed to be totally in the present moment?” And my response was, “Well, you can do that by getting a frontal lobotomy.” We’re here to be in the present moment, not just to be in the present, but to do the work that needs to be done, to have a good idea of what work does need to be done. And devote ourselves to it, for the sake of the present moment and for the sake of the future. So all three time frames are involved. Just learning how to focus them on what you’re doing right here, right now. As long as what you’re doing is skillful, you don’t have to worry about the future. And you’ve learned your good lessons from the past. So the main focus is right here, but it connects past and future. Because we are creatures in time. And the time we’ve spent so far becomes useful to the extent to which we can learn good lessons from it. Lessons that will cause us to act in ways that will lead to long-term welfare and happiness, now and in times to come.

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