

Heedfulness

December 27, 2009

I received a birthday card today, talking about the secret to a long life. It shows that old cartoon trope of a person climbing up the hill to a wise man sitting on top of the hill. And the wise man says, “The secret to a long life is to keep breathing as long as you can.”

Well, there is that kind of life: just keeping the body alive. But the Buddha talks about a different kind of life when he says that, “Heedfulness is the path to the deathless. Heedlessness is the path to death.” You can interpret that, of course, in physical terms, that if you’re not careful you can do stupid things that can kill you. But the Buddha’s more concerned with the life of the goodness of the mind, its skillful qualities. And that’s really much more important. It’s why we’re here. We’re looking to keep the goodness of the mind alive so that it can develop even further to something that goes beyond good and evil, i.e. to the deathless. But the path there does involve developing what’s skillful in everything you do.

Years back I heard someone complain that this focus on being careful in your thoughts and your words and deeds was distracting you from the wonderful deathless that was all around you, the unconditioned that was all around you. If you focus on conditioned things, you’re missing out.

But that’s trying to clone awakening, to adopt the viewpoint of an awakened person and force it on the mind just through the words, through the ideas. But the mind doesn’t develop that way. It has to develop by being careful, by being vigilant, realizing that your thoughts, words and deeds have an impact, an effect on yourself and on other people. And you really want to be careful about what that effect is.

This requires looking first at your motivation behind each action, and then looking at the actual results. Because sometimes the motivation can seem good but when you see the results coming out, something went wrong. Sometimes what went wrong was actually something within your control. You could have changed what you were doing; you could have done something right. Then there are times when it really is outside of your control. You did the right thing but circumstances were such that the results came back in a negative way.

This is where you need to depend on the advice of others to get some perspective. It’s one of the reasons why the Buddha said it’s so important to have admirable friends on the path. But notice that, in judging the action, it’s not a matter of judging just the intention or just the result. You’re judging both. You

want to see the connection there, so that the next time around, when that particular intention comes up for that type of situation, you're in a better position to judge: Is it really skillful or not?

In this way, when we pass judgment on our actions it's not like the judgment in a courtroom where they're trying to come up with a final verdict, guilty or innocent, and just leave it at that. It's more like the judgment in a workshop. You're working on a project. You're working on an object that you're trying to make nice. You're building something, you're creating, say, a chest of drawers or a table. So you look at what you're doing, at what's going into what you're doing, and at the result. You're judging a work in progress. You have to learn from all of these things so that you can become more and more skillful.

And that looking requires a lot of heedfulness. Because we do have this tendency to trust in our intentions. "We mean well," we think. "What looks good to us must be good." And yet we have that problem with delusion. We have to keep watch over that, because that's what's going to create a lot of trouble in our lives even when we mean well: our propensity for delusion.

I was reading the other day about a behavioral economist, someone who looks at human economic behavior not in the rationalist economic sense, believing that people always do what's in their own best interest. Behavioral economists go on the assumption that people tend to do a lot of things that are *not* in their best interests. Most of us have a strong tendency to misperceive a situation, either out of fear or out of greed.

Greed in particular. They say that a society built on greed, an economy built on greed, is a disaster waiting to happen. Because greed is basically hypermotivation, you're too motivated to get what you want, so you're not looking carefully at what's going on or what you're doing. They had an interesting definition for greed: Greed is a type of desperation. When people are desperate, they grab at anything, any idea that they want, any means that they want.

In other words, economists of this type recognize the existence of delusion, that delusion really is a problem. And it's good to see that there are some social scientists catching up with the idea that our defilements really are a disaster. They really do cause suffering.

Now their solution is to try to figure out a way of engineering society so that we can be protected from our delusion. But that's really difficult. The only way you're going to protect yourself from delusion is by watching your actions, watching what you're doing.

There was a famous pianist one time who was saying that when he plays the piano, he's listening to three things: He's got his intention for what he thinks the

music should sound like; and then he listens to what he's actually doing; and then getting a sense of, "Well, what does that do to the performance? Will I have to change direction? Change my plan for the piece? Or do I have to correct things to bring them back in line?" Again, it's looking at your motivation, looking at your action, and looking at the results. And then adjusting the results, adjusting your actions, adjusting your conception of what's being conveyed by the piece, so as to make the performance more and more satisfying.

This is precisely what we're doing as meditators. We have an intention to stay with the breath. We have some ideas of what the breath is, we have some ideas of how we should focus, how we should adjust the breath, how we should not adjust the breath, so we bring those ideas with us to the practice. But then it's important that you not just stick with the ideas but that you also watch what you're doing and then look at the results. And then learn how to adjust things based on how the results come out: either changing what you're doing or going back and changing your notion about what you should be doing. This is how we learn. This is how meditation becomes a skill. And we should try to bring this attitude to all of our activities.

We were talking earlier about what is a skillful sense of self to have in the practice. All too often, you hear people saying, "We suffer because of our sense of self. So just drop your sense of self and you'll be okay." But then you can't function. You need a sense of self, the self who's doing things or capable of doing things and also the self who's going to be receiving the results of the actions. As long as you need to do anything to find happiness, you're going to need these senses of self as the producer and as the consumer of the happiness.

The trick is learning how to create a skillful sense of self. And a good nucleus to build that sense of self around is this desire to do whatever is skillful, to learn from your mistakes so that you don't have to repeat them. And that means being heedful, watching what you're doing, realizing that you could easily make a mistake. Your actions are important, they do have consequences, so you want to be careful.

But fortunately there is a pattern to your actions and a pattern to the results that come from your actions. That means that you can learn from your actions, so that the next time around you can make a skillful choice.

There's an attitude that goes floating around meditation circles—it basically comes from the I Ching: the idea that each moment is unique and therefore you can't really learn from one moment to the next, because one moment requires one attitude and the next moment requires another attitude, and there's no real

pattern to things. You just grok the situation and try not to have your mind sullied by any ideas you picked up from the past.

But that's not what the Buddha taught. There are patterns in your actions, there are patterns in the results that come from your actions, and you can learn from them. What you need to carry with you all the time is this sense that skillful actions can be developed, unskillful ones can be abandoned, and you can learn from your mistakes—and you can learn from what you do right as well. There are patterns to perceive that you begin to pick up. This is how delusion gets overcome.

This attitude is called appropriate attention. In the beginning, you see things in terms of skillful and unskillful actions. And then it develops from that into seeing things in terms of the four noble truths: “Okay, where is the stress right now? What are you doing to cause the stress? How do you comprehend the stress enough so that you can abandon it? What qualities of mind do you need to develop as a path to get to the point where you can actually realize the cessation of stress?” Notice that each of these four truths has a duty associated with it: comprehending the stress until you abandon the cause, realizing the cessation of stress by developing the factors of the path. Each of these duties is something you also develop as a skill.

And the only way you can develop a skill is to have a strong sense of how important it is to have that skill and how dangerous it is not to. They've done studies of people who've developed manual skills to a high degree of mastery, and they've found that in every case this is what motivates the person: “There are dangers out there that come from not being skillful, so you've really got to work on making sure that everything you do is as skillful as possible.” In other words, as the Buddha said, heedfulness is the root for skillfulness.

We don't become skillful just by depending on our natural goodness or opening to the deathless or unconditioned that's out there or by trying to engineer a perfect society. Heedfulness is what gets us along the path. This is why the Buddha's final teaching was, “Bring about completion through heedfulness.” And that's the path to the deathless, that's the kind of life we're looking for, the kind of life that's important and worthwhile.

Simply keeping the body breathing is not necessarily a great accomplishment. There are many verses in the Dhammapada where the Buddha says, “One day lived with the mind concentrated is worth much more than a thousand years lived unconcentrated. One day lived gaining insight is much more noble and worthy than a thousand years lived without gaining insight,” and so forth. It's not the number of days, it's the quality of the mind: That's what really counts. And heedfulness is the basic quality that's going to develop all those other skillful

qualities for us. So try to have a strong sense that your actions do make a difference and that you really don't want to suffer.

In his biography of Ajaan Mun, Ajaan Maha Boowa ends the book with Ajaan Mun's last major sermon. And one of the main points of the sermon was just that: that the one thing you hold onto throughout the practice is the determination not to come back and suffer—not to come back, as he says, to be the laughingstock of the defilements. That's something you hold onto. That's what heedfulness is all about.