

Heedfulness & Confidence

July 29, 2019

Heedfulness is a skillful quality of the mind. In fact, the Buddha said it's the root of all other skillful qualities.

Anxiety, however, is unskillful. It's one of the hindrances.

And it's important that you understand the difference. That passage just now, connecting heedfulness with the ability to see dangers, makes it sound like heedfulness is anxious. But it's not. It notices that there are dangers but believes that the dangers can be avoided through acting skillfully. If we couldn't avoid the dangers, then heedfulness wouldn't mean anything. So heedfulness has a quality of confidence to it.

As you face change in the future—the big changes like aging, illness, and death, or the smaller changes—you should have confidence in the skillful qualities the Buddha teaches.

Decades ago, Westerners would go to Thailand and other Asian countries that were Buddhist, and they were always surprised by how happy the people were. They had been reading a little bit about what the Buddha taught about aging, illness, death, suffering, suffering, suffering, and they thought everybody who was a true Buddhist should be very depressed. And they concluded that the Thais and other Asians didn't even know their own religion well. Of course, it was the other way around. It was the Western scholars who didn't know the religion well.

Take for example the five reflections we chanted just now: aging, illness, death, separation—if you stopped there it would be depressing. The body's going to age for sure, illness is going to come, death is going to come for sure; things are always going to change. You get settled into a nice routine and suddenly something changes; you get separated from the people you like and the things you like. It would be depressing if the reflection stopped there. But then there's the reflection on kamma. And you understand that kamma's not there just to punish you for your misdeeds. The principle of kamma also works to reward you for your skillful intentions.

So we show respect for the training, as that other chant said. There's training in virtue, concentration, discernment; or generosity, virtue and meditation. These skills provide us with protection, in teaching us how to deal with whatever negative things do come up, and how to send out a good energy. There's a good energy that comes with generosity, and it tends to attract other good energies in

the world. The same with virtue, the same with meditation. It sounds a little magical but it's borne out in practice.

So have some faith, have some confidence in what you're doing. You're developing the qualities of mind that will allow you to deal with change as it comes, in a way that you don't have to suffer and you don't have to create needless suffering for the people around you.

So as we anticipate changes in the future, we should adopt an attitude of heedfulness. Not of anxiety, heedfulness. That means asking ourselves what skillful actions in our repertoire are going to be helpful and developing them even further. This is where heedfulness differs from anxiety on the one hand and blind confidence on the other: It's backed up by skills. You can think of the triple training. You can think of the perfections: generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, persistence, endurance, truth, determination, goodwill, equanimity. These qualities are all skills that we can develop. And then these skills enable us to deal with whatever comes up in a way that doesn't cause suffering for ourselves or other people. So we should have some confidence in them as we develop them.

Now the question is, how do we make sure that our intentions are not just good, that they're skillful? That's where you have to make room for trial-and-error. You try to act on your best possible intentions and if you're consistent in doing that, then you're going to see the times when good intentions fall short. Then you can use that experience to reflect on your intentions the next time around.

The problem is that our intentions tend to be mixed. We act on good intentions sometimes and bad intentions other times. So when the results come out we're not really sure what came from what. But if you try to be consistently good, and then the results come out and they're not consistent, that gives you a clue that sometimes what may seem good is not really skillful. Because even in good intentions there can be some delusion.

There's no magic formula for erasing delusion aside from those instructions that the Buddha gave to Rahula: Act on good intentions and see the results, and if they don't come out well, go back and reflect on your intentions again. Maybe there was something in there that you missed. So the process is not really magical in the sense that there's no guarantee that everything will turn out okay just because you're meditating or okay just because you're observing the precepts. You have to be observant and honest. But these practices do have a power. They send out good energy, they create good conditions. And we should have some confidence in that.

Otherwise, heedfulness degenerates into anxiety and becomes unskillful. We get stressed out over things that we shouldn't get stressed out over and we sap our strength, so that when the time comes that we need to use our mindfulness and alertness and ingenuity to solve a problem, we don't have the energy.

An image that the forest ajaans use a lot: You've been using your knife and—chop, chop, chop, chop, chop—you don't stop to sharpen it. After a while it gets dull. In the same way, your discernment gets dull because you're not sharpening it in concentration, you're not giving it the time to be confident that, yes, letting the mind rest like this will not only give you a bit of peace right now but will also be good for your discernment down the line.

So have some respect for the training, have some confidence in the principle of karma, that you *can* use it for your advantage, for your genuine advantage, for your genuine well-being. That way you can see dangers and be confident that you'll handle them in a skillful way. Now, there may be loss, there may be other things that can happen that you may not like, but the overall tendency, the overall trajectory—if you stick with good intentions and really reflect on them, reflect on your actions, reflect on the results, learn from your mistakes—goes to a place that's closer and closer to true safety. That's the best that any skill can promise. And the Buddha's promise is a promise that delivers. So have some confidence in that fact.