

More than Ordinary Heedfulness

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The Buddha said that all skillful qualities have their root in heedfulness. This emphasis on heedfulness is one of the remnants of the wilderness source for Buddhism: The Buddha gained his awakening in the wilderness, passed away in the wilderness, recommended that his monks go out into the wilderness, and one of the qualities you need in order to survive in the wilderness is heedfulness because there are dangers on all sides.

There was a famous writer who spent a lot of time with the Inuit. And when he was asked, “What was the quality that distinguished them from people in modern civilization?” he listed a few words from their language that described a quality he said he didn’t quite find the right English equivalent for, a combination of wariness, apprehension, a sense of danger present all around. That’s heedfulness: the realization that there are dangers and that, to avoid them, you have to be very careful about what you do.

Where Buddhism’s emphasis on heedfulness is special is that it identifies the dangers as lying primarily in the mind. But it also has a special sense of possibilities. If you don’t have the confidence that your actions could lead to safety, heedfulness would be meaningless. If there were nothing but dangers all around, you couldn’t do anything about them. You’d just have to give in to the dangers and get fatalistic about them. Or just stay confused.

This is why the Buddha said there’s another quality that takes heedfulness and makes it a quality for awakening, and that’s appropriate attention: seeing things in terms of the four noble truths and then applying the duties appropriate to the truths to what you’re actually doing. The four noble truths raise our sights as to what is possible for human beings to do. We can put an end to suffering. We don’t have to keep coming back to suffer again and again and again. It lies within our power to find an escape. So here, heedfulness is combined with confidence that there is a way out.

But at the same time, this confidence makes heedfulness very demanding. There are a lot of dangers in life that people simply accept and say, “Well, that’s the way that life is.” I was talking the other night to someone who was telling me about how she was trying to analyze her unskillful mind states and check on why she would go for them. And one of the conclusions she came to was that it’s a normal human reaction. Other people do things that are displeasing, and the normal reaction is for you to get angry. You see something nice, and the normal reaction is greed. Well, it may be the normal reaction, but it’s not the best. It’s not the best that we’re capable of.

The Buddha's actually pointing out that the mind doesn't have to stay on the "normal" human level. We meditate so that we can transform it. But how many people come to the meditation to be transformed? Most people simply want a nice place for the mind to hang out, and don't ask for much change beyond that. But the Buddha's saying that if, aside from the rest you gain from concentration, you simply allow the mind to go back to its old habits, you're being heedless. Areas where other people didn't see dangers, he saw dangers. Areas where other people didn't see a way out, he saw a way out.

Take, for instance, our attachment to the body. It's a normal thing. As long as we have a body, we have to take care of it, and it seems natural to be attached to it. But what happens, of course, is that your attachment to the body gives you a reason to be afraid of death. Simply the fact that you *have* a body leaves you open to all kinds of attacks: attacks from outside, attacks from within the body itself. As Ajaan Funn used to like to say, every part of the body has its diseases. In fact, every part of the body, he says, *is* a disease.

There are passages in the Canon that list the various diseases that can come in the different parts of the body, and he had a very creative way of translating the terms. For instance, where the Canon lists *cakkhu-rogo*, eye diseases, he translated the passages as saying basically, the eye *is* a disease. The simple fact that you have eyes, and ears, a heart, lungs, means you're open to all the kinds of diseases that are ready to appear in the eyes, ears, heart, lungs. And we just take that for granted.

But the Buddha says you don't have to. It is possible for the mind to experience formless states. Now, that may be something you don't know is possible for sure, but he recommends that you take it on as a working hypothesis because it opens up possibilities for safety that you wouldn't have access to otherwise. Because having a body requires also that you feed it. And, as you're looking for food, you get into conflict with other people, other beings, who are looking for their food in the same places.

But if the mind can attain a formless state, it doesn't have to get into those conflicts. It's not exposed to those dangers. As he says, whenever there's a choice between an assumption that places limits on what you can do and an assumption that opens possibilities for what you can do, it's always better to adopt the assumption that allows more possibilities for your actions. Otherwise, the simple act of assuming that there are no possibilities cuts off what might be a potential avenue that you could follow for safety and happiness.

So we apply appropriate attention to our heedfulness, reminding ourselves that there are possibilities beyond the ordinary human level. There's a possibility of a safety beyond the ordinary human level. The mind can be perfectly fine without a body. In the higher levels of the heavens, beings are not

only perfectly fine, they're much better off. As for nibbana, it has no body and it's the ultimate happiness. So turn around and look at your attachment to the body and ask yourself, "Is this something I want to hold on to?" When you realize that there's a possibility that you could actually be freed from the limitations of the body, then you're more likely to follow the path that would free you.

We have that contemplation of the different parts of the body. A lot of people don't like it, because they don't see it as an avenue to freedom. They just see it as badmouthing something that they would prefer to be attached to. But the Buddha's saying to question that preference. Question that attachment. Be heedful and expand your imagination through appropriate attention. Ask what the possibilities of safety that heedfulness can bring might be.

So it's not simply that we're aware of dangers. That's part of heedfulness. They're all around us, especially now in the fire season. We have to be very careful. But there are more dangers than that. Greater dangers than that. There are dangers inside. At the same time, heedfulness, at least in the Buddha's point of view, encompasses confidence that there is a way out from these dangers, a total freedom from these dangers.

And even though it may be a more-than-ordinary-human level of safety, you start with ordinary human capabilities, and as you develop them they can take you there. Always keep that assumption in mind, because it's an assumption that doesn't leave you trapped in the dangers that we see all around us and in us. It opens the way out.