

Seeing Danger in Birth

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I remember the first time when being a human being scared me. I was about six years old and I met a man who had had a stroke and was half paralyzed. I was told that he hadn't always been that way. He had been normal, and then all of a sudden one day half his body became useless. I remember the sense of horror, not so much at the man himself, but the horror that it could happen to me.

Ajaan Lee and Upasika Kee talk about this same sort of thing. In Upasika Kee's case, it was when one of her younger siblings was born. She saw all of the pain her mother went through, and she had to leave home for three days. The same with Ajaan Lee. He saw all the pain that the women went through as they were giving birth. He had to run away.

It's good to reflect on these things.

Here we are in a human birth, and it's not a very secure place to be. So we have to find a way out if we want to find any real security or real happiness. This is why we meditate, because we believe in the power of the mind to find a happiness that's more than ordinary. So you try to use these thoughts, not to get you discouraged, but actually to encourage you to practice. That's the use of heedfulness. That's the use of recollection of death: This can happen to us all.

And if we can recollect death in a way that makes us heedful, that's an auspicious thing. In Thailand, there's a textbook they use for the Dhamma exams for lay people. It divides ceremonies into two sorts: those that are auspicious and those that are inauspicious. The inauspicious ones all have to do with death. As with that chant we did just now: That's usually chanted at somebody's death. But the idea that anything associated with death is inauspicious is not a Buddhist idea. It's more of a Brahmanical idea. The Buddhist attitude is that if you can reflect on death in a way that makes you heedful, then it becomes auspicious.

In fact, that's the recollection the Buddha has you think about when you see somebody's death. He said to tell yourself, "This body too: Such is its nature, such its unavoidable fate." But you don't have to see a dead body to reflect in this way. You can just think about the fact that there's death and reflect on your own death, too. We read about death every day in the news. The numbers vary, but a day doesn't go by without somebody dying. In fact, quite a few people die. They say that on average it's 200,000 people a day. So it's all around us, which means that we should be very heedful: heedful in our virtue, heedful in our concentration, heedful in our discernment.

Heedful in virtue means realizing that whatever we might gain by even the slightest infraction of the precepts isn't worth it. Those little gains just get washed away, and then you're left with the karma.

Heedful in your concentration means trying to be as careful as possible in your efforts to get the mind to settle down: being alert, mindful, ardent; not just getting the mind to be still, but watching the mind as it stills down, so that you can begin to understand when the mind does leave the topic of concentration, even if just for a moment, how does it do that? And why?

Here you are: You've made the intention to stay with the breath, you work with the breath, get familiar with the breath, try to make the breath comfortable so it's a good place to stay, and yet the mind will still wander off. Why is that? How does it do that? What are the stages? There are psychologists who say they've studied brain patterns and they can tell that when a person's made a decision, often the decision has been made a little bit before the person's aware of it. Now, their conclusion is that we have no free will, that somehow the brain makes the decision and then we lie to ourselves that we've made the decision ourselves.

But another kind of lying is going on. You were there when the decision was made but then the mind likes to cover things up from itself. Part of it knows the decision was made and it's just waiting for the opportunity to slip out. Well, can you catch it? Can you catch that little moment in the mind where it makes the decision and then pretends that it didn't?

It's like that dog we used to have at Wat Dhammasathit. It was a very clever dog. It would come up in the evening when the monks were having their evening allowables and would scratch your leg. And then as you looked down at it, it would look away and pretend that it hadn't done it. Then if you ignored it, it would scratch your leg again. There are layers like that to the mind. And the purpose of concentration is to begin to see through those layers. That's what it means to be heedful in your concentration.

Heedful in your discernment means that when an insight comes, you can't just accept it at face value. You've seen so many cases of people who've come to false conclusions that they're awakened, so as we said earlier today, you learn from other peoples' mistakes. You've got to watch yourself. When an insight arises, how does the mind respond? What's its immediate reaction?

Ajaan Lee gives two pieces of advice. One is that, when you gain an insight, you ask yourself: To what extent is the opposite true? As the Buddha pointed out, there are many things that are true but not necessarily beneficial. And this may not be the right time and place for them. So to check whether—or when and where—the insight might be beneficial, whether it's the right time or place to apply it. And ask yourself further: To what extent is the opposite of that insight true?

The second piece of advice, he says, is wherever there's true there's going to be falseness as its shadow. Once you place a stamp on something as 100% true, something false has already slipped in. So you have to be careful about your insights. After all, if you're not careful, they're not going to be safe. They're going to lead you to do things and say things and think things that might be dangerous. So you want to be careful all around.

This is a quality that many of Ajaan Mun's students said they noticed in him. They'd set their minds on doing something and thought they were 100% good, and he would still find something wrong, an angle from which they hadn't looked, an angle that they hadn't considered.

Or you think about the Buddha. They called him the all-around-eye. He saw things from every angle. That's how he was able to make himself 100% safe.

So you want to see the dangers in birth, the dangers in becoming. Be alive to those dangers but don't be overwhelmed by them. The whole point of heedfulness is not that you give up in the face of dangers. In fact, it's the opposite of giving up in the face of dangers. The other part of heedfulness is seeing that there is an escape and it can be accomplished through your actions.

We take on right view, but remember that it is a view. It's not right knowledge yet. There are a lot of aspects of right view that the Buddha can't prove to you ahead of time. But he does offer two ways of conducting a pragmatic proof. For example, when you adopt as a working hypothesis the view that you do have the power of choice, that the results of your actions are going to depend on the intention behind the action, and that these results can last not only through this lifetime but also to future lifetimes: The first test is that, if you adopt this view, you're more likely to behave in a skillful way than if you adopted its opposite. If you believed that you had no choice, or that your choices didn't matter, you would just go with whatever came into the mind.

The second proof is, if you believe in the possibility that there is a path that leads to awakening, to the end of becoming, you open more possibilities for what you might achieve in terms of a real happiness than if you assumed that there was no such thing as awakening or the end of becoming. At the very least, if you open yourself to the possibility, you might be able to make it happen. If you close your mind to the possibility, there's no way it's going to happen.

So in a way, adopting right view is a gamble. But you look around: There are really no other good alternatives, no inspiring alternatives, no noble alternatives. So you might as well give it a serious try.

That's how you're heedful in your discernment. And it's through heedfulness that you provide yourself with safety. As the Buddha said, all skillful qualities are rooted in heedfulness. We're not skillful because we're innately good. At the same time, we're not innately bad. But our actions

depend on a calculation: Is it going to be worth the effort? And the more you believe in your power of action, and the more you'll notice the dangers that come from acting unskillfully, then the more your calculations will lead you to stay on the path.