

Making a Difference

January 13, 2012

The Buddha once said that all skillful qualities are rooted in heedfulness. Not only that, heedfulness takes you all the way to the deathless. As he said, those who are heedless are already dead; those who are heedful do not die.

So it's good to reflect on heedfulness, and the meaning of the Buddha's statements. On the one hand, the need for heedfulness means that the development of goodness is not something that just naturally happens on its own. You have to see the importance of your actions, that there are dangers out there and dangers in the mind. You have to make an effort to overcome those dangers, but the effort is not doomed. It really does make a difference whether you act on skillful mind states or unskillful mind states. It really does make a difference. If it didn't make any difference, then why bother being heedful?

This means that we don't start out by being equanimous about everything. All too often, people read about the Buddha's teachings and they see that many of his teachings end in equanimity. The factors for awakening end in equanimity. The four brahma-viharas end in equanimity. It sounds like that's where we're going. And many people say, as long as that's where we're going, why don't we just go there first? Why bother with all the steps?

Well, the Buddha's equanimity is very different from ours. The Buddha has found a true happiness. Notice that he doesn't say nibbana is the ultimate equanimity. It's the ultimate happiness: the word for happiness, here, sukha, can also mean bliss, pleasure, ease. And it's worth our while to aim at that ultimate happiness, that we put forth an effort to attain it. Equanimity meant is for the things that either would pull us from the path, or prevent us from moving further along on the path. You have to develop equanimity for those things, the things that, if you got really involved in them, you wouldn't have time to practice. You wouldn't have the energy to practice. And even the equanimity of someone who has attained nibbana is not just a blasé attitude to everything. These people have found the ultimate happiness and so they don't need to feed on anything else. But that doesn't mean, though, that they don't do anything or that they don't see certain actions as preferable to others. Certain activities *are* preferable to others. If they can, awakened people still want to make a difference.

Ajaan Suwat's comment was that as you're walking along the path, do everything you can to keep the weeds and the branches and all the other obstructions away from the path so that they don't get in the way of your progress. When you've gotten to the end of the path, as far as you're concerned those weeds grow up again because you've gotten to where you want to go. But you look back and you see other people coming along the path—and you have compassion for them. So you do what you can to clean up the weeds. When you see that other people are actually planting weeds in the path, you try to stop that if you can. If you see that you can't, well, that's when you have to exercise equanimity. Equanimity is the last resort. When you realize you can't be of help—and this applies to any situation—that's when you keep in

mind that fact that living beings are the owners of their actions. And you have to leave it at that.

But that's the perspective of someone at the end of the path. While we're on the path, we need to have a strong sense of the importance of our actions. It's like a child learning how to be a mathematician. You have to figure out how to add: two plus two equals four, three plus three equals six. And if the teacher told the child that this level of skill is nothing compared to the real math of calculus, the child would get discouraged and never grow to become a mathematician. The teacher has to emphasize the importance of learning addition and subtraction and multiplication and division, and how you master algebra and trigonometry so that you can get to the calculus and other forms of advanced math. Then you can use your mathematical abilities to actually make a difference. If you weren't enthusiastic about mastering the little steps in the beginning you'd never get anywhere. You have to see the importance of what you're doing.

When the Buddha was teaching Rahula at the beginning of the path, he didn't say, well nothing really amounts to much so don't really try. That would have been the end of Rahula's practice. He never would have gotten anywhere. The Buddha told him: Look at your actions. Every time you act, it's important that you look at your motivation before you act. What are you anticipating from the action? Is it going to be for harm or for happiness? If it harms anybody, yourself or other people, it does matter. You don't want to do that kind of action. If you see that it's going to cause no harm, you can go ahead and do it.

While you're doing it, you look at the results. Again, the results are important. This is not a time to think about the fact that ultimately the sun is going to go nova someday and the earth is going to fry to a crisp before it gets dissolved and there'll be no trace of our ever having been here. That's not the proper frame of reference. The proper frame of reference is, what intentions are you developing? Because even if the sun goes nova, if we haven't reached nibbana at that point we're going to be somewhere, reaping the results of our kamma. So you look at the results of your actions in the present so that you can get more and more skillful.

Even after the action is done, you want to review what the results were so you can learn from the action. If it came out well, learn from it. If it didn't come out well, learn from it. How can you figure out how not to repeat that mistake?

It's like that series of questions they ask people applying to a school to study brain surgery. People who apply to a program like all that tend to have good grades, but you can't really tell from the grades whether they're going to be good surgeons or not. So you need good questions to ferret out the qualities you're looking for in good brain surgeons. They've found out that the best questions for such people are, one, can you tell us about a mistake you made recently? If the person can't admit to making a mistake, you don't want that person operating on someone's brain. The second question is, how would you do it differently? Even if a person admits to a mistake but then doesn't immediately try to figure out how not to repeat the mistake again, that's not someone you want operating on the brain. Your ability to recognize your mistakes and to learn from them that really does make a difference. It's what makes you skillful.

All your thoughts, words, and deeds do make a difference. Because as you focus on them and try to get more and more skillful, that's what gets you on the path. And the path takes you to an ultimate happiness. And that makes a difference too.

At the same time, you're doing less and less harm in the world. That makes a difference as well.

So have a strong sense that your actions really do make a difference. The fact that we're meditating here does make a difference. Every aspect of the path makes a difference. Because after all, we do start out with a difference: There is pleasure and there is pain. And there's a lot of needless pain in the world. If we don't do something about our unskillful actions we're going to be adding more unnecessary pain to the world. And we'll never reach the ultimate happiness that the Buddha said is a possibility for human beings.

So watch out for people who start out with equanimity and advise that you start out with equanimity. Those people make a difference, too, but not a good difference. If they talk about how important equanimity is in all things and that no action really matters, then you can ask them, "Why are you even speaking to me?" The fact that we act on our intentions shows that, deep down inside, we sense that the mind makes a difference. And it's worth your while, as the Buddha pointed out, to try to make a good difference. If you don't, there's a lot of suffering. That's what heedfulness is all about, realizing that your actions do make a difference. So you want to be very careful about what you do.