

Grace & Dignity

May 3, 2014

All skillful qualities, the Buddha once said, are rooted in heedfulness. And when we talk about heedfulness, it also means non-complacency. When we think about heedfulness, we tend to focus on the dangers around us, dangers inside us, because they're there. We have greed, aversion, and delusion, and there are parts of our minds that really like greed, aversion, and delusion. That's a danger.

As the Buddha once said, the mind is capable of almost anything. Think of all the animals in the animal kingdom—all the different shapes and sizes and classifications. He said the mind is more variegated than that. The mind can take on the role of any animal. When the world is going well, it's easy to live a fairly moral life and to be a true human being. The question is: Suppose things started to break down. Can you trust yourself to be sure that you wouldn't give in to the impulse to kill or steal or lie to get what you needed? That you'd see that what you need was not the food or whatever, but to maintain your virtue? Can you trust yourself to see that?

That's the danger side of heedfulness, realizing that the dangers are there and they're real. But the other side of heedfulness is realizing you have the opportunity to protect yourself against those dangers. That chant we had just now on aging, illness, death, and separation doesn't end just there. It goes on to say that we have our actions, and what we experience will depend on our actions.

So there's our opportunity. We should appreciate that. We do still have the opportunity to develop virtue, develop generosity, to develop the mind through the meditation. We have the time, the location, and the environment that's conducive for that, so it's good to appreciate that. The fact that we're here depends on the generosity of many, many people. So we feel gratitude for that, and then we decide how we can carry that goodness on.

There's a saying in Thailand that the sign of a good person is gratitude. If you're grateful for the good things people did, you realize that they had the choice not to do those things, but they saw that it was worthwhile. It's not easy all the time to do the right thing, but they made the sacrifice. They did the difficult thing. If you're grateful for that, that's a sign that you're appreciative and that you see there is goodness that comes from doing the difficult thing. Like right now, training the mind: It would be easy to let the mind wander around as it liked. You've got a whole hour here. Nobody's checking up on you. There's no meditation monitor to look into your mind to see if you're actually taking advantage of the opportunity. But your own heedfulness is your monitor, appreciating the fact you've got the time right now, so make the most of it right now.

This is how you carry on the goodness that got you here, both in terms of your own good karma and in terms of the generosity and goodwill of others. And one of the best ways of carrying that on is practicing—training the mind—because the goodness of the world comes from the mind. All the good things we want to do in the world are best done from a mind that’s centered, clear, discerning, alert, and observant. You know they say that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. The road to nirvana, though, is paved with *skillful* intentions, which means that you look at your good intentions and you ask yourself, “When I acted on these good intentions in the past, were there any times when I seemed to have made a mistake—when it didn’t come out the way I wanted it to?” If you realize that you did make a mistake, then if you have the opportunity, you go and talk that over with people who are advanced on the path.

The Buddha gave a very basic instruction to his son that’s always useful to keep in mind. Before you do something, ask yourself what you expect the results are going to be, and if you expect any harm, you don’t do it. If you don’t foresee any harm, you go ahead. While you’re doing it, you check for the results that are actually coming up in the course of the action. And again, if you see any unexpected harm, you stop. If you see no harm, you can continue. When the action is done and you see that it caused harm over the long term, if it was an action of the body or your speech, you go talk it over with someone and then resolve not to repeat the mistake. If it was just a mental action, something you were thinking about and it had a bad effect, you don’t have to talk it over. You can just have a sense of shame around that—a healthy sense of shame, realizing you’re better than that. There’s a part of you that’s better than that, and you shouldn’t stoop to that kind of thinking again.

Notice that if you make a mistake with the body or speech, the Buddha doesn’t say you should automatically be ashamed, because sometimes there are things out there that are beyond your means of knowing. That’s why you want to talk it over with someone to gain a sense of whether the mistake was avoidable, or whether it was just one of those things. If you saw that your action caused no harm at all, then you take joy in the fact you’re on the path. You’re taking good advantage of the opportunities that are open to you.

Right now, the opportunities open to you are easy. You can meditate; you can be moral; you can be generous. But there are times when the skillful opportunity is not easy. It requires some sacrifice. Yet it’s always possible to do the skillful thing. That’s something we should always bear in mind. I don’t know how many times you read people say, “Well, there are times when there’s no choice but to do things against the precepts,” and they invent scenarios. And all the scenarios show a huge lack of imagination. There are so many skillful ways we can deal with difficult situations. It may take a lot of imagination; it may take a lot of energy. Sometimes it requires a lot of sacrifices. Some of the things you want to maintain, you realize you’ve got to give up if you want to maintain your virtue. But your virtue is always worth sticking with. Always always remember that.

But right now, it's easy. You sit here with this breath and the next breath, and there's nobody running in to disturb us. You strengthen your mindfulness, strengthen your alertness, and strengthen your concentration. These are all good things because it's from the mind that your actions spring. And if the mind is strengthened and in good shape, you're more likely to do the right thing—to see what the right thing is and have the strength and willingness to do it. So all the goodness comes from right here.

If you go looking for goodness in other people, you can be happy when you find it. But there will be a lot of times when you can't. Don't let that have an effect on your goodness. Make that the given in all of your intentions: that no matter what, you want to do the right thing, the skillful thing that doesn't harm anyone and that, if possible, can help others and help in your own development of virtue, concentration, discernment, your goodwill, compassion, your empathetic joy for people who are doing good things, your compassion for people who are doing unskillful things, and your equanimity for cases where you know you can't make any difference, so you have to let things go. We should appreciate the fact that we have the opportunity now to develop these qualities easily and make the most of it, because the opportunity may not always be here. There will always be the opportunity to do skillful things, but it's may have to come with a lot of sacrifice.

There was a German poet back in the 18th century who made a distinction between acting with grace and acting with dignity. Acting with grace is when you know what the right thing is and you're inclined to do it. Your feelings push you in that direction. But then there are times when you know the right thing to do but it's hard. It goes against your feelings. And yet you're able to convince yourself to override your feelings and do the right thing. That's an act with dignity.

So have appreciation for the opportunities when you *can* act with grace and use those opportunities to develop the strength of your mind. When the time comes that the right thing requires you to act with dignity, you'll have the strength to do that as well.