

Complacency

June 3, 2014

When King Asoka recommended a series of chants for the monks and nuns to repeat every day, there was one that dealt with what are called future dangers, reflecting on the fact that we're all subject to aging, illness, and death; there's always the possibility of famine, social collapse, a split in the sangha, or just a general corruption of the practice as time goes past. There's one especially fine passage where the Buddha warns about a danger in the future that the monks will use the tips of their tongues to find the tip-most flavors, and the Dhamma will die away.

The question is: Do you have the attainment that's going to make you safe, when those changes come? And if you realize that you don't, you should exert extra effort. That's the most important issue in life. And notice the motivation there. The motivation is heedfulness: the realization that there are dangers, but you can prepare for them.

As the Buddha said elsewhere, heedfulness is the underlying motivation for all of our skillful qualities. You think of all the different motivations we might have for practicing. One is a sense of shame. Here we've got this opportunity, and it would be a shame not to make the most of it. Another is a sense of pride, the realization that other people can do this. They're human beings; they can do it. I'm a human being. Why can't I do it, too? A sense of compassion: You see that you're suffering, and that other people are suffering, too. If you practice, you set a good example for them. But all of this comes down to heedfulness, the realization that your actions really do make a difference and you have to be careful about how you act.

This is why it's important not to let yourself get complacent in the practice. One of the worst things you can do in the practice is to overestimate where you are. This is the opposite of the American educational system, which wants people to always overestimate themselves. The Buddha, though, says you've got to learn how to gain a sense of yourself, as he calls it: *attaññuta*. You have to be very careful to look for where your strengths are, where your weaknesses are. And always keep examining yourself in these terms because if you overestimate yourself, then you're going to start getting lax in the practice. When the real dangers come, you won't have a genuine safety net to fall back on.

So it's not a matter of being able to claim you've got this or that. It's more a question of: Are you really safe? As anyone who knows that a storm is coming, you prepare the house or the shelter so that it's totally airtight.

Think about those explorers up in the far North. I've been reading about two men, who'd been part of a much larger party that had been able to make its way across the ice. This was in the book, *In the Land of White Death*. They made the way across the ice and finally got

into the series of islands that they were looking for. Then as they went from one island to another, this member of the party died and that member of the party died. They finally got to the spot where they wanted, and there were only two left alive. Here it was August, but they realized that the winter could come. Maybe nobody would come past; they might be stuck there for the entire winter.

Fortunately, there was enough food, but they were going to have to work on the shelter. So they immediately set to task, to preparing a shelter for the winter: one that was totally free of drafts, would keep them warm, and was sheltered from the north wind.

This is what we've got to do. We're subject to a really strong north wind here – aging, illness, death, and a very unstable and very fragile society. So are you safe enough? These are the issues you have to look into.

Then you have to look at the other issues in life to see how much energy you want to put into them. There's that chant we repeat often: "The world is swept away." And part of being swept away means there are a lot of things that will never come to closure, certain issues that will never get settled, jobs that'll never get done. A constant refrain in the teachings of the forest tradition is that the work of the world never gets done. All that happens simply is that you run out of strength and have to hand it over to somebody else who will work at these things until *they* run out of strength. And it just keeps going on and on and on that way. The work of the world is never done—but the work of the mind can be done.

This is also an issue in a famous story from the Vinaya. The different cousins of the Buddha were planning to ordain, and there was one who wasn't quite sure whether he wanted to ordain or not. So one of the other cousins said, "Well, what do you think you're going to have to do if you stay as a lay person?" They went over it together. You had to plant the rice, and then you had to look after the rice. Then you had to harvest the rice; then you had to save enough rice so you could plant the rice again the next year. And it just never, never stopped. There was no end to that work. The one cousin decided he'd rather ordain.

So we can't wait until things get settled in a certain way so that we can practice. We have to figure out: How are we going to *make* a space in the world that we have now? If you let the work of the world determine how much time you have to practice, it's going to swallow up everything. You have to keep pushing back, pushing back, realizing that what is most pressing is not always most important. Focus on the really important things: the state of your mind, the state of your actions, the state of your words, and particularly, the solidity of your mind. How solid is it? How easily does it get knocked off by events? That's one of those winds that come through the side boards of your shelter: the wind of loss, the wind of loss of status, the wind of criticism, the wind of pain.

You want to build a shelter that's airtight, free of drafts. Or in the image of the Canon, you want a hut so well thatched that you don't have to be afraid of any rainstorm—because that's the way the world is. On the one hand, it's got all this work that never gets done. On the other

hand, it rains on you, and it blows on you, and it can kill you. Like that time the fire was coming over the horizon, the thought that went through my mind was that mother nature wants to kill us. Here's a fire coming our way, and this body is put together in such a way that it will die if it doesn't escape. The forces of nature are going to kill it. Do you have your safe place? Do you have your shelter from the wind?

This was why the Buddha closed his teachings with the sentence, "Reach consummation through heedfulness," or through non-complacency. Consummation here means developing all the qualities you need to secure that safety. And heedfulness, non-complacency: That's what keeps you motivated.