

Turning Anxiety into Heedfulness

November 20, 2016

There's something of a tension in the chants we have in the evening before the meditation. On the one hand, there are chants like the one we had just now, "The world is swept away, it does not endure, it's a slave to craving," and then, on the other hand, "May I be happy."

There's also the tension between the chant, "I'm subject to aging, illness, death, separation," and then, "May I be happy."

But to understand this tension is to understand how and why we practice. We don't try to be happy by denying the fact that there are dangers out there. We try to find happiness in the midst of the dangers—realizing, of course, that not all the dangers are out there. It's not just a dangerous world. We're dangerous people. Because of our craving and clinging, we can do all kinds of unskillful things.

And so the teaching is aimed at admitting the fact that this is the way things are and then asking, "How do you find well-being in the midst of all this?" This is why we develop heedfulness as one of the main motivators for our practice. We have these chants on how things are swept away, and how aging, illness, and death are normal, to remind ourselves that we really do need to train the mind.

Because heedfulness is just that: a sense of the dangers, but taking whatever fear you might have about the dangers and directing it in the right way. It's combined with confidence, that there is a right way to find happiness here.

This is where heedfulness differs from anxiety. With anxiety, you don't really know what to do. You have no confidence that you have any right way of acting, of preventing the dangers. But with heedfulness, you do have a sense of confidence. And you get your priorities straight.

There's a series of suttas where the Buddha talks about future dangers. Among them is the fact that society can fall apart and collapse, and in times like that, it's difficult to practice. So you should practice *now*, while you've got the chance, so that when that danger comes, you can still have an inner sense of well-being that you can depend on. In other words, you will have found something inside that cannot be affected by changes outside. You've straightened out the issues inside, so the mind doesn't pose any danger to itself.

So fear of danger is not necessarily a bad thing. It depends on how you use it. If you let yourself get wrapped up in anxiety, then it really is detrimental. But there's a more skillful fear and that's fear that you'll do something really unskillful.

The Pali term is *ottappa*. The Thais translate it as "fear of evil." It doesn't mean fear of evil things outside. It means fear of the consequences of doing evil. In English, it's hard to find a good translation for it: "Compunction" comes closest, the sense that you can realize that the real dangers in life are in your own actions and so you want to be very careful about what you

do.

But, in being careful about your actions, you can actually provide a happiness that is secure. So there's a bright side to all this as well. If everything were just aging, illness, death, aging, illness, and death but with no escape, then that old charge that they had about Buddhism as being pessimistic would have been true. But that's not the case. The Buddha says there is a way out. Now, we can't haul everybody we love and everything we love along with us on the way out. So this does require a certain sense of priorities, as to what really is important and what you have to be willing to sacrifice.

Where your attachments are focused is going to determine whether they're relatively safe or not. If you have lots of attachments in the world, as Ajaan Lee said, you have lots of magnets out in the world that are going to pull you to where they are. It's like leaving yourself exposed on many sides. Wherever you have an attachment, there you're exposed.

So you want to bring all your attachments inside. In other words, realize that the qualities of your actions—your thoughts, your words and your deeds—are your real treasures. Those are the things you can hold onto, even as the world changes for the worse.

As the Buddha said, loss in terms of your wealth or health, loss in terms of your family: Those are relatively minor dangers. The real dangers are loss in terms of losing right view and losing your virtue.

So there are times when you have to be willing to face loss outside. But you always want to maintain your dignity as a human being. You don't want events outside to control your emotions—to start doing things under the power of your emotions and then say, "Well, it was just because so-and-so said this or so-and-so said that. That's why I said this."

When that happens, you become just a cog in a machine and let yourself get pushed around. It's when you can stand back and say, "No. Even if people mistreat me, I will still behave in an honorable way": That pulls you out of the machine. It makes you independent.

There will be a healthy sense of self that goes along with this. In psychology, they talk about the healthy ego function of anticipation: seeing that there are dangers out there and that you've got to prepare for them. This is what corresponds to heedfulness in the Buddha's teachings.

But it's strange that a book on healthy ego functions I once read never mentioned a sense of honor. But this is an important motivator. It's an important aspect of a healthy self that you create as part of the path: that no matter how bad things get, you're not going to let the bad things come into your actions, into your thoughts, into your words, your deeds. That sense of honor will be your protection.

In Pali, this corresponds both to compunction and to a sense of shame: that you'd be ashamed to stoop to do something really mean and low. And, as the Buddha said, that's one of the protectors of the world. And in protecting the world, you're protecting yourself.

All the precepts are like that. When you make up your mind you're not going to kill under

any circumstances, you're not going to steal, you're not going to lie, you're not going to have illicit sex or take intoxicants under *any* circumstances, you're giving universal safety. Of course, you can't protect everybody from everybody else, but you can say, "I'm not posing any danger to anybody at all." And when your precepts become universal like that, then, as the Buddha says, you have a share in that universal safety.

So this is where our security lies: in our practice. Things outside may change, but the general outline of how to find safety inside is always the same.

Remember that story of the Buddha talking to King Pasenadi. King Pasenadi comes to see him in the middle of the day, and the Buddha asks him, "Where are you coming from, great king, in the middle of the day?" And the king says, "Oh, the typical things that kings do when they're mad for power." It's amazing that he's so frank.

And the Buddha says, "Suppose someone from the east came and said, 'There's this huge mountain moving in from the east, crushing all living beings in its path.' And someone else comes from the south, another person comes from the west, another person comes from the north, and they all say, 'There are these mountains coming in from the east, south, west, and north, crushing all beings in their path.' Given that human life is so hard to come by, what would you do?"

And King Pasenadi says, "What else could I do but calm my mind and practice the Dhamma, with whatever little time I have left."

And the Buddha says, "In that case, I warn you, great king: Aging, illness, and death are moving in from all directions. Given that human life is so hard to come by, what are you going to do?" Of course the king gives the same answer: "Calm the mind; practice the Dhamma."

That's where our focus should always be, because that's where our true wealth is. That's where our true safety lies. And it doesn't matter which mountain moves in first, the mountains are going to get you. But they're going to get just the body. Don't let them get your mind. Have the confidence that you can keep the mind separate.

As for times when anxiety does come up, remember that whatever happens in the world, you're going to need mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment, in order to deal with the unexpected. So instead of laying out all kinds of scenarios about what you'll do if this happens, what you'll do if that happens—which would just eat up all your time—just remind yourself that the qualities you'll need are things you can develop right now as you meditate.

In this way, you can turn your anxiety into heedfulness. And then it actually becomes a positive force in the practice. Because, as the Buddha said, "All skillful qualities are rooted in heedfulness." And those skillful qualities do create your haven of well-being, even in the midst of dangers all around you.

The world will never stop being a dangerous place, but you can learn to stop posing dangers to yourself and others. And, in so doing, you find that you really can create a haven inside.

And although you can't create a haven for everybody else, at least your haven will be a good influence, to whatever extent you have an influence on the world. So there's nothing selfish about finding this well-being inside. You're taking yourself out of the food chain; you're taking yourself out of the danger chain. And that's a huge gift right there.