

Heedful of What's Precious

August 2, 2009

The Buddha's final instruction was to bring about completion through heedfulness, which means that in English the last word he spoke was "heedfulness." However, in Pali it was the other way around. The last word he spoke was "bring about completion." But heedfulness is the means by which it's done.

As he said elsewhere, heedfulness is the root of all skillfulness. The practice of developing what's skillful is *the* most basic Buddhist teaching.

Some people accused the Buddha of not teaching anything in particular, not making any definite statements. One of his students said, "No, that's not true. He was very definite about what's skillful and what's unskillful." When the student later reported this conversation, the Buddha said, "That was well-spoken." After all, the Buddha himself said that this was one of his definitive teachings.

So heedfulness lies at the basis of the teaching, the basis of the practice, which means that it's good to think about what it means to be heedful. On the one hand, it implies that you believe that your actions do make a difference. If they didn't make a difference, there'd be no need to be heedful: Just do whatever you wanted and there'd be no consequences. But they really do have consequences, they really do make a difference, so you have to be heedful in what you do.

The idea of heedfulness also implies there's something you have to protect. Usually we think about protecting our life by being heedful. In other words, if you act in a careless way you might kill yourself or harm other people or damage your belongings.

But for the Buddha, the simple fact of being alive or having belongings is not in and of itself a virtue. As he once said, "One day lived mindfully is better than a hundred years lived mindlessly." One day lived with virtue, one day lived with concentration, one day lived discerning the arising and passing away of your mental states, is better than a whole hundred years of living without doing any of those things.

So what's really precious here, what's really valuable here, is not so much your life as it is good qualities of the mind.

We find this confirmed in his other teachings. We talk of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as being jewels. When you have a jewel, you want to protect it. You have to be heedful that you don't leave it around where it might get lost. In the case of the Triple Gem, being protective of these jewels means trying to

develop their qualities in your mind.

As the Buddha said, the qualities that led to his awakening were ardency, heedfulness, and resolution. You want to protect these qualities as jewels in your mind.

The Dhamma means not only knowledge of what the Buddha taught but also the practice of the Dhamma to the point where you actually attain the Dhamma inside: That should all be protected.

The Sangha should be protected in the sense that you want to keep their virtues in mind and always live conscious of the fact that they've given their lives to the practice and they've benefitted. We have their example showing how noble human life can be. You don't want to forget that example.

Another thing the Buddha says to protect is the truth. In everyday language, that means once you've made a statement, you stick by it. You make a promise and then you protect the truth of your promise.

But there's also a passage where the Buddha says that truth should be protected and goes on to define the truth as nibbana. How do you protect nibbana? In and of itself, it doesn't need protection, but you want to protect your access to it, to make sure you don't close off the way.

Which means that you protect the qualities of the path in your mind. Everything from right view on through to right concentration: These things are valuable. They're among the things you should show the most respect for.

So the path is something you want to develop heedfully. In the passage we chanted just now, the Buddha talks about the different duties appropriate to the four noble truths. These are the duties of a person who practices the Dhamma. You want to develop the path so that you can comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, and realize the cessation of suffering.

So be very protective of this path. Do your best to keep nurturing it. What this means is that when skillful mental qualities arise in the mind, you don't just sit there watching them come and watching them go. You watch them coming and going because you have an agenda: You want to figure out *why* they come, *why* they go, so that once you understand the causes, you can turn them in the direction you want: You want skillful qualities to come and stay, so that they can develop. This is why this is called a *training*. We're not just passively observing things and hoping that somehow we'll wear out our defilements by being totally non-reactive. We have to observe things so that we can understand them. That means actively questioning, actively probing. We want to know.

The Buddha very strongly encouraged questions, because they're a sign that you want to know. If you don't ask questions, you're not really interested. So he

encouraged questioning.

One time he made the statement that there are two types of assemblies. The first assembly is one where cross-questioning is encouraged, and people get training in cross-questioning: In other words, once a statement has been made, if you don't understand, you should ask, "What does this mean? How is this?" Which probably means, "What's the connection here? How does x connect to y ? What things are causes and conditions for one another? What things are not related?" That kind of question.

The second assembly is one trained in bombast: They learn how to listen to beautiful statements and just leave it at that. They feel good and warm and fuzzy all over. They're trained in learning how to speak in a way that's good and warm and fuzzy. But it doesn't get anywhere. It doesn't lead to any understanding.

So an important quality in gaining wisdom is learning how to ask questions, trying to figure things out. When a skillful state arises in the mind, you want to figure out, "How do I keep it going?" If it disappears, you want to figure out, "Well, what happened? Why did it disappear?"

Similarly with unskillful states: If you see something unskillful coming into the mind, you want to watch it with the idea of figuring out where it's coming from so that you can undercut the cause.

So there's a lot of active questioning and probing here, and they're an important part of the path. You want to protect that part of the mind that's interested in knowing, that wants to know.

This desire here is not the craving that causes suffering, it's part of the desire of right effort: the desire to figure things out in terms of what's skillful and what's unskillful so that you can apply the right effort of trying to prevent the unskillful or to get rid of it once it's arisen. As for the skillful, if it hasn't arisen yet, you try your best to give rise to it; once it's there, you try to maintain it and get it to grow.

These are your duties on the path. And you want to protect that sense of duty. Don't let other things get in its way.

Especially for those of us who are ordained, these are the duties of our lives: to develop the path so that we can comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, and realize the cessation of suffering. That's the bottom line here. So we should do what we can to protect a community where this is the bottom line.

This how you protect the jewel of the Sangha. If you can't protect it in this way, it's very hard for the Dhamma to survive out there in the environment of the marketplace. Out there, the Dhamma has to be something that sells. It gets changed, it gets warped by the pressure to make money, which is the bottom line in most institutions.

This is why the Buddha was so adamant, one, that the Dhamma be given freely as a gift, and two, that it was important that the Sangha be maintained as an environment where the issues of making money are not paramount.

The big issue here is, “What are you doing to train your mind?” Whatever comes up, whatever issue there is: What are you doing to train your mind to develop and protect those qualities that are precious inside?

We have the opportunity to practice now, but—and this is the other aspect of heedfulness—we don’t know how much more time we have. So you develop those other two qualities of ardency and resolution to make the most of the opportunities that you do have while you have them.

The future is uncertain, but you prepare for the future by being heedful of what you’re doing right now—protecting what’s valuable right now by being careful, ardent, resolute, attentive, observant.

These are some of the aspects of what it means to be heedful. It’s through these aspects that the path comes to completion.