

Survival Dhamma

August 19, 2010

“Heedfulness is the path to the deathless. Heedlessness, the path to death. The heedful do not die. The heedless as if already dead.”

That’s one of the more famous verses in the Dhammapada and it’s the Buddha’s advice on survival. On one level, it sounds pretty ordinary. Any kind of survival— wilderness survival, survival in a city—requires that you be heedful. There are dangers, and if you’re oblivious to their dangers they’re going to get you.

But the Buddha’s talking about more than just physical survival. He’s talking about the survival of the good qualities of our mind, the survival of our chances for true happiness. And for him the ultimate survival is to reach the deathless, a dimension that doesn’t die. It’s not affected by change, time, space.

The mind can reach that dimension. It’s what the practice is all about. To reach it, though, we have to realize that the most important part of survival is the survival of the mind’s good qualities: our character, our desire for true happiness or, in more traditional terms, our purity, our wisdom, and our compassion. Wisdom in seeing that we want a long-term happiness and not just short-term. Compassion in realizing that our long-term happiness can’t depend on the misery of other people, so you’ll have to take their well-being into account. And purity in acting on our wisdom and compassion to make sure that we really don’t harm anyone. Those are the principles of our survival. It’s important to keep this in mind.

You can sign up for all kinds of survival courses, and there’s a lot of fear now about what’s going to happen to the world: Ecological disaster, political disaster, all kind of things can happen. And how are we going to survive when things outside break down? We have to remember that the crucial part of survival lies inside, in maintaining the basic principles of our heart and mind, maintaining our integrity. After all, the body is bound to die. If it doesn’t die quickly, it’ll die slowly. There’s nothing sadder than seeing people struggling, struggling, and struggling, harming one another and then dying anyhow, thinking that by harming one another they’re going to somehow ensure their survival—but then in the end everybody dies. A lot of people create a lot of bad kamma that way.

The Buddha, before his awakening, had a vision of the world as a stream that was drying up. The fish were flopping around in what little water that was remaining, trying to push the other fish out of the way and, of course, everybody ended up dying. But then, as he said, he saw an arrow embedded in the heart.

That arrow in the heart—craving—he saw, was the problem.

This craving keeps us coming back to these limited resources for birth, aging, illness, and death, again and again and again. This is the craving to which we're enslaved. The whole purpose of the practice is to find freedom from that slavery, to realize we don't have to be pushed around by our craving—but it depends on having a very clear notion of what survives and what it means to survive. The Buddha doesn't have us focus too much on the “what,” aside from assuring us that things don't end when the body ends, that even after death there's more coming. So you'll want to make sure, at the very least, that that “more” is heading in the right direction.

That's why we have the precepts. They're clear. There are some people who complain that the precepts are absolute, hard-and-fast rules. People don't like hard-and-fast rules, but actually the precepts clear-cut, and for a good reason. Clear-cut rules are easier to remember: Don't kill, don't steal, don't have illicit sex, don't lie, don't take intoxicants, period. Although some people would prefer a little wriggle room in the rules, they're being shortsighted and heedless. The times when you need clear-cut rules the most are when you're most tempted to break them. It's a lot easier to remember clear-cut promises that you make to yourself.

Remember, right after 9-11? So many Buddhist teachers were saying, “Well, this business about not killing, we can throw that away for the time being. And this business about hostility not being cured by hostility, forget about that.” People were throwing away the basic principles that they actually needed most at that point. The Buddha's not teaching us these principles just for times when they're convenient. He's teaching them for times when they're hard. When you're hungry, when someone really does threaten you, when you're really tempted to have illicit sex, tempted to lie, you can come-up with all kinds of excuses for why you can get away with killing, stealing, and lying. The same when you're really tempted to say, “I just want to forget about everything for a while and take some intoxicants.” Those are the times when you need to remember those clear-cut principles because that's what your survival requires: that you not give in to these desires, because they compromise the survival of your goodness and they compromise the survival of your chances to find the deathless.

It all goes back to that basic principle of wisdom, that happiness will depend on the skillfulness of your actions, and that long-term happiness is more valuable than short-term—or what the Buddha calls abundant happiness as opposed to limited.

The abundant happiness of the heart depends on being able to look back at your actions and realize that you didn't harm anybody to get where you are, even

though you had to make sacrifices. In fact, there's an abundant happiness that comes *because* of your realization that you were able to make sacrifices. There are times when you have to tell yourself, "Okay, as the Buddha said 'Just as the ocean doesn't overrun its boundaries, people who are really serious about the practice won't overstep their precepts, even for the sake of life.'" It's one of those principles that people keep forgetting, that the willingness to die for your principles is something noble because you still have your principles even as you lose the life you would eventually have to lose anyhow.

If you're willing to kill for your principles, then when you die you lose both your life and your principles. You're worse off than before. It's not the case that when you break the precepts, you'll reach the deathless. You still die. But keeping the precepts keeps open the possibility that you'll have the opportunity to continue along the path that does lead to the deathless.

When you hold to the precepts, the mind finds it easy to settle down in concentration, because you've had practice in mindfulness, you've had practice in alertness, and you can look back at your actions and not be filled with either regret or denial. You've also learned the principle of honesty, really looking at your actions and seeing where they do cause harm. It's true that people without precepts can obtain concentration, but it's a concentration infiltrated with dishonesty. And that kind of concentration is really dangerous. You get all sorts of twisted ideas about how now that you've got a good solid state of concentration, the breaking of the precepts doesn't matter, that you've somehow reached a level beyond the precepts. Or your ideas about what is harmful to other people and what's not harmful to other people or to yourself get twisted.

So the Buddha didn't say that you can get concentration only when you have precepts. But he did say that concentration bears great fruit if it's fostered with virtue; wisdom bears great fruit if it's fostered with concentration. Again, it is possible to have wisdom or discernment without strong concentration, but that sort of wisdom is very, very shallow. It doesn't really dig down deep into the mind. It can be very easily erased—and very easily grow skewed if you don't have the honesty that comes with virtue, and the steadiness of gaze that comes with concentration, the depth of well-being that comes with concentration that allows you not to let your hunger get in the way. Because the mind is hungry and if it doesn't have a sense of nourishment that comes from the concentration, then it tends to dress up its hunger as being legitimate, normal, natural. A hunger for a comfortable life or a hunger for sensual pleasures becomes perfectly okay. Wisdom gets mixed up with cleverness, and then can turn back and bite you and harm the really important part of your survival.

So the Buddha's path here is for someone who doesn't have to depend just on comfortable times. The Buddha did say it's easier to practice when times are comfortable. When there's famine, when there's revolt, he admits that it's harder to practice, but those are precisely the times when you really need all the skills you've developed during easier times. So now that we do have easier times, we should take advantage of the fact, we should be heedful and work on what's really important.

What kind of survival skills will we need when ecological disaster happens, economic disaster happens, political disaster happens? It really depends on the nature of the disaster. But the survival skills that apply across the board—your alertness, your mindfulness, your concentration, your discernment, your virtue—those are things you'll need regardless of the particulars of the disaster. So those are the things we should work on right now. Remember, we're not just trying to extend life, or to push death back a bit longer. As the Buddha said, there are things beyond death, and the best of them is the deathless.

It really is possible. There is a deathless dimension in the mind that can be attained through the practice. But if you go against the principles the Buddha found, you're closing off the way. You're being heedless. Even though there are times when breaking the precepts may extend the physical survival of the body, remember: As the Buddha said, "One day spent in the practice is worth more than a thousand years without the practice." That should be our vision of what survival means. When that's clear, it's obvious what the path to survival requires.

So always be heedful about what's going on in the mind, because that's where the true dangers lie, but that's also where your potentials for true treasures, deathless treasures, lie as well.