

## *From Heedfulness to Purity*

*August 26, 2011*

If someone were to ask you, “Do you sincerely want to be happy?” You’d probably say, “Of course.” But if someone were to look at your life, is that the conclusion they would draw? That you do want to be happy sincerely?

We all come to the Dhamma because we’re suffering in one way or another. We want to find a way out. But we often place conditions on the way out: “I want to be happy and preserve this, I want to be happy and hold onto that.”

And that’s normal. After all, you’re suffering and part of suffering is that you’re bewildered. Part of you doesn’t really know what’s going on and doesn’t really know why you’re suffering.

This is why each of us has a lot of strange preconceived notions about what the path and goal are going to be like.

And it’s okay to practice anyhow, even with your strange notions. If you wait until you get everything cleared up first, you’ll never get to the practice.

It’s through practicing that we learn, that we begin to recognize the things we’re holding onto that we thought might be good, thought might be worthwhile, but are actually part of the cause of suffering.

When the Buddha was talking about the root of what is skillful in the mind, he didn’t say that it comes from any innate goodness, innate compassion, or innate wisdom, aside from the wisdom of heedfulness: seeing that there is danger out there and there’s danger in here, and that your actions are going to make a difference as to whether you’ll be hurt by those dangers. Your actions will be what determines whether you’re going to fall into those dangers or not.

When you realize that much, you realize you’ve got to get a lot clearer about what you’re actually doing: in terms of thoughts, words, deeds. This is why we work on mindfulness, why we work on alertness. The alertness is there to watch what’s actually happening. And the mindfulness is to remind ourselves, “Okay, we did this, and what were the results? What will they be if we do it again?” That way, you can actually connect the causes with the effects.

We start on a crude level and we work up to more and more refined levels. But this is the basic pattern.

Those teachings the Buddha gave to Rahula: You try something that seems to be okay, that looks it’s not going to harm anybody. And why don’t you want to harm anybody? It’s going to come back at you.

It’s also through heedfulness that we develop compassion. It’s through heedfulness that we develop integrity, truthfulness, all the good qualities that we’re going to need on the path—heedfulness combined with the desire for happiness.

As your powers of observation get more and more refined, you begin to see areas

where your original motivation was confused or actually corrupt in one way or another. But it's not that the corruption is going to spoil everything. When you see that you've got something wrong in your motivation, and it's been causing stress, you've got the choice: Do you want to hold onto it or do you want to let go?

So you bring the mind to the concentration usually with some confused motives. And the concentration, the mindfulness, allow for the discernment that's going to allow us to see where the confusion lies, because we begin to see that it really does cause suffering, causes stress one way or another.

As you stick with the concentration, it sensitizes you to levels of stress you may not have even noticed before. You just took it as part of the background noise, something you could take for granted. Sometimes we need outside help to point out to us areas where we've gotten complacent, or types of suffering or stress where we say, "Well, nobody can escape this kind of suffering, nobody can escape this kind of stress." That's where we get complacent—i.e., the opposite of heedful. That's what cuts us off.

But it's best if we don't need to depend on that outside voice, if we can keep prodding ourselves. Tell yourself, "There must be something better than this." If there's the least little bit of stress, the least little bit of feeling burdened in the mind, there's something wrong.

Of course, where do you look for the something wrong? You turn around and look inside. You try to see the stress arising, the stress passing away. And try to notice, "What's arising along with it? What passing away along with it?"

It's all very simple when you come right down to it. It's simply a question of trying to stay simple ourselves. Our inner complexity is what allows some of our less skillful motives to hide out. The convolutions of our minds provide safe harbor for them.

But if you can strip things down simply to action and result and what kinds of results you're getting, and keeping in mind that you can always change your actions: That's what helps to sort everything out.

Your heedfulness is what's going to overcome whatever's unskillful in your motivation: whatever's neurotic, whatever's egotistical, whatever's not quite right. In other words, your bewilderment.

Your heedfulness is what's going to get you past all those things, when you finally realize, "I can't afford to hold onto this."

It's like being out in a little tiny boat in the ocean. You've got a lot of belongings in the boat and you begin to realize that those belongings are going to cause the boat to sink. So you throw away a little bit here, a little bit there, and think, "That might be enough." But you see that the boat is still sinking, so you've got to throw away more, throw away more.

And if you sink this time, then you come back the next time. But there comes the question, "How many times do you want to sink before you've had enough, before you're willing to let go of some of the things you've been holding onto?"

There's that statement in Zen: "The Great Way is not difficult for those with no preferences." This doesn't mean you don't prefer anything at all. You do have a preference: You'd rather not suffer. But when it comes to what you're going to have to give up and what

you're going to have to develop as part of the path, you can't let your preferences get in the way.

It's normal that we're going to resist giving up some things, resist developing some things. But you want your heedfulness to help you overcome that resistance. And the simple fact that there's suffering and stress when you don't overcome that resistance at some point will prod you to ask yourself, "Have you had enough of that?"

Because if you hold onto subtle defilements, they're going to cause trouble down the line. They may seem perfectly harmless compared to some of the really gross defilements that are there in the mind. The Buddha says, it's like having a little bit of excrement under your fingernail. It doesn't have to be much: a tiny little bit, but it still smells bad.

So you want to keep searching out: There are dangers in here. This may sound depressing, it may sound negative, but it's a simple fact.

And the whole purpose of the practice is optimistic. We can learn how to find happiness in a midst of a lot of suffering in the world. We realize that we can't end other people's sufferings. We can make sure that we're as little a burden as possible on other people. But the issue of the suffering that goes deep into the mind: that's each person's responsibility. And you want to take care of that. Because the more you're suffering, the more you do place a burden on others. This is why this is not a selfish path.

So if you find that you do hang onto this and that even though the this and that are not skillful, you also find yourself running into the suffering that comes from them. And it's simply a matter of learning how to detect it and then learning how to ask yourself, "Have you had enough?" This is how we purify our motivation, purify our actions.

The mind doesn't really get totally pure until arahatship. So you can't wait until your mind is totally pure before you start to practice. You can't wait until your motivation is entirely healthy before you start to practice. You start with the motivation you've got.

And it's the combination of your heedfulness and your sincere desire not to suffer: That's what's going to see you through.

They say that Ajaan Mun, in his last Dhamma talk, made the point that all the various elements of the path are your weapons or your support for the warrior in the mind. Now what is the warrior in the mind? It's the determination not to come back and suffer again. That's something you want to encourage.

This desire for happiness, the desire not to suffer, together with your heedfulness, realizing that you've had enough and if you're not really careful there's going to be more—more suffering, more pain, more burdens on the mind: This is what sees us through.

It's through heedfulness that we become good. It's through heedfulness that the mind is purified. Not that we start out pure, but we can get there.

So that's what you hold onto. Use that determination, that heedfulness to sort everything else out.