

Guarding Against Trouble

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Heedfulness, as the Buddha said, is the basis for all skillful qualities. There are only two passages I've been able to find, though, where he defines heedfulness. One is not resting content with what you've got in terms of your skillful qualities, and the other is guarding your mind against what he calls the effluents and things associated with the effluents.

Of course, that leads to the next question: What are the effluents? The Pali word *asava* literally means *things that flow out*. In this case, they flow out of the mind. In some cases, the Buddha defines them as sensuality, becoming, and ignorance. But there's a sutta where he talks about the effluents and they sound like anything that would create trouble for the mind. He lists seven different ways of dealing with the effluents, and in the course of the discussion you realize that some of the effluents are pretty deep and subtle things going on in the mind, while others are pretty obvious.

The seven are these: There are the effluents that are dealt with by *seeing*, and here the Buddha means seeing what questions are worthy of your attention and which ones are not. Questions like: Who am I? What was I in the past? What am I going to be in the future? What is my true self? Those he says are not worth your attention, because if you follow them, you get entangled with all kinds of views: views that you have a self, views that you have no self, both of which are to be avoided because, as the Buddha said elsewhere, when you start defining yourself, you place limitations on yourself.

So you avoid those questions and you focus instead on the questions of: What is suffering? What leads to suffering? What can be done to put an end to suffering? Those questions are useful.

So right now as you're meditating, what are you going to do to help put an end to suffering? Well, you develop concentration, you develop mindfulness. What you're doing is developing the path. And so you pay attention to this: What can I do to make the path stronger? What can I do to make the path more subtle? Those are useful things to pay attention to. In that way, you cut through the Buddha calls, *a thicket of views, a tangle of views, a wilderness of views*, surrounding questions of your identity.

Instead, you focus on what you're *doing*—less on what you are and more on what you can do. When you focus on what you're doing, you realize after a while that even your sense of self is something that you do, and there are times when it's useful to do, and there are times when it's not. You also find that there are many senses of self, so you sort through them. Try to figure out which ones are most helpful, which are least, and then you learn to stop doing the ones that are not helpful and continue doing the ones that are helpful, up to the point where

you don't need them anymore. That's how you deal with the effluents that can be dealt with by seeing.

Then there are the effluents that are to be dealt with by *restraining*. In other words, as the Buddha said, you restrain your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. If you find that you're thinking about things or looking at things or listening to things in a way that gives rise to greed, aversion, or delusion, you try to stop. Either you change the way you look or listen, or you just don't look at or listen to those things at all. You don't have to go around with blinders on all the time, but you have to be careful about when you're looking at something: Why are you looking at it?

This is especially true when you're online. It's not that the images jump out at you. You have to turn the computer on, decide which place you're going to go, so you're making some choices. What do you want to look at? Why? You should ask yourself these questions again and again. Because what's doing the looking? Is it greed doing the looking? Is anger doing the looking? Fear? Those are effluents. Why don't you have discernment doing the looking? Why don't you have goodwill doing the looking? Equanimity doing the looking? After all, the reason why you're looking will also stir up results, and you don't want to stir up results that go to more greed, more aversion, more delusion.

So you look carefully at how you're using your senses, because your senses are tools for the mind and also have their impact on the mind, and you want to make sure that that impact is good.

Then there are the effluents to be dealt with by *using*—in other words, when you use your requisites. When you eat food, when you use clothing, use shelter, use medicine, why are you doing it? There are some perfectly good reasons for using these things, but there are also some reasons that are not so good. You realize that the extent to which you have to use these things is placing a burden on others, so you use them for a good purpose.

You read restaurant reviews in *The New Yorker* and you begin to realize that people are not just there for nourishment. It's gone beyond that. There's the status, there's the whatever. If eating were just about nourishment, most restaurants would go out of business. But you don't have to be concerned about their going out of business, you have to ask yourself: What effluents is this encouraging in my own mind? Or what is this encouraging in my impact on the environment around me? Do you eat for play or do you eat for nourishment? Do you eat for putting on extra bulk or do you eat to find something entertaining—new entertaining combinations that no one has ever thought of before? You have to think about how your eating and how your use of clothing and shelter has an impact on you and on the environment around you. When you're more reflective like this, that helps to deal with the effluents that surround our general greed for the requisites.

Then there are the effluents that are to be dealt with by *developing*. This means developing qualities like mindfulness, analysis of qualities—in other words, all the factors for awakening, things that we’re trying to develop right now as we meditate.

You try to be mindful of the breath and you analyze what’s going well, what’s not going well with the breath. If you find that something’s not going well, then you do your best to change it. If it’s going well you do your best to maintain it. That’s persistence as a factor for awakening. When you do it right, it should lead to a sense of rapture, a sense of fullness, sometimes a sense of energy coursing through the body, and that can lead to calm.

Sometimes the rapture can get you stirred up, but it nourishes something in the body and the mind. When you don’t need that nourishment anymore, you can go beyond it. You calm down, get the mind into concentration, and the deeper it goes into concentration, the stronger its equanimity becomes.

All these are qualities you want to develop so that you have a basis for dealing with the greed and aversion and the sensuality, the desire for becoming, all these things that would otherwise come flowing out of the mind. When you meditate, you’re creating a good state of becoming: a state of becoming that has a pleasure that doesn’t need to depend on sensuality. It’s a pleasure that, unlike a lot of pleasures in the world, doesn’t lead to delusion. It actually leads to clarity.

Then finally, there are a set of three types of effluents that make a good combination: They’re the effluents that are to be dealt with by *tolerating*, the ones to be dealt with by *destroying*, and the ones to be dealt with by *avoiding*.

Tolerating here means two things: tolerating unpleasant words from other people and learning how to tolerate pain.

We live in a human world, and the nature of human speech is that sometimes it’s good and sometimes it’s bad. Sometimes it’s friendly; sometimes it’s unfriendly. Sometimes it means well; sometimes it doesn’t mean well. And you have to realize: This is just the way speech is. This is what we’re going to hear as human beings, so we should learn not to get worked up about it. We just think, “An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear,” as the Buddha advised, and then you just leave it there. Don’t use it to stab at yourself or to stab other people.

And as for pain, if you’re going to learn about pain—which is a lot of what the first noble truth is about—you have to learn how to sit with it. And in sitting with it, it’s not simply for the sake of enduring it. You’re trying to understand it: Why is it the mind takes the pain and makes an issue out of it? It seems normal that it would, but then we’re trying to get to beyond normal. So you have to ask yourself: What can I do that would enable me to be with pain but not suffer from it?

A lot of this has to do with the perceptions or labels you apply to the pain: where the pain is in the body, how it’s affecting you. Sometimes you find that the mind actually thinks that the

pain has a will. It intends to hurt you. We have all kinds of strange ideas around pain, many of which we picked up even before we knew language. We come out of the mother's womb and there's pain right there. And nobody can explain it to us at that point because we don't understand language. So we develop a lot of weird ideas about pain which, if they go unexamined, continue to do a lot of damage.

So you try to get the mind still and examine: "What are my perceptions about the pain? Do I actually believe it has a will? Do I actually believe that it's the same thing as my knee?" Say, if it's in the knee, "Is it coming at me? Is it going away?" If you can perceive it as moments of pain going away as soon as they appear, instead of a big block of solid pain coming right at you, you change your relationship to it. And in changing the relationship, you find that you can endure it a lot more easily.

So these are the two things that you deal with by tolerating: unkind words and physical pain.

The things you don't tolerate—the things you *destroy*—are thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of ill-will, and thoughts of harmfulness as they come up in the mind. In other words, you don't just let them sit there, and you don't say, "Hey, let's look into this sensual desire here—this looks like it's fun!" You have to say, "Nope, got to keep it out of the mind."

Thoughts of ill-will: You don't fantasize about seeing other people suffer. Harmfulness is similar to ill-will: You see someone already suffering and you want to add a little bit more. If any thought like this comes in, it's something you do not tolerate. The Buddha says you wipe it out of existence as quickly as you can. And that means, of course, that you don't just repress it; repressing means you deny that it's there. Wiping it out means you try to understand it: Why would the mind go for this kind of thing to begin with? You've got to look for: Where's the allure here? What do I like about this?

Watch for these things as they arise, watch for them as they pass away. And you begin to see: Why does the mind latch on to these things? Why does it run with them? As Ajaan Lee would say, why does it continue weaving them into a longer and longer piece of cloth? If you really see why you go for these things, and then can compare the allure with the drawbacks, you realize the drawbacks are a lot worse, a lot heavier, and the allure is not worth much. Then you let go.

The problem is all too often we're not honest with ourselves about what the allure is. Which is why we have to keep going over these issues again and again and again, until we understand, until there's that little flash out of the corner of your eye: You see the mind going for, say, sensuality or for ill will for some pretty paltry reasons. But because you've hidden them from yourself, they're able to do their work. And yet they don't really amount to much when you actually look straight at them.

So that's another reason why you have to get the mind really quiet and still and why you have to do it not only while you're sitting here with our eyes closed but also as you go through the day, so that you can catch the mind as it goes for these things.

Then finally there are the effluents to be dealt with by *avoiding* them. And these are basically commonsense things of not putting yourself in danger. As the Buddha expresses it, you avoid going out at night, you avoid stumbling into hedges, you avoid stumbling over cows, you avoid falling into cesspools—pretty commonsensical stuff.

The problem is that sometimes, when we're practicing the Dhamma, we lack common sense. We hear about the Dhamma protecting us or we hear about our good intentions protecting us, and we think that we don't have to be wary about the world around us. Our good intentions will protect us. But the Buddha never said that. The protection you get from the Dhamma is that you're not creating any new bad kamma right now, but it doesn't protect you from your old bad kamma. So you still have to watch out.

I noticed that Ajaan Fuang was a very wary person—wary of dealing with other people. He wouldn't trust people right away. He would watch them for a while first. When I lived with him, it was two or three years before I was even allowed in his room. I eventually became his attendant, and then it became my duty. I had to clean up his room and arrange everything. But he wouldn't allow me in there until he felt that he could really trust me. And when different issues came up in the monastery—so-and-so said this about you, so-and-so said that about you—he would sometimes ask trick questions to see how you would respond, to check to see if the accusation was true. He wouldn't come right out and trust people right away, because he learned in dealing with his own defilements: You can't trust your own defilements, and other people have their defilements—so how can you trust them?

So you've got to keep your guard up. You can't believe that simply having good intentions is going to be enough. After all, the Buddha said it's not good intentions, it's *skillful* intentions that matter. That means you have to be circumspect, so that you can avoid dangers.

There was an interesting story one time about a woman who came to the monastery to meditate. She was a friend of one of the cooks in the monastery, and the cook had told us that this woman had a problem: Every time she sat down to meditate, she would start shaking. So sure enough, she came to the monastery and was sitting in front of Ajaan Fuang and started shaking. One of Ajaan Fuang's students with psychic abilities, a woman, happened to be there, too, and so he said to her, "Check out and see what's wrong with her." So the woman sat in meditation and she saw the other woman being shaken by two beings that looked pretty nasty. So in her vision she confronted them and said, "Why are you shaking her?" Well, they turned on her, scared her so much that she went out and threw up. She went back to see Ajaan Fuang, and Ajaan Fuang said, "You fool! You've got to protect yourself when you're dealing with things like this." And for her, the protection meant filling her body with light, filling her

body with good breath energy, filling her body with her awareness, then spreading goodwill to those beings—and only then talking to them.

She found out the beings had been this woman's parents in a previous lifetime and that she had killed them. When they saw her meditating, they thought that she would get away, so they wanted to stop her. There's more to the story, but the important thing here is that, even in dealing on these levels, you have to protect yourself. All the more so in dealing with everyday human beings.

So these are the different ways that you embody heedfulness in your practice. You realize that there are troubles that can come from within the mind, there are troubles that can come from without, and you do your best to guard yourself them all. Because ultimately, that's what heedfulness means: It means that there are dangers inside and out, and you've got to protect yourself.

The good thing about heedfulness is the implication that if you protect yourself well, you can come out unscathed, or at least with a minimum amount of damage. But you can't be complacent. It's your actions that will make a difference. It's not simply that good intentions have a magical protective ability. If you have good intentions, you want to make them skillful and you want to make them circumspect, so that you protect yourself from danger on all sides. And that's how the mind becomes skillful all around.