

Victory

November 17, 2019

When the Buddha talks about coming into the present moment, it's never to just be there. If all you had to do is be in the present moment, he never would have talked about heedfulness. There would be nothing you had to do, nothing you had to be careful about—just accept whatever comes up, and you'd be fine. But every time he talks about being in the present moment, he talks about doing your duty, and he talks about it in the context of heedfulness: the fact that you're going to die and you don't know when, but you do know that you have the present moment. This space of time. This breath. And now this breath. You've got the opportunity to do something good, to develop something good or to abandon something unskillful.

When the Buddha talks about duties, it's always in the context of the four noble truths, starting out with the principle of skillful action: that skillful action should be developed and unskillful action should be abandoned. "Action" here means not only outside actions but also actions of your mind. From there come the duties of the four noble truths: to comprehend suffering, to abandon its cause—when you see that your craving is causing you suffering; it's nothing outside. Then you realize the cessation of suffering by developing the path.

So there's work to be done, and it's to be done with heedfulness—in other words, realizing you can't put it off. You've got to do it now, the best you can manage right now. That requires developing strength, which is why concentration is part of the path. We bring the mind to the present moment with the breath so that we can gain some strength from the breath and gain strength from getting the mind to settle down and be still.

So gather your thoughts in right now. If you're going to think about anything, think about the breath. Think about the mind being with the breath. Then pay attention to whether the mind is settling down or not. If it's not settling down, what's wrong? Is it a problem with the breath? Is it a problem with the feelings in the body? Or is it a problem with the mind?

When the Buddha sets out those three frames of reference, it's not the case that you simply choose one and ignore the rest. You focus primarily right now on the body in and of itself, but the feelings are going to be right there, too. Your mind should be right there—and if it's not right there, then the mind is the problem. Or maybe the breath is the problem. Or maybe the feelings are the problem. These are the three areas where you can check out what's going wrong right now and try to bring things back into balance.

But the underlying motivation here is that if you don't get the mind to settle down, you're going to keep on creating suffering, and you won't be able to see clearly how and why. You may know the general principles, but it's actually seeing them in action where you can really make a difference.

This is why the Buddha talks about respect for heedfulness. You bring the mind to the present moment and you try to do the best you can to understand what's going on.

Now, that respect for heedfulness has to be based on goodwill.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about taking yourself as your governing principle. In the sutta on governing principles, he seems to be talking about people who are thinking about giving up on the practice. You take yourself as a governing principle when you realize, "I came to this practice because I saw that I was suffering and I was hoping maybe I could put an end to suffering." But if you give up, what does that mean about your attitude toward yourself? Do you not want to give up suffering? Do you not want to see an end? If you had goodwill for yourself, you'd do what you can. You'd put up with whatever difficulties, whatever disappointments, were involved. You'd find your way around them. You wouldn't let them become obstacles, because otherwise you'd simply go back to your old ways. It's because your old ways were not satisfactory that you came to the practice to begin with.

So, this is one of the ways the Buddha has you develop a sense of heedfulness: through goodwill for yourself.

Then, of course, there's goodwill for others. If you can get a handle on your own way of causing suffering, you're going to be less of a burden on others. If you could find a true happiness, there would be a sense of satisfaction, a sense of contentment inside. You'd have no sense of irritation or frustration that you would take out on other people. The people who can't find happiness are the ones who get frustrated and take it out on others. But if you can find happiness, other people will benefit.

This is one of the reasons why we develop goodwill together with right view. The two of them together provide the basis for heedfulness.

To understand what's required in the practice, you have to have some right views about it. There are all kinds of ways you can be heedful out in the world. People going into the forest have to be heedful, but their way of "heedful" sometimes is taking a gun. Some people's way of being heedful is to hoard food, in case of a collapse of civilization. That's heedfulness with wrong view. Heedfulness with right view is when you want to hoard good actions, skillful actions. If you trust in the principle of skillful action, then you focus your attention there. You realize that this is where your true safety can be found.

In this way, right view brings everything back here. This is why right view is an important part of heedfulness—to direct your efforts where they belong, where they'll do the most good, where they'll be the most effective.

So: right view and goodwill. It's interesting to note that there's a passage where the Buddha says that if you have ill will for someone, it's a sign of wrong view. In other words, you think that you can benefit somehow by getting someone else to suffer. This means that there's a very strong connection between right view and goodwill. When you understand the causes of

suffering, then you ask yourself, “If I want to put an end to suffering, what do I have to do?” Well, you have to have goodwill for yourself.

That motivates all the rest of the factors of the path. Simply focusing on that question of why there’s suffering and how you can put an end to it—that in and of itself is motivated by goodwill. The two factors help each other along, so try to cultivate them as much as you can. This is how you make yourself your governing principle—in other words, the principle that keeps you on the path. It keeps you focused on what you have to do right now, right now, so that you come into the present moment as a victor and not as a victim. Not as someone defeated.

On a TV show I saw one time, a Dhamma teacher was being interviewed, saying that what the practice comes down to is learning how to accept things as they are, realizing that you can’t change anything, and being okay with that. The interviewer, who was usually very gentle with her interviewees, said, “But isn’t that defeatist? Isn’t that pessimistic?” The teacher being interviewed said, “Only if you think about it,” which is a horrible attitude: You let yourself be defeated and then you pretend it’s okay by not thinking.

The Buddha never told people not to think. Even when you’re getting into right concentration, you need to engage in directed thought and evaluation to get yourself there. Then, once you’re there, you try to develop discernment, and for that, you’ve got to think again.

And the Buddha was definitely not a defeatist. We’re here to gain victory over our unskillful habits, to gain victory over the mind’s tendency to create suffering for itself, to allow itself to be ignorant, to allow itself to keep on churning out suffering. This is what heedfulness is for: to learn how to be a victor, to learn how to win out over your defilements, because it’s only then that you’ll truly be safe.

At that point, you will have found in the present moment what’s really of worth there, as you dig down in the present moment and find something that actually opens up to a dimension outside of the present moment—outside of time and space entirely. That’s victory, because that will never be subject to any kind of danger at all. And no one else has to know about it. Ajaan Lee has an interesting passage where he says that one of the good things about nibbana is that no one else needs to know about it. With other things, where people know what you’ve got, they try to take it away from you, but nobody can take this away from you. They don’t even know you’ve found it.

This is what heedfulness is for. This is what goodwill is for. All the factors of the path: This is what they’re for. So don’t rest until you find it.