

Heeding the Deva Messengers

January 16, 2020

We got news this morning of two deaths connected with a monastery. One was a famous Thai ajaan. The other was one of the supporters of the monastery. And of course, there are deaths going on every day all over the world. The Buddha calls these heavenly messengers, or deva messengers— reminders that we, too, are going to die, and we have to be prepared. We have to be heedful, because our actions are going to make a big difference in how we live, how we die, how we're reborn. And the skills we develop now will play a big role in how we go through all of those processes.

It's because our actions make a difference: That's why heedfulness has meaning. If we're simply going to die and there's nothing we can do about it, then there would be no need to be heedful. But our actions do make a difference in how we go through death. So you have to be very careful about what you do.

The Buddha's teaching that's most connected with heedfulness is the teaching of the five strengths, or the five faculties: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. These are the qualities we need to develop as strengths within ourselves. We have to have them take charge in our minds so that we'll have the strength to do what's right, to do what's skillful now while we still have some bodily strength. When the body has no more strength at all, then it will be totally an affair of the mind.

So we start with conviction that our actions do make a difference, they do matter. It's amazing how many quote unquote "Dharma teachers" out there say that your actions don't matter, that you have no choice, that everything is dependent on causes and conditions coming from the past. That was a view that the Buddha specifically criticized. He said that it leaves you bewildered and unprotected. In other words, you have no way of knowing what in the past caused your suffering right now, and because they tell you that there's nothing you can do about it, there's no way you can protect yourself from suffering right now.

But the Buddha's teaching was very different. We do have influences coming in from the past, but they're not the whole story. They don't cover everything. They're like raw material from which we shape our lives, from which we shape our present moment.

So you have to be convinced that you can do the shaping. That's why we're here to meditate, shaping the present moment and watching ourselves while we do it, because we're shaping states of becoming all the time. This is the process in the mind that will lead to rebirth, and if we don't do it well, it's

going to lead to a bad rebirth. So we learn to shape a good state of becoming, a state of concentration, as a basic skill.

All of this conviction comes under conviction in the Buddha's awakening. He saw the principle of karma, he saw the principle of becoming as it takes shape in the mind and how it then plays itself out not only in thoughts in the mind, but also in the states of being you take on outside.

Becoming is basically taking on an identity in a particular world of experience. Now, inside your mind it's happening all the time, every place where there's a desire and you start imagining how you'd like to attain that desire. A certain world then develops around that desire, the world that's relevant to either gaining it or that's getting in the way. And there's the identity you take on inside that world as the person who's going to enjoy the result of acting on the desire, and the person who's going to be bringing those results about. Your sense of you, your sense of the world, will change with every desire. The becoming will change with every desire.

As the Buddha said, this is the process that causes suffering. It entails suffering probably because we have so many conflicting desires, but also because the whole process needs constant maintenance. We have to keep at it, at it, at it. And our desires are so random, so out of control. They can come up with anything. So we realize that we've got to get this process under our control. It's something we have to work at.

That's why conviction leads then on to the strength of persistence, as you see, when an unskillful desire comes into the mind, that you've got to abandon it. Then you do your best not to let any new ones rise in its place. At the same time, if there are no skillful desires, you try to give rise to them. Once they're there, you try to maintain them. Now, this does involve some becoming, even though it's skillful. But that's how you get beyond unskillful becoming. You can't just say, "I'm not going to have any desires at all," because the mind doesn't work that way. If you deny your desires, they go underground and then they turn into The Thing. They send out their tentacles under the floorboards, shoot up, and strangle you.

One of the purposes of practicing alertness is so that we can be very clear about what our desires are. That's why strength of persistence develops into strength of mindfulness, and mindfulness involves three qualities. In addition to ardency, which is the same thing as persistence, there's also alertness—where you see what you're doing, the results of what you're doing—and then mindfulness, to remind you of how this whole process works.

Because it's so easy, as we get into a particular state of becoming, to forget what we've done. We jump right in, like the audience at a play. The curtain comes up, the program sets the scene—pre-revolutionary Russia or whatever—and we tend to believe it. We give it more than the benefit of the doubt. We

jump right into that world. We totally ignore all the machinations going on behind the scenes. Even though this is where the analogy breaks down, it's as if we're also the stage crew. We create this and then go and sit in the audience, and pretend that we didn't create it. We're so forgetful. We block these things out.

So the purpose of developing the strength of mindfulness and alertness is so that you can remember, "I made this state. I put up this scenery, I set up these chairs." And you see the actors behind stage, smoking cigarettes, chatting, not at all the characters they're going to be as they get onto the stage. You want to be able to remember that so that when a thought comes into the mind, remember, "Okay, this comes up out of the mind. I've made this."

The Buddha has you ask whether it's worth getting into. Right now we're trying to create a state of becoming that's called concentration. That's the most skillful state of becoming you can develop, and that, too, is a strength, because it enables you to see the processes of the mind and yet be quiet and still at the same time. You're creating good becomings and you're clear about the fact that you're doing it. It's in this way that you get to study how becoming comes about: how to get the breath really comfortable, really still, and then you watch, like a spider on a web. The fly hits the web, the spider immediately leaves its spot and goes over and takes care of the fly, and then goes back to its original spot.

You, too, stay with the breath, but you keep an eye out for any stirring or tangle of energy anywhere in your sense of the body. Before it can turn into a thought, and from a thought into a desire, from a desire into a state of becoming, you try to dissolve it, you try to untangle it. You zap it as quickly as you can and then you come back. The quicker you are at zapping these things, the more you're going to see about the various stages that the mind goes through as it creates these states of becoming.

This way, the mind won't be so much of a mystery. Lack of mindfulness is what puts up walls. The practice of mindfulness and concentration tears the walls down, and then your discernment can see to what extent a particular state of becoming is wise and to what extent it's not. You see where it comes from, you see where it goes. And you can make an accurate value judgement as to whether it's worth going with or not. The Buddha's not telling you not to have any thoughts at all. But he wants to put you in a position where you can see clearly which thoughts are worth going with, which ones are not.

Because that's the position you're going to have to be in when you die. Thoughts will come in the mind; states of becoming will begin to coalesce. You're going to be pushed out of your ability to stay in the body, so there's a tendency to want to go for whatever comes up. You have to resist that tendency. You want to be a little bit more choosy. You want to be more

heedful, more careful, convinced that this skill that you developed in getting the mind into concentration will help see you through, so that when a state of becoming appears, you can see where it comes from, where it's going to go. Best of all is if you can resist the tendency to jump in.

If you can't stay simply with awareness in and of itself, then at least have the strength to choose wisely. That strength depends on what? It depends on your conviction, your persistence, your mindfulness, your concentration, your discernment—all the things you're developing as you meditate. This is why the *ajans* always say that meditation is good practice in learning how to die. You're getting to watch the processes as they're happening while you're alive, and they're going to be the same processes as the mind leaves the body. You get some control, you get some mastery over them.

So as we develop these strengths, this is how we're being heedful. Because when you're convinced in the principle of the ability of your actions to shape your life through these states of becoming, and if you're really heedful around that principle, then you want to be very persistent in trying to do it skilfully. If you want to be heedful in doing it skilfully, you have to be able to remember what you learned from the past. That's what mindfulness is for.

And if you're heedful about what you've learned from the past, you realize you need to get the mind into concentration because that's the best of all possible states of becoming, both as a pleasant abiding now and also as a source of knowledge about becoming. If you're heedful about your concentration, you have to realize, okay, it's not a final goal. There's still some subtle suffering in there. So you want to develop your discernment so that you can see it clearly and see the ways in which you actually don't have to come back and suffer.

It's in these ways that heedfulness leads to the strengths you're going to need to live your life well, to die well, to be reborn well—or, even better, not to be reborn at all. This ability comes from strengthening the mind, because at the point when you leave the body, you're not going to be able to depend on bodily strength anymore. Where you'll go is totally dependent on strength of mind. And for most of us, that's a difficult distinction to make, because as the body gets weaker, the mind tends to get weaker as well. But we're trying to gain some practice in how it doesn't have to go that way. It can maintain its strength and use its strength when everything else is falling apart.