

## *In Heedfulness We Trust*

*August 2, 2020*

We take it for granted that we can sit outside like this in the dusk without having to put up protection against mosquitoes. When I came back to Wat Metta after all those years in Thailand, it was hard to get used to this, because over there, this is the time of evening when the mosquitoes are out. And it's not just a matter of not liking the feel of the mosquito bite—the mosquitoes that carry malaria come out at this time of day, too. So you have to be careful. You have to be heedful. And even though it may sound like you're worried, the fact that you're heedful actually reduces the worry.

I remember reading an account one time of someone who had sought out Ajaan Sao when he was staying in the jungle in the northeast. He reported on how he was impressed that Ajaan Sao had lived for many months at this one spot. It was a well-known malarial jungle. Other people had gotten malaria there, but Ajaan Sao hadn't. The writer didn't attribute this fact to any special magical powers on Ajaan Sao's part. He simply said that Ajaan Sao knew how to look after himself in the forest. He knew the times to stay in his mosquito net and the times when he could go out; what water he could drink, and the water he couldn't. It turns out malaria can be transmitted through water where mosquitoes lay their eggs. So he always boiled all his water. He took all the necessary precautions and, as a result, he didn't have to worry. This, of course, didn't rule out the possibility that he might get malaria, but it certainly lessened the possibility. The more heedful you are, the less you have to worry about.

The same with eating lettuce. You don't eat lettuce in Thailand because there's no way it's going to be clean. No matter how much you scrub it, there's always a possibility that night soil could be in the pores on the underside of the leaves. So you just take it for granted lettuce is something you don't eat. Of course, nowadays they have hydroponic lettuce, which you *can* eat, but back in the days when I was there, lettuce was just ruled out. Crabmeat was also something you couldn't eat. Nobody in Thailand would buy live crabs, which meant that the crabs had been dead before they bought them for who knows how long, and they could easily spoil.

So these were things you just took for granted. You were careful; you avoided obvious dangers. That gave you less to worry about, and less to regret in case you did come down with

the disease. You knew you had done everything you could, but if it was going to happen, it *wasn't* going to happen because you were careless.

You probably know the story of the Shackleton expedition. The plan was to land on one coast of Antarctica, walk across the continent, and get picked up on the other coast. Well, they never even made it to the first coast. The ship was locked in ice. The ice was going to crush it, so they had to get off the ship. They dragged and rowed their little dinghies away from the coast and ultimately they crossed the ocean, and they all made it out alive.

The secret was that Shackleton impressed on his sailors the fact that if you try your best, if you know what needs to be done and you do what needs to be done and you die anyhow, you die without regret. If you know what needs to be done and you don't do it and you die, there's always that possibility, "Well maybe if only I had done what I should have done." So you do what needs to be done, and that minimizes your worry, minimizes your regret.

Of course, thinking of Ajaan Sao living in the forest, the reason we respect him is not simply because he knew how to live in a forest and not get malaria. He realized there were other dangers beyond malaria: the dangers of a mind out of control. So he looked for help from the Buddha, and did what the Buddha said. That was back in the time in Thailand when they were rediscovering a lot of the texts. A new Vinaya guide had just come out, and in one of the additions tacked on the end was a translation of some passages on ascetic practices, the *dhutanga* practices. And although the scholarly monks in the city who had found the text and translated it were occasionally practicing these practices, Ajaan Sao took them really seriously. After all, the Buddha said, "Go into the forest, live a life of seclusion," so that's what he did. He devoted his life to the Buddha's instructions on how to find true safety.

We pick up this same principle in Ajaan Sao's student, Ajaan Mun: the practice of the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. Realize that the people who have gone before us have found this is how you find true safety; you don't redesign the Dhamma just to make it popular. These are the Buddha's instructions. He identified the dangers and told how to avoid the dangers. So you listen to him and give his instructions a serious try.

This is a wise policy. Even though you may not know that the Dhamma's true, it makes sense both in pointing out the dangers and in pointing out the ways to avoid the dangers. In pointing out the dangers, the Buddha said we get reborn and it's based on our actions. As we come to the practice we don't know this for sure, but it's a wise premise to take on as your working hypothesis.

As the Buddha pointed out many times, if you take on a hypothesis that says everything is beyond your power, you're cutting off any possibility that you could learn or could develop a skill. So even though you don't know that there's rebirth and you don't know that karma's going to affect rebirth, it's wise to take that on as a working hypothesis.

You can't just say, "Well, I don't know" and leave it at that, because every time you act, you're making a calculation: "Is the effort that goes into this action going to be worth it in terms of the results I'll get?" You have to make up your mind: Are you going to calculate the results only in this life time or are you going to take into consideration the possibility that they could lead into future lifetimes? So you can't just say, "I don't know," and leave it at that. You have to make an assumption one way or the other.

And as the Buddha said, if you assume that your actions will have consequences leading not only in this lifetime but others—and that the consequences can be dire if you're unskillful and very good if you're skillful—you're bound to act in more skillful ways. You'll be a lot more careful in your actions. You have a basis for deciding what should and should not be done, and that, the Buddha said, gives you protection. Even if it turns out that the assumption is wrong, at least you behaved in a good way, in an honorable way. There's a sense of self-worth that goes with that, right here in the present moment. And if it turns out that the assumption is true, then you've benefited both ways.

So as the Buddha said, the basis of all skillful actions is heedfulness. We're not skillful because we're innately good. At the same time though, the Buddha never said we're innately bad. The mind is capable of all kinds of things. The problem is that it's very quick to change. So you want to develop your powers of mindfulness and alertness, you want to develop your discernment so you can see what's a good course of action and you can remember to stick with it.

You might say Buddhism is a religion of heedfulness. You're not hoping to place your trust on some outside power to come and do everything for you. You're starting with the assumption that true happiness can be found through human actions, and that that happiness will be well worth whatever effort goes into the path. Those are good assumptions to make.

You see other teachings saying that human beings are incapable of doing this, that they have to wait for somebody else to come and help them. But if that someone else is the creator of the universe, well, just look at the universe. Someone who'd create people born blind, born crippled: Is that someone you want to trust?

As the Buddha said, if you take a creator god as your basic assumption, then you end up falling into a path of non-action. In other words, there's really nothing you can do. The creator god is the one who's determined everything. So you're left helpless and unprotected.

It's only through heedfulness that you're protected. So heedfulness, even though it's a type of fear, is the opposite of worry. It's a confident kind of fear. It recognizes dangers but it also recognizes that there's a way to avoid those dangers, and it gives you motivation for working on your skills. So even though we will die at some point, if you've worked on your skills, you can die without regret, because you find that your skills carry you through. These are the things that you're really going to need at that point.

Most of the activities we engage in in the course of our daily lives are not going to be helpful at all at that point. But the skills of keeping the mind under control, developing your mindfulness, developing your alertness, developing ardency, your discernment: These are precisely what you're going to need. And of course, they don't show their benefits only then. As you go through daily life, these qualities based on heedfulness will see you through. After all, the five strengths, the five faculties, the Buddha says, are all based on heedfulness.

So as we take precautions as we go through daily life, it's not a matter of worry and fear. It's strength, protection, confidence, lack of regret—all of which are good qualities to nurture in our hearts and minds.