

Heedful of Ruts in the Mind

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The forest ajaans often like to point out that the Buddha gained awakening in the forest, he taught his first sermon in the forest, and he passed away in the forest. This is to remind us that the Dhamma starts with nature. And not nature in a sentimental way: wilderness, a place that's dangerous.

Even though the Buddha carried the Dhamma into the centers of civilization of his time, it always kept that quality of coming from the wilderness. You can see this primarily in his teaching on heedfulness. As he said, "Heedfulness encompasses all skillful qualities; it's the root of all skillful qualities." It's good to keep that in mind. Whatever skillfulness we develop as we practice doesn't come from natural goodness; it comes from the realization that there are dangers, but that the dangers can be avoided if you're careful. So you have to pay extra careful attention to your actions.

One of the main lessons of the forest is that you don't take any unnecessary risks. There's a story of Ishi, the last wild Indian in North America. When he finally left his home territory and went to live in a city, one of the first things they did was to take him to a show, and in the show they had acrobats. He got really upset at the acrobats, putting themselves into danger for no real reason at all—it served no real purpose. As he explained, he'd been taught from a very early age that you don't go around performing stunts, because you could hurt yourself, and then what are you going to do? There are no doctors around, and you become a burden on the rest of the tribe.

I had a student who went up to Axel Heiberg Island one time—actually she went twice—to do research for a degree, and while she was there, she was the only person on the whole island. And she remembers the time the plane that dropped her off was flying away, and she suddenly realized: She was alone on the island. If she tripped, twisted an ankle, it would be a good 24–36 hours before help could come. So she had to be very careful the whole time she was there. Each time she placed her foot, she wanted to be careful.

These, of course, are lessons in looking after the safety of the body. But as we practice, we transfer those lessons to the mind. You've got to be very careful about your mind. We live in comfortable surroundings here, and it's very easy to get careless. There's always the feeling that "Well, if we get into trouble, there will be people to help."

But there do come times in life, especially toward the end, when you get more and more cut off from what anyone can do for you. If your hearing goes, if your eyesight goes, you're totally on your own. If your mindfulness and alertness haven't been trained, they're going to have huge gaps. And where do you go in the gaps? You go into the ruts: whatever ruts the mind has been making for itself.

When you're careless—you go through the day here, you say, "Well, I can think a few unskillful thoughts now and then, as a reward for all that time I spent meditating"—you're just putting more ruts in the mind, so that when mindfulness lapses, that's where you're going to go.

You have to think about this. The places where your mind tends to go when it's not being skillful: That's where it's going to tend to go when there's a lapse in mindfulness, a lapse in alertness. Is that a place you really want to go? You have to take this seriously, as your mind is your most valuable possession. And at the moment of death, it's your only possession. Try to make it your refuge.

This, too, is something the forest ajaans talk a lot about: the very strong sense of a refuge they developed as they stayed in the forest, surrounded by dangers; and realizing that the dangers that could happen to the body are *nothing* compared to the dangers that could happen to the mind. If death came, would they be ready to go? Would they be able to handle it well? So they would think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.

This is something the Buddha himself recommended: When you're in the forest and you fear the dangers you might find there, think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha: one, as a way of just gaining confidence; and two, as a way of putting your mind in the right frame, so that, if anything did happen, you'd go well.

It's interesting to think about that. Other people take guns and things to protect themselves if they go in the forest; we take the mind, try to train the mind as our protection.

Think of the qualities of the Buddha—his wisdom, his compassion, his purity—and try to develop those qualities in yourself. That's what it means to really take refuge. The same with the Dhamma: The Dhamma is timeless—well, you try to make your practice timeless. The Sangha that practices well, practices straightforwardly—well, you try to make your practice straightforward.

Anything unskillful comes up in the mind, you don't say, "Well, I like this particular unskillful thought; I think I'll cherish this one for a while." Whatever comes up that's a threat to the safety of the mind, you've got to get rid of it, you've got to distance yourself from it, and make that your basic reaction. That way, if

you do find yourself in a position where it's time to go, you can go well, because you've developed good habits in the mind.

So wherever you are—in the wilderness or not in the wilderness—it all comes back to being very heedful about the state of your mind. In the Buddha's list of blessings or protections, being heedful of the qualities of the mind is one of your best protections.

That means taking seriously the principle of kamma: The thoughts that you have will lead to states of becoming in the mind; states of becoming in the mind will lead to becoming on the large scale. It's there in the first verse of the Dhammapada:

*manopubbāṅgamā dhammā,
manoseṭṭhā manomayā*

All phenomena have the mind as their forerunner,
mind as their chief, they're made of mind.

Who does the making? This process of becoming: the worlds you create in the mind, and the identities you take in those worlds. In what direction are they going? You've got to take this seriously. Not in a grim way, but be serious about it.

I know a writer who spent some time up in Alaska with the Natives there. He said they had two distinctive qualities: They were cheerful, but at the same time they were very—and then he listed a few of the words that they had in their language for this latter quality. He said he couldn't quite pin the word down in English, but the closest I can think of is "heedful." They lived in a world where they knew there were dangers, and help was not always nearby; which means that you have to create the help inside yourself, make *yourself* your refuge, make *yourself* the person you can depend on.

That means being reliable. Each time something unskillful comes in the mind, you try to get rid of it; when something skillful comes, you try to develop it. You follow the duties of right effort.

As the Buddha said, heedfulness lies at the base of all the strengths: conviction, persistence—persistence *is* right effort—right mindfulness, right concentration, and the discernment of right view and right resolve. Everything good comes out of heedfulness. So always keep that quality uppermost in your mind.