

## *The Joy of Heedfulness*

*September 20, 2021*

On a retreat I taught recently, there was a woman who said that her birthday was going to be in a few days. She'd be meeting with some friends, and she didn't think she'd be able to tell her friends what she had done on the day of the retreat, because the retreat was on aging, illness, and death. They would say, "Why would you want to listen to something like that?" thinking that the topic is glum and grim, and perhaps thinking that there's nothing you can do about aging, illness, and death, so why bother thinking about it? But that's not the case in either way.

Just think about how the Buddha has you reflect on aging, illness, and death, as in the chant just now. The first four parts of the chant *are* kind of grim. Aging is unavoidable. Illness, death is unavoidable. We're going to be separated from all that we love. But the Buddha doesn't stop there. He reminds you that you do have your actions, and they will yield results, good or evil. And you have the choice to do the good.

Think of that conversation between the Buddha and King Pasanedi. The king was saying that he had been spending the day engaged in the typical, heedless pursuits of someone who's in power and wants to maintain power, and the Buddha asked him, "Suppose someone were to come from the east, saying that there's a mountain moving in from the east, crushing all living beings in its path. And there are other mountains coming from the south, and the west, and the north, crushing all living beings in their path. Given that the human birth is so hard to come by, what would you do?" And the king said, "What else would I do but right conduct, Dhamma conduct, meritorious actions, skillful actions?"

So the Buddha then said, "Well, I declare to you, great king: Aging, illness, and death are rolling in, squashing all beings in their path. What are you going to do?" The king's answer was the same, "Right conduct, Dhamma conduct, meritorious conduct, skillful conduct." These reflections are meant to make you heedful.

It's interesting: The Buddha says that heedfulness lies at the base of all skillful qualities, but there are very few places where defines what the word means. There's one passage where he's talking about stream enterers being heedless. They have verified confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha; their precepts are already pleasing to the noble ones; but, he says, if they let themselves be content with that, that's heedless. In other words, you can't simply let yourself be content even with good things in the mind, much less bad.

I was listening to a talk a while back where someone was saying that when you read about jhana, it gets you all worked up, and you want to have jhana states in your mind. But the Buddha taught contentment. So this person was saying that wanting to have your mind in jhana was against the principles of the Buddha's teaching—which is totally wrong. Jhana is the kind of thing you *should* want. Remember the Buddha's own description of what enabled him to gain awakening: relentless effort and not being content with skillful qualities. In other words, he was constantly heedful.

But there's another passage where the Buddha talks about not being heedless in a way that reminds you that it's not just grim, thinking about dangers all the time, but it's also a matter of learning to be heedful of the good you can do. The passage goes, "Don't be heedless of acts of merit." The best way to translate that into English would be, "Don't underestimate acts of merit." A water jar gets filled even if the water just comes drop by drop. In the same way, a person who's habitually doing good will fill himself with goodness. Of course, there's the other side as well. Don't underestimate the evil you can do, even little acts of evil. If they become habitual—again, like the water jar, filling drop by drop by drop—you can fill yourself with evil.

So you have to be careful, but also remember that the good you do is valuable. Don't look down on it, and learn to appreciate whatever good you can do. When you find yourself in a bad mood, realize that you can get yourself out—and that's accomplishing something. After all, when you're in a bad mood, you don't want to practice, or the practice suddenly seems uninspiring, or it's not worth it. You have to realize it's all wrong view and would come under what the Buddha would call unskillful behavior. Because when King Pasenedi said, "Meritorious actions, skillful actions," he had probably heard what the Buddha had to say on the topic.

Meritorious actions, of course, are generosity, virtue, and developing goodwill. Skillful actions have to do with the ten guidelines: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no divisive speech, no harsh speech, no idle speech. And then for the mind: no inordinate greed, no ill will, and developing right view. These are the things that you shouldn't underestimate. They can do a lot of good for you.

Even little things, like generosity: You think of ways in which you can add to the goodness of the world, even if it's just immediately around you. When I was at Wat Dhammasathit, especially during the time of construction, my job was to look after all the cleaning up around the monastery. I found that by cleaning up the place, I felt that I really belonged there. I no longer felt like a foreigner because I had put something of myself into the place—and I was getting something back.

So don't underestimate acts of merit, and don't underestimate the joy that can come from being heedful. After all, what are you being asked to do? Be generous. Be virtuous. Think thoughts of goodwill for everybody. That should be a source of joy. Learn to behave in ways that avoid harm. That's a source of joy. So there's a joy in being heedful. And the more you appreciate that, the better your practice will go.