

Heedfulness All the Way Through

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All dhammas, the Buddha said, come from desire. All skillful dhammas come from heedfulness. Heedfulness is the desire to be safe, not to fall into danger. It's based on a realization that your actions will make the difference. So there's a bit of discernment in there, together with some goodwill for yourself. Then, based on heedfulness, the whole rest of the path develops. You can see this most clearly in a set of dhammas the Buddha calls the five strengths, which are identical with the five faculties.

You start with conviction. Formally, this is conviction in the Buddha's awakening. But what does that mean in practice? One of the main things it means is that we have conviction in the power of our actions. After all, the Buddha himself gained awakening through his actions. The *how* of the awakening came about from his actions. And part of the *what*, what he awakened to, was the power of action itself: to lead to rebirth, to lead beyond rebirth. Even though these are principles we don't yet know for sure, they're good to believe in. They're good to take as working hypotheses. So we take them on with conviction.

As the Buddha noted, conviction means believing certain people, believing certain things, and then acting on those things. If you don't act on your beliefs, they're pretty weak, and you can hardly say that you really believe them. The Buddha points out that certain qualities lead to happiness. Other qualities lead away from happiness. The heedful thing to do is carry through with the qualities that lead to happiness.

This is how conviction leads to the next strength, persistence, which is identical with right effort. You see that there are some things in the mind that are skillful, others that are unskillful, and this is where your actions come from. You do your best to promote the skillful qualities inside: things like renunciation, goodwill, compassion. And get rid of the unskillful ones: sensuality, ill will, cruelty. But again, you realize that if you really want to be secure, you can't go around just thinking nice thoughts all the time, because that tires the mind. When the mind gets tired, it slips back into doing unskillful things.

So if you're really heedful, the next strength comes along, which is mindfulness. Here, again, there's the duality between skillful and unskillful. The basic task of mindfulness is to keep something in mind continually. The formula says to keep focused, say, on the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, and mindful.

Then there's something you put aside: unskillful things, your greed and distress with reference to the world.

Mindfulness is very dualistic—a point that a lot of people miss. The Buddha illustrates this with his simile about monkeys. He said there's a safe territory where monkeys can stay and not get harassed by human beings. Then there's an area, though, where when the monkeys venture into human territory, and they're going to be in danger as human beings set traps for them. In the same way, when you're practicing mindfulness, you stay away from sensual thoughts: thoughts about how you'd like to see certain sights or hear certain sounds or smell, taste, touch certain things. You have to stay away from those areas, because that's where the hunters are. You stay within your territory, which is, say, the body in and of itself.

Like we're doing right now, focusing on the breath: That's an aspect of the body in and of itself. The "in and of itself" here means that we're looking at the body not in terms of how it fits into the world, but simply as it presents itself to your awareness. The breath is one of the things that's right there next to your awareness. And you look at it simply as it is, right there. What's it like to breathe? Pay a lot of attention to that. When the impulse comes to breathe in, where does that impulse come from? How does the breath then spread through the body? Does it spread smoothly? Does it spread comfortably? You can take advantage of that ability of the breath to respond to your thoughts.

The thoughts in the mind can be fleeting. In the past, it was a problem. When a fleeting thought of greed would come through, you'd breathe in a certain way. Anger would come through; you'd breathe in another way. Fear. You'd breathe in ways that were uncomfortable. This would set you up to feel that you had to get whatever that emotion was out of your system. Whereas if you stepped back and looked at it, you'd see: "All I have to do breathe in a different way. I don't need to feel compelled to act on the anger or on the greed or whatever."

So take advantage of that freedom, because as you stay with the body in and of itself and you really do keep away any thoughts about the world outside—either things you're upset about or things you want out in the world—the mind's going to settle down in concentration, with a quality called *ekaggatā*. Sometimes it's translated as "one-pointedness." But take the word apart: *eka*, one. *Agga* doesn't mean "point." It can mean the "summit" of a mountain, or the "ridge" of a roof, but it also can mean a "gathering place." This is what you're doing as you get the mind to settle down: You gather it around one object.

So if you're really heedful as you're mindful, you want to get the mind concentrated and still. This is the fourth strength. That's when the mind gains

power, because it can rest. Of the different qualities involved in the practice, concentration is the one the Buddha identifies with food. You nourish the mind. You nourish its sense of well-being simply by the being still and breathing, but being very mindful and alert at the same time.

As you center in here, you find that the other frames of reference come here as well: There are feelings in and of themselves around the sense of pleasure that you're trying to create and maintain by the way you breathe; the mind, your awareness right here; and then the different qualities that are either skillful or unskillful. They're all right here. This where you can see them clearly.

What's the heedful thing to do with that? You your discernment to see where you're creating unnecessary stress, unnecessary suffering for yourself, right there in the concentration. The Buddha talks about what he calls "five-factored noble concentration." The first four factors are the four jhanas; the fifth one is the ability to step back from what you're doing and observe it. After all, when you're in concentration, you're in what the Buddha calls a state of becoming: You've assumed an identity in a world of experience. In this case, the world is the body you're inhabiting, and you are the meditator. That's how you got the mind to settle down.

But now you're going to use your discernment to step back from that and see: What are you doing that's creating unnecessary stress? In the very beginning, it's going to be simple things, like the fact that you're talking to yourself about the breath. What happens if you put that chatter aside? If you put it aside too early, you just go back to your ordinary ways of thinking. So you need to start talking to yourself about the breath again. What are you saying about the breath? How to breathe so that you can stay with the breath with a sense of ease; how you can use that sense of ease and spread it throughout the body, because you want to develop a whole-body awareness.

Once you've got that whole-body awareness, and the breath feels good, you don't have to talk about it much anymore. As Ajaan Fuang once said, it's like calling a water buffalo to you: Call its name; the buffalo comes. When it comes, you don't have to keep calling its name. It's there. In the same way, you can drop the directed thought and evaluation. You can just be with the perception of breath filling the body. Be very careful not to let go of that perception. Otherwise, you start wallowing in the sense of ease. You lose your focus, and nothing gets developed. But if you stay with your one object, you begin to see the movements of the mind around that.

This is where insight comes in. The Buddha never taught separate insight and tranquility styles of meditation. He taught one kind of meditation, which is right

concentration. He said you can develop both tranquility and insight if you do concentration right. Doing it right means getting the mind to settle in with a sense of well-being: That's the tranquility. And then understanding the processes of fabrication: That's the insight. How do you go about doing that? From that ability to step back and watch yourself.

So as you develop these five strengths, it's not as if you're going from one house to another house to another house. You're really settling into this one house, but you're doing it in a heedful way. The longer you're here, the more perceptive you are, the more subtle things you can see. So it's all of a piece: everything from conviction all the way through to discernment. You take the Buddha's teachings on what's skillful and what's not skillful, and then you apply them very heedfully to what you're doing right now.

So as you settle in, stay here. But watch very carefully what you're doing here. You pull back a bit to watch, but you don't go far away, because you want to see what you're doing, and see the areas in which you're doing things that are causing unnecessary stress and unnecessary suffering—or, as the Buddha said when he's talking in the context of concentration, unnecessary disturbance. You drop those. It's like peeling an onion: You have one layer. Then you peel this layer away. Then, "Oh, there's another layer." Peel that one that way. You keep peeling until there's nothing left to peel. It's all happening right here. It's all basically the same thing: It comes from that duality between skillful and unskillful actions, taking it seriously, and following through with it.

As you let go of the various layers, sometimes you'll be thinking about how one layer is inconstant, or it's stressful, or something you can't really control. You use the Buddha's teaching on the three perceptions as tools, and not as something you're going to arrive at a conclusion about—"Is it true that the world is marked by these things?" That's not what the Buddha's asking you to do. He's asking to say: How do you use these perceptions as tools? You want to see the drawbacks of the things you're doing: things that seem skillful, but as you start seeing them separately, you begin to realize there's a relatively unskillful part to what you're doing. And you drop that. You don't have to think to yourself, "Inconstant, stressful, not-self." All you have to do is just watch and ask: Is this worth doing? If it's not worth doing, if it's causing unnecessary stress, why do it? That's the heedful use of these perceptions. And those are the heedful questions.

So it's heedfulness all the way through. The different strengths simply are different manifestations of heedfulness, as it grows more and more precise, more subtle, and goes deeper into the real problem of the mind:

Why is it that we want happiness, but the things we do cause stress and suffering?

If you follow heedfulness as you develop the strengths, you find an answer to that question, the answer that puts an end to the problem. In other words, you see what you're doing that's causing stress, and you realize that you don't have to do it. So you stop. That's the pattern that keep following all the way through.