

Overcoming Complacency

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The Buddha's last teaching was to tell his followers to attain awakening by being uncomplacent, by not being heedless.

If you look at the damage we do to ourselves day in, day out, the limitations we place on ourselves, the trouble we cause ourselves, you see that it all comes from our complacency, our heedlessness. On the one hand, we don't have much of a sense of what we're actually doing. And on the other, we have very little sense of—or we actually try to deny—the consequences of what we're doing.

As the Buddha pointed out, there's so much in our experience from moment to moment to moment that we're actively creating. We have a role in constructing our experience. The raw material comes in from the past, but we're constantly working it into this feeling or that perception. And then we experience the consequences of our actions.

Think of the five khandhas or aggregates: The Buddha says that the khandha of fabrication or sankhara, is the one that molds the others from potentials into an actual experience of the khandhas. From the potential for form, we create forms. From the potential for feeling, we create feelings. And so on with perception and consciousness as well. An act of creating that's going on all the time.

And then, on top of that, once we have those aggregates, once they're present to our awareness, we can create our sense of self out of them: "I'm this. I'm that." And our sense of self will change over time. But all too often it creates suffering for us: latching onto this, latching onto that, and then it turns on us.

Because whatever you create has got to be subject to wearing away: aging, illness, and death, as we chanted just now. It's part of the fine print that we didn't pay attention to when we signed on, but it's there. You can't deny it.

And so the question, given this fact that we do have such a creative role in our experience, is: What we're going to do with it? And the first thing you have to do is just become sensitive to that fact, to exactly how much you are creating things, how much you're adding on to experience, all the time. So you need to create a state of mind where you can see these things clearly. That's what the beginning of the path is: to get ourselves to a point where you can begin to see, "Oh, I'm doing this. I'm making that choice. And this particular choice is what's causing pain, this particular choice ends the pain." You want to be in a position where you can see these things clearly.

We get into the present moment not to enjoy the wonder of life, but to see exactly how much we're creating life, how much we're creating our own experience: where it's skillful, where it's not.

And so the question is, now that you've got these khandhas, what are you creating out of them? Are you creating more suffering or are you creating the path to the end of suffering?

And your sense of self: To which direction is it leading you? Because you notice that, when the Buddha teaches, he doesn't have you drop your sense of self immediately. He teaches you first how to develop a more responsible, more skillful sense of self. After all, the mind is going to focus on where it is and what it has to do. Even up through the state of non-returning, there's going to be a vague sense of "I" around those actions. At that point, it's not identified with the khandhas, but there's still that sense of "I" that somehow lingers around them.

So if you're going to have that sense of "I," learn how to create a skillful one: an "I" that tries to be virtuous, an "I" that tries to be skillful in every situation, both in terms of what you do and say on the outside level and in terms of what you think on the inside level.

So you're sitting here. Your "I" right now is the meditator, the person trying to be mindful. Okay, that's a much more skillful "I," or a much more skillful sense of self, than a lot of other things you could be doing right now. So hang on to it while it's skillful.

Try to get one with the sense of mindfulness, one with the sense of immersion in the breath. And even though there may be a sense of "I" in that oneness, it doesn't matter. As long as it's pulling you away from the more unskillful senses of "I" that you've had in the past, that's okay. You're putting yourself more and more in a position where you can begin to see these things clearly. And then you can peel away the unskillful parts.

In the meantime, just try to be one with the breath. There's the breath and there's the knower: Let those things come together. Don't try to take them apart yet. Try to get absorbed into the breath, in the same way that a melting pad of butter gets absorbed into a slice of bread, seeping down into the holes and saturating the bread. That's the kind of awareness you want to have: one that gets saturated into the breath, filling the body throughout.

In that way, you're taking these khandhas in the present moment, your sense of self in the present moment, and you're creating more skillful versions of them, creating less pain for yourself, actually creating the path out of pain, out of suffering.

Because you realize that if you don't do this, you're just going to keep creating those unskillful relationships to yourself. We're always worried about our relationships to people outside, but our relationship to ourself is very unskillful and that's a lot more basic, and a much bigger problem. How do you relate to your own thoughts? How do you relate to your perceptions? Learn how to relate in more skillful ways.

You can't let go of anything until you've become skillful at it, the one exception being sex: as the Buddha says, the most skillful thing you can do with sex is to let go of it. But with other things—such as learning how to hold on to what you should hold on to, what your sense of "I" should be, where your attachments should be—you have to learn how to be more skillful in your attachments. Learn how to latch onto mindfulness, latch onto concentration, latch onto the sense of the breath and the deeper states of concentration that you can get into. Those are

good places to hold on to. Because in the image of the bird in the cage, there comes a point when the bird can latch onto the door. When the door swings open, it's out. These things are the door.

But that quality of non-complacency has to underlie *all* your practice, realizing that willy-nilly you're in a position where you're constantly creating experience. Whether you consciously bought into that situation or not, that's not the issue. This is where you are, so you've got to be more responsible about how you shape each experience, more responsible for yourself. Otherwise, if you get complacent, you become your own worse enemy.

We look at the events that have been happening in our country for the last couple of months, and a large element is created by complacency, carelessness, heedlessness. Not just specific individuals—the society as a whole seems to be very heedless, making decisions and doing things without thinking that the consequences will ever come back at them. But the consequence can't help but come back. And yet we're surprised when they do. That's the mark of someone who's really heedless.

And when we're in this heedless state like this, we cause ourselves and others all kinds of damage. It's as if we have malice to ourselves—the consequences are the same.

There's a passage that the Buddha says that if you're angry, you do to yourself things that your enemy would wish on you. You look ugly when you're angry. In a quick decision you can destroy relationships, you can destroy your belongings, all kinds of stuff that you can really tear apart in a moment of anger—the kinds of things that would make an enemy happy.

Well, with carelessness, with heedlessness, you're doing the same thing. It's the heedless moment that says, "Well, I don't care": That's not wishing yourself well. That's not compassion or goodwill for yourself when you allow yourself to be heedless that way.

You're constantly creating your experience. This principle of cause and effect keeps shaping things over and over again. So you want to put yourself in a position of strength so that you can easily create skillful states of mind, skillful states of being for yourself. That's a lot of what the concentration is for, to create that sense of ease that gives you the energy, the strength you need, so that this need to be vigilant, this need to be careful and heedful about your acts of creation is not exhausting. Then apply the qualities that come with concentration—mindfulness, alertness, discernment—to see even more subtle levels where you might still be complacent, where you're still missing cause and effect.

Keeping looking and experimenting until you reach the point where you can finally take it all apart. That's when you're free. But until you reach that point, constant vigilance is required. Otherwise, you're destroying yourself. You can't pull out and say, "I don't like the sound of this, I'm going to go back to my old ways." If you back to your old ways, you're just creating more suffering for yourself. The only thing to do is just stay right here on the path and be as skillful as you can.

That's what makes all the difference in the world: the intention to be skillful, and the

mindfulness and the determination that keep it going. That's what mindfulness and determination are. You put those two together and what have you got? You've got vigilance, you've got heedfulness, you've got non-complacency. That's why the Buddha stressed these qualities so much in his last talk, because they're the qualities that make all the difference.