

Rooted in Heedful Desire

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I've forgotten which Western philosopher said it, but I remember it from one of my classes at school: that all wisdom begins with consciousness of death. Realizing that we're going to die forces us to take stock of our lives and our actions, in light of the fact that we have a limited amount of time and it's important to make the most of the time we've got.

Of course, that reflection can go off in all sorts of directions. Some people say, "Well, eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die." So it takes more than just consciousness of death to make you wise. It also requires a consciousness of your actions, the power of your actions to make a real difference in how your death goes, and what your death will result in.

This is why the Buddha said that heedfulness lies at the root of all skillful qualities. You realize that it's not just a matter of limited time. There are also lots of important choices to be made. You want to be very, very careful about those choices because they really do make a difference. That's the underlying insight of heedfulness.

This, too, is sparked by consciousness of death. In fact, there's that passage of the four heavenly messengers. It tells of a person who's lived a very heedless life, dies, and is taken before the lord of hell. The lord of hell says to him, "Why did you behave yourself so poorly? Didn't you see the messengers that were sent to warn you?" And the guy says, "No, I didn't see any messengers." The lord of hell describes four messengers: a sick person, an old person, a dead person, and a person in prison undergoing punishment. He says, "These are the things that were warning you that you've got to live heedfully."

So it's always good to keep these things in mind, to keep our actions in line with the path, in line with what really is skillful. And it's good to take that statement that all skillful qualities are rooted in heedfulness and combine it with another passage from the Canon: that all qualities are rooted in desire. Heedfulness, too, is based on desire.

Perhaps the best description of that desire is from a passage in Ajaan Mun's biography. Toward the end, when Ajaan Mun is giving his final sermon, he talks about the practice as being like a battle. The soldier in the battle needs all kinds of help. The soldier's weapon is mindfulness and discernment. The food that keeps the soldier going is concentration. What's most interesting about the passage is where Ajaan Mun identifies the soldier. The soldier, he says, is the desire not to

come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements ever again—in other words, not to be fooled by your own mind. Because if you let yourself get fooled, then you're going to come back and suffer all the more.

Ajaan Maha Boowa said that when he was with Ajaan Mun, Ajaan Mun would talk about his practice and about all the mistakes he'd made. Unfortunately, those mistakes are not recorded in the biography. The biography was intended more to point out all of his good habits and all of his good qualities, to inspire the reader. But it really would have been educational to hear about what kind of mistakes Ajaan Mun made. Because you think about: He was off in the forest alone, and it's very easy for a person meditating alone to get all kinds of wrong ideas about what's happening. So the question is, how do you recognize a mistake and how do you move on?

There's a piece of advice that Ajaan Mun gave to Ajaan Maha Boowa, where he said, "If anything comes up in your mind that you're not sure about, just watch, stay with the sense of the knower and the observer, and don't be quick to jump to conclusions. And regardless of whatever is happening, as long as you just stay with the knower, you're safe."

This is one of the things we have to be very careful of in our meditation: the mind's tendency to play tricks on itself. When you take care of greed, aversion, and delusion in their blatant forms, they can come back in their subtle forms. And so you just want to watch, watch, watch what's going on.

That patience in watching is one of the most important weapons the soldier has. It's a part of discernment. As long as you have the desire not to come back and be fooled again, you have to be very alive to the fact that you've been fooled many, many times in the past. That's why you're still here. You can ask yourself, "How much longer do you want to keep coming back and being fooled again?"

This is even why with stream-winners, the Buddha said, "You've got to be heedful." His famous last message—"Bring your practice to completion with heedfulness"—was one he gave to a group of monks of which the most backward, they said, was a stream-winner, someone who'd already had first taste of awakening. It's possible for stream-winners, even stream-winners, to be heedless. So whatever your attainment—the same holds true for everybody up through non-returners—you've always got to be heedful. You've always got to keep watch on what the mind is doing.

Upasika Kee brings up this principle in her teaching. She says, "As soon as you gain an insight, you have to watch immediately: What does the mind do or say right after the insight?" It's not enough to be right, you have to learn how to take that right insight and use it properly and observe what it does to the mind,

because the tendency to fool yourself even with right things is so ingrained.

This is why the Buddha said that the big problem is *avijja*, ignorance. *Vijja*, the opposite of ignorance, means knowledge, but not only knowledge. It also means skill. We suffer because we lack skill in dealing with the greed, aversion, and delusion that can so easily slip in and influence our thoughts, our words, and our deeds.

Which is why the image of the soldier is so appropriate. The soldier doesn't get by simply by knowing how to shoot a gun or shoot an arrow or whatever. The soldier has to know strategy: trying to be alert all around. When the enemy comes from one side, you have to be sure that the enemy isn't also sending a few forces in from behind.

This image of a warrior in battle is not one you hear much in Western Buddhism. Everyone likes to think that whatever comes up in the still mind is reliable. But the still mind is just as likely to be deluded as an unstill mind. When the mind gets still, it's as if you're opening up the doors to different rooms in your house that have been closed for a long time. And just because the doors have been closed doesn't mean that there are valuables in the rooms. Sometimes the rooms just contain your old junk.

So whatever comes up, you've always got to be careful. Stay with the observer. Put a post-it note on it, in case you have to move the notes around. And then just keep watching.

Why? Because you want to be heedful. And why do you want to be heedful? Because you've seen the suffering that comes from aging, illness, death, and separation. You realize that the suffering comes from your own actions, so you want to stop doing actions like that.

So heedfulness is based on informed desire, a desire informed by discernment. The discernment gets sharper the more you learn to use it in practice, as you catch little things you didn't see before and you learn how to deal with them more and more effectively.

So keep that image of the soldier in mind. It's probably why Ajaan Mun used it at end his last talk, in the same way that the Buddha ended his last words with that injunction on heedfulness—to underline that quality, underline that image, so that we don't forget. If we keep using it to motivate our heedfulness, we can develop the skills we need.