

Heedfulness

What's the quality of the action you're taking right now as you begin to read this chapter? Is it skillful or unskillful? Is your mind afflicted with aversion? Is there a disinclination to put effort into reading these words? Is there delusion in the mind? Dullness? Blankness?

When you study your actions in this way, you're being heedful.

The skillful quality of discernment is cultivated by practicing heedfulness.

There are two components to practicing heedfulness: (1) being mindful of our actions, and (2) discerning whether our actions are skillful or unskillful.

Practicing heedfulness, we pay attention to our actions as we participate in our householder's lives, as we traverse the landscape of our days and nights, as we move from moment to moment.

Practicing heedfulness we observe our physical, verbal, mental actions.

Observing, we ask:

Is this action unskillful or skillful?

Are there drawbacks in taking this action?

Is this action leading to suffering or the end of suffering?

Is this action informed by unskillful intention, intention imbued with desire, aversion, delusion?

Is the intention skillful, motivated by love, compassion?

We've already talked about practicing heedfulness. As we've explained, the development of generosity, ethical conduct, and the other skillful qualities depends on our capacity to be heedful, to discern whether our actions, as we cultivate these qualities, are skillful or unskillful. In developing generosity we pay attention to whether our giving is skillful, driven by compassion, or whether it's influenced by an unskillful factor, by desire, aversion, delusion. For instance, as we're attempting to practice generosity, we may perceive that our giving is informed by desire, the desire, perhaps, to get something in return. It's heedfulness that enables us to notice our propensity to act unskillfully; it's heedfulness that enables us to refrain from acting unskillfully. It's heedfulness, accordingly, that enables us to take skillful action. If we don't practice heedfulness, we're not going to be able to develop skillful qualities. "All skillful qualities," the Buddha says, "are rooted in heedfulness."

Developing discernment, we expand the field: we make an effort to be heedful of all our actions, physical, verbal and mental. It's not enough, as I'm sure you can appreciate, to be heedful only when practicing generosity, ethical conduct, renunciation, etc.; we have to be heedful of all our actions. Our happiness depends on it.

As he travelled from town to town, as he taught monks and nuns, lay men and women, the Buddha constantly stressed the importance of practicing heedfulness. He was often emphatic in instructing his disciples to be heedful. He often ended his dharma talks by exhorting his followers : "Practice jhana, monks. Don't be heedless. Don't later fall into regret. This is our message to you."

The Buddha's last words were: "Bring about completion by being heedful." It's safe to say that, in uttering his final words, the Buddha wouldn't choose to make a less-than-significant statement.

It's also useful to note that all the monks in attendance when the Buddha gave his final instructions had attained at least the first stage of enlightenment: stream-entry. They'd all reached a high level. But they still needed to watch their actions. Don't stop making an effort to be heedful, the Buddha said.

Heedfulness, obviously, is an important skill. It's important simply because our actions are important. Our actions, the Buddha indicated, determine our happiness. All dharma students, he said, should frequently reflect:

"I am the owner of my actions, heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and live dependent on my actions. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir." (AN 5.57)

As dharma students, we have to come to understand that our actions are what decide whether we find happiness in this life. We cultivate this all-important insight by paying attention to our actions, by seeing for ourselves that every action we take is meaningful, that every action plays a part in deciding what our lives will be like. As we foster this insight, we develop a strong desire to practice heedfulness.

In practicing heedfulness, we strive to be mindful of our actions, realizing we're not going to be able to be mindful every time we act. We do the best we can. We're heedful to the best of our ability. Over time our ability will grow. As we cultivate the skill over weeks, months, years we'll find that we're able to practice heedfulness with greater regularity and consistency.

Some examples of how we practice heedfulness:

You're a small business owner and you're about to talk to one of your employees about an assignment he messed up. You check yourself before speaking. Is the action you're about to take going to cause affliction for your employee, for yourself? What's the quality of your intention? Is it unskillful? Is it infused with anger?

You're a married man. You're talking to your neighbor, a married woman. You feel sexual desire for her. You flirt with her. Then you pause. You consider your verbal action. Is it unskillful? Is it going to bring about suffering?

After an upsetting telephone conversation with a family member, you replay the conversation in your mind. You fabricate streams of aversive thinking, manufacturing a strong resentment. Then you notice what you're doing. You're heedful of your mental action. You question it. Is this thinking skillful? Is it useful? Is it serving you? What will the consequences be if you continue to fabricate these thoughts?

In practicing heedfulness, we observe our actions. We take the position of the observer. We step back, look at our actions, as the Buddha says, like one person looking at another person. It's imperative in cultivating heedfulness that we develop the capacity to observe.

Taking the posture of the observer, we look objectively at our actions. Objectivity is critical. It's critical that we study our actions in an impartial, non-judgmental manner. The dharma student, developed in discernment, simply observes her actions, simply discerns whether her actions are unskillful or skillful. When she recognizes her unskillfulness, she doesn't criticize herself. She doesn't condemn herself. She doesn't react emotionally. The recognition of unskillfulness, it's important to understand, is not subjective; it's an acknowledgment of what is. It's an acknowledgment of the unadulterated truth.

Actions are either unskillful or skillful. They're either imbued with desire/aversion/delusion or love/compassion. It's pretty cut and dry.

As we observe our actions it's important, of course, that we practice truthfulness. It's important that we look truthfully at our actions. We've talked about being truthful with ourselves about ourselves. As we've said, we might be inclined to lie to ourselves about our actions. When we take an unskillful action, we might try to convince ourselves that it wasn't unskillful. We might rationalize our unskillfulness. We might downplay it. We might tell ourselves that what we did wasn't "that bad."

We might try to ignore the truth, protect ourselves from the painful reality.

In observing our unskillfulness, we might attempt to produce a "positive spin." In our culture, coming up with the right spin is practically an art form. But it's definitely not what the Buddha teaches. In practicing heedfulness, there's no room for shading the truth, for manipulating our perceptions.

In the Rahula sutta, the Buddha puts forth the basic instructions for practicing heedfulness. At the very beginning of the sutta he uses the metaphor of a mirror to explain how we should look at our actions:

"What do you think, Rahula: What is a mirror for?"

"For reflection, sir."

"In the same way, Rahula, bodily actions, verbal actions, & mental actions are to be done with repeated reflection."

In practicing heedfulness, we recognize “what is.” Like a mirror, which reflects only what’s in front of it, we recognize the pure truth. We don’t distort the truth. We don’t alter it. We don’t add anything to it. We don’t take anything away from it. We don’t analyze, interpret, explain. We observe our actions exactly as they are: unskillful or skillful. If an action is unskillful, we acknowledge that it’s unskillful. That’s it.

At times, it may be difficult to look truthfully at our actions. It may be hard to see the truth. In such cases, it helps to talk to a teacher. A good teacher helps us gain a clear view of the truth. A good teacher tells us the truth. In the most evolved teacher-student relationship, the teacher indicates where the student is acting unskillfully, he doesn’t hold anything back, and the student, in turn, is utterly willing to listen, to hear every last bit of the truth. This sort of vigorously honest exchange, of course, can occur only when the relationship is well-established, when there’s a high level of trust.

Sometimes students, when beginning to practice heedfulness, find it’s difficult to tell whether certain actions are unskillful or skillful. This is understandable; as with all the skillful qualities, it takes time to develop discernment. Our ability to discern whether an action is leading to suffering or the end of suffering will mature as we continue to practice and cultivate sensitivity to the subtle distinctions between what’s unskillful and what’s skillful. Practicing heedfulness requires sensitivity. You may not find it difficult to discern whether a more blatant action is unskillful. If you speak in a loud angry manner to your child, you may not have any problem discerning that your verbal action is unskillful. But many movements of unskillfulness are subtle. For instance, when talking to your kid your speech may be infected with a slight irritation, an unskillful quality that may be rather subtle. It’s the subtle actions that may present

a challenge when learning to practice heedfulness; it requires a degree of sensitivity to tell if certain subtle actions are fueled by unskillful or skillful intention.

Sensitivity to the quality of our actions, to the movements of desire and aversion, develops as we become attuned to the body, as we establish embodied awareness. As we deepen in our capacity to perceive a felt sense of our mental qualities, we're able to pick up subtle dissonances, subtle indications of desire, aversion. We're more able to tell if our intentions are driven by unskillful factors.

As you can tell, it's very important to develop an "embodied awareness." If we're going to move further along the path we're going to have to learn to be in touch with the body, connected to the body. We're going to have to learn to "tune in" to the body. (Many students have difficulty connecting to the body; body-related practices such as yoga, body scanning, tai chi, qi gong, etc. are often helpful in cultivating embodied awareness.)

The story of Sona the monk offers a good picture of what it means to be sensitive to the quality of our intentions/actions. As you'll recall, the Buddha, using the simile of the vina (lute, guitar), taught Sona to discern whether he was making too little or too much effort. In the same vein, the dharma student practicing heedfulness discerns when her intention/action is unskillful or skillful. Like a musician who's able to detect when her guitar is out of tune, the student detects when her intention/action is out of tune. She "hears" the dissonance that arises when her intention/action is unskillful, imbued with desire, aversion, delusion. She feels the dissonance in her body. As she develops in heedfulness and becomes more sensitive to her body, she "hears" more acutely, she becomes more sensitive to when she's out of tune.

As we cultivate the skill of heedfulness, we purify our actions. We refrain from taking unskillful actions. We begin to take actions that are an expression of love, compassion. We change the way we live. It's a transforming skill.

And again, it's a skill we can learn. We can learn to follow the Buddha's injunction to be heedful. It requires learning the method. It requires practice. And it requires concentration, which is what we'll talk about in the next section.

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