

## *Strong & Heedful*

*July, 2002*

*One who sees danger and respects being heedful*: the phrase we had in the chant just now. If you look at it from the point of view of ordinary everyday English, it's not a phrase we would say very often. In fact, *heedful* is a word that for some reason has gotten out of our active vocabulary.

I've had many long talks with other Dhamma teachers about how to translate the word *appamāda* from Pali into English, and they keep saying, "Isn't there a better word than *heedful*? It sounds strange." But maybe that's a sign that we need to listen to this particular teaching, because the concept of heedfulness implies that there are dangers, as the phrase says: *One who sees danger and respects being heedful*. There are dangers outside, but most important are the dangers inside. Outside, we have aging, illness, and death, separation from the people and the things we love. But as the Buddha points out, these things are not dangerous to the mind unless we latch on to the things that age, grow ill, die, and are subject to separation. Then that danger infects the mind. But if the mind doesn't go out and latch on to these things, the mind itself is safe.

So the real danger lies inside, in the weaknesses of the mind: the delusion, the craving, and the aversion that make us latch on to things in the first place. So the problem lies inside, and we have to find the solution inside as well. And it's useful to look at craving and delusion as forms of weakness, because the Buddha says the qualities that counteract them are strengths.

The Pali word is *bala*, and it's interesting to note that in all the texts talking about developing these strengths, heedfulness is the quality that underlies them all. Heedfulness is what keeps them from simply being brute forces in the mind.

In other words, the mental strengths the Buddha's talking about here are not simply force of will or force of desire. Each of them is informed by heedfulness—the realization that there really are genuine dangers here in the mind. So we develop these strengths to counteract those dangers of delusion and craving.

The strengths are five: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. Conviction is conviction in the principle of karma. In other words, believing that the quality of your life is determined by the quality of the intentions you act on. That conviction helps get rid of the delusion that somehow you can act in sloppy ways, or act in careless ways, or even act in evil ways, and not suffer the consequences.

So many people think, "There must be some way you can get away with that kind of behavior." And we often see examples of people who seem to have gotten away with it, but if you look at things over the long term, you realize they don't get away with anything at all. Even as they're doing that kind of behavior, there's a lot of dishonesty, there's a lot of discomfort in

the mind that they'll often deny and cover up. But that activity of denial is a form of suffering. And then, over the long term, there will be more bad results that come back.

When we're convinced of this, this is a strength because it enables us to make the effort to develop the good qualities in the mind. If we don't see any use in those good qualities, there's no way that we're going to make the effort. But once we're convinced that the principle of karma does bring results in line with the actions we've done, in line with the intentions that inform those actions, and when we're convinced that karma is a 24-hours-a-day / 7-days-a-week / 365-days-a-year kind of principle that's always operating, we realize we have to spend a lot of time and apply a lot of focus to the mind, because the mind is where these intentions come from.

That leads to the second strength which is *persistence*—you just keep at the practice of getting rid of unskillful qualities in the mind and fostering skillful ones. The skillful ones are the ones that determine the quality of our life, and make it a quality life. This is why we're sitting here meditating: our conviction that the quality of the mind is what's going to shape the quality of the life we lead, the life we experience.

So again: Persistence or effort here is not just the brute force of sitting here and gritting your teeth and getting through an hour, say, of meditation. It's noticing which qualities of the mind are skillful and which ones are not. Sometimes it begins with just that process of observation: Learn how to look at the states of mind that appear, not as *your* states or as something that you have to side with, or as something that you have to go with, but simply as things that come and go, and learn how to watch them to understand them.

You begin to notice what you can do to get rid of the unskillful ones and what you can do to foster the skillful ones. Because these things come and go not randomly, or willy-nilly. There's a pattern. There are certain ways of thinking that lead to unskillful intentions, and certain ways of thinking that lead to skillful ones. Try to notice what those are.

This is why we have to work at mindfulness, our ability to see these things and not get tied up in them. In other words, the thoughts that come into the mind are like someone driving up in a car and saying, "Hey, let's go!" Often you just jump in the car without asking, "Well, where are you going?" Then we find ourselves sometimes spending whole days in depression or anger or other unskillful states of mind, simply because we jumped in the car without asking where it was headed.

So mindfulness is the quality we need to keep this point of view in mind. Remember: When something comes up, ask first, "Where are you going? Where will this thought lead?" Look at the thought not as something you want to get into, but as something that you're standing outside of—and you want to stay outside of until you're sure it's safe.

So, watch it first simply as an event in the mind. For instance, when anger arises, instead of focusing on the object of the anger, focus on the anger in and of itself. When skillful states arise, focus on them, too. As you do this, you begin to see that there are times in the mind

when things are at peace, when the mind has a certain level of intelligence. You want to foster those moments.

Often they're pretty unassuming. They seem very ordinary, but if you learn how to stay with them, they begin to grow stronger. This is the process that leads to the next strength of mind, which is concentration. In other words, in the midst of all this coming and going in the mind, there is a still center. You want to find that still center and stay with it, because that's what gives a foundation to your right effort and right mindfulness.

These three strengths—persistence, mindfulness, and concentration—all go together. They reinforce one another. The concentration gives you a place where you can step back and watch things come and go and figure out what kind of effort they call for.

This is why it's especially important to focus your attention on the breath, because that gets you *out* of your head, where the comings and goings mostly happen, and down into the body, so that you have the sense of foundation, the sense of solidity you need to watch the comings and goings.

But even then, as long as there are comings and goings, the mind isn't completely secure. There's always the possibility that your mindfulness will lapse, your persistence will flag, your concentration will get knocked off center.

Which is why a fifth strength is needed, and that's *discernment*: seeing where the comings and goings come from. How is it that, when you're sitting with a nice smooth peaceful state of mind, all of a sudden anger pops up? You start thinking about things that happened a year ago, two years ago, five years ago. And they set the mind on fire—right now. Why does that happen? What sort of assumptions do those thoughts latch on to so that they take over?

Because if you look *really* carefully, you'll see that when a thought comes in, it's not just that it barges its way in without any cooperation on your part at all. There's a certain level of cooperation that allows it in, a number of assumptions that often go unquestioned. When you get the mind really still, you begin to see these assumptions as they operate.

And again, you watch them as not necessarily a natural or inevitable process of the mind, but as something that's visiting—that you can latch on to if you want to, but you don't have to latch on to if you don't. The more you see the damage these assumptions cause, the less inclined you are to latch on to them.

It's this process of recognizing these subtle little decisions in the mind—that's what allows you to let go of old patterns, so that the mind doesn't go around offering Velcro strips to all the thoughts that come along. You shave off those little Velcro hooks as you cut through those assumptions.

This is what makes the mind really strong. It doesn't become a prey to delusion or craving ever again, because the assumptions that allow delusion and craving to have power get stripped away. This is *real* strength of mind.

The Buddha says of the five strengths, discernment is the one that secures everything else, even though it often comes last. He makes a comparison with putting up rafters for a roof of a house: You put up the rafters and then the ridgepole gets put in place on top of the rafters, and once the ridgepole is in place, then the rafters become secure.

Discernment protects your conviction, persistence, mindfulness, and concentration, and makes them even more solid, so that the dangers posed by the mind, its inclinations for delusion, craving, attachment—which, when you come right down to it, are weakness in the mind, things you have to watch out for—can be replaced with strengths.

The reason these weaknesses have control is because we tend to be heedless of what they do. But once you're heedful and you develop these strengths in their place, then the mind is secure. It doesn't go around creating unnecessary suffering for itself. And when it stops doing that, that's the end of your problems.

Because it's the suffering the mind creates for itself: That's the big issue in life. That's what causes you really to suffer. As for other things that seem to make you suffer, those come from outside and have an influence on the mind because of your own attachments, because of the weakness, because of the susceptibility of the mind. But once you develop these qualities of strength, once you're heedful of the dangers, and imbue that strength with your heedfulness, then you reach a point where the mind no longer has to suffer. That's what the meditation is all about. Once you've reached that point, the Buddha says he has nothing more to teach you—and the mind is safe wherever it goes.