

Doing Your Duty

March 22, 2020

You may know the story of the Shackleton expedition. Shackleton and his men went down to the coast of Antarctica with plans to make their way across the continent, but they didn't even make it to the coast. Their ship was crushed by the ice, so they had to head back out to the ocean with no certain future for them. In fact, things looked pretty hopeless, but they kept going because each man knew his duty and fulfilled his duty, the attitude being that it's one thing to die having done what you know you could do, it's another to die having realized you knew your duty but you didn't do it. In the first case, your death is something beyond your control. In the second case, you don't know if you could have made a difference, and that can eat away at you.

In the same way, right now we have our duties. We're trying to keep the place isolated, minimize the risk of infection of the virus that's going around. It may happen that some of us get sick, but that doesn't mean we should shirk our duties. We do what we can. We do what we know we should do as an act of kindness to ourselves and to all the people around us. This is what it means to be heedful. The Buddha said that heedfulness lies at the basis of all skillful action, all skillful attitudes: the realization that there is danger, but that your actions *can* make a difference.

Now, in some cases your past karma may be such that no matter what you do, you're going to get sick. But do you know your past karma? Do you know that it's inevitable? As the Buddha said, there are some cases where a person is going to get sick and will recover regardless of whether he or she gets medicine; other people will get sick and won't recover even if they do get medicine; and then there are those who will recover if they get medicine but not if they don't. And he said it's for that third group that doctors prescribe medicine to all their patients.

Then the Buddha made the analogy with his students: There are those who will gain awakening regardless of whether they hear the teaching, there are those who won't gain awakening even if they do hear the teaching, but then there are those who will gain awakening only if they hear the teaching but not if they don't. It's for that third group that he teaches.

That's heedfulness. And it's coupled with circumspection: You think all around you, about the implications of your actions, and the fact that you're not the only one at stake, that your following your duty makes it easier for other people to follow theirs—and to benefit from their following their duties.

So even though we know that aging, illness, and death are inevitable, specific cases are not necessarily so. This is a case where the health system is at risk, and we here at the monastery are in a pretty ideal situation. Our supporters have allowed that we can have relative isolation. So we should make the most of their support, appreciate their support, appreciate their cooperation. We cooperate with them, keeping our attitude at normalcy, remembering that danger is normal. But that doesn't belittle the fact that our actions do make a difference. We can delay some dangers, and in delaying them, we give ourselves more time to practice.

So you try to keep the mind on an even keel. These are times of danger and fear. The fear is unnecessary, aside from the type of fear that underlies the wisdom of heedfulness. Any fear beyond that is totally useless. The fact is that all times are times of danger, and this is a time of specific dangers. We take on the duties that are specific to the dangers we face. When these particular dangers have passed, there will be others.

When I first arrived in Brazil recently, there was a big campaign against dengue, warning against letting yourself get bitten by mosquitoes. Then as news of the virus spread, people forgot about the dengue, forgot about the mosquitoes. All they thought about was the virus—and some people ended up getting dengue. So there will be this danger and then there will be other dangers. The important thing is to keep a calm attitude. Remember that aging, illness, and death are normal, so you have to make your mind normal toward them.

Barry Lopez talks about being with the Inuit, and how their constant attitude was a sensitivity to danger, but an ability to carry the danger lightly—not carelessly, lightly. In other words, they didn't weigh themselves down, they didn't let themselves get overcome by fear, because that would get in the way of dealing properly with the danger. You want to be mindful, alert, and circumspect.

This is a concept that Ajaan Lee would stress again and again. His translation of *vimansa* in the bases of success was *circumspection*: looking out for dangers outside, but then looking around and looking at yourself to make sure that you're not adding dangers on top of the ones already out there. This ability to look around, to be sensitive all around, is what makes a true Dhamma practitioner.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about staying with Ajaan Mun. He would be focusing on a particular dhutanga practice and trying to be very, very careful in adhering to it—and getting proud about it. Ajaan Mun would have his ways of breaking the practice to make him sensitive to his pride. In the same way, we have to watch out for the fear that can get in the way of dealing with the dangers we face skillfully, intelligently—but at the same time, making sure that we don't think that because it's possible that all the measures we take may not succeed in keeping the virus

away, that we shouldn't try anything. That's careless; that's irresponsible. We have to look at our attitude and make sure that it's just right—just right all around.

That's how our heedfulness will provide protection, because if we can't protect ourselves physically—if that's how it turns out to be—then at the very least we've maintained our protection mentally, so that if, despite all our efforts, the infection comes, we won't be able to blame ourselves for having been careless. We'll know that we did our duty right, like the members of the Shackleton expedition. They finally made their way out against all the odds. They all made it home safely. Shackleton didn't lose a single man, because everybody pitched in, everybody did his duty for his own sake, for the sake of the others, and that's how they survived.

In the same way, that's how our goodness as a community is going to survive. Even though we practice meditation individually and will experience the results individually, we do require one another's support.

So always keep that in mind.