
The Buddha's Last Word:

Care

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At BCBS, September 2004

I would like to spend some time this morning exploring a very important idea the Buddha developed—the idea of care. Now many of you may not be familiar with this particular term, at least not put this way: care. It's usually translated... well, actually it's not usually translated as anything, and that's part of the problem.

APPAMĀDA

The word in Pali is *appamāda*, which is actually a negative term. The *a-*, as in Greek, means “not,” and *pamāda* translates as something like “heedlessness.” It's difficult to find an English term that gives the same positive sense. One of the examples: a person who is suffering from *pamāda* is a person who has somehow lost control. A drunk, somebody who's completely out of it on alcohol, is said to be in a state of *pamāda*, and we probably all have some sense of what that means—perhaps even in some cases from first-hand experience. It is a state in which one is really no longer very coherent; a state in which one is perhaps rather careless in what one says and what one does; a state in which one may in fact be quite unaware of what's going on, such that the next morning, when you meet the friends you were with the night before, you can't actually recall what it is they say that you did or said. In this sense *pamāda* is a loss of consciousness, or at least a rather chaotic, unfocused, unstructured kind of consciousness that very often leads to regret, and perhaps even to despair.

Appamāda is an absence of *pamāda*. But in Buddhist thought, when we say something is “not-*x*,” in this case “not-*pamāda*,” that doesn't simply mean an absence of it. For example, a cup of water is not heedless; that clearly isn't what's meant here. The negative *a-*, not, actually implies the opposite of. So *appamāda*, if we follow the example I've just given, is the opposite of being drunk; the opposite of being completely spaced out; the opposite of being inebriated or out of control.

The difficulty with this term is expressed by the fact that different translators in different Buddhist traditions can't actually agree on what is the best word in English. Some of the terms which we may have come across include vigilance, diligence, heedfulness and conscientiousness. One German translator, Ernst Steinkellner, translated it as *wachsame Sorge*. *Wachsame* means wakeful or watchful, and *Sorge* means something like care or concern. So watchful concern. Or watchful care.

FAMOUS LAST WORDS

Now, this might of course make us think that care is not much different from mindfulness or awareness. And that's true. In fact, in some of the Buddhist commentarial literature, *appamāda* is often included as the seventh step of the eightfold path, which is Right Attention or Right Mindfulness. There is clearly a sense that care is a carefulness in how we attend to things. It has to do with being present rather than being absent; with being here and fully aware (which we seek in meditation); with finding ourselves and cultivating awareness, as opposed to being forgetful, absent or drifting off. It comes back to a quality of presence of mind.

But I think it's also more than that. Notice that it is the very last word the Buddha uttered, at least according to the Maha-Parinibbana Sutta. Whether the Buddha actually said them or not (after all, we can't really know) those around him at the time, and subsequent tradition, came to consider—or perhaps did in fact correctly remember—that this was the point the Buddha made just as he was on the verge of his own death. So clearly *appamāda*, both for the Buddha and for the tradition that immediately followed him, is regarded as a key. That is to say it is something to be cultivated, something to be developed, and somehow synthesizes everything he taught.

“Conditions are subject to decay,” he famously said. “Work out your salvation with care.” This has become a rather famous citation, particularly in the version of Rhys Davids, the early English Pali translator, who translated it as, “Work out your salvation with diligence.” This is a beautiful English phrase; it's very euphonious. It was borrowed by T.S. Eliot and appears as a line in his play, “The Cocktail Party.” I can't quite remember the context... But again, it's interesting how that struck Eliot in some way, and I find that it's very striking for me too.

Now, we have to be a little bit careful—and here we get into a bit of textual analysis. Work out your salvation with care. Work out your salvation with diligence. In the original Pali, there is no suggestion whatsoever of the idea of salvation. If anything, the text, which is slightly unclear, says proceed onwards, or strive onwards with *appamāda*. Just as Eliot borrowed it for his literary purposes, Rhys Davids is here paraphrasing and subtly transforming a passage from one of the letters to the Corinthians of St. Paul. Some of you are perhaps familiar with where Paul, at least in the standard English translation, says “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” I think it's rather a clever shift: work out your salvation with care, with diligence. However we read that exact phrase, the point of *appamāda* is plainly this idea of care.

The reason I've chosen to translate it as *care* is because I'm looking for a term that is more embracing than diligence or mindfulness, each of which we can think of quite easily as particular states of mind or particular frames of consciousness. Care seems to encompass a wider complex of mental states, and this becomes evident in another passage which I haven't cited in full; it's in the Samyutta Nikaya [3:17], which are the Connected Discourses of the Buddha, where the Buddha compares care, or *appamāda*, to an elephant's footprint. The elephant's footprint is considered to be the largest footprint of every animal in the jungle, and a footprint in which all other footprints of all other animals are able to fit. So he uses the image of the elephant's footprint as a kind of embracing—one might say totalizing—concept which includes whatever other virtues, whatever other qualities of mind, are to be practiced. It's something that holds the whole thing together.

There are those who might even talk of it as a holistic concept. One can imagine that a man who has been teaching and exploring ideas and practices in many different contexts for over forty-five years of teaching, might seek some kind of overarching idea that somehow held the rest in place. I wonder in this respect whether care or *appamāda* is a shorthand for describing the character—in the widest sense—of a kind of person who is committed to this sort of path. If his teaching were to be put into one word, perhaps, it would seem that the Buddha might have chosen the word *appamāda*. He does say in the Anguttara Nikaya [1:6], *Monks, I know of no other single thing of such power to cause the arising of wholesome states, if not yet arisen, or to cause the waning of unwholesome states, if already arisen, as appamāda.*



The word “care” somehow synthesizes everything the Buddha taught.

COMMITTED TO GOOD

Asanga, a Mahayana thinker with a brilliant mind who thought through a lot of these ideas with considerable clarity, defines *appamāda* as that which energetically cherishes the good and guards the mind against what gives rise to affliction. Here we have a sense of *appamāda* which has a primarily moral or ethical orientation. *Appamāda* is not, therefore,

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just about being watchful or awake or alert. And certainly it's not, I think, intelligible entirely as diligence. Diligence to me is too neutral a term; we can be diligent in doing all sorts of terrible things. Stalin was diligent in repressing the Kulaks, but I don't think he had *appamāda*. *Appamāda* clearly has a moral quality to it. It has to do with, as Asanga says, energetically cherishing the good.

How might he mean this word, "energetically?" It's something we apply ourselves to with some conscious effort. *Appamāda* is not just the occasional mindful thought or attentive state of mind, it's actually a commitment to being attentive. It's more than just a meditative state of mind, it's more than just being mindful. It has to do with that primary ethical or moral orientation we have in life, with which we bring into being whatever activity we're engaged in. Whether in formal meditation, in our interactions with other people, in our social concerns, or in our political choices, it's the energetic cherishing of what we regard as good.

Now don't ask me what *good* means—this is a rather large question; but since we're in a context here of Buddhist ideas, we will take the notion of good as understood in Buddhism. And of course the great symbol of the good, the summum bonum, the highest good, in Buddhism is awakening or enlightenment, which is embedded—and I think it only really becomes real and alive when embedded—in the figure of the Buddha. We can't reduce the optimal good to wisdom, any more than we can reduce it to compassion. The two are somehow fused; they're embodied in a being. Symbolically we think of the historical Buddha and how he's come to be represented. What I feel we are concerned with, as a practice, is what a human being can optimally become. The highest good, if we're Buddhist, is an image, a sense, or an intuition of what it is that we as confused people, and suffering people, can in the course of our lives aspire to and become.

So *appamāda* is a word for care. (But it's more than that somehow... It's very difficult to find the right word in English.) *Appamāda* is that intention which guides us and directs us and inspires us, that energizes us, that commits us to what it is we consider to be good. We can summarize that as wisdom, compassion, tolerance—all the virtues Buddhism encourages. But remember that *appamāda* is the frame that encloses them all. In other words, *appamāda* is perhaps best thought of not as a state of mind, but more of a perspective, an orientation, or a sensibility. It is a commitment to what we honor as good, and at the same time, it guards the mind against what gives rise to affliction. There is something protective about this commitment to what is good, guarding us against those impulses and drives and habits of mind that seek to subvert and overwhelm and distract us from the goal. All in all, I think it is a most suitable last word of the Buddha.

MEDITATING WITH CARE

Let's look at the idea of care in a more practical sense, for a moment. Just reflect back on the last period of meditation we did here, or any period of meditation, unless we have an exceptionally perfect one. The instructions for what we did were very simple: just sit still, be attentive to the breath, notice what is occurring within and around you. Don't get carried away by errant thoughts and feelings, or memories and plans, just stay present. This seems to be a very simple thing that we're being asked to do. But although it is simple, as we've no doubt discovered, it is not easy. In fact, what often rather upsets us or bewilders us is how extraordinarily difficult this very simple thing can be!

We've just plumped ourselves down on the cushion, and the bell has gone, and we're a little bit charged up and conscious: "OK, I'm going to spend the next thirty minutes sitting." Usually for the first few minutes everything goes very well. But as soon as it becomes routine, or as soon as we let our attention to the task fade away, what happens? We find ourselves suddenly invaded by thoughts and feelings and images and memories and fantasies that we have not intended in any sense to give rise to; they're suddenly there. And what's curious also is that we don't actually (or at least very rarely) notice when they arise.

We're sitting here on our cushion, focused on what we consider our sense of what is good, namely being mindful, being present, being conscious, being aware. And suddenly we're no longer mindful and present and conscious and aware. We're not actually here at all. We're off somewhere else. We are thrown into a kind of forgetting, a kind of forgetfulness. Sometimes, if a very powerful fantasy takes hold, it's very vivid, and clear, and we keep replaying it and indulging in it. But very often what carries us off is something that, when we come out of it, we can barely recall.



We've probably had that experience of sitting in meditation, everything going fine—and then the bell goes. You kind of come to; you actually might be a little bit woken up by this bell. Not that you've been asleep, but you've simply not being present. You've been elsewhere, and aware dimly that many minutes have elapsed since the last time you noticed your breath. And although it must have been something engaging to have taken you away, you can no longer even remember it. You might dimly recall some fantasy that's now receding rapidly; a bit like when you wake up in the morning sometimes and you've had a very vivid dream, but as you open your eyes, all that remains is a kind of dim, dull recollection that you seek to claw back to—but it's gone.

What this shows us is the extent to which we live much of our lives in a kind of forgetfulness. In any kind of activity that becomes routine—like driving a car, for example—it's very easy for the motor functions of the organism to take over and for the mind just to drift, and we're simply not aware.

Now this I think is a way of talking about *pamāda*, the opposite of *appamāda*. I gave the example at the beginning: the state of being drunk, of forgetfulness, of unconsciousness. In this sense *appamāda*, or care, is really about being fully conscious, being fully present. And being fully present is what guards the mind against what gives rise to affliction. As long as we're present, it's actually very difficult for those impulsive, errant, distracted, thoughts to take hold. As soon as that presence of mind slips, the next thing you know...we're off.

In the writings of the 8th century Indian Buddhist poet, philosopher, and moralist writer Shantideva, the afflictions—which is how I'm translating the *kilesas*, the defilements, the negative states of mind—are compared to bands of thieves who roam around us, waiting for an opportunity, he says, to invade the house of our mind and steal its treasures. He compares mindfulness to a guardian at the gateway of the senses that is continually alert to the potential incursions of attachment, aversion, greed, jealousy, whatever, that are—and feel like—things that are waiting to kind of invade us. This image helps point out that *appamāda*, this kind of careful, conscious awareness, is the very opposite of that loss of attention that allows us to be forgetful, carried away, or lost.

Now of course the problem is that when we are distracted in that way, we are not conscious of being unconscious—by definition. If we were conscious of what was going on at that time, we would not be distracted. Distraction is something that we are necessarily not aware of. We might be aware of the first moment; let's say, a seductive image coming into the mind. But when it takes hold, we lapse into a kind of semi-conscious—if not completely unconscious—state. That is *pamāda*, the loss of consciousness. It doesn't mean that you then cease to function; we don't suddenly collapse into a blubbing heap on the floor. We still appear to be functioning perfectly adequately and perfectly well. I think the alarming truth is that we spend a lot of our lives like that; probably a lot more than we would rather admit.

The practice of *appamāda*, of taking care, is to be continually on our guard about the loss of consciousness. Then instead of consciousness being just a series of moments separated by gulfs of unconsciousness that constitute our day, our lives become more and more present, alert, attentive, here, mindful, rather than the opposite.

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