

## Buddha's Practice in a Word

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### The Word is Appamada

Definitions:

Heedfulness

Without delay (non-procrastination, proactivity)

Without confusion (non-confusion, clarity)

“Working carefully, working consistently, working persistently, for the development of wholesome qualities; doing one’s duty, not relinquishing desire, not relinquishing the task....”

- Bhikkhu Bodhi

**Before the Buddha died, these are reported to be his last words:**

*(vayadhammā saṅkhārā appamādena sampādetthā”ti.)*

**“Conditions fall apart.  
Persist with (Appamada) diligence.”**

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### The Practice in a Word

- Thanissaro Bhikkhu

### Appamada

The Buddha could have concluded his teaching career with some inspiring words on the bliss of nirvana or emptiness, but he didn’t. He ended with a piece of advice: “Achieve completion through appamada” [SN 6.15]. Common English translations of “through appamada” — such as “untiringly,” “earnestly,” “with diligence” — convey the notion of sustained, determined effort. These give the impression that the Buddha’s last message was to stick with the practice. Translations of the phrase into various Asian languages, though, give it a different twist. Sri Lankan commentaries translate appamada as “unrelaxed mindfulness”; Thais interpret it as heedfulness, vigilance, wariness, care. The Canon itself, in another context, defines appamada as carefully guarding the mind against defiling mental states, at the same time strengthening it in terms of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment [SN 48.56]. In the light of these interpretations, the Buddha’s final message wasn’t simply to persevere.

He was saying, “Don’t be complacent. Watch out for danger. Protect the mind’s good qualities. Don’t get caught with your guard down.”

These interpretations help make sense of other instances where the Buddha stressed the importance of appamada, as when he said that appamada is the path to the Deathless [Dhp 21], or that all skillful qualities of mind are rooted in appamada, converge in appamada, and have appamada as the foremost among them [AN 10.15; SN 3.17]. Mere sustained effort can’t fill the role of appamada in these passages, for effort without wisdom can wreak all sorts of havoc. Vigilance and heedfulness, however, provide the perspective needed to keep effort on the right track: keeping us wary of our potential for causing pointless suffering for ourselves and others, and teaching us to trust in our ability — if we take the appropriate care — to bring those sufferings to an end.

This combined sense of wariness and trust is based on conviction of the principle of karma: that our actions really do make a difference, that the difference between causing and not causing suffering really does matter, and that the principles of skillful and unskillful action are patterned enough that we really can learn useful lessons from our mistakes. At the same time, this combination of wariness and trust is what allows appamada to play such an important role in the practice, providing the motivation to get on the path of skillful action in the first place, and the inner checks and balances that can keep us on the path all the way to the Deathless [AN 4.37]. Without a strong sense of trust in the path, it’s hard to attempt it; without a strong sense of the dangers inherent in any conditioned happiness, it’s easy to fall off.

The chief danger, of course, lies in the mind’s creative capacity for self-deception. But — unlike many other religious figures — the Buddha didn’t simply recommend that if we can’t trust ourselves we should place our trust in him. Instead, he provided ways for us to train ourselves to be trustworthy by investigating the areas where we tend to lie to ourselves most: our intentions and the results of our actions. In his first instructions to his son, Rahula [MN 61], he told Rahula to reflect on his intentions before acting on them, and to carry through with them only if he saw that his intended action would

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cause no harm. While acting, he should reflect on the immediate results of his actions; if they were causing any unintended harm, he should stop. After acting, he should reflect on the long-term results of his actions. If he saw that they actually did cause harm, he should resolve never to repeat them. If they didn't, he should take joy and continue on the path.

These are basic instructions in integrity: learning to see where you can and can't trust yourself, and — by repeatedly testing yourself against the principle of action and result — making yourself a person you can consistently trust. As you develop this inner integrity, it becomes easier to gauge the integrity of any teaching or teacher you encounter, for here, too, the Buddha recommends vigilance, testing things through action and result. Gauge teachings by the harm they do or don't create when you put them into practice. Gauge teachers, not by their special powers, divine authority, or enlightened transmission, but by the harm they do or don't do through their actions.

This pattern of heedful scrutiny applies not only to blatant actions but also to the most subtle workings of the mind: your response to sensory stimuli, your deepest meditative and non-meditative experiences. Whatever you're doing — and especially when you don't seem to be doing anything at all — don't be complacent. Look carefully, again and again, for even the slightest stress or disturbance you might be causing inadvertently, and learn how to drop whatever you're doing that's causing it. Keep at this until there's nothing more to be dropped.

In this way, your sense of appamada helps to ensure that your path goes all the way to the Deathless. To borrow an old analogy: if the practice is like a building, then appamada is not only the foundation. It also acts as the walls and the roof as well.

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### **Appamadavagga: Heedfulness**

- Translation: Acharya Buddhakkhita

21. Heedfulness is the path to the Deathless. Heedlessness is the path to death. The heedful die not. The heedless are as if dead already. [3]

22. Clearly understanding this excellence of heedfulness, the wise exult therein and enjoy the resort of the Noble Ones. [4]

23. The wise ones, ever meditative and steadfastly persevering, alone experience Nibbana, the incomparable freedom from bondage.

24. Ever grows the glory of one who is energetic, mindful and pure in conduct, discerning and self-controlled, righteous and heedful.

25. By effort and heedfulness, discipline and self-mastery, let the wise one make for himself an island which no flood can overwhelm.

26. The foolish and ignorant indulge in heedlessness, but the wise one keeps his heedfulness as his best treasure.

27. Do not give way to heedlessness. Do not indulge in sensual pleasures. Only the heedful and meditative attain great happiness.

28. Just as one upon the summit of a mountain beholds the groundlings, even so when the wise man casts away heedlessness by heedfulness and ascends the high tower of wisdom, this sorrowless sage beholds the sorrowing and foolish multitude.

29. Heedful among the heedless, wide-awake among the sleepy, the wise man advances like a swift horse leaving behind a weak jade.

30. By Heedfulness did Indra become the overlord of the gods. Heedfulness is ever praised, and heedlessness ever despised.

31. One who delights in heedfulness and looks with fear at heedlessness advances like fire, burning all fetters, small and large.

32. One who delights in heedfulness and looks with fear at heedlessness will not fall. One is close to Nibbana.

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