The Power of Truth

February 8, 2007

There’s a story behind it. The Buddha was walking through some fields one day and he stopped at a point and smiled. Ananda saw the smile and he knew that Buddhas don’t smile without a reason, so he asked him. The story goes that the Buddha said in a previous lifetime that he was born as a quail and lived in that field. One day, when he was still a baby quail, his parents were off someplace else looking for food, and a huge fire came sweeping through the field. The quail knew he had no other protection, so he made a vow of truth. In this case, the vow of truth was simply this, “My parents are gone. My wings are undeveloped. My feet are undeveloped. Go away, fire.” And the fire avoided the spot where he was. What’s interesting about this story is what it says about the power of truth. In the quail’s case, it was simply a statement of a true fact that kept the fire away. But in our meditation, truth means something more, that you’re really very honest with yourself about what you’re doing. Otherwise, you have no protection in the meditation. You hear instructions, and how do you know that the instructions are true? You hear that the Buddha said x, y, or z, and how do you know it was x, y, or z? And if he did say x, y, or z, was it applicable to where you are right now? As that other chant said just now, the world has no protector. There’s no one in charge. There’s no one you can run to to say, “Is this true? Is this not true?” The only thing you can rely on is your own truth. This doesn’t mean just your subjective idea of what you would like to be true, but what’s actually working in terms of cause and effect in your practice. This is the one quality that carries you through in all circumstances. If you look at the history of the forest tradition, it’s basically a bunch of peasant sons. The authority in those days resided in Bangkok. All the pronouncements about what the Buddha taught, not only that, but as time went on, there came the question, “What did the Buddha teach that was relevant to our time?” Pronouncements were coming out that did not jive with what was taught from the previous generation. A lot of people simply gave in. Whatever the line was from Bangkok, that was the line that they espoused. But the forest tradition didn’t go in that direction. They stuck first by what they knew of the Dhamma and Vinaya. And even that they tested. This is a principle that Ajaan Mun trained in all of his students. One was the confidence that they could actually do the practice and figure out what was genuine Dhamma from what was not. But it depended on their own truthfulness, their own honesty, really looking at what they were doing, really looking at the results, testing themselves. If you say you’re without passion, well, go out into the forest. And see how long your mind can last. If you say you’re without fear, well, again, go into the forest and see what happens when you hear strange noises in the night. And it’s through testing yourself against these things that you begin to gain a strong sense of what you could rely on and what you couldn’t. In a meeting, the rarest forestage Ajaan said he did know, there was this quality of the forest that they all had in common. Their personalities were very different. Some were very calm. Some were more fiery. But they all had this attitude of, one, healthy skepticism to things they heard and saw outside. And, two, that you had this very strong sense about them that they were very solid and reliable. This is a quality that they developed over time, through their practice. It kept getting tested again and again. This is something they really needed, especially given that they didn’t stay around with Ajaan Man all the time. They would stay a little while and then he’d send them off to a cave or to a mountain or to a forest area to learn to test themselves on their own. And it’s through having tested what they’d learned through their practice that they came back. And they were not fazed by what was coming out of Bangkok. They were not fazed by what the scholars were telling them. So all of us in our practice are trying to develop this same quality as well, because there are so many versions out there of what the Buddha taught. People are speaking with a lot of confidence that this must be the way it is. One of the discoveries of the forestage Ajaans was that there was no clear line separating Samatha practice from Vipassana and Ajaana practice from Insight practice. The two shaded together. Another line coming out of Bangkok was that they were two very different things. And it wasn’t just coming out of Bangkok. This was coming from a long commentarial tradition. And we look now at the canon, which in those days wasn’t very much available in Thai, and see that the forestage Ajaans were on to something. When the Buddha taught mindfulness and Ajaan, he didn’t really separate the two drastically. He talked about his basic formula in mindfulness practice, and then he’d talk about developing it as a form of Ajaan. He’d focus on the body in and of itself, hardened, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That’s the formula for mindfulness. Then he would say first you develop this concentration with directed thought and evaluation. That’s a Jhana practice. Then without directed thought and evaluation, with enjoyment and equanimity. In other words, you take it through all the four Jhanas. One of the basic themes of the concentration practice is just this, the establishing of mindfulness. There are lots of passages you can cite. Sure, the Buddha put the two practices together. The same with developing insight. You start with strong concentration, and you develop insight by looking into the concentrated state, analyzing it in terms of the five aggregates, or simply the fact that it’s constructed, fabricated. But even to get into a concentrated state, he also says that you need some, not only some tranquility, but also some insight. If you don’t understand the workings of your mind, it’s hard for it to settle down. So these two sides of meditation practice work together. Why is this important? For one thing, when you are allowed to mix mindfulness with concentration or tranquility with insight, it broadens your range of tools. If you’re doing just, say, what is said to be a Vipassana practice of just watching and not reacting to anything, it really ties your hands. The question is, if you’re just watching what passes, passes, passes, how are you going to understand cause and effect? Scientists don’t just sit around watching what passes by. They interfere with the process. They try to direct it in a certain way and then watch what happens. As a result, then they change the parameters of their experiment to see what result that has. It’s through interfering that you learn things. It’s the same with the mind. We’re interfering with the mind here. We’re trying to get a good, solid state of concentration going, calm, easeful. We learn about the mind by seeing what works and what doesn’t work. That’s insight right there. If things aren’t going well, you have the freedom to change them. After all, who’s going to sit here and watch over you, telling you what you can and can’t do while you meditate? What this also does, by putting the two practices together, or the two sides of the practices together, means that you have to learn how to monitor what you’re doing. It’s not simply a matter of learning the instructions and then doing what you’re told without reflecting on what you’re doing or without reflecting on the results. It’s not a matter of taking the results to your teacher and having him say, “Ah, yes, that’s the first jhana,” or, “That’s the first insight,” or whatever. Because, again, what does the teacher know? How do you know what the teacher knows? You’ve got to look at the results in your own mind. So what this does, it focuses you on that issue of, “Where is there stress right now? What’s causing the stress?” This is called appropriate attention. It’s about seeing things in these terms. This is the faculty, this is the quality, the Buddha said, that is most important in gaining awakening. This is how you gain insight. It’s by looking at what you’re doing, because that’s what insight is supposed to get you focused on. It’s what you’re doing that’s causing stress, what you can learn how to stop doing that’s causing stress, and seeing the state of the end of stress, the end of suffering that results. We’re not here trying to clone someone else’s insight. We’re following a path, and this is the path, looking for the stress, learning to comprehend the stress. In other words, look at whatever’s coming up and understand it thoroughly to the point where you gain dispassion for it so you can stop creating it. Anything that’s unnecessary, anything that’s burdensome, you learn how to stop doing it. That’s how you know for sure that the end of stress has come. If you’re simply trying to clone what you’ve heard about what the path should be like and what the result of the path should be like, it’s like taking that old analogy of the road to the grand canyon. You look at the road to the grand canyon, and it doesn’t look like the grand canyon at all. It’s like digging a big trench. That’s what the grand canyon is supposed to be. It’s a big trench. So what happens is you cut off the road. You can’t get there because you’ve hit the trench. You follow the path. Part of the path is developing concentration. It’s not simply watching concentration come and go and say, “Okay, well, that concentration arises, concentration passes away. That’s an insight.” That’s not an insight. The context of insight is not the three characteristics. That’s a formidable truce. The three characteristics are helpful within that context, but they don’t form the context themselves. But the word “three characteristics” doesn’t even appear in the Pali Canon. They talk about anicca as a sannyāsa, a perception, or as something that you focus on. That’s an insight. As a practice, you focus on this theme so you can see what it does to the mind, particularly in the terms of how it helps you gain dispassion for things that you hold onto. The same with dukkha and anatta. It’s a perception that you follow, that you try to cultivate. Then you watch to see where it is in your experience. Because of the effect that it has on your mind, it helps promote dispassion, helps promote understanding. But you’re not here to get anatta. You use these things as a tool, and then you put them aside when they’ve done their work. So it’s important that you don’t let the neat distinctions drawn by scholars get in the way of your practice. Realize that it’s good to have a full range of tools available to you. It’s in the interplay of these tools that you learn to get a sense of which side you need to emphasize at any one particular time or how you can develop both together. It’s in the interplay that you gain insight. This underscores the old distinction between warrior knowledge and scribe knowledge. Scribe knowledge is concerned about definitions. Samatha is one thing. Vipassana is something else. Jhana is one thing. Discernment is something totally separate. That’s the way it is in the books. That’s how scribes like their knowledge—all neat and crisp and clearly defined. But as a warrior, you’ve got to use whatever is available for whatever the situation that’s arising. That’s when you want to have all your tools available. That’s when you have to have the ability to read the situation and have a sense of what’s going to work and what’s not going to work. You can know this only by having all your tools ready and having experimented to see what works and what doesn’t. This is why your truthfulness is what keeps you protected as a warrior. There may be nobody out there in charge, nobody to protect you. Even though the devas protect you, there’s only so much the devas can do. But you’ve got your own truthfulness, and that’s something you can really work on. It can keep the fires away. The fires of passion, aversion, and delusion—you learn how to ward them off by being true in your meditation. That’s the only way you’re going to know if what I’ve said just now is true. But it’s good to know that that’s where the truth resides. It doesn’t reside in someplace else, some other person, some other outside authority. And it doesn’t reside just in your own ideas of what you like and dislike. It resides in your honesty. That’s why the Dhamma is so special. Dishonest people can’t know it. They can talk about it, but they can’t really know it. Only honest and truthful people can. you

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2007/070208%20The%20Power%20of%20Truth.mp3>