Being True to Know the Truth

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In fact, John Lee once said that the only way to find the truth is to be true. The only way you’re going to overcome your uncertainty and doubts about the practice is by being true to the practice. Now that might seem like a double bind, how you’re going to know what you have to be true to in order to find the truth? The answer lies in the Buddha’s explanation of how you overcome uncertainty, which is by looking in your mind and seeing what really is skillful and unskillful. What qualities in your mind are skillful that lead to happiness, and which ones are unskillful, leading to unhappiness? That’s a question that’s not solely related to the Buddhist teachings. It’s a question you should be asking yourself as you go through life, regardless of whether you’re consciously practicing the Dhamma or not. Anyone would want to know what qualities in the mind actually lead to happiness, and which ones don’t. And so you test. You take a few guidelines. This is why we have teachings. If you want to try the Buddha’s guidelines, he says try to avoid thoughts that are based on sensual obsessions, thoughts that are based on ill-will, thoughts that are based on cruelty. He himself talks about how he got onto the path, which is by dividing his thinking into two types. Thinking and being. He argued that sensuality, ill-will, and cruelty was one type, and thinking free of those qualities was another type. He looked at his thoughts in terms of the mental qualities behind them and also in terms of the results they led to. Not so much in terms of content, but in terms of motivation and the actual result. So you want to be true to watching the mind and being honest in engaging in the practice of watching your motivation and engaging in the results of your actions. These things are often hard to gauge, not because they’re far away, but because we don’t like to look at our motivation and we don’t like to look at the results of our actions. This has happened that many of us picked up as kids. We found that we had to lie about our motivation so we wouldn’t get punished. And after a while, we stopped lying just to other people and we started lying to ourselves as well. The same about the results of the actions. Sometimes you see yourself causing harm and it’s just too painful. So it’s important that you learn the qualities of mind that enable you to admit unskillful intentions and also admit mistakes. This is why we work on mindfulness, concentration, discernment, and why the Buddha has us look at that larger picture, reminding ourselves that we’re not the only ones with unskillful intentions. We’re not the only ones who make mistakes. It happens all over the world. So we’ve got to learn the qualities of mind that allow us to be mindful. Take that larger picture and then apply it day by day by day to our actions. And put the mind in a good enough mood so that it’s willing to admit these things. This is a lot of why the Buddha has right concentration with pleasure and rapture as part of the path. That’s what feeds the mind, gives it strength, and puts it in the right place. The right frame of mind, a more resilient frame of mind, so you can look at your actions and actually gauge them in a fair way. So that’s how you’re true. This is what is needed to be true—a sense that you’re not afraid of the truth. And you can be open with yourself and open with others, as the Buddha encouraged for a whole lot. We made a mistake to admit it to other people, specifically people who are further along in the path. There’s such a thing as admitting a mistake to the wrong people, who either say that it’s horrible, unheard of, or say, “How could you possibly do such a thing?” You say, “Oh, it’s all okay. Nothing really matters.” You won’t admit it to someone who’s got some good ideas about how to avoid that kind of mistake in the future, without getting all spun out. So it’s a delicate balance, this matter of being true. But it’s the only way we’re going to get out of uncertainty, because if our motivation is hidden to us and the results of our actions are hidden to us, what’s left? How are you going to learn anything? How are you going to arrive at certainty? What this means is that we will practice with some doubt. Doubt is ended only with stream-entering. So in the meantime, we acknowledge our doubts and say, “This looks like a reasonable path.” It doesn’t ask that we deny our sense of reason or that we deny huge chunks of reality. Actually, it’s asking us to look more and more carefully at reality, especially the chunks that we tend to deny. And it recommends developing noble qualities of the mind. That’s one of the qualities of the Noble Truths, is that only noble people get to see them. But the Buddha also points out how you become a noble person, what qualities you have to have. And it’s not simply by pretending to be noble. It’s by uncovering whatever is unskillful in the mind and realizing it for what it is. It’s like having a thorn in your flesh. If you pretend it’s not there, it’s just going to get worse. It’ll get infected. You have to dig down and get every last little bit of it. It’s the same with your defilements, your greed, aversion, and delusion. You have to dig down and find every last little bit of these things if you’re going to be cured. So you really have to be honest. These things are unskillful, and you’ve got them. But you don’t have to believe they’re inherent in you. Whether you’re still stuck with them forever. Nobody started out perfect. Even the Buddha didn’t start out perfect. He had his doubts. When the thought occurred to him that he was going to have to learn how to renounce his sensual passions, he said his mind didn’t leap up at the idea. He was the only one who was willing to realize that there would be benefits that would come. Was he willing to bite the bullet? And so we practice acknowledging our doubts but not letting our doubts overcome us. You should have a sense that this looks like a likely path, like that elephant hunter following the tracks of the elephant in the forest. He sees the big footprints. He says, “This is a good path. This is a likely sign of a bull elephant.” But he’s not totally convinced of the fact. He knows there are dwarf females with big feet. There are tall females with tusks. Because not only does he see the large footprints, but also the scratch marks high up in the trees. It’s only when he actually sees the bull elephant that he knows, “Okay, this is the bull elephant that can do the work that I want. This is what I’m looking for.” So he follows those tracks, even with his doubts. He looks for something likely. And when you come right down to it, that’s how we live. We have to look for things that are likely and then test them. It’s only through really testing them and developing the qualities of mind that make us competent judges that we overcome our uncertainty. So conviction or faith in the Buddha’s teachings is not a matter of pretending that you have no doubts. You’re clear about your doubts, but you’re also clear about the ways in which those doubts can be overcome. You become true by truly looking at your actions, truly looking at your motivation, being honest with yourself about why you’re doing things and the reasons for them, and then truly trying to do something about it when you see that you haven’t been skillful, trying to find a way to develop that skill. So, as the Buddha said, you pay appropriate attention to the skillful and unskillful qualities of the mind. Appropriate attention means looking at things in terms of the four noble truths, where is the stress, what’s the cause of the stress, and also realizing there are duties that are appropriate to these things. You see something causing stress, you try to abandon it. Then when you’ve actually fulfilled the tasks, you’ve abandoned the cause, you’ve developed the path. That’s when you find out if the Buddha’s teachings really are true. As Ajahn Maha Bua says, “A truth meets a truth, and there’s no conflict.” A true person meets with true happiness. That’s where there’s true harmony. you

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