Truth with Boundaries

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I was reading the story one time of a woman who’d gone through a really bad period in her mind. And she said she was able to get herself out. She actually had a neurotic breakthrough. In other words, the neurosis she was in broke. What enabled her to make it break was that whatever thought was hounding her mind, driving her crazy, she would ask herself, “Well, what if the opposite is true?” I was struck by this story because it reminded me of a point that Ajaan Lee made one time, saying that when you gain an insight into meditation, you have to ask yourself, “To what extent is the opposite true?” In other words, you have to circumscribe some limits around your thoughts so they don’t totally occupy your mind. Think about the Buddha. The only two teachings he gave that he said were categorically true and beneficial across the board. One was the principle that you should develop skillful qualities of the mind and abandon unskillful ones. And the other was the four Noble Truths. That’s it. Those are the only teachings that he said are categorically true. There are lots of other things he taught. Either they fit into the two principles and so are part of the categorical teachings, like the Seven Factors for Awakening. Those are basically part of the Eightfold Path, which comes under the Four Noble Truths. But then you have other teachings that are widely associated with the Buddha, like the Three Characteristics or the Three Perceptions, one of his greatest insights. But he showed by the way he taught these things that sometimes they’re beneficial and sometimes they’re not, even though they’re true all the time. Not every truth is beneficial for thinking, for applying. When you’re trying to get the mind into concentration, you’re thinking about how things are inconstant, stressful, not-self. You apply that to the concentration itself, it’s hard to put forth the effort to really make it as constant as possible, because you need a state of mind in order to see things clearly. I read something very strange the other day, someone saying that you can’t really analyze a state of concentration while you’re in it, because direct thought and evaluation can’t see direct thought and evaluation. That’s what the whole point, though, of getting the mind into concentration, is that it’s a transparent state where it can observe itself very clearly. And if you couldn’t observe yourself while you were in concentration, how would you know that the first jhana had direct thought and evaluation, pleasure and rapture, singleness of preoccupation? These states are there so you can observe yourself. And to get into those states, though, requires that for the time being you put aside the three perceptions and you apply them to other things. You apply them to anything that would get you out of concentration. But the concentration itself, you try to make as constant as you can, as pleasurable as you can, and under as much control as you can. I know someone else who complained about concentration practice, saying that it requires right effort, and effort requires a strong sense of self, because you’re going to be struggling and battling. And this person decided that he had sort of seen through the Buddhist joke that you can’t really create a state of concentration, you just have to let it come when it’s going to come, and otherwise don’t make any effort. When you don’t make any effort, he said, then there’s no sense of self. Well, there’s a very strong sense of self right there. That’s amazing how much the last factor of the Noble Eightfold Path is when it gets attacked so much. Because it’s necessary. The Buddha himself saw it as the heart of the path. Everything else, he said, was its requisite or its support. Because it’s one of the categorical teachings, anything that would get in the way of getting the mind into concentration, you’ve got to put it aside until the concentration is ready. Then you start taking it apart. And that’s when the three perceptions get applied. So even the three perceptions have their time and place to be used. In other times and places we’ve got to block them. So it’s good to think about this when you find yourself obsessed with a particular thought. Have you found the fifth noble truth? If it’s driving you crazy, obviously it’s not. It means it has to have some boundaries. You’ve got to figure out what are the boundaries of this truth that you’ve got. Because the things that drive you crazy will have some truth to them. But it’s only partial. You think every perception is only partial. It’s like a sketch. Your image of the world that you have in your mind leaves out a lot of the details. It’s like a map. Use a map because it’s useful for certain purposes. And you want to make sure that as far as those purposes are concerned, it’s accurate. But if you have too much information in the map, or holding on to the wrong map, the map actually gets in the way. It’s just like a map is a sketch of the world. You have a map for the roads, you have a map for the geological formations, you have maps for oil deposits. And depending on what you want, use the map that’s designed for that purpose. That’s if you’ve got an accurate map. Then you’ve got other maps that are total garbage. So think of your own perceptions as being that way as well. Whatever you think is going to be just a sketch. You want to make sure that the sketch is accurate as far as it’s concerned, and it’s actually giving you the details that you need to know. There’s an analysis someone did of different recipes. The recipes all for the same dish. He was pointing out that some people who write recipes are really good at figuring out where you’re going to have a problem, and they address that problem. And figure out what you can probably figure out on your own. And so some cooks are better at writing recipes than others because they not only know what they’re doing, but they also know when other people would have problems, get questions. So think of your thoughts as recipes, think of your thoughts as maps. And to what extent are the recipes useful? To what extent are they not? And how far does their truth go? This is an important principle that you want to develop. Because if you have the mind that tends to go to extremes and tends to get obsessed with one particular idea, you’re really going to have trouble when insights start arising in your concentration. Something comes up and you put the stamp of 100% truth on it, and you start writing it around in areas where it really doesn’t belong. Again, it’s useful to have that question. To what extent is this true, and to what extent is the opposite true? When you don’t see both sides, you’re dealing only with half-truths, and maybe not even a half-truth. This principle is called “guarding the truth.” When you have ideas and you have to ask yourself, where do they come from? And how true are they? You have to get a sense of their limitations. Because even things that come up as insights in the meditation, you may say, “Well, this comes directly from my experience.” Well, maybe you’re approaching it with a map. It’s going to make you emphasize certain details and forget others. And this has to do with your insights in your meditation. To say nothing of your thoughts as you go through the day, and start getting obsessed with something. You need the tools for getting yourself out. For breaking the shell around that thought, so you can escape from it, and so you can be outside the thought, and not totally consumed by it. So when you’re obsessed with a certain thought, and you’re convinced that it really has to be true, ask yourself, “Have you found the fifth noble truth?” The obvious answer is no. In that case, you can’t really believe it 100%. You’ve got to find out where that other percentage is, the percentage where it’s not true, or it’s not beneficial. Focus your attention there, and that helps get you out.

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