Finding the Truth by Being True

November 14, 2019

One time the Buddha asked Venerable Sariputta, “Do you take it on conviction that the five strengths—strength of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment—lead to the deathless?” And Sariputta said, “No. I don’t take it on conviction. I know.” That was because he had actually developed these qualities all the way to where they lead. But for those of us who haven’t gotten there yet, we still have to take it on conviction. We’re not 100 percent sure that these things work, but they make sense. They’re good qualities to develop in the mind. Particularly the strength of conviction. It comes down to the principle that your actions do make a difference. You are in charge of your actions. And if there’s any place where your actions are unskillful, you can make a change. Those are all good things to believe. If you believe the opposite, that you have no control over your actions, you can’t make any changes. You’re placing huge limitations on yourself. There’s another passage where the Buddha is talking to a group of people who have not yet decided where they want to assign their allegiance in terms of the different teachings that were available then. And he told them, “You can choose either to believe that your actions do make a difference and that they really do lead to something really good, if they’re skillful, and that you can develop that kind of skill. You’re much more likely to behave in a skillful way.” And even if it turned out they didn’t lead all the way to nirvana, you still have the sense, the satisfaction that comes from knowing that you behaved honorably. So as he said, it’s a safe bet. The same with the belief that nirvana is possible. If you believe it’s not possible, then you’re placing limitations on what you might possibly do. You don’t know for sure yet, but it’s wise to take the view or have conviction in the principle that opens the most doorways for what you can do through your actions. So that’s something you want to hold on to always. You don’t yet know. But it’s something good to believe. It opens doorways that would be closed otherwise. And it forces you to be very careful in what you do and say and think, which is all to the good. People go through life so thoughtlessly, so carelessly in their actions and their speech, leaving a huge trail of misery, both for themselves and for others. So it’s an act of kindness to yourself, an act of kindness to others, to believe that skillful actions really are worthwhile, and that the effort that goes into making your actions more skillful is effort well-expended. That’s strength of the conviction. It can go only so far on its own, which is why the Buddha recommends other strengths as well. Persistence. You actually act on that conviction. Do your best to look at yourself and see which actions are causing harm, either to yourself or to others, and resolving not to repeat those actions. And looking specifically into your mind. Look at what states of mind are arising in the mind. If you encourage them, they’re going to get you to behave in unskillful ways. And which ones are going to encourage you to behave in skillful ways? Do what you can to stop the unskillful tendencies, and do what you can to nurture and tend to the skillful ones. Here in the States, we have groups of people who get together. For example, suppose this was the last year of your life. How would you live your life differently? What would you change? What’s really worthwhile in your life? What activities are a waste of time? It’s a useful exercise. It would also be a useful exercise to have a group that got together and said, “Suppose you really believed in the principles of karma and rebirth, that those actions will make a difference not only now but into future lifetimes. How would you change the way you live?” I proposed that to a group up north one time. And a year later, someone who’d been at the talk came to see me and said, “When you said that, I found myself really resisting it. So I asked myself, why the resistance?” And, as he said, the resistance came from the realization that if he actually tried that out, he would have to be a lot more careful and skillful in what he did and said and thought. He’d have to put more effort into being skillful. So it was basically laziness that was getting in the way. But when you find that you can develop more and more skillful qualities, that access to some extent to some confirmation that, yes, conviction in the principle of action, conviction in the Buddha’s awakening, really is a good thing to hold to, you see the improvement in your life. Even more so as you meditate. You find that as you’re trying to act skillfully, you have to be very mindful about what you say and think and speak. And this quality carries over into your meditation. You’re sitting here focusing on the breath. Other thoughts are going to come in. And if your mindfulness is strong, you keep remembering, “I’m here with the breath. I’m not here for anything else.” This applies to scattered, random thoughts, visions that may come in the meditation, even the pleasure that comes in the meditation. You can’t let yourself drop your breath and just go wallow in the pleasure, because then you lose your focus. Things get very quiet, but you don’t really know where you are. You’re in what Ajahn Lee calls delusion concentration. But if you have practice being mindful about what you do and say and think, it’s going to be easier to be mindful as you meditate. Then you find that, as you really are mindful, to abandon what’s unskillful and develop what’s skillful, the mind will have to settle down and get firmly established in concentration. This, too, becomes a strength that confirms your conviction. As your concentration gets more solid, you begin to see things for yourself. This is where your discernment comes in. The Buddha makes a comparison. He says it’s like building a house. When you put up the rafters for the roof, they have to support the ridge pole, but the ridge pole is what makes them secure. Then there’s discernment here. He says there is the ridge pole. The other strengths are the rafters. They support discernment, but then discernment is what verifies them. It was the act of discernment that Sariputta had that led to release. That was what confirmed for him that all the other strengths really could lead to the deathless, a happiness that was free from conditions. A happiness that didn’t have to place any burdens on anybody at all. But it’s this act of discernment where we see where we’ve been ignorant of our own actions and where we can begin to sense what we’re doing that’s causing stress and suffering and what we can do to stop. In other words, you’re applying the principles of conviction. It’s not all that different. It’s something that you see clearly. What you took on faith, what you took on conviction, really does work. The Buddha gives another analogy. It’s like an elephant hunter going into the forest looking for a big bull elephant because he needs a big bull elephant to do some work. He comes across some large footprints. But because he’s an experienced hunter, he doesn’t immediately jump to the conclusion that these must be the footprints of a big elephant. After all, there are dwarf females with big feet, but they look promising. So he follows them. He comes to scratch marks way up in the trees. But again, he doesn’t come to the conclusion that these must be the scratch marks of a big bull elephant because there are tall females with tusks. It might be their scratch marks. But again, it looks promising, so he follows them. And finally he comes to a clearing. There it is, a big bull elephant. That’s when he knows that he’s got what he’s looking for. Then the Buddha interprets the analogy. The footprints stand for the mind in concentration. The scratch marks stand for the various psychic powers and knowledges that come with concentration. And the sight of the big bull elephant is when you see for yourself that the deathless really does exist and it was found through following the path. That’s when you know for sure that the Buddha was awakened, that the Dhamma was well-taught, and that those who have practiced the Dhamma have practiced well. That confirms your conviction. So remember, as we’re practicing, we’re practicing on conviction. There are a lot of things we don’t know yet. But it’s by acting on the conviction that we come to know. And the Buddha wants you to be very clear about what you do and do not know. He calls it “guarding the truth.” When you say something based on what you know, that’s one thing. If you say something based on what you believe in, what makes sense, what seems reasonable, you can’t be clear about that fact. Even things that make sense may not necessarily be true. Even things that seem promising may not necessarily be true. But you can’t wait to have the truth come to you. You have to be true to find the truth. You have to take some principles and act on them. So choose your principles well. Choose the principles that would lead you to believe in the skillfulness or the potential for skillfulness in your actions. That developing skill will be a good thing. And believe in principles that open wide the possibility of how great a happiness you can find through your actions. It’s only when you leave these possibilities open that they have any chance to be true. And then it’s simply a matter of your truth and developing virtue, concentration, discernment, and strengthening all the strengths that will enable you to know exactly how true the Buddhist teachings are.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2019/191114_Finding_the_Truth_by_Being_True.mp3>