The Power of Truth

November 26, 2019

There’s a theme that runs through the Buddhist teachings around the power of truth. Truth here having several meanings. One, of course, is the statement of true things, the perception of what’s true. But then there’s also truth as a question, the quality of a person. And the two go together. It’s the second one, though, where the real power lies. You make up your mind you’re going to do something good, and you stick with it. But then you have to keep checking to make sure it really is good. And if you’re not used to telling the truth to other people, you’re going to start lying to yourself. So to be a true person, to speak true things, the two go together. And they do have a power. It’s through the power of truthfulness that you can discover the truth. Because you’re willing to see things that you may not like to see about yourself. It means you can do something about them. Then also you realize that the path requires that you make a concerted effort, that you really be determined to stick with the path, because it’s going to require sacrifices. And it’s going to require watching your actions again and again and again. This is why the Buddha said, that one of the prerequisites for taking on a student is that the student be truthful and observant. The two go together. When he first taught his son, there were instructions on precisely how to do that. He first set out the principle of truthfulness. You get the sense that the son, Ruhula, had told a lie that day, because it’s the very first issue that the Buddha brings up when he sees him. Ruhula set out a bucket of water with a dipper for the Buddha to wash his feet. The Buddha takes the dipper, washes his feet, and leaves a little bit of water in the dipper. He shows it to Ruhula and asks him, “Do you see that little bit of water here in the dipper?” “Yes.” “That’s a little goodness there is in a person who tells a deliberate lie without any sense of shame.” Then he takes the water and throws it away. “See how the water is thrown away?” “Yes.” “That’s what happens to the goodness of a person who tells a deliberate lie without any shame.” Then he switches the topic, but doesn’t really switch it. He just focuses it on where you have to be truthful, which is reflecting on your actions. You think about the Buddha himself and his course to awakening. He did have teachers at the beginning, but he realized they didn’t know the path to awakening. He was going to have to find it himself. That required that he look very carefully at what he was doing. If he wasn’t getting the results he wanted, he was going to have to change. He held himself to a high standard. As he said, he didn’t let himself rest content with his level of skill. He kept up his efforts. He was true in his pursuit. And that’s how he found awakening. Both in sticking with it and in being truthful and observing what was actually going on. Otherwise, you can put a lot of effort into the path. But if you’re not truthful in observing the results of your actions, you’re not going to learn anything. There was a famous French diplomat, Teller Rome. He lived through the end of the ancient regime, through the French Revolution, into the time of Napoleon, and then past the time of Napoleon, into the restoration of the Bourbons, the house that had been overthrown during the revolution. One of his comments about the Bourbons after they came back into power was that they never forgot anything, but they never learned anything. In other words, they didn’t forget anything. They had old grievances, old grudges, but they never learned from their own behavior as to why other people were so upset with them. And so they continued acting in foolish ways and eventually got overthrown again. It’s only when you’re willing to look at yourself and say, “This is not working. What else could I do?” That’s when you have a chance to grow. If you keep focused on trying to be harmless in your actions, you can pursue that. You can pursue it all the way to awakening. As your sensitivity to what counts as harm gets more and more subtle, in the beginning you’re dealing with the precepts. Then you move on into the training of the mind, learning to think harmful thoughts about yourself, or anybody else, having goodwill for everybody. And then realizing that to embody that goodwill for yourself, you’re going to have to get the mind to settle down. And then the disturbances in the mind, those are the harm you’re looking for. And you have to be very quick to see what you’re doing that’s disturbing the stillness of the mind. In this way you develop a lot of good qualities. In order to be mindful, you have to be alert. Alert to what you’re doing, alert to the results of what you’re doing, remembering lessons you’ve learned from other people, remembering lessons you’ve learned from watching your own actions, and then being ardent and trying to be more and more skillful. You develop the qualities of heedfulness. Realizing that if you don’t clean up your act now, you may not have a chance further down the line. Well, the next chance may be a long time in coming. So in this way it keeps you on top of what you’re doing. And as one of the foresages on this says, you learn to live with the truth. And when you learn to live with the truth, the truth holds no dangers, holds no fears. There are a lot of people who don’t want to see the truth, largely because they’ve been behaving in ways that are not very truthful. They realize that there’s a lot of artifice in their view of the world, and the slightest little bit of disturbance can come crashing down. So they spend a lot of time shoring up a lot of delusions. But if your sense of who you are can withstand the truth—in other words, instead of defining yourself as a person who’s always good, you define yourself as someone who’s always willing to learn—then the truth holds nothing to fear. This is where you begin to see that the truth has some power. You speak the truth, you act the truth. And it’s how you find the truth that turns out to be the truth that the Buddha found and the truth that all of his noble disciples have found. It’s all the same thing. It’s the total end of suffering. Happiness is not dependent on conditions. You dig down through all the conditioning in the mind, weed out all the conditions. And more and more subtle levels of disturbance, you finally get to a place where it’s totally undisturbed. It doesn’t have to depend on anything at all. That’s a different level of truth. That’s even beyond statements and even beyond the truth of a person. It’s an absolute fact. It’s there. So anything you can do to find that truth, that’s the best use of the power of the powers of the mind. You can think of all the list of psychic powers the Buddha developed. There’s one, the ending of defilement. That was the one that he focused on. The other is, as Ajaan Fuang once said, a game. And they’re useful if you have different powers like that, if you use them well. The problem is, a lot of people get them and don’t use them well. But the power to put an end to defilement in your mind, that’s not anything that can be used poorly. That’s something that’s found through the power of truth. So to develop that strength within yourself, even something as simple as staying with your mind, if you find yourself wandering off, just come right back, come right back, come right back. If you find the mind talking to itself in ways that are not helpful, you say, “I don’t need to listen to this kind of talk.” There are other more encouraging things that are just as true, or even more true, and certainly more beneficial. Because that’s what we’re looking for, a truth that is beneficial. It’s right for your time and place. That’s why the Buddha came up with the Four Noble Truths as his main teaching. Because they deal with the big problem in life, the suffering that people cause themselves. It required a lot of goodwill on his part to focus there and then to get that teaching established. So the Four Noble Truths are truths that have the backing of goodwill. They’re meant to be beneficial. This fits in line with the fact that so often in the Pali Canon, the Buddha pairs the word dhamma with atta, which means purpose and goal. These are teachings with a benevolent purpose. And if you have a benevolent purpose, a purpose toward yourself and the people around you, then you want to be true to that determination. And if you are, then the truth holds no dangers at all.

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