The Perfection of Truth (outdoors)

March 13, 2022

Focus on your breath. Take a couple of good long deep in and out breaths first to see where you feel the breathing process in the body most clearly. And focus your attention there. And then ask if it’s comfortable. If it seems okay, keep it up. If it doesn’t feel good, you can change. Make it shorter, more shallow, heavier, faster, lighter, slower. Try to see what rhythm and texture of breathing feels best right now. Remember, you’re the one who has to make the decision. What really feels good. So you have to pay careful attention. This is the quality of truthfulness. It’s one of the perfections. There are two perfections that are very similar. There’s virtue as a perfection. And one of the virtues, of course, is telling the truth. And then there’s truth itself as a perfection. The difference between the two is that when you tell the truth simply in line with how you understand things, whether your understanding is right or wrong, the fact that you’re reporting your understanding, that doesn’t break the precept against lying. And that does count as truth under virtue as a perfection. But with the perfection of truth, it’s a little bit more demanding. You’re supposed to make an effort to make sure that your understanding of a situation really is genuine, really is truthful. There are lots of different ways of doing that. You can check the facts, go back, look again. In terms of figuring out cause and effect, though, you have to understand the causes to see what really is a causal connection, what just is coincidence. And it’s only when you’ve tried different alternatives that you really say truthfully, “Oh yeah, this really is the cause of X.” So in the case of the breathing, if I try long breathing for a while, then short breathing is light, fast, slow. And then when you’ve tried the different types of breathing, then you can speak with authority. What really does make the body feel at ease in the present moment? What kind of breathing makes the mind feel at ease in the present moment? And it’s good for the mind. You don’t want the mind to be so taken in by the comfort that it gets drowsy or begins to lose its alertness. So what kind of breathing feels good but will also help keep you awake? And nobody else can tell you what kind of breathing will work best for you. You have to find out for yourself. But as I said, when you’ve experimented like this, then you can speak with authority. There are so many things in the world that we think are true, but we really don’t know. As the Buddha said, sometimes we hear something and simply because somebody reported it to us, we believe it. Or because we believe the person who said it. Or because it seems to make sense in terms of what we already agree with. Or we’ve hammered things out through our reasoning. Or because it’s something that’s an old tradition. And the Buddha said none of those things are a guarantee that something’s going to be true. If you really want to know the truth, you have to check it for yourself. As for things that you are not in a position to check, you simply have to remind yourself, “Okay, I don’t really know this.” And if it’s an issue that doesn’t really affect your choices in life, then you can just put the whole thing aside. Tell yourself, “That’s none of my business.” But if it does affect your choices, there are a lot of areas in life where we have to make choices. We don’t really know 100% what the results are going to be. Or even what the situation is where we are right now. In that case, we have to see what seems to be the best working hypothesis. And remind yourself, this is a working hypothesis. It’s not really knowledge yet. But it seems to be the best principle to base your actions on. For example, there’s the question, “Do you really have choices in life? Or are your choices an illusion?” You reason with yourself. If you believed that your choices were an illusion, you’d get very careless about what you chose. You’d just give in to your urges. You’d say, “Well, I have to do this because that’s the force that’s acting through me.” Someone one time was reporting that she was on a meditation retreat. She found herself feeling a lot of lust for a young man sitting in front of her. It got so bad that she couldn’t even sit in the same hall with him. She had to go to sit in her room. Then she told herself, “Well, this isn’t my personal lust. This is this cosmic lust. It’s abandoning responsibility.” If you think it’s a cosmic force acting through you, then you’re not going to make any effort to figure out why it’s there and what you’re doing to contribute to it. But if you take the working principle, whatever thought you give in to, you have the choice to give in to it or not. You have to try and figure out, “What choices am I making?” Because the mind does make choices, as the Buddha said, alert to the choice. And sometimes not alert to the choice. It’s very good at hiding things from itself. And you find that if you pursue that, to see what the choices are, you get a greater and greater understanding of what’s going on in the mind. Now, this knowledge is confirmed at your first taste of awakening. Up to that point, it’s simply a working hypothesis. And you have to keep reminding yourself that it is a working hypothesis. You’re not 100% knowledgeable, but you take it as a working hypothesis. Assumptions that lead to the best behavior on your part, the most useful behavior. Assumptions that open things up inside. If you say, “Well, it’s just a cosmic force acting through me,” it leaves everything a mystery. But if you assume that you’re making choices and that choices are having an effect, you start seeing more and more what’s going on. You’re more and more clear about where unskillful choices are made. And you find that the mind gets clearer and clearer. So in this case, you’re working on an assumption, and as the Buddha said, you’re guarding the truth when you keep reminding yourself, “Okay, this is just an assumption. I still have to work harder to prove it.” But you see that it’s getting more and more likely, because it does seem to be having an effect on your life. The more clearly you can see the choices being made in the mind, the quicker you can be to prevent unskillful choices from taking over. This is where your perfection of truth really does become a perfection. When you go out of your way to be really honest with yourself, about what you’re doing and the results of what you’re doing, it’s precisely this quality that allows you to study the Dhamma, to arrive at the truth. As the Buddha said, “What was he looking for in a student? Someone who’s honest and observant.” Honest about what he or she is doing and observant about how much he or she actually knows. And curious to want to know more. As he further said, when you want to find the Dhamma, it requires two things. One is commitment, and the second is reflection. You commit yourself to the practice, like right now. You make up your mind you’re going to stay with the breath. Try to breathe in a way that feels good, and you keep at it. As long as the breath doesn’t feel quite good yet, you keep at it. Figure out, is it too long, too short? If you can’t figure it out, just tell yourself, “I’m going to let the body breathe on its own for a while and see what it does.” But you don’t give up, as after all, many other people have followed this path in the past. They’ve gotten good results, so there’s no reason why you shouldn’t be able to get good results, too. Have that sense of confidence and commitment that you’re really going to do this as well as you can. And then you reflect on what you’re doing. Are you getting the results you want? Or sometimes you find when the mind settles down today, it settles down and it feels one way. Tomorrow, when you get it to settle down with the breath, it feels different. Just note the differences, because the types of concentration that the mind can get into are many and varied, and they all have their uses. So if you reflect on what you did in order to get into today’s concentration, and then tomorrow you reflect on what you did to get into tomorrow’s concentration, then you can remember that. In the beginning, your powers of observation are going to be crude, so there’ll be a lot you’ll miss. But if you keep observing, observing, observing, and reflecting, after a while you’ll begin to see patterns. When the body is like this, the mind is like this, it needs this kind of concentration in order to restore it. Other times, the mind has too much energy. What do you do to calm it down? By being observant, you develop a repertoire, a range of skills, and it all comes from being honest. You’re clear about what you’re doing. You don’t hide anything from yourself. And you’re clear about the results. So there’s added quality that turns simple truthfulness into perfection. In other words, making a genuine effort in order to really get at the truth, rather than simply report what you think is true. That can really make a difference in your mind. When you make a difference in the mind, it makes a difference in your life. And a difference in your life affects not only you, but also the people around you. And it’s a good difference.

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