When Truth Meets Truth

July 9, 2023

We close our eyes when we meditate because meditation is meant to solve a problem that starts from within. When we’re looking at things outside it can get very distracting. So we close our eyes, focus on the breath, because the breath is the part of the body that’s closest to the mind. It’s the part of the body that’s most responsive to the mind. It’s through the breath that the rest of the body moves. And that we know what’s going on in the body. And by breath here we mean not just the air coming in and out through the nose, but the flow of energy that goes through the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out. And you can feel that anywhere. Ask yourself as you breathe in, where do you feel the movement of the energy? It can be in the chest, it can be in the head, it can be the rise and fall of the abdomen. Focus wherever it’s clearest. And then ask if it’s comfortable. Because we’re trying to get the mind to settle down here in the present moment. And if it’s not comfortable it’s not going to want to stay. So we use the breath to create a sense of well-being. And that sense of well-being is going to be especially necessary when we start looking into the problem that the meditation is meant to solve. So try to establish a sense of being solidly here, because you’re going to have to watch the mind in the present moment. We want to watch the mind continually. So settle in. Have a sense of feeling at home here. Then you’ll be ready to do your work. And the work is to understand how it is that the mind creates unnecessary suffering for itself. We’re born into this world and the first thing we know is pain. The first thing a child does when it’s born is a cry. That’s simply the pain of getting born. But as we go through life we begin to find that there’s necessary pain and unnecessary pain. And it’s the unnecessary pain that’s actually weighing down the mind. But before we understand that, it’s just the simple reaction to pain. Stress. Suffering. Which is first, bewilderment. We don’t know why it’s happening. And then two, we search for a way out. As the Buddha expresses that search, is there somebody who knows a way or two to put an end to this pain? As little children, even before we know language of any kind, that’s what we’re searching for. We hope that our parents will be able to help remove any pain. And oftentimes they can. But there are times when they can’t. You’ve probably seen a child get really desperate when it realizes that its parents cannot put an end to some of the pains it’s feeling. And as we go through life we begin to see more and more that a lot of things that our parents can’t solve for us. So we’re looking for somebody else. Is there anybody else who knows how to put an end to pain? The Buddha offers himself as the person to provide the answer. And he qualifies in several ways. You think about when we’re looking for someone to put an end to pain. One, we’re looking for someone who really knows. Two, we’re looking for someone who can actually explain that knowledge to us so that we can understand it. And then three, we’re looking for someone who has the compassion to explain it to us. Of course for most of us we’d also like someone who would actually do the work for us. But as the Buddha pointed out, the real causes of the unnecessary suffering we cause for ourselves come from within, from our own lack of skill. And nobody else can make you skillful, but someone like the Buddha, who knows how to put an end to suffering, can explain it, and has the compassion to explain it, is happy to give you advice. And it’s important to realize that this is the issue in which we most want the truth. It’s because we suffer that we want the truth. You can imagine what it would be like to have no suffering, no pain, no inconvenience at all. The question of whether someone was telling us the truth or wasn’t telling the truth wouldn’t seem to matter. You can think of all the made-up stories that people like to listen to. And they’re feeling good. Whether the stories are true or not doesn’t matter. But when you’re suffering, you really do want the truth. You don’t want fictions. Which is why we’re very careful about the people we listen to, on how to put an end to suffering. The Buddha said it’s because of our own lack of skill. He boiled the lack of skill down to three things. One was lack of virtue. Another was lack of concentration. The third was lack of discernment. So this is the path that he teaches. In terms of virtue, we learn how to behave in ways that cause no harm to anybody. No killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking of intoxicants. We live in a way that doesn’t impose harm on anybody, and doesn’t harm ourselves. Because if you can harm yourself, it’s a very easy step to harm other people. But when you realize that you harm yourself by acting in ways that break the precepts, you get more careful. And you find that your life becomes a lot less complicated. The same with concentration. You get the mind to settle down. And you begin to realize that the mind that’s thinking random thoughts all the time, it’s actually disturbing itself. But if you think about one topic continually, and you really get to know that topic, the mind has a sense of well-being, can settle in, have a sense of belonging here. And with discernment you begin to see the movements of the mind that actually create stress and suffering. It’s because we act in ignorance that we don’t see these things. But when you start looking into your thoughts, not in terms of whether you like them or not, but in terms of where they lead, in terms of whether they lead to stress or lack of stress, you find it more and more obvious that certain ways of thinking really are unskillful. And they lose a lot of their appeal. That’s basically how we put an end to suffering. By seeing the ways that we think that are harmful. We just see it in more and more precision, more and more detail. More and more subtlety. Until finally we reach a dimension in the mind where there is no suffering. We realize it was through our efforts that we found it. Now our efforts didn’t create it, because it is something that’s unfabricated, unconstructed, unconditioned. But our efforts in virtue, concentration, and discernment enable us to detect it, open up to it. It’s like a road going to a mountain. The road doesn’t cause the mountain, but the road, when you follow it, takes you there. Just as we look for honesty and true knowledge and compassion in a teacher, a teacher looks for some qualities in us. The Buddha said the people he was looking for to teach were people who were honest and observant. In other words, just as you want him to be honest, he wants you to be honest, and looking at where you’re actually causing yourself suffering. Because so many times we lie to ourselves about why we’re suffering. Either throwing the blame on somebody else, or else misunderstanding our own minds. Because there are parts of the mind that we’re very protective of and we don’t want to question. But oftentimes those parts are precisely the ones that are causing us to suffer, so we have to be willing to open up to them. To admit where we’re doing things that are really unskillful, and be willing to change. So that’s why honesty is an important part of the practice. And the other is being observant. The Buddha’s not expecting you to know anything yet before he teaches you. But he does expect you to be willing to learn, and able to observe yourself. Because he can’t get into your mind and point out to you “okay, you’re doing this, you’re doing that, stop this, stop that.” You have to learn how to detect that yourself. And being observant requires that you learn how to ask the right questions. Say a particular habitual way of thinking comes up in your mind. The question shouldn’t be “is this my normal way of thinking?” Because sometimes you say “well this is just the way I am, I’m not going to change.” That just puts an end to the path right there. So try to get the “you” out of the question, and just simply say “what is this action, where does it come from, what mind state does it come from, and where does it lead?” And you begin to see that certain thoughts tend to come out of greed, or aversion, or delusion, and they lead you to a bad place. Other thoughts come from a lack of greed, lack of aversion, lack of delusion, and they take you to a good place. When you start looking at your thoughts in this way, as processes rather than as thought worlds that you’re either choosing to enter or not, but you see simply the process of how a thought world gets created. And you’re going to ask yourself “this is creating unnecessary suffering, why should I bother?” It’s like driving past one of those old drive-in theaters, and they’re playing a horror film on on the screen. You can either choose to look at the screen and get pulled into the horror film and make yourself suffer, or you can stand back and just look at the flashing of lights from the projector onto the screen and see “well there’s nothing there, so why should I let these processes pull me into in a way that’s going to cause suffering?” And when you see that happening in your own mind, that’s how you can begin to put an end to the unnecessary stress and suffering you cause yourself. So that’s all that’s asked. One, you be honest. And two, you be observant. When you find a teacher who fills the qualifications that you’re looking for, in other words someone who really knows the way down to suffering, who’s honest enough and able enough to put it into words, and three, who has the compassion to teach. When honesty meets honesty like this over the question of suffering, that’s how progress can come about, and that’s how you learn truths that really are worth knowing. As the Buddha said, he awakened to a lot of things on the night of his awakening. He compared them to all the leaves in the forest. But what he taught was like just a handful of leaves, because that handful, the Four Noble Truths, would be useful in putting an end to people’s suffering. Answering that question of who knows a way to put an end to the suffering in a way that really gives results. And we can show our gratitude for the fact that he was so selective in what he taught, and so compassionate in what he taught, by putting his teachings into practice. We’re going to come right down to it, that’s the only homage he asked for. We presented with flowers, candles, incense, we bowed down to him, but what he really wanted was for people to take his teachings and practice them and get results. So now that we’ve found someone who fills all the qualifications, he honestly knows, he’s capable of explaining the way to the end of suffering, and he’s compassionate enough to teach it to us, we should try to bring forth our own honesty and our powers of observation, to take advantage of those teachings while we can.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2023/230709_When_Truth_Meets_Truth.mp3>