

Truths of the Will

November 5, 2006

Someone once said that there are basically two kinds of truths in the world: truths of the observer, and truths of the will. Truths of the observer are things that are true regardless of what you do, that have nothing to do with your ideas about things, what you want, what you don't want. They're just the way of the world. This is what science is all about. And to learn these truths, you can't let your wants get in the way. This kind of truth also describes a lot of things you see day to day.

As for truths of the will, those are things that exist only if you will them into being. They depend on your wants. You decide that this is something you want and you act on it. Say you want to be a concert pianist. That's going to become true only if you decide that this something you really want, that it's worth working on, and you stick with that decision.

When you look at the things that mean the most to us in life, most of them are truths of the will. If you just looked at the world from the point of view of an observer, everything would be pretty pointless. We get born, we grow up, we struggle to survive, and then we die. That's pretty much it. What's the point of all that? Many times you look back on your life and you think of all the things that you fought over, all the things that you worked hard to get, and even if you got them, they just slipped through your fingers. You wonder: What was that all about? Many people look back on their whole lives and that's all they see. "What was that all about? Why all that suffering?"

So if you want to have a point to your life, you have to will it into being. Many of the Buddha's teachings explain why this is so. Your experience of the present moment comes from what? The results of past actions, your current intentions, and the results of your current intentions. That's an interaction between truths of the will and truths of the observer. I.e., you willed things in the past, and then that set into motion certain causal forces, some of which came out in ways you didn't intend. But that's simply because that's the way the world is. That's how causality works. You didn't work the process right. But now you've got your current intentions and they're having an effect right now, and they are going to have an effect on into the future, and they offer you the chance to get it right this time.

So it's up to you to decide: Is there going to be a point to all this? Is there going to be a direction to all these different intentions? Or are you just going to muck around in your life, and at the end wonder what was that all about? Even the way we suffer comes under these two kinds of truths. There's the truth of the three characteristics which is that anything willed is going to be inconstant, stressful, and not self; anything that's subject to conditions is going to be stressful. But then there's also the suffering that comes from craving, especially unskillful craving.

The first kind of suffering you can't do much about, but you can make a difference with that second kind. This is an area where your will has a lot to say, has a lot of impact if you focus it properly. Putting an end to suffering is a big job,

but it is humanly possible. And because it is possible, it's really worthwhile to focus your energies in that direction. That really does give a worthwhile direction to your life. Some people decide they want to be a concert pianist, but then when they become a concert pianist, they find that it's not really as fulfilling as they thought it would be. Someone wants power, gains power, and then abuses it, misuses it, creating a lot of suffering, both for himself and for a lot of other people, which is going to have consequences for a long time down the line.

So for your life to have a point, you have to have a goal and you want to choose a wise goal. This is why the Buddha's seems to be the wisest: a total end to suffering. That requires developing a lot of important qualities in the mind, things you have to will into being. You look at your life and it doesn't seem like there's much opportunity to put an end to suffering, but again you're looking at the things that an observer would look at. The end of suffering is a truth of the will, and if you focus your energies in that direction, it does become possible.

You look at all the verses of the elder monks, elder nuns and a lot of them started out in really miserable circumstances. If you just looked at the facts of their lives, you would have thought, "No chance for this person," and yet somehow they pulled themselves together and decided that this is what they wanted out of life. After all, desire is a factor of the path. It's right there in right effort: You generate desire to develop skillful qualities, you generate the desire to abandon unskillful qualities. That kind of desire is good. You just need to learn how to focus it properly, to create the right conditions.

I was reading a book a while back on analyzing people who had started out their adult lives in really bad shape psychologically, and yet they were able to pull themselves together. Tolstoy was an example. As a young person he looked pretty hopeless, and then he somehow pulled it all together and became a great novelist, an inspiration to a lot of peacemakers. In the book I was reading—it was basically psychotherapy applied to history or psychoanalysis applied to history, which often is a pretty sordid affair. Usually they want to ferret out who had strange sexual desires, and who had strange psychological problems, and just leave it at that. But in this case the analysis was meant to derive lessons on how is it that some people who start out in really bad shape manage to get it together? That's psychoanalysis applied to history with a real point.

The conclusions were not anything really surprising, but it's important to remember that some of the basic facts of life, the most important ones, are things we tend to overlook. The conclusions here pointed out basically two things: First, in each case the person found someone who really believed in him or her and encouraged him or her to develop skillful qualities. Second, that person had a belief system that emphasized that it really was important to make something of yourself, something of more than just ordinary value.

This is what we have in the Dharma and the Sangha. For the Sangha, you've got people who believe in the worthwhile endeavor, the value of developing skillful qualities and encouraging other people to develop skillful qualities. It creates the right social environment for learning how to mature. And then second, there's the system—the belief system or the values of the Dhamma—that if you develop skillful qualities in your mind, it really does make a difference not only for yourself, but for all the people around you. There is a value to learning how to will, or to intend things in a skillful way. It really does make a difference.

Science can't teach you that. Science tells us that the sun is going to go nova some day, so all your efforts to do something with your life are going to get burned up anyhow. Scientists just are concerned with truths of the observer. We're dealing with truths of the will: What do you want to make with your life? It's possible to make all kinds of things given the raw materials you have.

Often you may find that, given your past kamma, current circumstances are not all that good. But remember several things: One, past kamma is not totally determining what's going to happen in the future; you make decisions from moment to moment. Two, what you see right now is not the sum total or running balance of your kamma account. Think of your past actions more like lots of accounts, or lots of seeds that can sprout and grow and blossom at different times. You may be going through a fallow period right now when not many good seeds are blossoming and some bad seeds are blossoming instead, but that doesn't mean you don't have good seeds in your kamma accounts. So what you want to do is to work right now on what the skillful decision is right now.

As for what's going to come from your past kamma, learn how to treat whatever it is with skill. Associate with people who will encourage you in that direction, encourage within yourself the beliefs and understandings that give value to that way of approaching your life. Because one of the things about truths of the will is that often you see people for whom you think, "There's no chance that this person is going to be a concert pianist; there's no chance that this person is going to make anything out of his or her life." That's what it looks like from the outside. But a lot of very unlikely people have managed to succeed given the right conditions, as I said, finding the right people to associate with and having a strong belief in the importance of their actions.

This is why faith in the Buddha's awakening is such an important thing, because the Buddha was awakened by what? By his own actions. And it wasn't any special divine quality that he had and we don't have. He simply developed the qualities that he had that we can develop as well.

So look at your life and see what qualities need to be developed in that direction. The traditional list of the perfections is a good one to think about, because it can apply not only to monastic life but also to lay life. And not only to times when you're on retreat like this or times when you're in the monastery, or times when you're meditating, but to all your activities throughout the day. Look at all your activities as opportunities to develop good qualities in your mind, because those of the things that last. The Buddha calls them noble treasures because when you develop good qualities in the mind they stay with you, not only in this lifetime but on into future lifetimes.

What are the perfections? Generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, energy, tolerance or endurance, truth, determination, goodwill, and equanimity. Sometimes when conditions are difficult, you've got to work on the equanimity and the endurance. Other times when opportunities are good, you have to work more on the energy, not to let good opportunities pass you by. When you keep these qualities in mind, you find that you've got the opportunity to practice the Dhamma, to develop qualities that should work in your dealings with other people.

Now you may look at your life and feel that your circumstances are not conducive enough. That's when you may decide that you have to change the

circumstances of your life. But the basic conditions you need are the two I mentioned just now. Learn to associate with people who believe, one, in the importance of developing skillful qualities and, two, in your ability to do it. Building on that, hold to the conviction that if you want your life to have a point, you have to give it a point, and you can do that. No matter how discouraging the facts you can observe in your life, don't believe that the observable facts are telling the total story or that your future is already cast in concrete. You constantly have the ability to change your mind, to develop more skillful intentions, to learn from your past mistakes, so that you can bring those truths of the will to fruition.