

## *The Power of Truth*

*February 8, 2007*

The chant just now, the Quail's Protection: There's a story behind it. They say the Buddha was walking through some fields one day when he stopped at a point and smiled. Ven. Ananda saw the smile and he knew that Buddhas don't smile without a reason, so he asked him. The Buddha said that in a previous lifetime he was born as a quail and had lived in that field. One day, when he was still a baby quail, his parents were off someplace else looking for food, and a huge fire came sweeping through the field. The baby quail knew he had no other protection, so he made a vow of truth—in his case, the vow of truth was simply this: "My parents are gone, my wings are undeveloped, my feet are undeveloped, so go away, fire." And the fire avoided the spot where he was.

What's interesting about the story is what it says about the power of truth. In the quail's case, it was simply a statement of a true fact that kept the fire away. But in our meditation, truth means something more: that you are really very honest with yourself about what you're doing, because otherwise you have no protection in the meditation. You hear instructions, but how do you know that the instructions are true? You hear that the Buddha said *x*, *y*, or *z*, but how do you know it was *x*, *y*, or *z*? Or if he did say *x*, *y*, or *z*, is it applicable to where you are right now?

There's that other chant that said just now, "The world has no protector; there's no one in charge." There's no one you can run to and ask, "Is this true? Or is this not true?" and get an answer that will erase your doubts. The only thing you can rely on is your own truth. That doesn't mean just your subjective idea of what you would like to be true, but what's actually working in terms of cause and effect in your practice.

This is the one quality that carries you through in all circumstances. You look at the history of the forest tradition: It was basically a bunch of peasants' sons. The authority in those days resided in Bangkok: all the pronouncements about what the Buddha taught. Not only that, but as time went on, there came the question of what the Buddha taught that was relevant to our time, whether the path to nibbāna was still open. Pronouncements were coming out that did not jibe with what was taught from the previous generation. A lot of people simply gave in. Whatever the line was from Bangkok, that was the line they espoused. But the forest tradition didn't go in that direction. They stuck fast to what they knew of the Dhamma and the Vinaya, and even that they tested.

This is a principle that Ajaan Mun trained in all of his students: one was the confidence that they could actually do the practice and figure out what was genuine Dhamma from what's not, and two, that it depended on their own truthfulness, their own honesty, really looking at what they were doing, really looking at the results, testing themselves. If you say you're without passion, well, go out into the forest and see how long your mind can last. If you say you're without fear, again, go into the forest and see what happens when you hear strange noises in the night. It's through testing yourself against these things that you begin to gain a strong sense of what you can rely on and what you can't.

In the various forest ajaans I met, there was a quality they all had in common. Their personalities were very different—some were very calm, some were more fiery—but they all had this attitude of, one, healthy skepticism toward things they heard and saw outside, and two, a very strong sense about them that they were solid and reliable. This quality they developed over time through their practice—that kept getting tested again and again—was something they really needed, especially given that they didn't stay around with Ajaan Mun all the time. They would stay a little while, and then he'd send them off to a cave or to a mountain or to a forest area to learn to test themselves on their own. And it was through having tested what they had learned through their practice that they came back and were not fazed by what was coming out of Bangkok, what the scholars were telling them.

So all of us, in our practice, are trying to develop the same quality as well, because there are so many versions out there of what the Buddha taught, people speaking with a lot of confidence that this must be the way it is. For example, one of the discoveries of the forest ajaans was that there is no clear line separating samatha practice from vipassana, or jhana practice from insight practice. The two sides shaded into each other. The line coming out of Bangkok was they were two very different things: That wasn't just coming out of Bangkok, it was coming from a long commentarial tradition. When we look now at the Canon—which in those days wasn't very much available in Thai—we can see that the forest ajaans were onto something.

When the Buddha taught mindfulness and jhana, he didn't really separate the two drastically. He described the basic formula for mindfulness practice and then he talked about developing it as a form of jhana: Focus in the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That's the formula for mindfulness. Then he would say first you develop this concentration with directed thought and evaluation—that's a jhana practice—then without directed thought and evaluation, with enjoyment, with

equanimity. In other words, you take it through all the four jhanas. One of the basic themes of concentration practice is just this: establishing mindfulness. There are lots of passages you can cite, showing that the Buddha put the two practices together

The same with developing insight: You start with strong concentration and you develop insight by looking into the concentrated state, analyzing it in terms of the five aggregates, or simply the fact that it's constructed, fabricated. Even to get into that concentrated state, he also said that you need not only some tranquility but also some insight. If you don't understand the workings of your mind, it's hard to settle down.

So these two sides of meditation practice work together. And why is this important? Well, for one thing, when you're allowed to mix mindfulness with concentration, or tranquility with insight, it broadens your range of tools, more than if you're doing just, say, what is said to be a vipassana practice, or just watching and not reacting to anything. Limiting yourself to those approaches really ties your hands. The question is, if you're just watching what passes, passes, passes, how are you going to understand cause and effect? Scientists don't just sit around watching what passes by. They interfere with the process. They try to direct it in a certain way, and then watch what happens as a result. Then they change the parameters of their experiment to see result *that* has. It's through interfering that you learn things.

And it's the same with the mind. We're interfering with the mind. We're trying to get a good solid state of concentration going—calm and peaceful—and we learn about the mind by seeing what works and what doesn't work. That's insight right there. If things aren't going well, you have the freedom to change them. After all, who's going to sit here and watch over you, telling you what you can and can't do while you meditate?

What this also does—by putting the two sides of the practice together—is that you have to learn how to monitor what you're doing. It's not simply a matter of learning the instructions and then doing what you're told to do without reflecting on what you're doing or without reflecting on the results. And it's not a matter of taking the results to your teacher and having him say, "Ah, yes, that's the first jhana" or "that's the first insight" or whatever. Again, what does the teacher know? How do you know what the teacher knows? You've got to look at the results in your own mind.

What this does is that it focuses you on that issue of: where is the stress right now, what's causing the stress? This called appropriate attention—seeing things in these terms—and this is the internal quality the Buddha said is most important in

gaining awakening. This is how you gain insight, looking at what you're doing, because that's what insight is supposed to get you focused on: what you're doing that's causing stress, what you can learn how to stop doing that's causing stress, and seeing the state of the end of stress, the end of suffering that results. We're not here trying to clone someone else's insights. We're following a path, and this is the path of looking for the stress, learning to comprehend the stress—in other words, looking at whatever's coming up and understanding it thoroughly to the point that you gain dispassion for it—so that you can stop creating it. Anything that's unnecessary, anything that's burdensome, you learn how to stop doing it.

That's how you know for sure that the end of stress has come. If you're simply trying to clone what you've heard about what the path should be like, what the result of the path should be like, it's like the old analogy of the road to the Grand Canyon: You look at the road to the Grand Canyon and it doesn't look like the Grand Canyon at all. So you dig a big trench across the road, because that's what the Grand Canyon is supposed to look like, a big trench, right? What happens is that you cut off the road so that you can't get there because the trench is in the way.

The correct way is to follow the path, and part of the path is developing concentration. It's not simply watching concentration come and go, and saying, "Okay, concentration arises, concentration passes away, that's an insight." That's not an insight. The content of insight is not the three characteristics, it's the four noble truths. The three characteristics are helpful within that context, but they don't form the context themselves.

Actually, the word three "characteristics" doesn't even appear in the Pali Canon. They talk about *anicca* as a *sañña*, a perception, or as an *anupassana*, something you focus on as a practice. In other words, you focus on this theme so that you can see what it does to the mind, particularly in terms of how it helps you gain dispassion for things you hold on to. The same with *dukkha* and *anattā*: Each is a perception that you follow, that you try to cultivate, and then you watch to see what it does in your experience, to see if the effect it has on your mind helps promote dispassion, helps promote an understanding. But you're not here to "get" *anattā*. You use these things as tools then you put them aside when they've done their work.

So it's important that you don't let the neat distinctions drawn by scholars get in the way of your practice. You realize that it's good to have a full range of tools available to you at all times, because it's in the interplay of these tools—learning to get a sense of which side you need to emphasize at any one particular time, or how you can develop both together—that you get insight.

This underscores the old distinction between warrior knowledge and scribe knowledge. Scribe knowledge is concerned about definitions: “Samatha is one thing, vipassana is something else. Jhana is one thing, discernment something totally separate.” That’s the way it is in the books, and that’s how scribes like their knowledge: all neat and crisp and clearly defined. But as a warrior, you’ve got to use whatever’s available for whatever the situation that’s arising. That’s when you want to have all your tools available, that’s when you want the ability to read the situation and have a sense of what’s going to work, and what’s not going to work. You can notice only by having all your tools ready, and having experimented to see what works and what doesn’t work.

This is why your truthfulness is what keeps you protected as a warrior. There may be nobody out there in charge, nobody to protect you. Even when we ask that the devas protect you, there’s only so much devas can do. But you’ve got your own truthfulness, and that’s something you can really work on. That can keep the fires away: the fires of passion, aversion, and delusion. You learn how to ward them off by being true in your meditation. That’s the only way you’re going to know if what I said just now is true.

But it’s good to know that that’s where the truth resides: in your own truthfulness. It doesn’t reside in someplace else, some other person, some other outside authority. And it doesn’t reside just in your own ideas of what you like and dislike. It resides in your honesty. That’s why the Dhamma is so special: Dishonest people can’t know it. They can talk about it, but they can’t really know it. Only honest and truthful people can.