

Honesty

February 19, 2009

When the Buddha started training his son, Rahula, the first lesson he gave him was a lesson in truthfulness, which means several things: being truthful with other people and being truthful with yourself about what's actually going on in the mind. The quality of truthfulness also means that once you've made up your mind to do something, you stick with it. You actually do it in spite of whatever difficulties it involves.

All three of these qualities go together: the truthfulness of statements you make; the truthfulness of how you represent yourself to yourself; and your willingness to stick with your convictions in spite of the difficulties they may involve—being true to your determinations. All three of these things are absolute, rock-solid, basic qualities that are needed in the practice of the Dhamma.

Being a true person is very closely connected with being truthful about what you say and how you think about yourself. So truth is not just a quality of words; it's a quality of the person. The big problem in our lives is the ignorance that leads to suffering, and a lot of that ignorance is willed. It's not simply a matter of not knowing; it's not *wanting* to know. This is why the Buddha put ignorance and craving together as the causes of suffering.

There are certain things we don't like to admit to ourselves. We see an unskillful mind state coming up and we tend to dress it up. We say, "Well, maybe it's not so bad after all." Or we deny that we actually feel it. Of course, that makes it difficult to understand why it's there to begin with.

This is why the Buddha said that when you look at things arising and passing away, it's not enough simply to gain insight into the fact that they arise and pass away. You also have to ask yourself what the appeal is. When you find yourself holding on to a cause of suffering, ask yourself, "What's the appeal? Why do I like this?" We may not even admit to ourselves that we like it, and that gets in the way of any kind of understanding. So you have to be willing to look at your mind and say, "Yeah, there are a lot of unskillful things going on in here."

When they talk about acceptance in the practice, this is what they mean—or what they should mean: accepting that there are unskillful sides to the mind, unskillful members of the committee. You can't pretend they're not there. But acceptance doesn't stop with admitting their presence. You have to accept responsibility for getting rid of them. To do that, you can't just push them away. You have to understand where they're coming from. Sometimes you can do the

understanding in the abstract, but often you don't understand a committee member until it's really insistent, screaming at you, "You want this! You hate that!" In cases like that, you've got to learn how to ask the committee member, "Okay, why?" right then and there.

Don't wait until afterwards to think about it more in the abstract because by that time, the committee member has come up with a new reason. And different parts of the mind will have embroidered a new screen behind which that committee member can hide. So when there's a particularly strong reaction in the mind, you've got to react back strongly the other way. Say, "Why? What's the reason? I'm not going to act on anything until I hear a good reason."

Often this committee member will have been used to getting its way just by being very forceful, very pushy, and you give in. But you have to be strong in response. Say, "No, I'm not going to give in until I hear a good reason." And you may actually hear some reasons coming out of it at that point. But again, they may not be the true reasons. You have to be very skeptical about these reasons. Is this really why you're attracted to that defilement? See what answer appears in the mind. And as I said, wait until you hear a really good one before you're willing to act on that committee member. If you're strong enough to resist it, you'll find that its strength will begin to wane.

I saw a meditation manual once that had a great picture of a tiger. The tiger's face was extremely large and very realistic. It was drawn with all little details, all the hairs and whiskers on the face. But the body of the tiger was folded paper, like origami. It was a paper tiger. It was a symbol for the way unskillful feelings come on very strong, and you give in because they seem so strong. You don't realize that the strength lasts only for a little while. If you can wait and be patient, the strength will go away. Then you can look at them more calmly and see what it is that the mind's been feeding on.

This image of feeding is one that the Buddha uses throughout his teachings. It was common at the time in India. You might even say that the Buddha's philosophy was about the question: How do we know what's good to eat? It started with the Vedas. Those were rituals for feeding your relatives in heaven or storing up food for yourself so that when you die, you'd have a store of food in heaven as well—the concept being that you need to feed in order to stay alive even in heaven.

Well, there's not just physical feeding, the Buddha realized. There's a mental feeding that goes on as well. He took that image into the mind. There are sensations we feed on. There are states of awareness and consciousness we feed on. There are also mental intentions, and these are the important ones. What's your

intention? What do you want out of a situation, and why does that particular desire appeal to you? Learn to look at it with a jaundiced eye. We don't like to think that we have unskillful emotions and ideas, but if we didn't have them, we wouldn't be suffering. So we need the honesty that can see through that. We may like to think that our minds are pure. But wait a minute. There are these problems. If the mind were pure, it wouldn't have any problems. So maybe there is something wrong in there, something unskillful.

The fortunate thing about it is if you *really* open the mind to the light of day, you begin to see that the unskillful motives don't make any sense. The reason they have power is because they hide in the shadows. And when they stay in the shadows, they seem to be bigger than they are. This is why the Buddha said, in talking about how he teaches, "Let a person come who is honest and observant, and I will teach that person the Dhamma"—honest both in the sense of being truthful with him or herself and truthful with people around him or her; and observant in really looking into the mind, seeing what the mind has been feeding on and how that feeding is unskillful. You're looking both for the allure of whatever attachment you have and also the drawbacks.

Aside from our honesty, we really have no other guarantee for our well-being. After all, the Buddha isn't sitting here right now to tell you Yes or No. We look at the texts, but how do we know that the texts were accurately handed down? And how do we know that we're reading them rightly? As for the different techniques that are out there, guaranteeing, "If you complete our technique, there you are, awakened": Well, how do you know that that's true?

Our only guarantee is our own honesty. If we lack honesty, there's no safety at all.