

Truths Noble in the Heart

May 2, 2013

The Buddha once said that the results of action are an imponderable, which may sound strange given that his teaching on action is so basic to all his other teachings. The main principle is simple: You do, or say, or think something with a skillful intention, and the results are going to be good; you do, or say, or think something with unskillful intentions, and the results are going to be bad. That's simple – but the problem is that that simple principle gets iterated many, many, many times. And that makes its results complex.

How many times in the course of the day have you done something, or said something, or thought something? You can't count all the actions, and that's just in one day. And it spreads out over lifetimes. You begin to realize that you've got a lot of things going on here. Some of the actions will give results quickly; others will give them slowly. Others are ready to give the results, but you're not watering them, so they don't give the results. Others are a long time from giving the results. You water and water and water them, and nothing seems to happen. The complexity of the interactions among all these actions is what makes the results of action an imponderable. And this is what you bring to the meditation.

This is one of the reasons why—when people ask, “How long will it take for me to gain jhana?” or “How much longer will my meditation be miserable?”—there's no answer. Each person's karmic background is really, really complex. It's not the case that what we see right now is simply the running balance in our one karma account. The Buddha's image is of a field with lots of seeds and, as I said, some of them are ready to sprout; some are not. And who knows what upsprouted seeds are in your field?

What this means, as you come to practice meditation, is that you can't set a timeline or a deadline for when you're going to get the results you want. You just trust that putting in good actions, putting in skillful actions, is going to help. To make another comparison, it's like a very large tree growing. You give it fertilizer, but you have no idea where the fertilizer's going to go in the tree – whether it's going to cause the roots to grow deeper, or the branches to grow longer, or the leaves to get better. You may read on the label of the fertilizer

bottle that this is a fertilizer that's designed for leaves, and there's another fertilizer that tends to encourage roots. But which root and which leaf? You don't know.

So you do your best. You learn from looking at other people; you learn from other people's advice. This is one of the reasons we have monasteries and why the Buddha set up the institution of what they call dependence, where young monks stay with senior monks for at least five years – not just to hear the Dhamma, because nowadays, you can hear the Dhamma all over the web. What's special about dependence is that, on the one hand, you see good examples – hopefully, you have a good example in your teacher – and on the other, it gives the teacher an opportunity to look at you to see what's lacking in your behavior. You may have the idea that you'd like to have some really long branches in your tree, but what you really need are some stronger roots. So the teacher's got to tell you, "This is what you've got to do for the roots." And as for when the tree is going to be fully mature, we can't say. That's why the dependence is at least five years, and sometimes it can be longer.

You learn from others, and you have to learn from your own observations. As the Buddha said, there are two things that are most helpful to bring about awakening. The external factor, of course, is admirable friendship – friendship with admirable people. And the internal one is appropriate attention, seeing things in terms of the four noble truths.

What's noble about these truths? You look at them, and they're pretty ordinary. There is suffering in life. Well, yeah, everybody knows that. And some people might notice that, yes, it does come from craving and ignorance. What's noble about the truths is the fact the Buddha said you've got to make these truths your top priority. He singles them out as the truths that you have to really look into, that have to try your hardest to understand. What is suffering, after all? What is stress – or however you want to translate *dukkha*? And what is the mind doing that's giving rise to more stress and more suffering over and over again?

Many people will want to look into this problem at some point in their lives. But again, it's when you take this issue as *the* primary issue in your life: That's when the truths become noble. In other words, they stand out beyond, and over, and above everything else. So you don't just stick them into the corners of your life. This is another reason why we have the monkhood, the monastic life, and provide the opportunity for people to live in a community

where the bottom line is not money. The bottom line is the fact that you're trying to train your mind. This kind of environment gives you more opportunities but it doesn't automatically guarantee results.

Once someone asked the Buddha, "Which is the better lifestyle – the monastic or the lay?" And he said that's a question that deserves an analytical answer; it depends on the person. Some people live a monastic life and they really mess it up. Other people live a lay life and they do a really good job in the practice against the odds. The odds are better when you have time to take off from lay responsibilities. You don't have to worry about your job and your family. You can focus directly on the mind. But simply time, or time put in, doesn't guarantee anything. Even if you put in 10,000 hours, it's not a guarantee that you're going to come out really good at the practice. It requires that you *observe* and that you pay really close attention to this issue: Where is the stress? What are you doing that's putting extra stress on to the mind? And what could you do to stop that and put an end to that stress?

You have to examine all the various issues in your life that you're concerned about, and you have to peel away the other ones that get in the way of this one. That's when the truths become noble, because that's when you give them the opportunity to do a lot of good work in your mind. It's like the saying they have that when an alcoholic goes into someone's house, he'll know pretty quickly where the alcohol is kept because that's the issue that keeps eating away at him. Where is he going to get his next drink? Well, for a meditator, you have to know: Where are the four noble truths right now? At the very least, where is the stress? Where is the cause? What are you doing to develop the factors that are going to help put an end to the cause?

So every morning, when you wake up, ask yourself: Where are the four noble truths right now? And what are you doing with regard to them? You want to make that the first thing in the morning, the last thing at night, and everything else in the course of the day. Those are the big issues, because when you allow these truths to be noble in your life – in other words, to take priority – then you've got the opportunity to become a noble person yourself and to see the noble attainments. The other aspect of the truths that's noble is that all the factors in the path are really noble things to develop, noble things to do. There's no place where the Buddha tells you to do anything dishonest or slipshod, anything that's harmful to yourself or harmful to other people, or

anything that you would later regret. You're developing noble qualities in the mind.

This is why they say that the path is admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end. It starts with admirable intentions, uses admirable means, and then the goal is admirable.

So allow the truths to be noble in your heart, and they'll give nobility to your heart.