

Truthful & Observant

June 22, 2014

The Buddha once said, “Let a person come who is observant and no deceiver, and I will teach that person the Dhamma.” In other words, the two qualities he was looking for in a student were truthfulness on the one hand, and the ability to be observant and discerning on the other.

Those were the same two qualities he taught his son. The very first time he taught Dhamma to Rahula, the first lesson was about being truthful: that if you’re not ashamed at telling a deliberate lie, there’s really no goodness to you. So this is *the* principle across the board, to be truthful.

And as for being observant, he had Rahula ask himself a series of questions before he acted, while he was acting, and when the action was done. The questions had to do with the effect that the action was having, either on himself or on other people. That’s what being observant is all about: looking at the results of your actions. There are lots of things you could observe. You could observe lunar eclipses or you could observe the behavior of raccoons or owls. But what the Buddha really wants you to observe is this: What are you doing, and what are the results of what you’re doing? Both immediately and in the long-term. Even before you act, he asks you to anticipate what the results are going to be, based on what you’ve observed in the past.

What he was teaching Rahula here is a principle called appropriate attention. Notice, the Buddha didn’t teach *bare* attention, he taught *appropriate* attention, looking with a particular agenda—the agenda here being trying to learn to be more skillful in your actions. This is what he said leads to purity. We want to be compassionate, we want to be discerning, but to make our compassion and discernment pure we have to check our actions, to see if they will cause harm, are causing harm, or have caused harm. In other words, learn from the perspective of past, present, and future to keep your actions in line with your basic principle of wanting to be compassionate.

He taught the same principle to two groups of young boys. There are two stories.

One time he was on his alms round and he saw some young boys tormenting a crab. And he asked them,

“Do you like pain?”

And they said, “No.”

“Then why are you inflicting pain on others?”

Another time was when a group of boys were catching some fish, and again he said, “Do you like pain?”

“Well, no, of course not.”

“And you think you can escape pain if you inflict it on others?”

Even in teaching children, the Buddha was intent on teaching appropriate attention. He said that this was the most important internal factor for gaining awakening. And you want to start at an early age. Get used to asking the right questions—which center on what you’re doing, right here, right now.

If you anticipate trouble or harm, don’t act in that way. If, while you’re doing something, you find that you are causing harm, stop. If you realize after an action that the action caused harm, you talk it over with someone else to figure out how to act more skillfully the next time.

This is the big issue in life and these are the questions the Buddha has you ask in every situation. They even apply to the concentration as you’re trying to get more and more skilled in settling the mind. You look at what you’ve got going in the present and then you ask yourself, “What am I doing that’s causing unnecessary stress or an unnecessary burden or an unnecessary disturbance in the mind?” It’s usually a kind of perception. When you catch that the perception is the problem, then you replace it with a more refined perception. You learn how to see your mental events as actions, as a very immediate kind of karma.

Years back, I was giving a talk to a group of people on the topic of karma. They’d been meditating and most of them had the impression that karma was something superfluous in the Buddha’s teachings, something that had nothing to do with their meditation. So I pointed out that you have to look at your meditation as a kind of action: You’re creating karma by focusing on the breath, you’re creating karma by spreading thoughts of goodwill. It’s good karma, but you want to learn how to do it even more and more skillfully.

I was getting a lot of blank looks from the audience as I said this, and I found out later that the type of meditation they’d been doing was one where you’re not supposed to be *doing* anything at all. You were supposed to allow whatever’s going to happen to happen and take a totally passive, accepting role to what was happening.

But that’s not how the Buddha taught meditation. He said he wanted you to see meditation as a kind of action that you want to master to the point of real skill. Even when things get very refined, very still in the mind, there are always these questions: “Is there any unnecessary stress here and, if so, what are you doing to cause it? What action is causing it? Can you drop that action?” This is how you get into deeper stages of concentration, deeper and deeper levels of discernment.

So it all starts with this very simple principle of appropriate attention, learning how to ask yourself questions about what you’re doing. Are you getting the results you want? If not, what can you do to change to get better results?

The Buddha lists this quality of appropriate attention in the four factors of stream-entry: the factors that get you to the first stage of awakening, and in fact carry you all the way through. The Buddha says at another point that, for someone who's attained the stream, this quality of appropriate attention is something to bring to bear on even more subtle levels of stress.

The factors of stream-entry start with associating with people of integrity, finding people that you trust, people that you find inspiring. Then you listen to their Dhamma. Once you've listened to their Dhamma, you apply appropriate attention to the Dhamma, and then you use the Dhamma to ask appropriate questions about your actions: In what ways do your actions measure up; in what ways do they not?

Then, of course, you don't just stop with the questions. The final factor is practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. This is the factor the Buddha said is going to keep the Dhamma alive. It's also our way of showing our respect and gratitude for the Buddha for his teachings.

It means two things. The first is that you don't try to bend the Dhamma to suit your preferences; instead, you try to bend yourself to fit in with the Dhamma.

Second, you practice for the purpose of disenchantment, or, in Pali, *nibbida*. Disenchantment is the factor that leads to dispassion. Passion is what drives the process of fabrication in the mind, in the same way that, say, passion for food is what drives us to fix the food to begin with. We think we're going to get something good out of it, so we keep fabricating things over and over and over again.

But again, here, you're trying to apply appropriate attention to the process of fabrication you're doing. Does it get you the results you want?

As you're working on the path in the beginning, the problem may be that you're actually not really on the path, and so you're not happy with the results. But as you get more and more onto the path, you begin to realize this is a good type of fabrication, so you keep it up. Then, as you look at the other kinds of fabrications you've been engaged in, you begin to see their drawbacks.

A lot of people complain that as they begin to meditate, the things they used to find interesting and fascinating and fun no longer hold any interest anymore. So I ask them, why are you complaining? You should realize that you're growing up. This is what a lot of the teachings are all about: how to grow up, how to really look at your actions and take responsibility for them, trying to bring them in line with what you know is really good.

Fortunately, the standards we're using here are standards for the sake of our happiness. You read people like Freud who describe a huge struggle between your super ego and your ego, the super ego telling you what you should do and what you should want, and your ego trying to negotiate with your actual basic desires to find some way of

being happy in spite of what the super ego is saying. In the Freudian view, the super ego is a very unfriendly function of the mind.

But in the Buddha's teaching, the super ego is very friendly. The four noble truths are there for the sake of your happiness. The duties appropriate to these truths are the Buddha's "shoulds." You should try to comprehend suffering, you should try to abandon the cause, realize the cessation of suffering, and develop the path so you can realize the cessation of suffering—all of which are things for your own well-being. So there doesn't have to be that much of a conflict.

You'll find that your greed, anger and delusion don't like a lot of these shoulds. But then you look at what they're doing for you. They give you some pleasure—if they didn't give you any pleasure at all, you wouldn't be under their power—but they can't really be trusted.

Ajaan Lee has a nice analogy. He said that following your greed, aversion, and delusion is like being a slave to crooks, con men, and thieves. They make you work hard and they give you a little bit of reward, throw you a few scraps, but then when the police come to get you, they go running off and you're the one left holding the bag.

So are you really getting the kind of happiness you want out of them? How about putting them aside and letting the Dhamma be the dominant factor in your life? Practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma so you can learn how to develop some dispassion for the things that are causing you suffering. When dispassion comes, the motivation that keeps you fabricating – keeps you wandering on, wandering on – is gone. Things are allowed to cease. And you find out what remains when all the fabrications cease.

All of this grows out of appropriate attention. This is why, when the Buddha was teaching children, he would start with questions like this because he wanted to train them in the art of questioning: learning which questions are worth attending to, which ones are not; focusing on the fact that your actions really do make a difference. It's really all up to you. So you want to look into your motives for acting, you want to look into your actual actions, and you want to look into their results very, very carefully. Keep in mind that basic motivation – the goodwill and compassion where you don't want to suffer and you don't want anybody else to suffer. How can you get better at that? Always hold *that* question in mind.