

Truthfulness

May 17, 2005

Truthfulness—the Pali word is *sacca*—is one of the perfections we try to develop in the practice. It doesn't simply mean saying true things. It means being a true person, true in the sense that you're willing to put yourself on the line, willing to test things in a genuine way, because you truly want to discover what the truth is.

Ajaan Lee once said that the reason we don't find the truth is because we're not true. We want everything handed to us on a platter. We want to have certainty before we practice, yet that kind of certainty is always filled with doubts. The Buddha once said that there is really ultimately one thing that's true, and that's nibbana. And the only way we're going to know what the true path to nibbana is by getting there. Then you can retroactively say, "Oh, that was the practice that got me to the right spot." Everything else up until that point is experimentation.

What you're experimenting with is your own body, your own words, and your own mind. That seems like an awful lot to put on the line, but then the rewards are great—and the drawbacks of not attaining that reward is great as well. So you take the Buddha's teachings in the meantime as your working hypotheses. How do you test them? He said to shape your words and your thoughts and your deeds in line with them. And that's not always easy.

That's why this is called being true. This is why it takes strength of character, because sometimes the easy task is just to lie down and let things take their course. Or to just do what you like doing. But there has to come a point where you see that that doesn't really take you where you want to go. You have to be willing to do things you don't like but convincingly hold out the possibility of taking you where you do want to go. You look at the various paths to happiness, and this one seems to make the most sense. But even though it makes sense, there may be doubts in your mind, because you haven't seen that happiness. So you have to put your thoughts and words and deeds on the line to test that working hypothesis.

So on the one hand, you have enough confidence to be willing to test yourself. On the other, there's bound to be an element of questioning, an element of wariness, and you want to figure out kind of doubting, what kind of wariness is skillful and what's not. You can learn that only through the practice. If you blindly accept, "Well, this has to be the way it is," and throw yourself into a particular practice without questioning, you're not developing the qualities that

lead to wisdom, that lead to discernment. You're not developing the quality of heedfulness that the Buddha said lies at the base of all skillful qualities. There has to be an element of wariness, but not of a debilitating sort. That's why you have to find the right balance. You check things out. You try them, put them to the test.

And how do you know they've passed the test? When you come across something that really is unchanging, that has nothing to do with space and time. Up until that point, if you find things that seem to work, you seem to get to certain levels of concentration that sound like what you've read in the books. When that happens, put a Post-it note on it, that it sounds like what you've read about. Sometimes you're right, and sometimes it turns out the you overestimated or underestimated yourself. But that's why it's a Post-it note. You can peel it off and place it someplace else if you find it's necessary.

The element of truthfulness is what keeps you trying, keeps you testing things, so that when you find something that's better or something that changes your old way of looking at things, you're willing to change. You don't sit back and wait until somebody can come along and give you the guaranteed real deal, and only then will you be willing to try it, because that never happens. The only way you can know the truth is by testing the teachings. And you have to be true in putting them to the test.

Ajaan Fuang once made the comment in one of his Dhamma talks that you look at the breath. Is it true? Yes, it's truly there. Then the next question is, are *you* true? Are you going to stick with the breath to really see what it can do? In the beginning you say, "Well, I think so." But it's only after practice, after time, that you can say with utter confidence, "Yes, I am true." You approach that quality of truth in degrees. You can be certain about yourself only when you can be certain about the Dhamma. And you can be certain about the Dhamma only when you are certain about yourself. You test the Dharma and yourself in the same way. And you reach the conclusions at the same time.

This is why the Dhamma is special: Only people who are really true can know its real truth.