

Common Sense

March 6, 2006

When the Buddha described the essence of his awakening, he boiled it down to a very simple principle, a principle of causality.

That's not usually what we want to hear. We want to hear about all the great cosmic visions he had. And he did have some cosmic visions leading up to his awakening. In the second watch of the night, he saw beings dying and being reborn all over the cosmos in line with their karma, in line with their actions.

But that wasn't his awakening. His awakening came when he extracted a causal principle out of that: that what you do bears results.

So that became his laboratory: his actions. He watched what he was doing in his mind, and he saw which mind-states gave rise to suffering and which ones put an end to suffering. That's how he arrived at the four noble truths, and that's how he arrived at true awakening: simply noticing that thoughts and feelings have an effect on the mind, and that some thoughts and some feelings have a better effect than others.

That's the whole principle of the path. You try to develop thoughts and feelings that lead to an end of suffering. As for the ones that lead to more suffering, you learn to let them go.

It's all very basic commonsensical, but most of us don't like to think in terms of common sense when it comes to the mind. We want something more magical. But magic doesn't work. What works is the common-sense approach that looks at things as they happen in the mind and notices the difference between skillful actions and unskillful ones—and teaching yourself to choose the skillful ones.

Now, some of the principles as to what's skillful and not can be taught. For instance, you've got the precepts. If you kill, it's going to be unskillful. If you steal, if you have illicit sex, if you lie, if you take intoxicants, it's going to be unskillful, it's going to have a bad effect on the mind. These principles are true across the board.

But there's a lot more going on in the mind than just those actions. And to see the principle of cause and effect in the mind as it applies to those subtler things, you have to be very observant, developing the qualities that allow you to be observant.

First, you practice restraint of the senses. What this means is that you're very careful about what you look at, what you listen to, what you smell, taste, touch, and think, because certain ways of looking, certain ways of listening can really wreak havoc in the mind. They can spark all kinds of greed, anger, and delusion.

Sometimes the mind gets set on fire by just a single glance, or by listening to a single sound. It's not the sights or the sounds or the smells that are the problem, though: The problem is the *way* you look at them, the *way* you listen.

So you've got to be very observant. If you notice that, by looking at something in a certain way, you're giving rise to greed, you've got to learn either not to look at it or to look at it in a different way. Otherwise, you set the mind on fire.

This requires that you be observant and that you be truthful with yourself.

The Buddha said that above all else, these were the two main virtues he was looking for in a student. He said, "Bring me someone who's observant, who's truthful and no deceiver, and I'll teach that person the Dhamma." In other words, you don't deceive others about what you're doing and you don't deceive yourself.

If you want to see the truth, if you want to know the truth, you have to be true, you have to be honest with yourself. And a lot of the truths you're looking at in the mind are very subtle—which means that your honesty has to be very subtle and thorough, too, so that you can see the principle of cause and effect in your mind, detecting which truths are useful and which ones are not, which things that seem to be skillful really are skillful and which ones are not.

When you're dealing within the mind, nobody else can come in and rearrange the furniture and point out to you, "Well, this has to be this way and that has to be that." You can get instructions from the outside, there are hints and directions, but as for what you're actually going to see and how sensitive and how skillful you become, that's up to you. It's up to your own honesty, your own truthfulness, so that you can actually observe cause and effect as they happen in the mind.

It may sound like a tedious process, but think of all the suffering that you go through in life if you don't train the mind in this way: That's a lot more tedious, a lot more burdensome.

So try to focus on the present moment and see if you can tell what's going on in the mind, what you're doing and what effect it's having on things.

This is why concentration is such a central part of the path. It's something you intentionally do. You intend to stay with the breath and then you intend to stick with that intention. You keep reinforcing that one intention: You're going to stay right here with the breath, you're going to let the breath be comfortable. And then you learn to do whatever is needed to get the mind to stay with the breath consistently with a sense of ease, of well-being.

Then, once you've set up a good intention like that in the mind, you begin to see the effect that it has. At the same time, you're putting the mind in a good position where it can start seeing other things, within and without, more and more clearly.

In this way, you can detect the ways in which the mind is sometimes dishonest with itself—the way it covers things up, sloughs over things that it doesn't want to look at, doesn't want to admit. If you can develop a solid enough sense of well-being in the mind, then you'll be more willing to look at the things that in the past you covered up, that you pretended didn't exist.

Yet so much of the mind is filled with make-believe and so much of that make-believe causes suffering. And then we pretend that the suffering isn't there, which just compounds the problem.

So learn to look at everything in the mind in terms of cause and effect—and particularly in terms of which causes lead to suffering and which ones don't, which things you can choose to do that are skillful and which ones that would be unskillful. Remember that everything that happens in the mind is part of a causal chain.

When you feel pain, it's a result not only of physical events but also of mental events: the way the mind focuses on the pain. You can increase or decrease the amount of suffering by the way you focus on the pain.

The same with pleasure: Certain forms of pleasure, if you really focus on them, are helpful in making the mind clear and still. A sense of ease and well-being that comes with the breath: That's a helpful kind of pleasure. Be careful simply that you don't wallow in the pleasure and lose track of the breath.

It's like building a scaffolding up to build a building, but instead of working on the building, you see a cloud come past, it looks nice and soft, so you jump on the cloud—and you go right through. In other words, the pleasure comes from the concentration, but as soon as you notice the pleasure, you drop the breath and go jumping into the pleasure. Then it wears out, it dissipates, because the cause isn't there anymore.

You have to learn how to work on the cause, knowing that the pleasure's there but not getting carried away by it. Stick with the cause to keep that pleasure coming. It's a basic skill you need to develop in the mind.

Learn how to approach the pleasure in such a way that you can keep it going. Not simply because you want to: The wanting in and of itself directs you in the right direction, but if that's your only approach, then you never get what you want because you've never noticed where the cause is, and where's the effect.

You've got to watch these things carefully in the mind. You can't just deal with abstractions. You can't just deal with lovely cosmic thoughts and ideas. You've got to look specifically at what's happening in the mind with all your honesty, with all your truthfulness.

After all, what guaranteed the validity of what the Buddha found was that he was a very honest person. If even there were the slightest suffering in his mind, he would admit it: There was still something wrong, still something lacking.

All too many people get a nice, easy sense of calm in the mind and then they say, "Well, this good enough. This might be it." They turn a blind eye to whatever stress or suffering is still there in the mind. In that way, the meditation doesn't lead them to any truths at all because *they're* not truthful. They're not honest.

This quality of honesty is *the* most important thing in the practice. When the Buddha was training his seven-year-old son, Rahula, that's what he started out with: being honest. Once he'd established honesty, truthfulness, as the most important principle in the practice, then he taught Rahula other things: how to observe his own mind, how to observe his own actions in terms of cause and effect. And how to learn from his mistakes.

This is important. Many times when a mistake happens, we don't like to admit it. We cover it up—and in that way, we lose an opportunity to learn.

So don't think of this as instructions just for little kids. The Buddha starts out here because it's important, because it's crucial. Everything else depends on this one principle: that you learn how to observe your mind and you learn how to be truthful about it.

See what you're doing that's causing harm for yourself and harm for others, and learn to stop. See what you could be doing that's going to be more helpful and beneficial to yourself and to others, and learn how to do that no matter how hard it may be.

Start with this principle of truthfulness. This is what gives you the foundation you're going to need. Everything else builds on that.

Don't skip over this, saying, "I want to go up to the tenth floor, I want to go up to the twentieth floor, where the view is good." You've got to work on the foundation. If the foundation is solid, then it doesn't matter how many stories you build on top of it: It's going to be solid all the way up. But if the foundation is weak, you can build one or two stories and the whole thing comes tumbling down without even the slightest earthquake. Some outside stimulus comes and huffs and puffs and blows the house down.

So make sure your foundation is solid: that you're really truthful about your actions and you really look at the mind to see what's happening in terms of cause and effect.

That way you take advantage of the central insight of the Buddha's awakening: Some causes give their effects immediately; other causes give their effects over time. That's the essence of his awakening. That's the message he wanted to get across.

He once went into a forest of what they call simsapa trees. The trees had little tiny leaves about the size of dimes. He picked up a handful and asked the monks, "Which is greater: the leaves in my hand or the rest of the leaves in the forest?" And the monks said, "Well, of course, the rest of the leaves in the forest are far more."

The Buddha then said that, in the same way, the things he had learned in the course of his awakening were like the leaves in the forest. As for what he taught, that was like the leaves in his hand. That wasn't because he was stingy or uncommunicative. It was just that the leaves in his hand were the instructions that can help put an end to suffering. Those were the truths that were most useful to teach.

And that central truth is just this: the principle of causality, causes and effects in your mind, particularly the effects that come from intention.

So look very carefully at your intentions, be very truthful about them—because this is one area where we tend to deceive ourselves.

When we were little kids, we'd make mistakes and then our parents would come to punish us and we'd try to lie, to pretend it didn't happen. "It was already broken when I lay down on it." "I didn't mean to hit her." After a while, we get so used to lying to our parents that we start lying to ourselves.

This is where our main ignorance is. We lie about our intentions to ourselves and we lie about the results of our actions to ourselves. As a result, we never get to learn anything useful.

So. Basic principle: Be truthful about what you plan to do, be truthful about the actual results of your actions. Learn to connect the two to see what you can learn. If you're really observant, what you learn can take you all the way to the end of suffering.

It's a very commonsensical principle. And the challenge in our practice is just to see how far common sense can take us.

As long as we're true, we'll get to meet the truth. If we aren't, we won't. It's as simple as that.