

Universal Truths

June 13, 2007

When you meditate during the Dhamma talk, 99% of your attention should be with your breath. Let the talk be in the background—because the Dhamma is found inside the mind. The Dhamma in words is just pointers. As you listen to the talk, remind yourself that the words are pointing inside your mind. If you're inside your mind paying attention to what you're doing, you're already at the right place. You don't need the talk. If you find yourself wandering outside, you'll run up against the talk and it'll point you back in, to where the real problem is: ignorance.

Real ignorance is not ignorance of words or principles. It's ignorance of what's going on in the mind. In particular, it's ignorance of how you're causing yourself suffering. In a broader sense, it's ignorance of four noble truths: ignorance of where there's suffering right now and of what you're doing to cause the suffering; ignorance of what you could be doing to put an end to the suffering and of what the end of suffering would be like. Those are the four things you could be paying attention to. They're things that are happening right inside. They're not happening in the words. The words simply point to these things, and especially to your experience of suffering, something that nobody else is experiencing. That suffering is as close as you get to really purely personal experience. There's no way you can take it out and show it to us. Scientists studying your brain can see all sorts of indicators that you might be in pain, but they can't actually see your suffering. And there's no way you can compare your suffering to anyone else's, to see who's suffering more, exactly what it tastes like, or what it feels like. But it *is* something you can know for yourself. So you should pay attention to it.

What this means is that the four noble truths are not some abstract teaching whose truth is peculiar to India 2,600 years ago. They're things happening right here, right now, and they're happening very directly in your awareness. To chip away at that ignorance, you start by focusing on something more obviously happening right here, right now: the breath. In the Buddha's analysis of suffering, ignorance conditions fabrication. Bodily fabrication is the breath. If you breathe with ignorance, it can be a condition for suffering. If you breathe with knowledge and awareness, it can help cut through suffering. It can help you see your ignorance more clearly. As you see your ignorance more clearly, you're

replacing it with knowledge. So when you're focused on the breath, learning to breathe comfortably, allowing the mind to relate in a comfortable way with the breath, you're taking a stand against ignorance. And all the ignorant thought processes that go on through the day: You're putting up a resistance to them so that you can understand them. It's through understanding them that you can go beyond them, transcend them.

These principles are universal. That's why the Buddha called them *ariya-sacca*, which we translate as noble truths. But the word *ariya*, in addition to meaning noble, also means standard, in the sense of a universal standard. So these truths are not only noble, they're also universal standards. They apply to all of us, with no exceptions. They're something we all have in common. We each experience suffering and the cause of suffering for ourselves alone, but the pattern of our suffering is something we have in common, which is why the path to the end of suffering is universal. It doesn't matter what country you come from, what your background, what your language. The path works across the board if you apply it in all fairness, if you realize that this is something that applies to you as much as it does to anyone else.

Most of us like to think of ourselves as exceptions to the rule. We like to think that it's going to be different for us somehow, especially when you hear of all the effort that the various ajans put into the practice. We'd rather not have to do all that work. We think that maybe things should be easier for us because we're better educated, or maybe we know more in our culture. Well, no, we don't. Our problems are just the same as theirs. They may be dressed up a little bit differently in each case, but at their root they're all the same. Ajaan Fuang once quoted Ajaan Mun saying that people are all alike, but then if you look a little deeper you see that they're really not, but then when you look deeper still, you see that they really are. Ajaan Fuang's comment on that was: Take that and think about it for a while. There are some differences, but what we have in common is what's really important.

Like the chant we had just now. Aging, illness, death, and separation: These are things we all have in common. The chant is a little bit lacking in that it simply reminds you that *you* are subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death. Or as in the Thai translation, these things are normal for you. You're subject to being separated from things that you love. Life starts out, you're always learning new things, gaining new things, but then it reaches a point where they all start going away. What you do have left is your actions. You will fall heir to what you do, say, and think. And the results depend on whether what you do, say, and think is skillful or not.

As the Buddha said, thinking about these truths as they apply to yourself keeps you from doing unskillful things. You realize, "My gosh, if I allow myself

to think a lot of unskillful stuff today, the results are going to seep out into my words; they're going to seep out into my actions. Then I'll start not just thinking unskillful things, but also doing and saying unskillful things. That all begins to pile up." Do you want that? No. So these reflections are meant to keep you in line, to keep you from doing harmful things to yourself, harmful things to other people. They teach you restraint.

But the original sutta in which this chant is found doesn't stop just there. It goes on to recommend that you remind yourself that these things don't just apply to you, they apply to everybody, to all levels of being. No matter where you go—this lifetime, the next lifetime, whatever the realm, all beings that have been, all beings that will be, whether they're living, whether they're dying, whether they're being reborn: These principles apply to all of them. And, as the Buddha said, when you think about that, it not only prevents you from doing unskillful things, but it gets you on the path. You finally realize that there's no other escape from these principles of suffering and its cause. And the path has to be the same for everybody, so that the cessation would be the same for everybody. You are not an exception. No matter where you go, whether you would like to be reborn as a brahma, or to come back as a human being who's maybe a little bit more wealthy—maybe a lot more wealthy, better looking, more powerful: You would still be subject to these same truths, no matter what.

That's meant to give rise not just to restraint, but also to a sense of *samvega*, something that goes deeper: a realization that the way you've been living your life really is going nowhere. The way most people live their lives goes nowhere. The only "somewhere" you can go is out. Even that's not a place, but still it's a direction. Otherwise life has no direction at all. It just wanders around, looking at this for a while, looking at that for a while—like the map charting the way a dog wanders around the neighborhood, sniffing at this, sniffing at that, wandering over here, rolling in this, rolling in that. It really goes nowhere in particular at all.

But if you accept that these truths are universal, then the Buddha's ready to show you the universal way out. He doesn't teach just good or bad karma, or skillful or unskillful karma. He says that there are gradations of skillful karma. In particular, there's the plain old skillful karma that keeps you in the cycle, and then there's the karma that puts an end to karma, that gets you out of the cycle. That's the path—the path that cuts through the ignorance, the path that cuts through the craving that causes suffering. That's the way out.

So it's up to us to decide whether we still want to dabble around, to roll around in a few dead squirrels, or whether we've had enough and want out. If we want out, then the path is all laid out, from right view on through right concentration, which means that you try to endow your concentration with all

the factors of the path. Virtue, concentration, discernment: All these things should come together in your practice.

So as you focus on the breath, try to do it in a virtuous way. In other words, do it with restraint. Remind yourself, you can't go wandering off, dabbling in this, dabbling in that. You've really got to be true to the theme of your concentration. And your concentration should be discerning: Which ways of focusing on the breath make the mind uncomfortable? Which make the breath uncomfortable? Which ways of focusing, which ways of thinking about the breath, which ways of labeling and understanding the breath help make it more comfortable, easier to stay here so that it does become your home?—so that no matter where you go, you have this home inside, this nourishment on the path. That's how your discernment works. You want to bring all of these qualities together. If you leave any of them out, then the path is incomplete. When it's not complete, it can't do its work.

So you give it all of your mind. The word for "mind" in Pali—*citta*—also means the quality of really being intent on what you are doing. And *citta* in this second sense is one of the elements of right effort, one of the bases for success. So give this practice your whole mind, your whole heart, your full intent, so that the results will be full and complete as well.