

## *True for What Purpose?*

*February 10, 2020*

Some facts are like the grammar of a language, and some are like words. The grammar gives the structure, helps us to interpret the words, puts the words in order and in context, focuses on which words are important, which words are not, what they mean. And then the words fit into the structure.

When the Buddha taught the four noble truths, it was as if he was teaching the grammar for the practice. They're not just four interesting facts that you file away in your vast library of facts. They're meant to structure everything you think about. He's pointing out that the problem of suffering is the big problem in life, and here he's got the solution—and if you want to solve the problem, you have to be very careful about what you focus on, and what you don't.

You see this in his teaching on questions. Some questions are meant to be answered in a categorical way. In other words, the answer is true across the board. Some are answered in an analytical way, saying that it depends on the situation. Some are answered with cross questioning. The Buddha would question his listeners to make sure that they would understand the general framework of what he was going to say before answering their questions. And then some questions he just simply put aside—and these were some pretty big ones: questions that people were fascinated with, a lot of the philosophy of the time. And the reason he put them aside was because they got in the way of solving the big problem.

The same principle applies to the facts we see around us. We're sitting in this room, and there are lots of things you could be thinking about concerning what's going on in this room right now. You could decide that you wanted to count all the atoms in the air, or make a catalog of what books we have over on the shelves and what Buddha images we have on the alter. But it would be a waste of time.

Especially if you think that your purpose is to put an end to suffering. You want to focus on your own mind, you want to focus on your own body as you feel it from within, to get the mind to settle down. This means you have to be selective in what you focus on, and also in what you say to yourself about it. You could be commenting on how your mind is not settling down, and how you're a miserable meditator. Or you could be commenting on how this time you were able to stick to five breaths, so next time let's try for ten, or fifteen. In other words, you could talk to yourself in a discouraging way or an encouraging way. It's up to you.

The question is, what purpose is served? It may be true that you're not doing well in the meditation, but what is that truth for? What does it help?

This principle applies throughout the practice. When you're following the precepts, you could focus on the things that you're missing out on because you can't lie, or can't steal, can't kill, can't have illicit sex, can't have intoxicants. Or you could focus on how much better your

life is because you're not doing any of those things.

The same with the concentration: You focus on the breath, you talk to yourself about how the breath can be comfortable here, it can be comfortable there. There may be parts of the body that are in pain, but you don't have to focus on them. You focus on the parts that you can make comfortable. Get them on your side. Then, once you have them on your side, you can deal with the parts that are not so comfortable.

In some cases, you can actually make the pains go away. In other cases, the pains don't go away, but at least you're not tensing up around them, making them worse. You spread the comfortable breath energy through those different parts of the body so that when the time comes to analyze the pain, you've got a good place to go in case you're not getting anywhere with the analysis. So you're learning to focus on things selectively.

The same with discernment: As the Buddha said, you could focus on how pleasant feelings and perceptions can be, or how much fun it is to engage in thought fabrication. And as he admitted, these things do have their pleasures, but focusing on them in that way just gives rise to more passion, aversion, and delusion. Instead, you could focus on their drawbacks: that no matter how well you fashion them, there will still be parts of them that you can't rely on, parts of them that will be stressful, parts of them that you cannot control.

So you have to ask yourself, why are you engaging in thoughts about them? If you're engaging in thoughts about them for the sake of putting an end to suffering, okay, you focus on their drawbacks, at the right time.

When you're trying to get the mind into concentration, though, you focus on the ways in which you can, at least to some extent, get them under your control, get them to be constant, get them to be easeful.

So you have to learn how to select your truths. Even as you go through the day, the same principle applies. In dealing with other people, you could focus on the ways in which they show disrespect to you, or you could decide that that's not important. After all, there have been times when you've had disrespect for them; it's only natural that they'll have it for you. If you can think in those terms, it's a lot easier to let the issue go.

You have to remember that all perceptions give only a sketch of reality. Every way in which you represent the truth to yourself has its false side. You have to simplify things for your purposes. This is what they call the pragmatic approach to truth. You focus on truths that serve a purpose. If they don't serve a purpose, then no matter how wonderful they are, why bother? If they do serve a purpose, and even though it may be stressful to think about certain issues—because they require that you think and work, put forth an effort—still, if they serve a purpose, it's worth it.

This is why the concept of *attha* plays such a large role in the Buddha's teachings. It's the purpose of his teaching, their meaning, their goal. If you keep the goal clearly in mind, that helps you to sort out which facts are worth focusing on. And once you've got them selected,

then what are you going to think about them? How are you going to interpret them? What meaning are you going to give them, for what purpose?

Don't let yourself get waylaid by things that are irrelevant, because as you go through life there are a lot of issues that you're simply going to have to put aside, put aside, because they get in the way of the things that are really important. Even as you're dying, you could focus on the fact that you're going to be missing this, missing that, and the mind will start thrashing around. Or it could focus on the fact that now the body is going to be falling apart, where are you going to focus your attention so that you don't create unnecessary suffering for yourself?

Here again, the four noble truths provide the grammar. They provide the structure, allowing you to organize your sense of what's important, what's not important, where your priorities are. Anything that fits into that grammar is part of the language of the practice. Anything that doesn't fit into that grammar, you can put aside. No matter how much you've been attached to it, no matter how large a role it has played in your life so far, you have to learn how to take it apart in line with the Buddha's grammar, so that you can see what aspects of what you've learned from your life are actually going to be helpful in the path and which ones are not.

It's not as if you throw everything away, or that you deny the importance of your past experience. It's simply that you learn how to convert it to a new use. Memories of the past that made you miserable, you can take them apart: Where's the perception? Where is the fabrication? Where's the allure? Why do you go for them? What gets accomplished by them and what are the drawbacks?

As you take these things apart, you begin to get a new perspective. You'll think in terms of the principle of karma—this is a huge back-and-forth that's been going on for who knows how long—and then the desire to get something brought to closure, to get something resolved, starts to seem meaningless. That's when you've used that particular story, that particular narrative for the sake of the Dhamma: when you develop that sense of *samvega*.

So think about the Buddha's grammar and how all the different things you're focusing on either fit or don't fit into that grammar. It's like any language. It's very good for expressing some things, and not so good for expressing others. This one is good for expressing the truths that lead to the end of suffering. There's no better language for that purpose than this.

So as you look at everything else, reject what doesn't fit into this grammar and take on only what does. You'll find that it really does serve a purpose, that you'll be glad that you took on. As for the things you've had to let go, well, you'll be glad that you were able to let them go. There will be no lingering regret.