

Truth

April 21, 2011

Ajaan Lee often made the point that our practice is a skill. The Dhamma is all about skill. The words are there to help us master the skill, to understand the problems we face in mastering the skill, and understand the various approaches we might take to solve those problems. But the words are not the Dhamma; the words point to the Dhamma. The genuine Dhamma is something we have to do. One of the old meanings of the word Dhamma is “action.” To see Dhamma in this sense, we have to look at our actions very directly, very carefully, to see where they’re skillful and where they’re not.

This is why you see a lot of analogies to skills in both Ajaan Lee’s teachings and in the Buddha’s. The Buddha compared a skillful meditator to a skillful archer, cook, or carpenter. Ajaan Lee would say that as we develop directed thought and evaluation in the practice, it’s basically learning how to observe our actions and their results, and to figure out what’s going wrong. He would compare it to learning how to weave a basket, sew a shirt, or make clay tiles. Remember this as you’re reading and listening to the Dhamma: The Dhamma isn’t just a matter of understanding the words as you listen. Ajaan Lee once said that if you wanted to explain the Dhamma at the level of being able to remember the main points, it wouldn’t take three hours. But then, taking just one of those points, it might take three years to really understand it as you put it into practice.

So the Dhamma is not something to just memorize. It’s something you actually have to do and observe. This is why the Buddha said that truthfulness is one of the primary requirements of practice. It involves two things. One is being honest about what you’re actually doing and the results you’re actually getting. The other meaning of truthfulness is sticking to something once you’ve made up your mind that it’s what’s really worthwhile to do. The two qualities go together: Once you’ve noticed that something seems clearly and truly good, then you stick with it without betraying your knowledge or your understanding, until you get the true results you’re after.

You have to be true in order to learn the truth. Then, you take that truth and continue to be true to really benefit from it. For a lot of us, the thought of “honesty” means being honest about our shortcomings. That’s one side of honesty. It’s a painful side. And there’s another painful side: being honest about our capabilities that we haven’t fully developed. We could make more of ourselves. That was the honesty that drove the Buddha on this path. As a prince, he had power, wealth, and all kinds of sensual pleasures. According to traditional accounts, the people around him kept asking, “What more could you want? Think of all the great people in the past. This is how they lived their lives. Why can’t you?” The Buddha responded, “That’s a sign that they weren’t really great or admirable. They weren’t worthy of honor or respect.” Truly great people are the ones who check to see if they have a greater capacity within themselves and explore that capacity by pushing the envelope.

That’s what the Buddha did and that’s why he found the Dhamma. He would look at his actions and ask himself, “Am I suffering?” When the answer was Yes, the next question was, “What am I doing that might be causing that suffering?” He had to look honestly at what he was doing and the results that he was getting. Then he had to ask himself, “Is there an alternative way of doing this? Is this all a human being can do, or is there something better, something more?” He stretched his imagination and would try out any promising approaches to see if they actually worked.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha regarded truthfulness as the most important virtue, both in the sense of speaking truly and in the sense of not betraying your knowledge or your understanding. All the precepts come down to this quality of truthfulness. You observe that you’ve been harming people—yourself or

others—and you want to stop, and then you make up your mind to stick with that determination. Precepts aren't commands. The Buddha isn't forcing them on you. You have to see for yourself that it really would be better to give up harmful actions. It's a promise you make to yourself. Once you make it, you want to be true to that promise.

If you start lying to yourself or betraying your knowledge, it sets up a long series of other ways you have to lie to yourself. It's the same when you lie to other people: You tell one lie and then you have to cover up that lie with another lie, then a third lie, and then a fourth. It gets very tricky and very complicated, for after a while you forget who you told which lie to. It's a lot simpler just to stick with the truth. "Okay, I do have these shortcomings, but I also have these potentials." It's by being true that the potentials open up.

The Buddha placed great emphasis on this virtue of truthfulness. It's one of the reasons why he said that people who feel no shame in telling a lie are capable of any kind of evil. This doesn't mean that everybody who lies is capable of all kinds of evil. There are people who will feel ashamed about the lies they tell, which shows that they know some boundaries, that they have a sense of right and wrong. The people who feel no shame at all are the ones you have to watch out for. It's especially troubling when you hear somebody say, "There are circumstances where a lie is perfectly acceptable." They'll give extreme examples where if you don't tell a lie, somebody might die. Then they turn it into a principle that lies can be okay in circumstances that are far less drastic. But even in the drastic cases, can you be sure that telling a lie will save the person's life? Some people are very poor liars. More importantly, what kind of person feels no shame in justifying the telling of a lie? A shameless person. If you feel that lying can be okay, then you're capable of any evil.

So you want to make sure that you take refuge in the truth. Ajaan Maha Boowa once said that if you hold to what's true, then the truth holds no danger for you. When you pretend or make false assumptions, then the truth becomes a threat. When you begin to practice and look at where you're suffering, you notice certain things that you hold on to that cause you to be fearful and to feel threatened. Look into the truth of these assumptions. "Is this really true? Is this really mine?" These are cases where the perception of not-self is crucial as a tool for letting go of the things that make you feel threatened by the truth. When you can let go of those things, the threat goes away.

The result is that the more honest you are with yourself about your shortcomings and strengths, the better your sense of yourself. *Attanñuta* is the Buddha's term for this. This takes time and requires truthfulness. Having a sense of yourself means knowing your strengths and weaknesses, the areas you have to fix and/or improve, and also what areas or qualities of the mind you can depend on to make those improvements. To be honest with yourself and about yourself doesn't mean saying, "I'm miserable and I accept the fact. Maybe I can be okay with this." That's not what the Buddha asked for or recommended. He recommended knowing your strengths as well as your weaknesses. Make a clear evaluation here. The clearer you are about this, then the easier the path will become.

The Buddha asked two things of a person who came to study with him: that the person be both observant and truthful. Those two qualities go together. The more truthful you are in general, the more you can begin to trust your observations as to what's true or what's not, what's worthwhile or what's not. In that way, the truth becomes your refuge. Your truthfulness becomes your refuge. Otherwise, how are you going to know what's skillful and what's not? How are you going to know whom you can trust and whom you can't? You have two basic sources of knowledge: what you gain from other people, and what you gain from yourself. Both have to be tested through the truthfulness in your own powers of observation and in the thoroughness to which you put the teachings to a fair test.

That's why the truth is your ultimate refuge: the truth of your own heart and mind. Ajaan Lee once said, "If you aren't true, then the Buddha's teachings won't be true for you, and you'll never know what the Buddha's teachings truly are." Turn that around. If you're true, then the Buddha's teachings *will* be true for you, and you *do* have a chance of knowing what they are. That's where honesty has its more than pleasant side: first, when you can say that you honestly want to learn the Dhamma, and then when you can honestly say that you know the Buddha's teachings about true happiness, the ultimate happiness, are true.