

Fear of the Truth

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The Buddha's teachings are full of images of safety. For example, they compare the practice to being in a fortress: You've got a strong foundation; you've got a moat around the fortress; you've got a wall covered with plaster so that nobody can climb the wall; you've got a wise gatekeeper; and you've got plenty of food.

And that's just the path. As for the goal, the Canon has even more images of safety: It's a harbor, a shelter, a place of rest. And, of course, the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha are a refuge. We find that refuge by developing their qualities, so that the mind becomes a refuge—directly for itself, and indirectly for others.

Now, the nature of this refuge is not that it's simply a place where you run away and hide. It's like the fortress. You're there on the frontier, ready to deal with enemies, your own defilements: defilements you've picked up from other people, the ones that you've grown in your own basement.

In giving you the path, the Buddha's giving you the strength you need in order to face these things. The main cause for suffering, he said, is ignorance. And it's not so much a lack of knowledge. It's a willed ignorance. It comes from fear of the truth. There are certain things we know about our own minds that we don't like, and we're afraid of them. And so we try to push them away.

There are so many things in life that we push away: We don't like to think about aging, or illness, or death. We have that chant about the 32 parts of the body, and people say, "Oh, *please* don't chant that." They don't want to think about the disgusting side of the body. There's a lot that we run away from, but running away doesn't make us safe. Even if you decide you're never going to think about aging, illness, or death ever in your life, that doesn't guarantee that they're not going to happen. In fact, they will happen regardless, and you'll be totally unprepared for when they do come. As for the defilements of the mind, the real troublemakers, the more you pretend they're not there, the stronger they grow. They go underground, and they spread their tentacles everywhere, like *The Thing*.

So what we're trying to do as we practice is to develop a position of strength where we can face these things and not be afraid of them. We're building a fortress. And in our fortress, our main foundation pole is conviction. Conviction starts with, simply, the belief that there *are* people who've gained awakening, who *have* been able to face-down their defilements and come out winning. And they did it not because they were gods or goddesses; they were human beings, just like us, and they were able to do it by developing the same strengths that we have in

potential form.

But conviction comes not just from hearing about these things, but also from putting them into practice. Sometimes it takes a while to gain conviction, not only in the principle of action, but in the principle of *your* actions, i.e. the fact that you are capable of doing these things; you *are* capable of being more mindful, more concentrated, gaining more discernment, developing more patience, more equanimity, more compassion for others. Sometimes this confidence is hard to gain. It takes a while. But as you keep chipping away, chipping away, you find that your confidence becomes confirmed, verified.

And yes, this does work. You have these capabilities. And this confidence is what allows you to take on bigger and bigger enemies, and to admit that they're there. This is an important part of looking into the mind. We see a desire, and often we're afraid of really looking carefully at the desire, afraid of what's behind it. It's only when we have a firm foundation of confidence and solidity that we can begin to admit, "Oh, there *is* that unskillful emotion there. There's some jealousy in there that I didn't think was there. There are some other unpleasant emotions that I didn't want to admit to myself."

It's easier to admit those things to yourself when you also see that you've got positive qualities, so that the picture isn't totally bleak. This one of the reasons we work on concentration. Again, it's part of the fortress. It's not something that we hide away in and hope that everything else is going to go away. We develop this as a strength, as a sense of well-being, with a sense of competence, i.e., the sense that we can do this.

In the beginning, it may be discouraging as you see your mind flying off in different directions. But if you learn to stick with it and to appreciate even small gains, you begin to get a greater and greater sense that, yes, you can handle this.

I was talking to someone a while back who was afraid of the current financial situation. The family might lose their house, and she said that the hard part of it was just the fear that she wouldn't be able to handle it when the house was lost. But when she actually sat down and realized that, yes, she could handle it, she could survive—things wouldn't be as nice as they are right now, but she could handle it—the fear went away. It didn't have to control her whole life. And she began to see how the many tentacles it sent out had affected other aspects of her life as well.

So an important part of the practice is developing this confidence in your competence, that you don't have to be afraid of the truth; that whatever the truth serves up, you're able to handle it.

There's a passage where Ajaan Maha Boowa says, "When you live with the truth, there's nothing to fear." The truth has nothing to serve up but more truth. It's when you've living with fictions—with a lot of make-believe in the mind—that you feel threatened by the truth. When

you try to pretend that there's nothing unskillful in the mind at all, that all of your intentions are good—or that the unskillful ones will go away with some magical practice—then the truth is threatening, and you build up all kinds of walls around it. But it keeps breaking through those walls. And you put up *more* walls. You spend a lot of energy repairing the walls, filling in the cracks. And yet greed, anger, and delusion, all the unskillful emotions, manage to break through the walls, to seep through the cracks. Like tree roots, they work their way through the walls, and then bring them down—these roots of what's unskillful in the mind.

So rather than expending a lot of energy in a useless way, try to devote your energy to building something that's really true. Don't build walls. Build virtues. Build concentration.

It's interesting that of all the virtues, the Buddha makes truth the most important. Truth is not just a quality of accurate statements; it's also a quality of the mind. In fact, if you want to find the truth, you have to develop this quality of truthfulness: the willingness to look at what's there, admit what's there—so that you can work with it. But really to *look* at it requires that you develop a good solid foundation, so you don't feel threatened by it.

This is why comprehending suffering, letting go of the cause of suffering, requires developing the path—because this is not just a path. It's also a fortress, a safe place, a strong place. When the mind is well-endowed with mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, it really can handle these things. Greed comes up and you can see right through it. Anger comes up, fear comes up, delusion comes up, and you see right through it—and you realize that whatever there is that's unskillful in the mind, you don't have to identify with it.

There may be a particularly insistent member of the committee, but it's just that: nothing more than a member of the committee. It's not the whole committee. And it's not necessarily more real than anything else. This is one of the big things that brings down our practice: the belief that our good qualities are somehow less real than our bad ones. This is because we've got those bad qualities behind those walls, so we can't really see them for what they are. We see their tentacles seeping through, and they seem monstrous.

But as you learn to develop your own strong qualities, you begin to see that, as Ajaan Suwat liked to say, the light of discernment—in one flash—can do away with a lot of darkness. No matter how long the darkness has been there, no matter how big it is, one light can destroy it.

So, when you develop this quality of truthfulness—not being afraid of the truth—and you test it, bit by bit by bit, you begin to see that it's not just an empty bravado. It's a real strength. You really do develop strong fortress walls, and the fortress is well-endowed—with food, weapons, soldiers, wise guardians, wise people at the gate—so that whatever the enemy, you're prepared, you can handle it.

So work on developing these strengths so that you don't have to be afraid of the truth, so that you can get the truth on your side. Ultimately, the Buddha says the highest noble truth—

the truth of liberation, the truth of nibbana—is the ultimate protection for the mind, the ultimate place of security and safety. That, too, is a possibility in the mind, a potential in the mind—in *your* mind. So don't let all the unskillful potentials scare you off. There are plenty of good things to be found in here as well.