

Noble & True

November 22, 2013

As you come to the meditation, bring an attitude of respect to what you're doing. After all, this is a noble truth – the path to the end to suffering – and as you follow the path, it ennobles you. It makes you more of a true person as well.

We live in a culture that tends to be very cynical about truth. We have more “truthiness” than truth. In other words, people are interested in giving an impression of being truthful but not necessarily wanting to actually be true. That's what we see all around us, and we're trained to view everything skeptically in that way. As for nobility, that's a word you hardly ever hear.

It's like the word dignity.

I've told you that story about the Russian woman I met years back. It was at a Sunday evening with a Dhamma group up in Irvine. In the course of the Dhamma discussion, I mentioned the word dignity. She came up afterwards and said that all these years she'd been in America.... She had learned the word “dignity” in her English classes in Russia, but she never heard an American person use it. That's a very embarrassing thing.

The same goes for the word “noble. How many people do we describe as noble in our culture? Our values seem to be going in a very different direction. They're all about consuming, and there's very little nobility in consuming. True nobility lies in having the opportunity to take something away from someone else and not doing it – learning how to refrain from harm – and our society doesn't really seem to value that. It's a real shame. This is why practicing the Dhamma is countercultural, not only here but all over the world.

In India when the Buddha was teaching, what he was teaching went against the culture. In Thailand, when you go to the forest tradition.... That's one of the first things that struck me about the forest ajaans. After having lived in Thai lay culture for a couple of years, I knew what that was like. But the culture of the forest ajaans was very different; their attitudes and values were very different. They were really noble people and very true people. That's because they had followed this path. So this is the path that ennobles you; this is the path that makes you true. So give it some respect.

Pay close attention to the breath; pay close attention to getting the mind to settle down and be with the breath. As for any thought that comes up, no matter how interesting or enjoyable or alluring, you've got to say No right now. It's in your ability to say No that nobility lies. And

also, to stick with the No – that's where the truth lies. But you're not just saying No. You're saying Yes to the experience of the breath in the body and how you sense the breath energies in the body. They help you settle in so that you can see for yourself some of those states that are described in the texts.

When the breath energy is pleasant, allow the sense of pleasure to permeate through the body, so that no part of the body is untouched by that sense of wellbeing. There may be little pains here and there, but don't pay them attention. Focus primary attention on the sensation of comfort that you're gaining here right now, because it's a blameless comfort; it's a blameless pleasure. Again, that's something that makes the path noble.

I was reading recently of some scholars complaining that the four noble truths are not really noble. After all, what's noble about craving? What's noble about suffering? They were claiming that the four noble truths aren't even really true for anybody aside from those who have already become awakened, which is a very peculiar statement. After all, the Buddha teaches the truths as part of a path. They're part of how you *get* there – to awakening.

You take them on as right view. In other words, you don't know whether they're actually true or not, but you're going to test them. You're going to apply them to your life, and the act of doing that is a noble act. Seeing craving not as a friend but as a cause of suffering – something to be abandoned – that, too, is a noble act. Seeing the act of clinging to the aggregates not as a source of happiness or a source of who you really want to be, but as suffering, something to be comprehended so that you can abandon its cause: That's a noble act as well. When the mind has a good sense of the present moment and how to stay with the present moment without letting other things get in the way: Seeing that as something to be developed is a noble act, too.

So the truths really are noble. Ajaan Suwat often said to regard the suffering of the mind as a noble truth, something that's really worth paying close attention to, trying to really understand it. That's another thing that's noble about the truth. It deserves your full attention. Otherwise, if we just push the suffering away or try to run away from it, those are just our ordinary ways of dealing with suffering. There's nothing noble about them. As the Buddha said, rushing after sensual pleasures or toward self-affliction: Those are ignoble. Here we're trying to do something that lifts the mind above those two extremes.

And in doing this, we become true. We really do stick with it, we really do try to comprehend suffering, and we get deeper and deeper in our understanding. We see craving; we don't see it as our friend.

And it's not only noble people who can see that craving is a problem. There was once a householder who went to ask the Buddha, "What is this about suffering and the cause of suffering? Please explain it to me." The Buddha said, "Okay, I'll explain it in terms of the present moment, not anything far away in the past or future."

Then he asked the man, "Are there people in your home town for whom, if you heard that they were imprisoned or fined or had died, you would feel nothing at all? And the householder said, "Yes." "And why is that?" "Because I have no craving for them, no desire for them." "And how about someone like your wife or your son? If you heard that anything happened to them in that way?" He said, "It would be a total change in my life." "Again, why is that?" "Oh, because I have craving for them."

An ordinary, everyday person can see this, so it's not something that's true only for noble people. But to see how useful this truth is and where it can take you – that's something you confirm only at the first stage of awakening. But in the meantime, you take it as a guide; it's your right view. It hasn't been confirmed yet, but trying to use this as a guide so that you know what to try to comprehend, what to try to abandon, what to try to develop: Taking those duties on is an ennobling act. This is how the truths are ennobling. As the mind develops and you finally are able to abandon the craving and develop the path: That's what makes you true.

So have some respect for these truths. They can teach you a lot. There's a lot to be learned from suffering. As I've said many times before, it's like a waterhole out in the savannah. If you want to know about the animals in the savannah, you can just go to the waterhole, and they're all going to come in the course of a day. Just be very quiet and stay there. It's the same with the mind. All the attitudes in the mind are going to come gathering around your pain and suffering. Your beliefs about the universe, about whether there's a god – "Why is God creating the suffering?" whatever your beliefs – those beliefs will come into play.

And the Buddha does teach you some values. This is what right view is all about. These are the conditions that help get us beyond conditioning. Those same scholars I was reading also said that you can't really get away from conditioning. Everybody's conditioned, so even awakening is conditioned. Well, there is a sense in which the path is a kind of conditioning. The Buddha has to condition you out of your other social conditioning through the path. But once the path has done its job, you put it aside. You put the conditioning aside. That's what the simile of the raft is all about.

We're not here just to confirm right view. We use right view to take us beyond it. It's like the Buddha's instructions on how to go to a city. We follow the instructions. We confirm them for ourselves. But we're not

there just to learn about the route; we want to actually get to the city at the end of the route.

So these are means to an end, but they're means to a noble end, which means that they're noble as well. They ennoble us. They make us noble and they make us true, which is why we call them noble truths.