

The Power of Truth

May 23, 2016

One of the Buddha's insights is that truths don't just represent the way things are. In other words, they're not just an act of reporting: They also have a power. Certain truths will make you do things, allow you to look at things in a certain way, which will then allow you or compel you to act.

This is one of the reasons why the noble truths are noble, because they get you to act in a noble way. The Buddha wasn't interested in saying simply things that were true. As you may remember, his standard for the things he would say was that they be true, beneficial, and timely. The beneficial part had to do not only with the meaning of the words, but also with what they would get you to do. This is one of the reasons why the two words, Dhamma and attha, go together so often in the Canon. Attha is not only the meaning of the words, but also the goal to which they aim, the profit that they bring about. So when you ask about the attha of a teaching, you're asking both about the meaning of the words and about where they lead, what their pay-off is. What is this truth for? Where does it head? Where does it lead? What good does it do? Truths have power. They do lead in a certain direction.

There are lots of true things you can say about reality that can actually be contradictory—or at least they sound contradictory. There are ways you can look at the aggregates and say that they're stressful, and other cases the Buddha admitted there is pleasures in the aggregates. You can't say they're 100% stress. So, the question is then, which truth are you going to focus on? And that's answered by asking what's the result going to be? What is it going to get you to do? If you focus on how pleasant the aggregates are, you're going to hold onto them. If you focus on their stressful side, then you're going to do what you can so as not to be trapped by them.

The noble truths are noble because not only do they get you to do noble things, but also because they get you to a noble attainment. The Buddha talked about two kinds of searches in life. There's the search for happiness in things that will change. He said that there's nothing noble about that. And then there's the search for happiness in things that don't change—no aging, no illness, no death. That kind of search, he said, is noble.

To help with that search, we look at things in terms of the four noble truths. There are certain duties that go along with them, and when we fulfill those duties, they'll take us to something deathless, and that experience of the deathless is what guarantees that they really are true, and really are noble. We might look at the truths, and think about them, and decide that, Yes, they seem reasonable. But as the Buddha said, just because something is reasonable doesn't mean that it really is true. The fact that they're reasonable simply aids in giving us confidence or conviction in their truth. That's one of his observations that goes against a lot of our

understanding in the West that things like conviction or faith are opposed to reason. We believe that because there's a major religion in our society that extols things that you have to take on faith even though they go contrary to reason. That's why we think that reason and faith are two radically different things.

But, as the Buddha said, just because the four noble truths seem reasonable, doesn't necessarily mean that they're true. There has to be a further test. But their reasonableness is what gives you the faith and conviction that they're worth the test. If something doesn't make sense, if it contradicts itself, it doesn't really invite you to test whether it's true. But if something seems reasonable, it seems worthy of the test.

So you put it to the test, and you put yourself to the test, too, because these truths demand a lot of you. They demand that you look at your thoughts, your words, and your deeds—and particularly your thoughts—in a way that often will require you to let go of things you really like. That's because you learn how to look at the thoughts as part of a causal process. When you think in this particular way, where does it lead? When you think in a different way, where does it lead? This is what's special about the noble truths: They focus on this process of what the mind is *doing* with the truth. In this way, they contain the seeds for their own transcendence.

There's a passage where Anathapindika is talking to a group of wanderers. He wanted to see the Buddha, but it was too early in the morning—the Buddha and the monks were out on their alms rounds—so he went to talk to some wanderers instead. They ask him first off, "What does the Buddha believe? What are his views?" And it's interesting. Here's Anathapindika, who is a stream enterer by that time, he's already seen the deathless, and yet he says, "I don't really know the extent of the Buddha's views"—remembering, of course, that what the Buddha taught was just that handful of leaves, as opposed to the leaves of the forest, which were all the various types of knowledge he got in his awakening.

So the wanderers ask him, "In that case, what do *you* believe? What are your views?" And he replies, "I'll be happy to tell you my views, but first you tell me yours." And so the different groups have their different positions. Some say that the world is eternal. Some say it's not eternal. Some say it's finite; some say it's infinite. The body is the same thing as the soul, the body is different from the soul. After the death of a Tathagata you can say either that he exists, or he doesn't exist, or both, or neither. The standard list of positions on the hot philosophical issues of the day.

And as Anathapindika then points out, each particular view is stressful. It's inconstant, it's put together, and everything that's inconstant and put together is going to lead to stress if you hold onto it. So as you cling to that view, you cling to stress.

After that, they say, "Okay, what's your view?" And so he says, "Whatever is inconstant and put together is stressful." They say, "Well, you're holding to that. You're clinging to that. You're going to suffer from that, too." He says, "No, following this view, I see the escape from it." That's because it focuses you back on the process of how you relate to truths, and how you relate to

your views, so it enables you to let go when you no longer need it. And in the letting go, that's when it leads to the deathless.

So these are special views, and they're special because of their power. They lead you to a certain kind of action. They lead you to look at your own mind carefully. What are you doing? How do you relate to your thoughts, and words, and deeds? How do you relate to your beliefs? How do you relate to your practices and all the things that we tend to cling to? What are the results of that clinging? How can you learn how not to cling to them? We need certain views, and we need certain habits and practices, and even certain assumptions about ourselves, in order to practice. But how do you use these things so they don't just keep you trapped? When they've done their work, how can you learn to let go?

In the beginning you learn, as the Buddha said, not to pride yourself over your views or your habits. You don't brag about them, and you don't get into needless arguments with people about them—because when you get into arguments, there's always the question of who wins the arguments, and that leads to a certain amount of pride, and that pride will cause a problem. You get into arguments only when you see that there's a chance to correct a view that causes harm to the person holding it. So avoiding needless arguments is, on the beginning level, how you begin to use these parts of the practice without being tied down to them, and without using them to create needless trouble for yourself.

Remember that image of the snake. As the Buddha said, you try to grasp a snake, and if you grasp it wrongly—in other words, you grasp it by the tail—it's going to bite you. If you grasp it rightly, then it's not going to cause any trouble. You take a forked stick and you pin it down right behind its head. And no matter how much it may writhe around the stick, or even around your arm, it can't do you any harm.

But notice: In both cases, you're holding the snake, but in one case you're holding it in a way that doesn't cause you any harm. The views are things that you have to hold to, but you have to learn how to hold onto them properly. You hold to these truths in a proper way because they lead you to something beyond them—if you're holding them properly. Some people would say, "Why not just avoid having any views at all?" Well, that would be like not holding the snake at all. And if you don't hold the snake, how are you going to get the advantage that you can get from snakes? I mean, you can get their venom, and you can use their venom to create anti-venom; there are lots of uses for the snake venom. If you don't hold onto the snake at all, you're not going to get any benefit from it. So you do have to hold on. It's simply a question of *how* you hold on.

You have to remember that you're holding on for the purpose of getting past suffering. That's what the four noble truths all keep pointing to, simply laying things out: There's suffering, and there is its cause. There's a cessation of suffering, and there is a path to its cessation. The cessation is obviously where you want to go. In that way, the truths give you a goal, they give you an *attha*, a purpose. And they get you to act toward that purpose. That's

their *attha*, too. That's the power of these truths. And then they reveal their power in genuinely being true and noble when they lead to a real experience of the deathless.

When that comes, you naturally put them aside, because you realize that talking about the deathless is one thing, but actually experiencing it is something else. And the experience is what you're going for. And the experience is such that you don't need the words to stay with it. It stays on its own.

So when you consider the various truths in the world, you'll notice that some have a lot of power, and some have very little power. Certain facts you can learn, and they don't have any impact on your behavior at all. Those are things that are true, but not necessarily beneficial. Then there are certain truths that, if you act on them, are going to actually cause trouble. Those are not truths you want to get involved with in any way at all.

What you want are truths that are true, and beneficial, and right for you at this time. And the noble truths, as the Buddha said, are categorically true. In other words, they are always true. They always apply to every situation. So learn how to apply them in the right way so that they can really reveal their power, the power that makes them noble.