

Universal Truths

September 1, 2009

Of all the Buddha's teachings, there are only two that he said were categorical, in other words, basic universal truths, always true, always useful across the board. One is the distinction between skillful and unskillful action in thought, word, and deed, and the fact that unskillful actions should be abandoned, and skillful actions developed. And the other is the four noble truths: stress, its origination, its cessation, and the path of practice leading to its cessation. That's it.

Those are the teachings he taught as really basic. Those are the teachings that form the framework of the questions that he encourages people to ask. In terms of skillful and unskillful action, he said, this is what you should ask wise people: "What is skillful? What is unskillful? What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What when I do it will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?" That, he said, is the beginning of wisdom.

And as for questions around the four noble truths, they're the questions that point you to exactly where is stress right now, where is the cause of stress, what qualities of the mind need to be developed to help put an end to stress?

All this sounds very ordinary, but you have to realize that there are a lot of questions the Buddha is basically saying *not* to ask. Among the big ones are: "Who am I? Do I exist? Do I not exist? What am I?" These questions get you entangled in what he called a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views. In other words, they snare you and pull you in, so you can't get away. Yet these are questions that most people ask.

When Aldous Huxley wrote his book on perennial philosophy, he said that the basic question that all great true religions deal with right off the bat is: Who am I? What is my true identity? Yet the Buddha said, No, don't ask that. It's just a tangle of views, it doesn't get you to the end of suffering.

I read a manuscript several years back in which the author was talking about the Buddhist approach to nature. Again he started out with, "This is the great religious question: Who am I?" I happened to write on the margin of the manuscript: "This is precisely the question the Buddha said not to ask. Why are you imposing this question on what the Buddha had to teach?" But the writer didn't care.

We keep wanting to push that question: Who am I? Who am I? But it just ties us down. The more we define ourselves, the more limited we become. Even if we think of having a cosmic identity, we get limited to that. We get limited to that

view and that view becomes a source of controversy. You're going to have to argue it with other people. Or even if you don't argue with other people, you've still got the inconsistencies in the view itself. If you're one with the universe, why doesn't the universe do what you want it to do all the time? It should be under your control, but it's not. If it's you, then everything in the universe should be yours. But is it? Try laying hold of your neighbor's belongings, and you'll find that it isn't so.

What you end up with is identifying yourself with a particular idea, or a particular feeling, a particular perception, and that becomes limiting too.

So even though these questions may sound large and weighty and profound, they really aren't. Ajaan Lee makes the comment many times that people tend to take high Dhamma and think that it's low, and low Dhamma and think it's high. The Dhamma of trying to pin down a self identity is very low. High Dhamma is the Dhamma that the Buddha started off with and ended up with: the noble eightfold path, starting with right view. And even though it may seem very ordinary, it's very radical to look at your experience in those terms: Where's the stress? What's causing it? What can be done to put an end to it?

As in the sutta we chanted just now: With each of those categories, once you've been able to ferret out which is which, then the next question is: What do you do with it? The Buddha said there's a task for each. Wherever there's stress, you try to comprehend it. "Comprehending" here means understanding it and knowing it so thoroughly that you abandon all passion, aversion, and delusion around it. As for the cause of stress, you try to abandon it. With the cessation of stress, you try to realize it. And the path, you try to develop. That's why the Buddha has you divide things up in these four categories: because they tell you what to do given a particular event that's coming up.

Say there's stress in the mind: You want to figure it out: What's causing it? Try to trace it back to its causes. Or if you find it difficult to sit and focus on stress, then you might want to develop some of the qualities that go into making up the path.

So these are the duties of right view. The Buddha doesn't impose them on anyone. He doesn't force anyone to carry out these duties—but the stress and suffering that we suffer from: *They* force us. If you really want to gain release from these things, you first have to comprehend them. You have to do the duties appropriate to each of the truths.

One of the reasons we start with the breath is that it gives us practice in being sensitive to skillful and unskillful intentions, and then from there, going deeper into seeing where we impose unnecessary stress and suffering on ourselves.

Because as you work with the breath, you begin to gain a sense of the power that the mind has on the sensation of the breath. You can play with the breath: Make it long, make it short, deep, shallow, heavy, light, fast or slow. You can check the impact on the body and the impact on the mind of those different ways of breathing. And you begin to see the more mindful you are—in other words, keeping these tasks in mind—and the more alert you are to what’s actually happening in response to what you’re doing, the more sensitive you then become to when you’re doing it skillfully and when you’re not; when you’re fiddling around with it too much, when you’re not adjusting it enough.

There are ways in which you can see the basic categories of the four truths right here in the breath, and you get practice in working with them to figure out what you’re doing that’s unskillful with the breath so you can learn how to abandon it, what ways of dealing with the breath are more skillful, and you can try to develop those. As for the times when you can’t figure anything out, you just sit there and watch it. This is the beginning of comprehension.

So the breath is our practice ground. We’re not here to get the breath. We’re here to use the breath as a means to awakening. All these truths are means. Even though they are universal truths, they’re instrumental. In other words, you use them for a purpose or for a function, then you put them aside. Even the four noble truths, at certain parts in the practice, get put aside.

There’s a passage where the Buddha says after you’ve watched things arise and pass away in terms of these truths, then finally you begin to see everything that arises is just stress arising, everything passing away is just stress passing away. That’s it, whether it’s the first noble truth or the second, or the fourth: It’s just stress arising and passing away.

But this insight is appropriate only when you’ve really have developed all the factors of the path really far: right mindfulness, right concentration, and all the rest. It’s good to keep in mind, though, that there comes a point where you have to let go of even concepts of things like the five aggregates and the duties of the four truths. There’s just stress arising and passing away, something you just comprehend and develop dispassion for.

And because there are these different stages in the path, you have to learn how to read yourself, to question yourself: Where are you on the path right now? What approach do you need to take right now so you can figure out which of the Buddha’s teachings are the ones you want to hold onto for the time being? It’s going to be a long time, though, before you let go of the four noble truths, so you want to hang onto those, because those are the ones that keep you from going off

into those wildernesses and tangles of views, so you can stay on course to complete the duties for each of the truths.

Once you've learned how to develop these duties in terms of the breath—and as the breath gets more and more subtle, more and more refined—the activities of the mind come to the fore. So you apply those same truths, those same duties to what's going on in the mind. This is where the real work gets done.

So remember, it's not a question of discovering who you are, or what you are, or whether you exist or don't exist. It's simply a question of seeing: What are you doing? Is it skillful? Is it not? Is it causing suffering and stress? Or is it putting an end to suffering and stress? Those are the questions that are important. And it's only by asking and answering those questions that you really get anywhere.