

The Importance of Being Truthful

November 4, 2009

The Dhamma's something really special in that people who are not truthful, people who are not honest, can't practice it. You have to bring truthfulness to the act of listening to the Dhamma, to the practice of the Dhamma, if you want to gain any attainment in the Dhamma. Otherwise, things get directed off-course. So if you want to start practicing with the Dhamma, you have to look at the areas where you already are truthful to yourself and spread out from there.

A lot of our ignorance lies in the areas where the mind lies to itself. It doesn't want to be honest to itself about its motives for its actions or about the results of its actions. And that, of course, leads to suffering.

So we have to find an approach that allows us to get around that willed ignorance, around those areas where the mind lies to itself. A lot of it has to do with the fact that when we do something we know is unskillful, we tend to judge ourselves rather than the action. We don't like being judged as horrible people or shoddy people or lazy people or whatever is reflected in the particular action. So one way around that reluctance is to make sure that when you're judging an action you keep it at the action and you don't judge the person.

The Buddha doesn't encourage you to look at yourself as a bad person. He tries to encourage you, saying, "Okay, you have what it takes to practice. But you've got these bad habits, you've got these bad actions." He doesn't have you deny that they're bad. And to recognize that they're bad is not a form of aversion. It's a form of heedfulness, which is the beginning of all that's skillful, realizing that if you keep on acting in unskillful ways, you're going to suffer, the people around you are going to suffer. But keep it on that level: just the action. When you see these things as simply actions, there's nothing inherently wrong with you, there's nothing can't be changed. Actions can be changed; choices can be changed. That's why we're here training the mind, because our actions do come out of the mind.

Again, the Buddha never talks about what the mind is. And he certainly never says that the mind is basically good or basically bad. Ajaan Chah, in one of his finer turns of phrase, says, "What is the mind? The mind isn't *is* anything." That reflects the Buddha's attitude in which he doesn't talk about what the mind is. He talks a lot, though, about what the mind *does*. And that's where we can make changes.

As when we're sitting here right now focusing on the breath: You'll find the mind wandering off. As soon as you catch the mind wandering off, you have a choice. Will you allow it to wander a little bit further to see what it can dig up, to overturn a few stones? Or are you going to get right back to the breath? There's a choice right there. You also have the choice of berating yourself for wandering off or whatever. Don't do that. Just notice, "Okay, it's

wandering off. Come back.” As for any other extraneous conversation in the mind about what this wandering off means and what it tells you about yourself, you say, “I don’t need that.” All you have to do is recognize that the wandering off is not what you want right now and you come back.

And you’ve got a good place to come back to. You can work with the breath. You can make the breath comfortable. Try some good deep in-and-out breaths for a while just to ventilate the body and to make the breathing process really obvious and blatant. Then pose that question in the mind: What kind of breathing would feel good *now*? How about *this* breath? And then *this* breath? And keep it up. Sometimes you find that a regular rhythm feels good, and other times you find that one breath will have energized one part of the body but the next breath will have to energize a part that was missed by the last one.

For some reason, I don’t know why, every time I think about this way of approaching the breath, it reminds me of one time when I was at Wat Asokaram during my first year as a monk. There were two or three dogs that came around to my hut after the morning meal. If I just put the food down, one dog would dominate the group, and the other two wouldn’t get any food at all. So I was very careful to keep them separate, I’d throw food to each of the different dogs, one by one, and made sure that everybody got fed. You want to take the same attitude toward your breath.

Sometimes one breath will nourish the torso but you’re missing the legs. Okay, so the next time around, you work with the legs or the arms or the shoulders or the head. Just notice which part of the body seems to be missing out on the share of energy and work with that. Working with the breath in this way gives you a lot of tools you need for dealing with unskillful habits, because it forces you to be observant and it gives you a good place to stay, a place where you can feel good about being right here.

When the idea of following through with an unskillful habit comes up, you can say, “Look, I’ve got something much better here. Why bother with that?” Often we fall into an unskillful habit because of a sense of irritation or dis-ease or just discomfort here in the present moment. We tend to react to that discomfort in an old way. It may not be the best way but it’s something we’re familiar with. And part of the mind seems to think, “Well, there’s a natural connection.” But working with the breath can help break that connection.

Say you’ve got a desire for a cigarette or for something you know you shouldn’t be doing. Ask yourself, “Physically, where do you feel that desire? How does it manifest in the body?” You may notice a pattern of tension in the back of your hands, in your stomach or whatever. And if you’ve been working with the breath you know, “I can deal with that pattern of tension in a different way and breathe through it.” Allow that sense of dis-ease to disperse and you find you’ve got a new ally, a new way of dealing with those feelings, a new habit, a better habit to replace the old one. Once you’ve got this new habit, then you can look more carefully at the

drawbacks of that old habit, realizing that you don't have to go there. The next time it comes up, you can just breathe right through it again.

If part of the mind starts arguing, saying, "Well, I really prefer that other old way of doing things," you can just sit down and talk to it. Like that great passage in Ajaan Lee's autobiography where he's planning to disrobe. He sits down and asks himself, "What would actually happen if I disrobed?" And he goes through the whole story. In the beginning, it sounds really good, but after a while reality kicks in. Ultimately, things get so bad in his imaginary story that he hears himself say, "Boy, I wish I hadn't disrobed." And then he realizes, "Well, I haven't disrobed. Here I am." That helped to disperse a *lot* of the appeal of his desire to disrobe.

This is what you want to do, because with a lot of your habits, even though part of you doesn't like them, another part finds them appealing. You've got to really look at that carefully and point out to yourself, "Okay, this doesn't work." It's not nearly as appealing as you might have thought.

This particular tactic is especially helpful when you do have the alternative of the breath, a sense of well-being in the present moment that you've learned how to maintain, that you've learned how to cherish. Sometimes people get critical of being stuck, say, on concentration, or stuck on the comfort of the meditation. But it's a useful place to be stuck, it's a useful way to be attached—because if you're not attached to this, you find yourself going back to your old habits. It's like having new food to eat. There's no way you're going to give up your junk food unless you've got better food to eat. So here it is: better food.

So when you think about your habits, remind yourself that habits come out of the mind, they're a result of mental actions, certain ways we react to certain stimuli. They seem to be in an ironclad connection—that once this stimulus comes in, you've got to act in that way, but you don't. You've got the choice.

When you provide yourself with alternatives, then you can start arguing back with the parts of the mind that come up with all kinds of arguments that say, "Well, if you're not going to give in today, you're going to give in tomorrow, so you might as well give in now." You can tell yourself, "Well, tomorrow's going to take care of tomorrow. I'm responsible for right now. At least I have one choice right now, so let's make it the best choice." The next time the question comes up, say, "Okay, here's another chance to make a good choice." You don't make yourself any promises for tomorrow but you *do* promise yourself right now, right now, right now. And as long as you're with right now, you're taking care of all of time. You don't have to worry about tomorrow. Just worry about right now, *this* breath, the sense of ease you can get from *this* breath, your ability to maximize that ease with *this* breath. When you focus right here, you find that these habits that seemed to be so hard to kick get a lot more manageable.

Especially when you can look at them not as an indication of what kind of person you are, but simply as actions that get bad results, and you have the choice: You don't have to follow

that action, you don't have to suffer those bad results. You're learning how to take the principle of cause and effect, and turn it to your own advantage.

The more truthful you are about exactly why a particular habit appeals to you and what leads you to do unskillful things, the more you see this other truth: that you do have the choice *not* to do those things. This is where being truthful helps to reveal truths that you otherwise wouldn't have known. Because only when you're true in admitting that these other things going on in the mind will these other opportunities become apparent.