

Emulating the Truth

July 5, 2010

We were talking today about how everyone lives in imitation of somebody else. We model our lives on the examples of others. This is why it's important to choose a good example. It's not bad that we live in imitation. It's not necessary to be totally original in your life, especially when we have good examples to follow: the Buddha, the noble disciples, people whose lives are an expression of some very important truths—in particular, the truth that truth is not simply a matter of statements or ideas.

Truth is also a quality of the character. The truth with which you perceive the truth is going to actually determine whether you can attain any kind of truth. When you see what needs to be done, when you check and are careful to look at your actions and the results of your actions, the care you take is an important part of the truth, because you really need to get around your delusion.

We all know we start with delusion. We've got lots of delusion, in so many different areas, and the best way to chip away at that delusion is to look very directly at our actions, and then at the results. This, the Buddha said, is how we overcome doubt: to see which qualities of the mind are skillful, which ones are not skillful, by looking at what they actually lead to.

This is how we also develop the wisdom faculty in the factors of awakening, the factor that's called analysis of qualities, *dharmma-vicaya*: looking at what's skillful in our actions, and what's not skillful, and seeing that they're clearing different. It's important to realize that we overcome doubt not simply by forcing ourselves to believe something, but by looking carefully at what we're doing, and learning how to check the conclusions we come to. This is what converts the original wisdom of wanting to look for a happiness that's long term into another one of the Buddha's qualities, which is purity.

The Buddha told Rahula when he taught him this method of looking at his actions, that this is how people achieve purity: by being very careful, being very true. In fact, he prefaced his remarks with the principle of telling the truth. You probably know the story: Rahula sees the Buddha coming from afar, so he sets out a water jar and a dipper for the Buddha to wash his feet. The Buddha washes his feet, leaves a little bit of water in the dipper, and says to Rahula, "You see how little water there is in this dipper?" And Rahula says, "Yes." The Buddha says, "That's how little there is of a contemplative"—and here the word *samañña*, the quality of a contemplative can also mean just generally goodness—"that's how little goodness there is in a person who tells a deliberate lie with no sense of no shame." Then the Buddha throws the water away. He says, "See how that water's been thrown away?" And Rahula says, "Yes." "That's what happens to the goodness, the quality of a contemplative, of someone who tells a deliberate lie with no sense of shame: The goodness gets thrown away just like that." Similarly when he

overturns the dipper, and then when he shows Rahula how hollow and empty the dipper is: If you tell a deliberate lie and feel no sense of shame, then you're overturned and hollow and empty in just the same way.

So in establishing the principle of truthfulness, and the Buddha says this is the basic principle in looking at yourself: that you really be true.

This means that you want to look for people who are true: people to associate with, people to model your life on, people who have integrity. And you look in all their actions: the kind of help they give to other people, the gifts they give, the way they give a gift, the way they conduct an argument. That last one is especially revealing.

I've had the opportunity to deal with some very famous Buddhist scholars, and had discussions back and forth by letter. I noticed with one particular scholar, who has a reputation for being very principled, very sober, and very, very honest, that the way he conducted his arguments was very dishonest. I would make a statement, and he would come back and say, "I'm going to disprove your statement," but before disproving it, he would turn it into something else, and disprove that. I pointed this out to him many times, and it never seemed to register. So I finally had to conclude, "Okay, this is a person whose integrity is not all-around. Not someone I can trust." So, that too is something you want to look for: How do people conduct their arguments?

There's a passage where the Buddha is dealing with some followers of the Jains. They have some questions, and some issues they want to bring with them. So he first makes some conditions before he answers their issues. With one of them he says, "If we can base our discussion on the truth, then we can have a discussion." With another he says, "If you will accept what should be accepted, reject what should be rejected, and if there's anything you don't understand, you'll ask the meaning, then we can have a discussion." And of course, in one of those discussions, the person who said that he would stand on the truth starts making statements that contradict what he said earlier on. And the Buddha called him on this, saying, "I thought you were going to stand on the truth"—which means that being consistent is one way of standing on the truth.

But also notice that passage where he says, "If there's something you don't understand, ask. Cross-question me about it, right then and there." In other words, don't simply jump on something as being obscure and impossible to understand, and attack on the basis of that. We're here to find out the truth. And that's the quest all along: It's the search for the truth, in all of its forms, both as truth of statements and truth of the character. And as the Buddha said, the more you develop your own truth, the more readily you can sense this quality—or its lack—in other people. This is how you turn from that student who's the spoon in the curry who never knows the taste of the curry, into the tongue. You immediately taste what's going on. You understand, because you've trained yourself to be true.

So when looking for examples to follow, you want to look for people who are true, in all the different dimensions of the word. And that's how you find true happiness. It's in imitation of truthful people that we become true ourselves. The fact that we see their example and appreciate it gives rise to the desire to have that kind of truth as well, so that ultimately it's not just imitation. They inspire us, but it's through the honesty of our inner search that we find the honest truth for ourselves.