

## *Truths of the Will*

*January 28, 2013*

As the Buddha said in his first sermon, the path to the end of suffering is something you have to develop. In other words, it doesn't just happen on its own; you have to work at making it grow. So when you're sitting here, trying to get the mind concentrated, that's what you're doing: There is an effort that has to go into this so that the concentration will develop and grow.

You don't just watch states of concentration come and go, thinking that there's wisdom in simply watching them come and go. The wisdom lies in figuring out how to bring them here, how to get them established, and how to maintain them while they're here, and to get them to develop further.

So right effort really is an important part of the path, and this path we're following is a truth of the will.

William James once talked about two different kinds of truth, what could be called truths of the observer and truths of the will. Truths of the observer are things that happen regardless of whether you want them to or not. In fact, if you want to understand them, you have to get your wants out of the way so that you can observe them carefully. The movement of the stars, whether there are planets out there around the other stars: If you really want to know these things, you can't let your desire for things to be a certain way, or *not* to be a certain way, to get in the way of your observation.

As for truths of the will, these things will become true only if you want them to. If you want to be a dancer, the only way you're going to be a good dancer is if you want to be a good dancer. If you want to be a good carpenter, it depends on your will. In this case, your will or your desire is not something that's in the way. If it's unskillful, of course—if all you do is sit there and want, want, want but don't act on it—then it is a problem. The desire has to inform the actions you do in order to get to where you want. That sort of desire, that act of the will, is necessary for these things to become true. That's a truth of the will, and that's what we're working on.

You have to *want* the concentration to happen for it to happen. There are times when it'll come on its own. But for it to really develop into right concentration as a factor of the path, it has to be cultivated. So you focus on the breath. And whatever energy is required to keep the mind with the breath, you apply that energy. Whatever skill is needed to pull away from any disturbances, any hindrances, any distractions, you apply that skill. You keep at it.

Of course, truths of the observer require a certain amount of will for you to know them. In other words, if you don't want to know these things, you're not going to conduct the experiments to find them. Similarly with truths of the will: There are some things you simply have to observe. You have to observe how causality works. What kinds of causes do give rise to concentration? What causes give rise to discernment? What activities get in the way of concentration; get in the way of discernment? These are things you have to observe. In both cases, you learn about these things by wanting to know. There's simply the issue of when it's appropriate for your will to make things happen and when it's not.

Then once you have the knowledge, there's a further issue: What do you do with that knowledge? This is where the will has to take over, even with truths of the observer: What do you do with your knowledge about the movement of the planets? Even more so with the truth of the practice: You *want* to use your knowledge of causality to put an end to suffering. You're not satisfied with being right where you are. There's something better in life.

All too many people come to the Buddha's teachings hoping to be told that they're already wonderful; they're already good. But that doesn't accomplish anything. They think their suffering is caused by their lack of self-esteem. And that may be one cause of suffering, but there are deeper causes. If you don't look for the deeper causes, you'll want to keep coming back to find happiness in things that are inconstant, stressful, not-self—things that can't provide you with a happiness that lasts.

That's a problem, and the Buddha offers you the way out. His solution requires your seeing that some of the things you're doing are wrong and unskillful. You've been developing the wrong paths. There are lots of paths, not just the path to the end of suffering. There's the path to a pleasant life here as a human being. There are paths that pull you down: unpleasant lives as a human being and even further down than that. So you have to ask yourself what kind of path you've been following. That's a truth of the will that you may or may not have been consciously acting on.

As the Buddha said, you have to ask yourself every day: "Days and nights fly past, fly past. What am I becoming right now?" What kind of person are you becoming? We're all becoming older, but what kind of older person are you becoming? Are you gaining in wisdom with age? Are you gaining in discernment, gaining in concentration, gaining in virtue? Or is your aging pulling you someplace else? That's a question you have to ask day after day. If you want to have something accomplished by the fact that time is passing, you've got to apply yourself to the path. You've got to hold onto it.

The other day, someone was mentioning to me he'd been told that, yes, the path is composed of fabrications—things you intend—but you have to learn how to hold these fabrications lightly so that they don't weigh on you. That's true only in some circumstances. The path is like a tool. With some tools, you have to hold onto them tight for them to work. Like with a hammer: If you try to hammer a nail while you're holding the hammer lightly, it can bounce back and hit you in the face. When you're using the hammer, you hold on tight. When you don't need the hammer, you put it aside. You let it go. But then when you need it again, you pick it up again, and you hold it tight again. And the same goes with the path. With things like virtue, concentration, discernment, you have to hold on tight.

“Tight” doesn't mean constricted. It means sticking with it consistently. The truths of the path are not like traffic laws where on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, you can't park in a certain place, but at other times you can. The path is 24/7. These are, as the Buddha said, categorical truths: true all the time and in all situations. You always want to stick with the precepts. You always want to work to keep your mind centered to make your discernment all around so that you're not just focused on one little thing and ignoring all the other results of that one thing you're focused on.

People who studied with Ajaan Mun often commented he would see implications of things that they missed entirely. His vision was all around. And one of the epithets of the Buddha is the All-around Eye. This term had many meanings back in his time, but one of them was that he saw things from every angle. That's a quality of discernment we want to develop. Why? Because we see that we're suffering, and we want to put an end to it, which requires that we look into our blind spots.

Nobody's imposing this on us. The duties of the path are not something the Buddha's forcing on you. He's not engaged in a power play. He simply said that this is what works. He's tested all kinds of things and he's found that this is what works in putting an end to suffering. If you decide that that's something you want—again, the end of suffering, the cessation of suffering qualifies as a truth of the will—you want to give this a try. See if what the Buddha observed is really true, that this is a path that puts an end to suffering once and for all.

So be observant and hold on to that willing act that says, “I don't want to come back and suffer.” Remember Ajaan Mun's final sermon. All these aspects of the path are like tools and weapons for a soldier going into battle. And who is the soldier? The soldier is that determination not to come back and suffer ever again—or as he says, not to come back and be the laughingstock of your defilements.

Hold on to that desire until you don't need it anymore—until it's actually yielded the end of suffering. And in the meantime, try to have all-around eyes to observe as you follow the way.