

Speaking Truth to Defilement

January 11, 2016

Years back I was reading about a psychologist who was studying people in their attitude towards happiness, things that made them happy. He said he was surprised to learn that a lot of people lie to themselves about what makes them happy. You ask them in anticipation of something, “Will this make you happy?” and they would say Yes or No. And then as for the things that they said would make them happy, he found ways of asking them while they were actually experiencing those things, and it turned out they weren’t as happy as they thought they would be. But if you asked them about the same experience afterward, then they seem to have remembered it as being a happier occasion than it was. He said he was surprised to see how consistently people will lie to themselves about their happiness.

But then he reflected on himself, and he realized he did the same thing. He liked to climb mountains, or he said he liked to climb mountains. But he realized that while he was actually on the mountains climbing them, he was pretty miserable. But the anticipation made him happy, and the memory made him happy, too.

This is something we really have to watch out for in our lives. If we’re going to really take our happiness seriously, we have to learn not to lie to ourselves about it.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has the precepts as one of the assisting factors to right concentration, the requisites or the supports for right concentration. Because if you want your concentration to lead to discernment, it really does help to be observing the precepts.

Years back, when Ajaan Suwat was leading a retreat in Massachusetts, at the very end of the retreat someone asked him a question about carrying meditation into daily life. And he answered with the five precepts. One of the people organizing the retreats was upset, thinking that Ajaan Suwat was looking down on what this organizer called “lowly laypeople,” that they could only manage the five precepts. But that wasn’t Ajaan Suwat’s point. His point was that the five precepts provide training in the mind and also create an environment in which the meditation goes better. They actually train you in qualities you’re going to need as you meditate.

Truthfulness is number one. Of all the precepts, that’s the one that the Buddha seems to take most seriously. You look in the Jataka Tales, the stories of his lives leading up to the time when he became Buddha, and you find that at certain times he actually killed, stole, had illicit sex, or drank intoxicants. He was basically learning the ropes and hadn’t realized that these things had to be avoided consistently.

But there was never a case where he lied.

At another point, he said that if you feel no shame at telling a deliberate lie, there is no evil you will not do. So he takes lying that seriously. Because as we’re meditating, we have to learn more and more to tell the truth to ourselves. We get practice telling the truth on a

daily basis. “Not even in a joke,” as he told Rahula, “Make up your mind: I will not tell a deliberate lie, even in jest.”

You think about humor, especially in our country, and a lot of it is fantasy and things the person telling the joke knows are not true and the person listening knows are not true. Now it’s one thing to say, “Okay, this is a joke,” and you tell the joke, that’s perfectly fine. But a lot of our humor is involved in misrepresenting what’s going on.

The Buddha says to avoid that, to drop that. You want to be really careful that what you say does actually represent the truth. Now, there are times, of course, when he says that if you say something that’s going to give rise to greed, aversion, or delusion within you, or would give rise to those mind-states in your listener, then you don’t say that. You learn to avoid it.

The promise to yourself that you will not misrepresent the truth means that you have to be very careful about how you handle delicate situations. But you want to make this a habit, because otherwise, if you find it very easy to tell little white lies, then the lies gets bigger and bigger and bigger and you start telling major lies and you don’t feel the difference. But if you’re meticulous about even the little things, then you get more sensitive to when the mind wants to misrepresent something a little bit, for whatever the reason. And that’s a really good sensitivity to develop because it makes you more sensitive to what’s going on deep in your own mind.

We have lots of images about what kind of people we are and what’s actually going on in the mind. These perceptions are like agreements. When Thai took over the word *sañña*, which is the Pali word for perception, one of the meanings that they ended up giving to it was an agreement, a promise, a contract.

And this is what’s going on in the mind. We have these images that we send to different parts of the mind, and the different parts have agreed, okay, that this image means *that*, and that one means *this*. And we’ve learned how to lie to ourselves with these images. We can send ourselves false messages.

For instance, you might crave a particular person or a particular set of circumstances, and then when you actually get that person or that set of circumstances you realize that that’s not what you really wanted. There was something else going on in there. Maybe you were more fascinated with the perception or the image or the thought-construct around that person, or a feeling that came up as you thought about that situation. It had nothing to do with the actual person or the actual situation.

The important thing is that if you don’t recognize where your cravings are, there’s no way you’re going to be able to see through them.

So you have to be very truthful to yourself. Get the mind still so that it’s in a better position to see what’s going actually on inside. But you also have to develop this quality of truthfulness so that you can speak truth to your defilements and get the parts of the mind that genuinely want true happiness to listen, to recognize, “Okay, this is one way in which I’ve been lying to myself. I thought *x* would make me happy and I thought I really wanted *x*, but maybe it was something else around *x* that I wanted.” So you look into that.

Like climbing mountains: Climbing a mountain can be a pretty miserable experience, but being a mountaineer has a certain *panache*. Maybe that's what the psychologist was looking for—that at his age, he could still climb mountains.

So as you take the meditation into life, you don't just bring your practice into your life, you also bring your life into the practice. In other words, make the practice the framework in which you live, and in this framework, truthfulness is very highly valued.

We have a problem in that our society's really good at lying. People will tell lies, and everybody knows they're telling lies, but they like to hear the lies anyhow. Certain of our defilements like certain lies. And the more people who tell the lie, then the more "truthiness" it gets until finally it becomes what everybody accepts as the truth. It gets very hard to go against.

This is another reason why, as a meditator, you want to separate yourself out from the general run of things and learn how to question these attitudes, these values of our society. Are they really worthwhile? Are they really good for us? And when you learn to question them, then you can question yourself, "The attitudes that I've developed and I've adopted here: Whose interests are they serving? What interests are they serving? Are those interests really in my best interest?"

You get the mind quiet and, if you have this practice in being truthful as you go through the day, then you start recognizing when you're not being truthful to yourself, what's going on inside. That gives you something to work with. You've found an area in which you have something useful to learn.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha valued truthfulness so much. And why if we value our happiness, we want to develop this quality of truthfulness, trustworthiness, as much as we can, both inside and out. Otherwise, you're never going to be able to find a happiness that's really true, that really does satisfy your desire for a happiness you can trust.