

## *The Desire for Truth*

*January 7, 2020*

We all have a desire for truth. As Ajaan Lee says, even common animals want the truth. The example he gives is interesting. If you take some food and show it to a dog and act as if you're going to give it to him, the dog comes over. But then you run off, don't give the food to the dog. If you keep this up, after several days, the point will come where the dog doesn't come anymore. And the look it gives you tells you it's pretty disgusted.

Although we all desire truth, that desire is not something disinterested. In other words, we're not after truth just for its own sake. If you really look at our desire for truth, you'll see that what we want is a true happiness.

We've seen enough of the false and disappointing pleasures and happiness offered by the world. We want something that's really true and dependable. We want to be told the true way to find that happiness. And as we mature, we begin to realize we also want to be true to that way if we're going to be able to live with ourselves.

So you've got three kinds of truth right there. There's the truth of the reality of the happiness. There's the truth of the words that tell you how to get there. And then there's the truth of the person: true in following a genuine path, even when it's difficult. And the practice involves all three kinds of those different truths.

Nibbana is the true happiness. As for the truth of the person, the Buddha made that one of his prerequisites for accepting a student. "Bring me someone who's honest and no deceiver," he said, "someone who's observant, and I'll teach that person the Dhamma." Then he would ask that person to take the Dhamma as it was taught and put it to the test. As Ajaan Lee also said, if you want to understand the truth of the Dhamma, you have to be true. In other words, you have to be true as a person to understand how true the statements are, so that you can get to the truth of nibbana.

So how do you become more true as a person? The Buddha starts with his instructions to Rahula about how important it is to be truthful in reporting what you're doing, what you've done. Then he goes into seeing truly what you're doing and the results of what you're doing, because you can learn about the Dhamma and hear the words but if you don't understand where they lead, you don't really understand them. This is because Dhamma in Pali is also associated often with the word *attha*, which means goal or meaning. The Dhamma is composed of statements with an *attha* in both senses of the word: They have their meaning, and

they are intended to induce behavior that leads to the goal, the true reality of nibbana.

So the Buddha's every statement is meant to lead to a certain type of behavior, which in turn is meant to lead to a certain kind of experience. You're not going to really understand the words until you follow through with those actions that lead to that kind of experience. So you have to test yourself. You have to make yourself the sort of person who's more observant, particularly of your actions.

So as the Buddha told Rahula, before you act, look at your intention, and if you see any harm that's going to be done, or you anticipate any harm that's going to be done by that action, then you don't do it. If you don't anticipate any harm, go ahead and do it. But watch for the results that are coming up while you're doing it, because in the Buddha's understanding of causality, it's not the case that you have to wait until your next lifetime for actions to give their results. You put your finger in a fire, it's going to hurt now. It's not going to hurt two or three lifetimes down the line. So if you see anything harmful coming up, you stop. If you don't see any harm, you can continue.

When you're done, you look at the long-term results. If you did cause harm, you resolve not to repeat that action. Then you go and talk it over with someone else on the path, someone who's more experienced, so that you can get some ideas about how you might avoid that harm next time around. If there was no harm, then you can take joy in the fact that your practice is developing, and you keep it up. This, the Buddha said, is how all people who purify their thoughts, words, and deeds go about doing it.

So it's in purifying your deeds that you learn about them.

Then you look at the ideas that made you want to act in that particular way, to see which ideas are skillful, and which ones are not. This gives you an idea of what's true Dhamma and what's not. All the way down the line, the Buddha has you test his teachings because they are teachings meant to give results. They're meant to be beneficial. They're meant to lead to certain kinds of actions. As he said, he wouldn't say things that were false, unbeneficial, or untimely. So the Dhamma's meant to be true, beneficial, and timely. It's up to you, however, to learn what the right times are, and what those benefits are. You do that by testing yourself, developing the qualities that make you more observant.

This is one of the reasons why we meditate.

We develop our mindfulness and our alertness so that we can be very clear about what we're doing. If you're not really clear about what you're doing, how can you know the results of your actions? So you watch the mind. You're alert to see what the mind is doing. You're alert to the breath. And then when you learn

anything about the relationship between the mind and the breath—how to get the mind to settle down, how to deal with distractions that pull you away—you remember that so that you can put it into practice again. That’s what mindfulness is for. And as you get more precise in observing yourself, you become more and more a true person, because you see the truth of the Buddha’s teachings as to which actions are skillful and which ones are not.

When you develop the skillful actions and abandon the unskillful ones, you really do benefit. It may take time, but then you’ve got to think about the time spent, time wasted when you’re not practicing. That can go on for a long, long time. There’s no end to that time. But this practice does lead to a goal: the reality of the happiness that comes when you get more and more precise in observing your actions, not only your actions outside, but more specifically, the actions of the mind inside. Because as you get the mind into concentration, you begin to realize the concentration, too, is an action. It, too, is fabricated. It, too, has some stress—although the Buddha doesn’t call it suffering or stress in this context. He calls it a disturbance.

You look for the disturbances in your concentration. You see where you’re causing them in the way you perceive things. Then you refine your perceptions.

In this way, you take that principle he taught to Rahula and you bring it into your mind. Then you make yourself more and more true in doing the concentration and in observing, and then letting go—even of the things you find attractive, as you begin to realize that they, too, have their drawbacks. This is how you discover the truth of what Ajaan Lee had to say: that if you want to understand the Dhamma, you’ve got to be true.

In this way, you get all three types of truth: the truth of the person, the truth of the statements that you’ve tested to see when they’re useable and when they’re not, how they’re to be understood, how they’re to be put into practice. And then you finally realize the truth of a reality: the ultimate attha, or goal, which is the reality of true happiness.

Now, the reality is not something you do. It’s something that’s there to be found. And the truth of the Buddha’s statements is true in itself as well. Where you have to do your work is in becoming a true person, really putting the teachings into practice, being very careful to observe where you’re creating stress, where you’re not; where you’re creating harm, where you’re not; where you’re creating disturbance, where you’re not. It’s when you’re honest and observant, the basic prerequisites for being a student of the Buddha, that you can develop the truth of the person, which verifies the truth of the statements by leading to the

truth of the reality of a deathless happiness that can be found by putting the Buddha's teachings into practice.

This is how we satisfy our desire for truth. There's no other truth that satisfies that desire. So look to yourself. How true are you? The more true you are, the more you'll be able to understand the truth the Buddha was talking about and the reality he was talking about. It's in this way that your desire for truth will be satisfied.