

The Missing Truth

February 20, 2022

The Buddha says that when we experience pain, stress, suffering, the mind has two reactions. One is bewilderment. We don't understand how the suffering has come. The second is a search: "Is there anyone out there who knows a way or two to put an end to the suffering?"

This means that we're looking for three kinds of truth. We're looking for someone who truly knows the way to put an end to suffering. We're looking for the words that truly describe that way. And then we're looking for the truth itself: an actual experience where there is no suffering.

Now, for the most part, we tend to be disappointed. Either there are people who say they know the way, but it turns out they don't, or maybe they don't know how to describe the way if they have found it. So we don't get to the truth of the end of suffering itself. But with the Buddha, we have, one, a person who was true. He truly knows. And two, as we chant every day, *Svakkhato bhagavato dhammo*, the Dhamma of the blessed one is well taught. So his words are true.

But simply listening to the words won't take us to the actual true experience of the end of suffering. That's something we have to do. That's where *we* have to be true in really applying ourselves to the practice. This is why the Buddha said that discernment comes in three levels. The first two are the discernment that comes from listening and the discernment that comes from thinking things through. We've listened to a lot of Dhamma, we've thought a lot about the Dhamma. What remains is the third level, the discernment that comes from developing.

We may have started developing already. I don't think there's anybody sitting here who's brand new to meditation. It's simply a question of how much energy you put into it, and how much discernment you bring to it.

There are basically two things we have to think about. One is committing ourselves to the practice, and the second is reflecting on what we're doing as we practice. The Buddha himself said this is how the Dhamma is found: by committing yourself to the Dhamma and then reflecting on what you're doing. The commitment means that you're going to do this as well as you can, because it's only through doing things as well as you can that you're going to learn where you're still lacking and where you still need improvement. If you just go through the motions, part of you knows that you're not really expecting much in terms of the results. So when the results don't come, you're not surprised. But you haven't

really learned anything. This is why the Buddha uses the word *commitment*. You really give yourself to this.

Like right now, you're trying to stay with the breath, to be mindful to stay with the breath. Keep it in mind each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. If another thought comes in, you remind yourself: "No, that's not what we're here for. We're here to work on concentration."

Alertness means watching three things: The first is the breath, keeping in mind the intention to make sure it's comfortable. That connects with the feeling, the feeling of ease that you're trying to create here. That gives you three of the establishings of mindfulness right there: body, feelings, mind. When you can bring those together, they gain strength from one another. In other words, your intentions are focused on the breath. Your awareness fills the body. The breath fills the body. The sense of ease fills the body. In this way, you give the mind a good place to stay in the present moment. If you have very narrow awareness of the present moment, it's not a very pleasant place to stay. You feel squeezed. You feel constrained. But if you can spread out and fill this territory, it's a spacious place to be.

As for the fourth establishing of mindfulness—dhammas—those are basically the qualities of mind you have to bring to bear to protect the other three. If any of the hindrances show up—sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty—you have to get rid of them. Otherwise, they'll eat away at your concentration.

As for skillful qualities, those start with the factors for awakening: mindfulness, your analysis of what's going on in the present moment, your persistence, a sense of rapture, calm, concentration, equanimity. Those are things you try to give rise to when they're not there. When they *are* there, you try to maintain them. This is how all four of the establishings of mindfulness work together.

As you develop them, then this really becomes a good place to stay right here. Your mind is more and more inclined to *want* to be here. It's happy to be here.

So try to bring all of these things together. When they're brought together, that's when they grow. It's like a seed. If the seed is in a little plastic bag someplace, and the soil is in another plastic bag someplace else, and they're hidden away in the dark, away from the sun and away from water, the seed is not going to grow. But if you put them all together—you put the seed in the soil, put the soil in the sun, and then put the water on the seed—the seed will grow.

It's the same with the body, feelings, and your awareness here. When they come together, they grow. There's a sense that they become one, and you wouldn't want to separate them out again. That's concentration.

Discernment is when you begin to see that they still are separate things, even though they inhabit the same place. But for the time being, you let that question of discernment be put aside. Right now you really do want to work on getting things together. When they're not together, it's possible to divide them up in accordance with your preconceived notions, but that's not necessarily where the best places are to divide them. When you've brought them together, though, then the various components eventually will begin to separate out on their own.

Ajaan Lee's image is of having a rock. You know that there's tin and lead and silver and gold in the rock, but if you try to use a toothpick or a big axe to get the minerals out, they won't come out. You have to heat the rock. The rock sits right there, and then when the melting point for tin comes, the tin will come flowing out on its own. You raise the heat a little bit more until it reaches the melting point for lead. The lead comes flowing out. You raise it until you get to the melting point for silver. The silver comes flowing out. Finally, the same thing with the gold. They separate themselves out on their own through the intensity of your practice. In terms of your mind, *intensity* means intense mindfulness and intense alertness, as continuous as you can make them, as centered as you can make them.

This is where the element of your truth as a person comes in. If you're with the breath for a while but then wander off someplace else, it's like submitting the rock to some heat but then taking it out of the heat even before it gets to any of the melting points. It's going to cool down. Then you come back and you heat it up a little bit more. But again, just before it gets to the melting point for tin, you take it out. If you keep on doing this, then no matter how much heat you put in, no matter how much effort you put in, it's not going to get anywhere because it's not continuous. You begin to wonder if there's any tin in the rock at all—to say nothing of silver or gold.

It's when you're continually aware, continually alert, continually mindful: That's when the practice develops momentum and gathers strength. It's in this way that your truth as a practitioner makes all the difference. After all, the Buddha's knowledge is already true. The words he used to describe the path to awakening, what the results of that path are going to be—those are already true. And the truth of nibbana is true in itself. But as long as you aren't true, you're not going to get to that experience of the truth, and you won't really know how true the Buddha is, how true his words are.

So that's the missing truth: the truth of your application as you practice. But that's something you can apply and make true. If you couldn't make it true, then there'd be no purpose in the Buddha's teaching to begin with. But it is something you can become more and more truthful about: more truthful in your application, more truthful in your commitment to the practice, reflecting on what you're doing and making adjustments. The reflection is what leads to discernment. The commitment brings more concentration. The two of them acting together, back and forth: That's how all of these truths get brought together and you get to the truth of the reality of unbinding. That's when you appreciate all the other truths, and where the bewilderment around suffering finally gets totally resolved. Then, as far as the issue of suffering is concerned, as the Buddha said, the mind will have no more questions.

Meanwhile, you still have questions. But the way to answer them is not to hope that somebody else will provide you with the answers. Sometimes that may be what you need, but other times, it's simply a matter of your committing yourself to the practice, reflecting on what you're doing—and the truth will appear.