

True Honesty

July 2003

As I mentioned this afternoon, one of the amazing things about coming to teach the Dhamma in America is how difficult people find it to really sincerely have goodwill for themselves—how hard they find it to really wish for their own true happiness.

This may be because the way our culture teaches us to hate ourselves. We may be the wrong race, the wrong gender, the wrong body shape; not have enough money, not have enough power like the other people we see day after day after day on that little box in the living room. And it gets to us.

So, as part of the practice, we really have to consciously fight that old habit. Learn to sincerely wish for your own true happiness. Think of how much you'd like to live in a world where true happiness was possible, attainable.

Our society teaches us that it's not, that we have to content ourselves with scraps and leftovers—the happiness that comes from buying a certain kind of car, from eating a certain kind of snack, whatever. That's not much.

Yet our society hopes that we'll content ourselves with that, that we'll content ourselves with the rewards that come from doing the work they want us to do.

American society isn't the only one that's that way. All around the world we find societies that way, simply that it seems to be a problem here in spades because of the mass media. Human society around the world tends to content itself with less than the ideal.

The Buddha, however, was not willing to content himself with less than the ideal. He took his desire for happiness seriously. He cared about it, more than anything else. Which is why, when he ultimately did find that happiness, he took other people's desire for happiness seriously, too—sometimes more seriously than we take it ourselves.

So remind yourself that you do live in a world where true happiness is possible. It is attainable. It may be difficult, the path there may not be easy, but it's worthwhile, whatever the sacrifices are. Whatever we have to give up in terms of our pride, whatever we have to give up in terms of our desire to be already good as we are: We have to learn how to be willing to give it up, because we have to take our good qualities and make them even better than they are if we're going to find that happiness within.

But always keep that possibility in mind: that we do live in a world where true happiness is possible. So we shouldn't feel indifferent to the possibility for true

happiness. We shouldn't feel embarrassed about our desire for true happiness inside.

This is what we're working on right here: digging down into the mind. As the Buddha said, the possibility for true happiness lies right here. It's a deathless, a timeless well-being.

What obscures it? Our actions. The way we act lies in the way of that happiness—which is why we have to pay extra special careful attention to how we act. What does it mean to act? Where does the intention form? How does the intention move the body? How does it move speech? How does it move our thoughts?

This is where we have to look. This is why the issue of skillfulness is so important. It's not a distraction.

I think I've told you the story about the young man at the meditation retreat earlier this year who complained that the emphasis on skillfulness was a distraction from the deathless. All you had to do was open up to it and there it was, he said. Actually, though, it's hiding behind your unskillful actions. It's hiding behind your unskillfulness.

From the way he was treating his girlfriend there at the retreat, he seemed to be the person who, more than anybody else, needed to pay a little more attention to how unskillful he was. Perhaps he knew that, which is why he was so resistant to the teaching.

But if you're really serious about true happiness, this is what you have to look into: your unskillful actions, the ones that cause suffering.

This is why the Buddha's teachings focus on the four noble truths, because they're right there in our actions: what we do that causes suffering, what we could do to stop suffering.

Recently I've been reading some Dhamma talks where the teacher seems to think that the great part of honesty is to be honest about what a miserable meditator he is—and that the difficulty seems to lie in learning how to have equanimity about that. Be equanimous about the way things are, they say, "Well, this is what experience is. No experience is better than any other experience, so this is the experience you've got. Be honest about it."

That's not real honesty. Real honesty is being honest about what your possibilities are, what your potentials are.

After all, the Buddha pointed out that we have the potential to find that true happiness. Do you treat that possibility with honesty? That's where true honesty lies. It stretches us. It's not simply admitting where we are. That's the beginning step, but it's not the end step. The next step is how to get from where we are, dig

deeper down inside into the present moment, dig deeper down into the mind, so that we can really understand what we're doing that obscures that potential for happiness.

So be honest about where you are but also be honest about what your possibilities are. That keeps the challenge of the path always before us. That way, we don't rest content with second best or third best or wherever we are down the line.

It's a point that bears repeating that this is what honesty is: It's testing how far our potential is. Rather than simply sitting where we are, we see how much better we can get in terms of developing mindfulness, developing concentration, developing discernment, how we can skillfully work at that process of understanding what it means to act.

Reflect back on whatever skills you've learned in the past and what attitudes you needed in order to be really good at the skill. You probably learned that pushing yourself too fast or too hard, being too hard on yourself was detrimental, but at the same time, being too lazy and lackadaisical could also be detrimental as well. It's finding the proper attitude to balance, to practice, practice, practice in such a way that we really do see improvement: That's how the skill is mastered.

We are on a path, after all. But it's a path that digs deeper and deeper into what's already hidden right here, right now. And the better part of honesty is seeing exactly what is here right now, what potentials for happiness lie within that will more than repay that desire for true happiness.

That question that the Buddha said lies at the beginning of wisdom—"What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?": That points you in the right direction. But, as he says, when you get to the end of the path, you find that all the terms of the question get transcended.

"My": A sense of not-self comes in. "Long-term": Long-term implies time, but this is timeless. "Welfare and happiness": The happiness of the deathless, the well-being of the deathless is something that goes beyond anything we can conceive. But those are the concepts that point us in the right direction.

The beginning of the question is what keeps us going on the right path: "What, when I do it...?" Watch what you're doing. Be careful about what you're doing. Explore this potential for acting unskillfully. What happens when you act unskillfully? Are you honest about that? What happens when you act skillfully? How skillful can you get? Are you honest about that?

Sometimes we say, "Well, I'm only going to push myself so far. I'm going to indulge this little defilement. After all, it's not too serious. It'll be okay along the path." Is that really being honest with yourself?

These are questions we have to ask if we want to take our desire for true happiness seriously, if we don't want to squeeze it and strangle it, smother it up in indifference, smother it up in hopelessness, or with any of the other habits we have in our mind that we're not willing to give up for the sake of true happiness.

When you look at the habits you're asked to give up, they're all pretty miserable habits: pride, laziness, the impulse to look for short-term gratification. These are all pretty miserable habits and yet they seem to be the ones we hold on to the most. So ask yourself, "Is it worth holding on to them when the price is that you miss that opportunity for satisfying your desire for true happiness?" We're always making a trade. The question is, are you making a good trade? Will you go for the gold? Or are you ending up with the flax?

There's a story they tell in one of the suttas about two men who go into a city that's been abandoned. There was a sudden exodus of people from the city and they left lots of their possessions behind. So two men from a neighboring city go in to check it out, to see what they might be able to pick up.

They come across some flax, so they each tie up a big bundle of flax. Then they come across some linen thread, and one of the men says, "Well, actually this is what we were getting the flax for anyhow, so that we could spin thread out of it. Let's put down our flax bundles and pick up this thread instead." But his friend says, "Well, no, I've worked so hard at bundling up my flax. I'll just carry this bundle." So he carries his bundle while the other man throws the flax away and picks up the thread.

From that point on they find progressively more and more valuable things: linen cloth, linen clothing. From linen they discover all different kinds of metals, ultimately up to silver and then to gold.

The first man says, "Well, the reason we got the flax to begin with was because we wanted gold. So let's abandon what we've got and take the gold." At that point, he has silver but his friend still has the bundle of flax.

But his friend says, "Well, I worked so hard at bundling up this flax and this is really my flax so I'm kind of attached to it, so I'm going to hold on."

So the first man throws away his bundle of silver and picks up a bundle of gold and takes that back.

Well, you can imagine who really benefitted, whose family was happy with what was brought back from the city. Yet, all too often we're unwilling to let go of our bundle of flax to pick up the linen or the silver or the gold.

So be careful. Make sure you're not the person wandering around with that bundle of flax. You're here to pick up the gold.