

Truths of the Will

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The forest tradition started out as a peasant movement. When we think of peasant movements, we usually think of peasant uprisings, but this was a different kind of peasant movement. These peasants focused on finding ultimate happiness. Ajaan Mun was the son of a peasant. Most of his students were sons of peasants. Looked at from the outside, it would seem very unlikely that the movement would be a major force in revitalizing Buddhism in Thailand, and yet it was. You can imagine sociologists back in those days looking at it and saying, "This movement has no chance of succeeding." The Thai government at the time was trying to stamp out any independent movements. And yet here we are.

You notice that one of the themes in Ajaan Mun's talks, among the few talks that were recorded, is that your social standing doesn't have any bearing on your potential as a meditator. He said all you need in order practice is to be a human being, and that's what you are. You've got a human body. You've got a human mind. Those are all the raw materials you need to practice. It's simply a matter of taking what you've got and developing it.

This is important to reflect on when you start getting discouraged in the practice, when it doesn't seem to be working and when you look back at your own past failures. Right now, those things don't matter. What matters is your application to the practice right now. The mindfulness, the persistence that you bring to the practice: This will make all the difference in the world.

We were talking earlier today about two kinds of truths: truths of the observer and truths of the will. Truths of the observer are facts where you have no role in determining how valid or true they are. You simply observe them. That's your role. You observe them and you try to figure them out. In that area, elements of faith and will are directed mainly at simply your faith in the usefulness of observation. But the validity of the truth itself is something that's independent of you.

Truths of the will, though, are something different. You have to bring them into being for them to be true. If you don't bring them into being, they don't happen. They never become a reality. A relationship with another person is a truth of the will. Skills you develop are truths of the will. In this area, faith, confidence, conviction make all the difference in the world. If you refuse to get into a relationship until you have all the evidence you need to prove that it's going to work, that relationship will never happen. If you refuse to work at a skill until you

get the evidence that it's a worthwhile skill and you have the capacity for doing it, the skill will never happen. You've got to believe in the skill, and you've got to believe in yourself. That belief is the primary ingredient that will make that skill a truth, a reality.

Meditation is a truth of the will. Nibbana at the end of the path is not something you can will, but you *can* will the path to nibbana. So you've got to have faith in yourself. You've got to have faith in the path that will take you there. In terms of the raw materials, you've got this human body here. It breathes. You can watch the breath. It's got all that physical parts of the body that you can use to meditate on. Nothing is lacking.

As for the mental requisites, you've got them as well. It's simply that they haven't been developed properly. Intention lies at the basis of everything. As the Buddha once said, everything is rooted in desire. Based on desire comes the intention to actually act on the desire, to act toward what you want.

Attention is what determines how you look at your life. The Buddha talks of a quality called appropriate attention—*yoniso manasikara*, is the Pali term. Basically it means looking at things in the right way. And that's something you can will. Looking at things the right way basically means looking at them in terms of the four noble truths, looking at the world in terms of suffering and the cause of suffering, the possibility for an end of suffering, and the fact that there is a path of practice leading there. You look at your mind and see which events in the mind fall into which truth. Where is the suffering in your mind? It's there. You don't have to look for it anywhere else. The cause of suffering is right there as well, It's right there in the craving. Look for that, too. And in doing the looking, you're developing the path.

All these things are right here. It's simply a question of how much you're able to stick with the practice. There will be setbacks, as with any truth of the will, but you can't let the difficulties get in the way. You can't let your doubts get in the way. You want to be observant. You want to be careful. And for that purpose, you have to have a certain amount of skepticism—not skepticism in your ability, but just skepticism as to what's coming up in the mind that pretends to be a skillful quality or a skillful intention. You've got to look at it very carefully, to make sure which of the four noble truths it actually falls under. Is it a part of the path or is it part of the path of practice leading to suffering, which comes out of ignorance and craving? To see that requires that you be very, very perceptive.

But you've got to believe in the process that it is useful to look at your intentions, that you can learn from looking at your intentions, and that by doing

so, you can begin to ferret out which ones are trustworthy, which ones are not, which ones should be cultivated, which ones should be abandoned.

An important part of the practice is keeping up your faith, keeping up your conviction in what you're doing and in your ability to do it. This is a quality called emotional intelligence, the ability not let your discouragement get in the way, not let your missteps get in the way. You've got to learn how to give yourself pep talks, give yourself encouragement, keep your values clearly in mind. Don't let the setbacks get you down. Focus on the things that you do right when you need that encouragement.

This is how truths of the will actually become true. The path, after all, is something fabricated. It's something you have to put together. And it's not going to happen unless you believe in yourself, unless you believe in the path. So you've got to keep that belief strong. Where skepticism should come in is when you look at individual events in the mind. Some of them seem to be skillful, but when you put them to the test, they turn out not to be. Okay, be willing to admit that. Be willing to admit your mistakes and you'll be able to learn from them. Don't let it be a source of discouragement. Let it be your source of knowledge. The attitude that's willing to learn from your failures as well as your successes is what'll get you through. Learn how to develop that attitude. That, too, is a truth of the will.

Some people find this easier than others. But all of us can develop the proper attitude. As the Buddha said, if it weren't possible to abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones in their place, he wouldn't have taught people to do just that. But it is possible. Anybody can do it if you set your mind to it. It's the intention that makes all the difference.

So learn to be clear about your intentions, recognizing which ones you should cultivate, which ones you should drop, so that the truth of the path, that fourth truth, becomes a reality in the mind—and the third noble truth, the end of suffering, will become a reality in the mind as well. That way, nibbāna, unbinding, total freedom from suffering, which actually goes beyond the third noble truth, will be something you touch right here. As the Buddha says, you touch it with the whole body, with your whole experience.

Right now, those are just words. But if you apply yourself to the practice, you can find out for yourself whether there's more to the words than just words. As we chanted just now, this is something for wise people to know for themselves. And "wise" here doesn't mean just knowing books and knowing how to explain things, and knowing how to abstract your ideas and make systems out of them. Wisdom means looking very clearly at your intentions, being able to tell skillful from unskillful right in your own mind. Wise means looking at your tendency to like to

do things that will give bad results and not to like to do the things that will give good results, and developing your ingenuity so you can get around that obstacle, so that no matter how much you like to do something or don't like to do something, it's not the issue. When you see that something will give good results, you follow through with it. If you see something will give bad results, you drop it. That's the beginning of wisdom right there.

And it's not just the beginning. It's a principle that carries all the way through. We have the example of Ajaan Mun and the whole forest tradition. From the outside it might seem very unlikely that they would have been able to find anything special in their practice, but they did. So take heart from their example. As the Buddha once said, if people stick with the path of right practice, the world will not be empty of arahants. We can't guarantee whether other people will stick with the path, but you yourself can guarantee that you will, if you set your mind to it.