

Comfortable with the truth

(a talk by Bhante Thanissaro, Wat Metta 9. September 2005)

A mental vision is often like a physical vision. Our eyes point out. And we tend to focus on things outside as well. Especially when things aren't going well. We look for somebody/something outside to blame for the problem. And if you'll have act the whole world straightend out in order to be happy, well, it would never happen; you'd die first.

And as it turns out that's not where the real problem is. The problem is inside. As the Buddha said, we suffer because of craving and ignorance. And one of the major issues in ignorance is not seeing where we are causing ourselves suffering. When they say ignorance of the four noble truths, that's precisely what they mean: We don't see our own craving, we don't see our own ignorance, and so we keep doing things to cause suffering, and we don't know. Or when we happen to do things right where we're not causing ourselves suffering we haven't figured it out why that's happening. We don't see the connections.

And this ignorance is not all that mysterious. As the Buddha pointed it out in his instructions to Rahula. Lesson one in the Dharma. One, he said: "be truthful", and two: "look at your intentions". Look at your actions, look at the results of your actions. Precisely that is where we don't like to look. It's a lot easier to lay the blame on other people than it is to say, well maybe something is wrong with our motivations, maybe something is wrong with our intentions. Partly because as children we're taught to lie about our intentions. To get away from being punished: "I didn't mean to do it", "I didn't think that would happen". Many times you did mean to do it. Many times you did think what would happen. But you can't tell that to your parents. Otherwise you'd get punished. Or we deny that some harm happened because of our own actions. Again, fear of punishment. This gets internalized, even when there is nobody standing over us to punish, as we learn not to look at our own intentions, we learn not to look at the

results of our actions. And as a result, huge areas inside the mind become unknown territory, big blank spaces.

And it is precisely those areas there that we need to know about if we're going to gain any headway and put an end to suffering. It's not a question of learning about emptiness, or Buddha nature, or anything abstract like that, but just looking at: "Look, what am I intending right here right now. What's my motivation?" Looking again, and again, and again. Each time, preferably before you act. So you can check yourself in time. And then see what's happening as a result of your action.

And an important way to approach this is to have the right attitude towards your mistakes. Many times you don't like to admit mistakes. So that just buries them deeper and deeper in ignorance. But the Buddha, when he's teaching Rahula, taught: You should be open with your mistakes, tell them to other people, I mean. Not to get yourself all tied up in remorse. Cause that just makes the problem worse. When you get tied up in remorse it lowers your energy level, lowers your self-esteem, and it gets harder and harder to decide to do the right thing. And what the Buddha says of what he calls shame over the mistakes you've made is not (...) you should have a low opinion of yourself. Actually you should have a high opinion of yourself, that you're a better person, and that you're not the sort of person who normally does that and wants to continue that kind of thing. And you are honest enough to want to look for help. That's why it's best to be open. That's why the monks confess their offenses to each other. That is why the practice is not a solitary fare. You want to learn from the wisdom of others. And the best way to do that is to be open. And then you take what you've learned from your own experience, you take what you've learned from the wisdom of others and: try again, try again. Keep trying. Because if you don't keep trying then things start backsliding. And this large area of ignorance in the mind just stays in the dark.

So this is the basic principle in Dharma principle, if you keep looking inside what's wrong that doesn't mean there's nothing wrong outside. There's plenty of things wrong outside. But if you focus on them all the

time you miss the areas where you are actually responsible for. That is: What are your intentions. How do you choose which ones to act on? You want to be transparent to yourself in this way. Otherwise, if you keep looking outside, as Ajahn Lee said, you never see the Dharma, all you see is the world. Seeing the Dharma comes from looking inside. It all depends on the directions, and the directions on which we're mentalized and focussed.

So this is why we meditate, to get more and more sensitive to our intentions and their results. Very simple, focus on the breath. See how long you can stay with your breath, see what other things come up and push you off. And then learn to be quick to come back, and learn to get quicker, so that you don't get pushed off. Usually at the beginning this is one of the most disconcerting parts of the meditation, to see how hard it is to stay focussed on something simple like this. But it's an important lesson. There are a lot of currents flowing through the mind. The Buddha calls them asavas, or fermentations, effluents, things that come flowing out. And if we are not careful they become floods, overwhelming the mind. You're sitting here, telling yourself to focus in on the breath, and all of a sudden you're far away someplace else. And the mind's been flooded. But fortunately it doesn't have to stay that way. You can pick yourself out of the flood and come back. Keep at this until you find that you can catch these outflows when they're still small, and (turn off this ... ?). On the one hand puts you in the right place to see your intentions and also gives you the strength to withstand intentions that you might ordinarily give into if you develop more and more a sense of wellbeing here with the breath. The compulsion to go after a particular idea, or a particular thought, or a particular sight, smell, taste, tactile sensation, whatever, gets a lot less when you have a good comfortable place to stay. It's like the difference of having a good home to stay in as opposed to a really harsh and punishing home, or near miserable home. It's the kids from the miserable homes who are out on the streets. Kids with the good homes tend to stay home more. It's the same with the mind.

Create a good space inside the mind where you can stay right here right

now, it's easier to stay here, you're more inclined to stay here, and you see more and more what's going on in the mind. And if you discover there are people dealing in drugs in the backrooms, well, here you know now. And (if you want them to?) not get established here then you can expel them from the backrooms. So that more and more this home of the mind more and more does become like a home, and less and less like a bus station. Otherwise you have control of who comes in, who comes out, what happens inside the home. And you get more and more confident being truthful with yourself. And the sense of wellbeing you develop makes it more and more amenable, nicer to keep focussed inside. In the past when you focussed inside all you saw was a mess. And so you didn't want to look there. But now you look inside, and you've got a nicer and nicer place to stay, nicer and nicer place to look at. This gets your inner eyes focussed in the right direction. Because if you really want to see the Dharma, this is where you have to look.