Finding the Truth Through Truth

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During the time when India was fighting for its independence from Britain and Gandhi was really on the world stage, there were lots of reporters and news about him, and he was followed everywhere. One day a reporter asked him, "Gandhi, what is God?" Gandhi went through periods of not talking as a practice, so he got a paper bag, wrote on it, and gave it to the reporter. It said, "God is truth."

And so if God is truth, then the way to God is through truth. Tonight I want to talk about how the way to the truth that sets us free—the path to that—is the path of knowing what our truth is in each moment. The way to truth is through truth.

On every level, from the grossest example to the most subtle, sublime experience, our practice is to know for ourselves, as best we can, the truth of that experience. There is a good analogy that's often used, and I think it's often used because it's a really good analogy: the analogy of climbing the mountain, where there is a discrete goal and this sense of wanting to get there. People who climb mountains really want to get there. There's a strong pull—it may not be as wholesome as wanting liberation, but nevertheless there's a very strong pull, a discrete goal, a path, and techniques of the body to get there.

And yet, the whole climb, everything hinges—and this is why I think people like climbing too—on being really present with this step so that you don't slip. That's the whole key to all of climbing: to be fully present with where your feet are, and also your hands. There's this sense of how you get to where you want to go by being fully present and knowing this moment and taking care in that way, and then it unfolds.

This seeing of the truth, and the development of our heart and mind so as to be able to ascertain the truth, is something that each of us must do if we want to know the deepest happiness that our hearts so want.

C.S. Lewis wrote: "If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end. If you look for comfort, you will not get either comfort or truth—only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin, and in the end, despair."

It's a calling I know that we all have, and it's a path that we have to walk. It's not an easy undertaking, as we all know. Any yogi can know that. The habits of the heart and mind that have been built up and developed tend much more—at least in the beginning, and not just in the beginning—towards wanting, as C.S. Lewis said, comfort. But you could read "comfort" as wanting pleasant sense experiences.

The Buddha said, "Luminous, bhikkhus, is the mind, but it is defiled by adventitious defilements." When our minds are clouded by the defilements, our ability to see clearly, to know the truth, is hindered. The classic example that I can almost guarantee everyone here has known is when we fall in love. We don't

see clearly. We see what we want to see. That clarity is hindered by deep, deep wanting. Not that it's even unwholesome wanting, but there's such strong wanting that there can be very clear personality traits that we just don't see. This can happen on the grossest level or at the most subtle level whenever the mind's natural luminous quality is hindered.

As we walk this path to truth, there are countless truths and layers of truths that we come to know and see by just paying ever closer attention to our experience. But to show how the truths deepen and build on one another, tonight we'll look at three basic layers of truth that we can experience walking this path.

First, what I would call mundane truths: truths about our personalities and the contents of our hearts and minds, and then extrapolating from that, truth about others, truth about the natural world we live in, the truth about getting things and wanting things, and the truth of the law of karma.

Then what I would call deeper truths: truths of the depth and breadth of how the defilements are in the heart and mind, truths of the three universal characteristics, and the truth of the Four Noble Truths.

And finally, what we would call the absolute truth or ultimate truth: the truth of the existence of Nibbana.

We'll look a little bit at these three truths and how we connect with them in our practice. The mundane truths are what we can know quite quickly and easily simply by consciously starting to pay attention to our lives—not even necessarily through formal practice or an intensive retreat, but just by intentionally looking at our lives in a way that perhaps we hadn't before.

And we bring our attention to our lives—to the inner world and to the outer world.

With the outer world, unfortunately, when we start to bring attention and pay attention, the thing that becomes quite immediately apparent is the condition that our outer world is in. You could call it nature or the biosphere. The level of destruction that humans through different activities are causing to the biosphere—it becomes very clear very quickly. You could say the truth about this is known.

By paying just a little bit more attention to, say, a kiwi fruit, and learning about it—that they're actually not available here, they're not grown in this country, and in the middle of January they have to be flown in from Chile at the very other tip of the hemisphere—the truth of the cost to the environment becomes clear just by paying attention, perhaps in ways we hadn't known before. It's no longer hidden with just a little bit of attention. "Oh, I didn't know that. Now I know that." Connecting with the truth of that.

The other wonderful thing about paying attention to our outer world is that it begins to show us in very simple, concrete, clear, mundane ways some of the deeper truths of the three characteristics: change, cause and effect, uncontrollability, and not-self.

I'm kind of a weather nerd, so I'll use weather examples, which are always around us. When you pay attention to the weather, to our outside environment, you can't miss change. It's just always happening. When we pay attention to the weather, we totally see uncontrollability. Things are happening through

cause and effect. You're not in control. Things are just playing out very lawfully. You wanted to do something with a friend outside one day, hoping for some nice weather, and it rains. It pours. There's no control over that. When the conditions come together for rain to happen, that will happen. It's very lawful. And it doesn't happen or not happen according to our wishes.

Very simple things, but just by looking in this way at our outside world, we can see these truths and many more with nature. Nature is such a great teacher.

So we pay attention to our outside world in a very simple way. And we also pay attention to our inside world, the inner world. When we do that, one of the things that comes right to the forefront is the truth of the state of our hearts and minds. All you have to do is sit down to meditate once or twice. It might take a couple of times because you might fall asleep the first time. But if you can stay awake, the truth that becomes known is the state of our hearts and minds, much of the time.

When I first started practicing, one day we were sitting around talking after meditating, a weekly meditation group, and we asked what all yogis ask, rightfully so, of the teacher: "Well, what effect has this had on you? This is hard stuff. What's happened for you?" He'd probably been practicing maybe fifteen or twenty years at that time. He said, "Well, basically, I've seen what a jerk I am."

I remember that. That makes me want to meditate.

But through speaking with him and through my own understanding, I came to see that he wasn't just being funny or self-deprecating. There was that level to it. But he was also letting us know one of the truths of how this path unfolds. And that is: to the sense of self, this path is totally humiliating and humbling. We need to be ready for that and work with that.

I think most people consider themselves to be fairly present and caring. No one considers themselves to be a jerk. But after just a short while meditating, the truth of the condition of the heart and mind starts to show itself. And that truth is that most of the time we're not present, thinking primarily about ourselves. And when we are thinking about others, it's with either desire or aversion.

Now, usually what happens is that we have to go through a period—even though we're told not to identify with this, most of us, and I know I have—

We create a self around what we're seeing and then create a second layer of suffering with what a bad person or a bad meditator we are.

There's this great quote by James Garfield: "The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable." He's talking about that first stage—when we identify our experience with the self, that will be miserable. Then of course we learn how to work with that.

Through continued practice and support from teachings and teachers, this identification with the defilements can begin to subside. The second layer of suffering perhaps isn't quite so strong anymore. And

that starts to open up the possibility for seeing clearly. Because when we're reacting to what we see with defilements in the mind, there's simply no ability to see clearly.

I want to highlight this point because it's really important in practice. When we identify with anything—including our character flaws or whatever we're noticing in our hearts and minds that's difficult—not only do we suffer from that identification in the moment, forming a self based on how bad we are or what a terrible meditator we are, but the ability to see clearly is also hindered. So it's like a double whammy. It doesn't feel great, it's suffering in the moment, and it creates conditions that are not supportive for clear seeing.

When we form a self based on anything and we're not noticing that—that's the key, we're not waking up to it—it becomes difficult to know the truth of our experience. I'll revisit this a little later in the talk, and I think later in the retreat I'm going to give a talk just on that: how the delusion of forming a self based on "not good enough" operates. I can speak about that.

Then again with the outer world—when we pay attention to our outer world, it includes the people in our lives that we know well. As we begin to know our own inner life through meditation, and the forces that occupy and shape our life, our internal forces, we can extrapolate and get to know the forces that shape and occupy the people we're close to. Just as we come to know our own difficulties and the unwholesome behaviors and mind states behind them, we get to see those of our friends and family and intimate partners as well. That also starts to become clearer.

Now, how we relate to them when they're exhibiting these behaviors based on internal processes will be the same way that we've developed in how we relate to ourselves. This is another important point about why it's essential to try not to identify with what we see in our own experience, in our hearts and minds. Because if we do identify with it, we will give ourselves a hard time. It's not like we might—we will. And as that builds up into a pattern, we're going to do the same with other people.

I saw that really clearly. I was just on retreat myself. You know when you're on retreat and you feel past behavior really strongly? Well, one episode came up powerfully for me with my wife, and it was like, ouch. But it's good. The ouch is good. It kind of sets us straight. What came to my mind right in that moment is when kids go bowling and they put up those bumpers—they block the gutters with those boards. Have you ever seen those? The ball goes off course, hits the bumper, and it sends it back on course. When we touch these painful parts, it sends us back on course. It automatically sends us more straight toward where we want to go.

But anyway, I could see that the reason I was behaving in that way towards her was directly—directly—related to how I was with myself in a certain way. It was just so clear. So this is another important reason to practice and work with trying not to identify with what comes up in our practice. Because as we are with ourselves, we will be with others.

As we hopefully start to learn not to identify so much with what we see, and we keep paying attention to our inner world, another truth begins to emerge. We start to see that this acquiring of material objects and pleasant experiences is empty. We start to notice that hollow feeling that comes with it. And we start to see that it's not as fulfilling as we once thought it was.

I used to really enjoy snow skiing, downhill skiing. If someone asked me what my favorite thing in the world was, I'd say downhill skiing without hesitation. You're outside, carving these turns—it's just the best. That perfect turn was the one thing I keyed in on. That was the whole experience of downhill skiing in my mind.

And then, even before I came to the Dharma, I started noticing other things. It's a long car ride—three hours each way. It's expensive. It's freezing on the lift. The snow in New England is terrible. It's crowded, and the slopes get skied off quickly. There's maybe one good turn on your first run, and then it's all ice. Just broadening the view to see that this experience is so much more than that one perfect turn.

As that happened, I just started skiing less and less until I stopped altogether. It wasn't a decision, like "well, I should stop skiing." Somehow, by paying a little more attention to my experience, these other truths about skiing emerged. It wasn't just that one wonderful turn.

We start to see this in all things in our life. With so many pleasant experiences and sense pleasures that we pursue, the view broadens and we begin to see the hollowness, or even the suffering and difficulty, that is tied up in them—even in mundane ways. We're not yet talking about deeper truths; just practical things like the expense of skiing, the long drive, the cold.

Now, if we can avoid turning away from some of these other truths about pleasant experience—either through denial or through beating ourselves up for wanting pleasant things, or through simply engaging in more acquiring behavior—then some of these deeper truths can start to be revealed when we really begin to look. We can start to see some of the deeper truths of suffering and craving, the first and second noble truths.

At the risk of being redundant, I want to point out again that when we see this level of desire operating in our hearts and minds—this desire for sense pleasures and experience—it's so important not to identify with it, to rejoice rather than beat ourselves up. Beating ourselves up is just not a great place to meditate from. There's very little clear seeing that happens when we're in that place. The truth of dukkha and its connection to craving will simply be missed. We're too busy beating ourselves up.

Bringing some understanding or wisdom to our practice about the importance of not identifying with experience is really helpful in not getting stuck. This is where Sayadaw U Tejaniya's teachings are so important. He says to bring some wisdom to your practice—don't go in without any understanding.

There are three layers of wisdom. First, the wisdom that we can know through reading or hearing—we hear something and think, "yes, yes, I understand." Then there's wisdom through reflection, where we

think about it and recognize that it really does make sense, that it resonates with our experience. And then, of course, there's the wisdom we're ultimately after in this practice: wisdom through our own direct experience, through the unshakable knowing that yes, this is true for me.

We can't necessarily bring that third level into our practice from the start, but we can bring those first two levels. They prepare the ground.

The last mundane truth I'll discuss is that of karma. When we pay attention to both our inner world and our outer world, the truth of cause and effect is right there. I mentioned with the weather—it's very easy to see cause and effect. It's everywhere. It's really all that's happening.

Now, not all cause and effect is karma. If the wind blows, the trees sway. That's cause and effect, but there's no karma there because there's no intention. Karma, while being cause and effect, is based on intention—with unwholesome intentions giving rise to unwholesome effects or fruits, and wholesome intentions giving rise to wholesome or happy results.

As we pay attention to our inner world, we can start to see the various intentions behind our thoughts, speech, and action. These intentions are normally not known. They usually operate underground with people who don't have a practice of watching their own mind and heart. But when we do watch, we can start to see and know these intentions. And as we continue to pay attention, it becomes possible at times to

clearly see the effect of those intentions, both in our inner and outer worlds.

One time this happened to me so clearly. And it's not always this clear, right? Because the Buddha said, don't try to figure out karma because your head will explode. There are so many effects going into a single cause, a multitude of conditions. But sometimes it can be quite clear.

Our family was at the beach, and I was just being kind of a jerk. I was throwing rocks at my nephew, just little rocks, bugging him. And at that time, my niece was about three or four. All of a sudden, I knew—I saw it all in the corner of my eye. I saw it coming. She had picked up a grapefruit-sized rock, and she came over to me, and as hard as she could—I just saw it coming—wham, she nailed me on the head with it. I saw stars, the blood's coming down. It was quite a scene. Poor gal, she really felt bad. She just wanted to play. She just wanted to join in the game that uncle and nephew were playing.

And it was just so clear: cause and effect. I had some unwholesome intentions, just kind of being a scoocher. And wham, there it was. Okay, I get it.

Another way this becomes apparent, one that I feel as more intense, is when you notice the habitual places where your mind goes when it wanders. And you see: that's conditioned. My mind goes there because it's gone there a lot. And it's like, whoa. I've conditioned that to happen. And as it's happening, it's conditioning it more. We see that. It's not always a terrible place, but the mind can go to quite self-centered or fearful places. And you can see very clearly: yes, that's conditioned to happen when

there's not mindfulness.

Seeing the truth of karma is really helpful because we see that everything we do matters as far as our happiness or lack of it is concerned. And this tends to make us want to pay more attention. When we see that—at least for me—the result is like, oh, I really want to pay attention.

So those are some of the more mundane or evident truths we can know just by starting to pay attention to our lives. Truth about ourselves and others. About the natural world we live in and how we're affecting it. The truth about the habit of wanting and sense pleasures, and the truth of karma. And even the beginnings, in a kind of mundane, natural way, of noticing the three characteristics: change, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self or conditioned arising. These insights naturally deepen over time into seeing more profound truths, or seeing these same things at a deeper level.

As we continue to be mindful, lots of things become apparent—which is why I said at the beginning of the talk that there are lots and lots of things we see. I'm just choosing this particular progression to talk about. But as we get more and more mindful of our experience in a more nuanced way, we see in a more nuanced way how the defilements are kind of omnipresent in our experience—especially moha, especially delusion. You could say the truth of this matter comes into view.

As we're able to be with this truth and take it in and not react to it—that's the key—as we're really able to take this in saying, "Yes, this is how it is," and not react to it, or as Steve Armstrong says, as we're able to bear our karma, two things happen. Actually, many things happen, but I'll highlight two.

The more we see the defilements and don't react to them, naturally there's less reactivity in the mind. In the moment, there's less reactivity because we're not reacting to them. But in the long term, because we keep seeing them, slowly they start to diminish. Both of these conditions—not reacting in the moment when a defilement becomes known, and then the slow diminishing of defilements through the seeing of them—support us in having a clearer lens to our moment-to-moment experience.

And with this clear lens, the three characteristics of everything that's happening—it's like the grain starts to raise. If you had a board, a sanded but unfinished board, it's just kind of dull. And then you take linseed oil or some kind of finish and you paint it on... Anyone a woodworker here? It's the best moment. It's like, wow. And you see, oh, look—there's the grain. There's the beautiful grain.

So our clear seeing is the linseed oil. It allows what's there to be known, to be seen clearly. These truths have been there all along. Everything is shouting to us the truth. It's just that the apparatus isn't quite honed in to see it.

Another example. I used to love ice cream—actually, I still love ice cream. I'm definitely a greed type. And ice cream was really one of my favorite sense pleasures. There were times I would have ice cream twice a day. Once, a long time ago, in another marriage, we went out for ice cream in the middle of a blizzard. The guy behind the counter was like, "What are you doing here?" We wanted ice cream. It was just a great

sense pleasure—a fun thing to go out with people, cool in the summer.

Now, this example comes from after I had been practicing for a while. I just started to look at my experience. It was like, this is happening a lot. Let's check this out. I began to notice my mind state and also how one thought in the morning—maybe I'll have ice cream today—when not really seen, could condition the whole day and end up in the fruition of me having ice cream. Not that that's even a bad thing, but just by starting to pay attention, I began seeing the cause and effect process with mind and body, and how much power thoughts have when we're not mindful of them.

So I started to look at ice cream on that level, starting to feel the desire for it even before I got it, noticing what that was like in the mind, how that thought—will I have ice cream today?—actually carried a lot of suffering throughout the day. And then more about eating ice cream itself. It's cream. It's heavy. It's really heavy. It's like taking a pint of heavy cream and just drinking it. I started to really tune into my body. The feeling in the stomach, in the mouth. I would notice I would get incredibly thirsty. I started to notice that and put it together—oh, I'm thirsty every time I eat ice cream.

Just slowly seeing, bringing attention to the process more and more. And without trying, without saying ice cream is bad to eat or I'm bad for eating ice cream, through connecting with the truth of the moment about the experience of eating ice cream, I just started to eat it less and less and less. And now I really don't eat it that much. It's not like I never eat ice cream. But I just know. It changes. It's very short-lived. It's impermanent. It's unsatisfactory. There's actually suffering wrapped up in the whole thing.

This is a fairly gross example, but this process of looking, seeing, understanding, and then release is the same for every level of our experience, from the grossest to the most subtle.

That can be the first thing that happens. And then our continued mindfulness becomes the ground for noticing dukkha as a characteristic. It's also the ground for knowing dukkha as the first of the noble truths. Through the heightened sensitivity to our heart and mind and to our experience—and how we're relating to it—that constant or at least consistent mindfulness cultivates, we begin to understand that dukkha isn't just when we stub our toe or when we get jealous. It's a truth of every moment of our experience, including the happy ones.

My best example of this, on a mundane level, is this: let's say you're away on a vacation. You're hiking or whatever you're doing, for a week. It's about early afternoon of day four. And you notice what day it is. And it's like, oh. It's coming. The end is coming.

Have you felt that? That's the dukkha of pleasant experience—because it's going to end. And you can feel it.

But this truth, far from being a bummer, when understood rightly, really shows us the reason we've suffered in the past. It points to this: the not understanding of dukkha is why we've suffered. And the result of that misunderstanding was craving.

We can start to see this for ourselves. We can start to see what the Buddha meant when he said, "And what is the cause by which stress comes into play? Craving is the cause by which stress comes into play." And then he said, "Monks, I don't envision one other fetter, fettered by which beings conjoined go wandering and transmigrating for a long, long time in samsara, like the fetter of craving. Fettered with the fetter of craving, beings conjoined go wandering and transmigrating for a long, long time."

The cause of suffering is craving, and craving arises dependent on the ignorance of dukkha—also on the ignorance or delusion of a sense of self. But a big underpinning for the arising of craving is the ignorance of dukkha. When dukkha is seen clearly, craving is seen clearly. They're very much together.

The Buddha said this first noble truth of dukkha must be understood. And we understand it by seeing, by looking at our experience, at the truth of our experience. It seems like every dharma talk I say this, no matter what the topic: you could say the whole practice boils down to one thing. So tonight I'm going to say, you could say our practice boils down to deepening and refining our understanding of the truth of dukkha. One could make an argument that that's basically what we're doing.

So we move through more mundane truths of our life and our world, and then deeper truths about the depth of the defilements, about the universal characteristics, the noble truths, and finally the deepest truth—absolute truth that can be known. To the degree that the truth of dukkha is understood is to the degree that craving is abandoned.

When craving is completely abandoned, the mind simply dwells in its natural state of knowing. That's what the mind does. It does it very well when it's not hindered—clearly knowing the truth of each moment. And the result of clearly knowing the truth of each moment, when it's not defiled, is that the mind is filled with deep equanimity. It simply dwells with equanimity.

And when that is matured, when it's accompanied by the maturation of the rest of the paramis, then the door opens to the most important truth we can know: the third noble truth, the truth of the cessation of suffering. As Bhikkhu Bodhi says, by putting an end to the constructing of conditioned reality, we open the door to what is ever-present but not constructed, not conditioned—the asankhata dhatu, the unconditioned element. This is nibbana, the deathless, the stilling of volitional activities, the final liberation from all conditioned formations and thus from impermanence and death.

So that's the top of the mountain.

If you believe that the truth will set you free, and you want to know for yourself, in your own experience, the deepest happiness that's possible for a human being, then start noticing what's true right now. The way to truth is through truth. It's that simple.

And how do we do it? Very simply, we ask ourselves: What's being known right now? What's the truth I can know right now of this moment?

Hearing sounds. Great. What are they doing? Arising and passing away. Great. What's my relationship to them? I don't like them. Great. How does that affect the mind? It's suffering. Great. Great to see. Pushing away experience leads to suffering. Great.

Or the breath is known. In this moment, I know the breath. It's just the truth of this experience. Great. What's my relationship to it? There's no wanting or not wanting.

How does that affect the heart and mind? There's no suffering. Know that.

Notice that in either example, nothing was changed, gotten, or gotten rid of—just connecting with the truth of each successive moment. That's all. It simply unfolds from a clear, simple, non-judgmental knowing of the truth of just this moment.

And again, I'm using "truth" not like some absolute thing. It's simply what we can know, as best we can, about our experience in this moment. That's what I mean when I say the word truth.

Eckhart Tolle says, "Whenever you deeply accept this moment as it is, no matter what form it takes"—and we have to remember that one a million times, *no matter what form it takes*—"you are still. You are at peace."

Wisdom comes with the ability to be still. Just look and listen. No more is needed.

So let's just be still and look and listen, just for a moment.

Wisdom comes with the ability to be still. Just look and listen. No more is needed.

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