

# Active Truth

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The Buddha had a very active sense of the truth. True things on the conditioned level, he said, don't exist in isolation; they're part of a causal chain. They come from previous and co-existing conditions, and they affect conditions that come after them or together with them. And as for the truths we talk about, the truths that can be taught, those are active, too. They have an impact on the person who talks about them, and on the person who listens; they lead to certain kinds of actions. Because of this, the Buddha said that something that was false could not be useful, in the genuine sense of the term. There's a passage where he talks about different kinds of speech: speech that's true but not useful; speech that's true and useful. And then there's the question of whether people like to hear it or not. But there's no category for things that are useful and false.

What this means is that if you want to find a truth, one way of testing it is to see the impact it has. If it's genuinely useful, then it's a truth. And this is why the Buddha said that his teachings should be put to the test, because this is how you can know if they're true: by seeing what impact they have on your behavior. If you take a teaching and put it into practice, what does it do? What do *you* do? And what are the results of what you do? If you find the results really do have a good impact on the mind – that's a truth.

For instance, the teachings on karma: They ask you to accept four things: (1) There really is such a thing as an action that's done; this is not an illusion, it's not unreal. (2) We are responsible for our actions. In particular, there's a mental event, an intention informed by views, that causes those actions. (3) The action has an effect. And (4) the quality of the effect is determined by the quality of the mind state causing the action. The Buddha's proof for these principles is: What happens when you put them into action? What difference will they make? Well, think of what would happen if you *didn't* believe these things, if you felt that your acts didn't really matter, that they really weren't true, that the idea of a good or a bad action was somehow a fiction: Imagine the way you'd act. Or if you felt that you could do something but then hope for some higher being to come along and forgive you and erase the results of that action: How would you act then?

If you believe in the principle of action, then you're going to be very careful about what you do. You're going to check the results. Any mistake you make, you can take as a lesson – a mistake here being that you've harmed either yourself or the people around you. That's the way the teaching is tested and put into effect. And you can see the effect: It does have a good impact on the way you act. You become more and more skillful, create less and less suffering for yourself and others. That's how the Buddha proves the principle of action,

proves the principle of karma. He doesn't cite his own memories of previous lifetimes or proof that someone can have a consciousness that goes from one life to the next and then remember what had happened in previous lifetimes. That's not the proof.

When people say that all the Buddha's teachings have to be proved in an empirical way, they usually use this as an argument against the principle of karma, against the principle of rebirth. Most people can't remember their past lifetimes, therefore they can't prove the teaching, therefore it's not a relevant teaching, maybe not even Buddhist. That's the line of reasoning. But that kind of empirical proof is not what the Buddha had in mind. His proof is more pragmatic: Take a teaching, put it into effect, and see what results you get. If you get good results, that's a true teaching. But he also has room for what he calls "individual" truths versus "noble" truths. Sometimes you hear that the Buddha taught two levels of truth, but the only time he makes a distinction between two types of truth is this one: things that are true for you, individually, and things that are true for everybody, across the board. That's one of the meanings of "noble": standard, universal, all across the board.

As we're meditating, we're trying to sort through the things that are true for us individually so that ultimately we can get to noble truths, things that are true across the board. You find that when you meditate – you focus on your breath like this or that – it works, it gets good results. In the beginning you're dealing for the most part with individual truths, because sometimes a particular focus or a particular way of conceiving the breath is going to work for one session – in other words, it works for a particular problem – and the next time you sit down and meditate, it doesn't. That's because you've got a different problem. The old approach may have been true for that particular problem, but new problems pop up time and again.

You have to take note of what you learn from each session of sitting or walking meditation, and then test it the next time around. If it doesn't work the second time around, you can chalk it up either to the fact that you weren't observing carefully the first time – there were things that you missed – or that it was a solution to a different problem, not the problem you're facing now. In this way you begin to build up your body of knowledge, your body of individual truths. But if you work with them skillfully, you find that they head more and more toward the noble truths. You learn to sort things out in terms of stress and its cause, the path leading to the end of stress and the actual ending of stress. It's when you hit that last one, which is formally the third noble truth: That's when you know you've hit the noble truths as a whole. You've understood them properly, you've performed the right tasks appropriate to each.

Even these truths are active truths. Stress is something the Buddha says to comprehend. Normally we want to run away from it or push it away, but the Buddha says that you've got to comprehend it. If you don't comprehend it, you can't get past it. It's like that riddle of the Sphinx: The Sphinx stands across the

road with a riddle; anyone who comes up and can't answer the Sphinx's riddle gets eaten up. If you can answer the riddle, you get past. It's the same with stress: You've got to be able to answer the riddle of stress so that you can get past it.

As the Buddha said, our normal reaction to stress and pain is, one, bewilderment and, two, a search for a way out. The only way to get beyond your bewilderment is to sit and watch the stress. And the only way you can do that is to put the mind in a position where it doesn't feel threatened by the stress. That's what the path is for—and particularly the heart of the path: Right Concentration, putting the mind in a state of ease, even rapture, focused on one thing. This gives the mind a sense of power, a sense of safe haven, a safe place to go. When you have this sense of safe haven, you can begin to probe into things that you'd normally be afraid of.

To make another comparison: It's like fighting a dragon. If you know you have good, strong armor and the dragon's breath can't burn you, then you can get in close to the dragon and find its weak point.

This is why concentration is such an important part of the path. It puts you in a position of strength, where you can get intimate with the pain and yet not be anxious. It gives you a sense of confidence that when things get difficult, you don't have to worry. This is one of the reasons why the forest ajaans recommend going out into the wilderness, for when you get out there, all kinds of things can happen. If you sit there worrying about them, you can't stay. You end up running back. But if you have your wits about you, then you can get the mind into a state of concentration so that it doesn't fixate on all the dangers and problems of being in the wilderness. So that's one level of problem that concentration can help you overcome: your fears.

Second, when difficult things actually happen, you find that you can withstand them with your concentration. There's a great passage in the *Theragatha* where the monk is reflecting on the fact that he's in some pretty bad pain, he's really sick. "What are you going to do?" he asks himself. "There's no medicine, no doctor, and nobody around to help. As you stay here in the grove, what are you going to do—are you going to run away?" "No," he answers, "I'm going stay here and I'm going to focus on the four frames of reference and the seven factors for Awakening. That'll be the mind's protection."

In other words, he realizes that his safety lies in looking after the mind. You look after the body to the extent that you can, but then you have to realize that this is a dying body. It's like those cars made with planned obsolescence—it's designed to fall apart at some point. There comes a time when no matter how much you worry about it, how much you try to fight off death, the body's still going to go on its own. Your only safety lies in developing these qualities of mind. Sometimes the power of mind can actually heal the body. But there will come times when it can't. Still, at that point it doesn't matter, when the powers of the mind are really strong. So this is why concentration is something you want to develop.

Again, sometimes you hear that when you're meditating, being mindful, and a good strong state of concentration comes along, you have to be wary of getting attached to the concentration, so just let it come, let it go. And somehow in that way you transcend the attachment. Well, that's not what the Buddha taught. Concentration is to be developed. You take time, you work at it. Even if it involves a certain amount of attachment, it's attachment to a good thing. It's like holding on to the rungs of a ladder: You don't want to let go of one rung unless you've got your hand on another rung or you've finally reached the roof. That's when you can get off the ladder totally, and you're safe on the roof. As Ajaan Fuang once said: Don't be afraid of getting attached to a state of concentration; be afraid that you won't *get* to the concentration, or that you won't be able to maintain it. Once you're there, once you're attached to it, then you can work on the attachment.

So the path is nothing to be feared – after all, the Buddha said, the pleasure of concentration is nothing to be feared. It's something to be developed.

This is how you prove the truth of his teachings. You work with them and you find that they really do lead to the end of suffering. That's when you've got your proof. Up to that point, things haven't yet been proven. They haven't gone beyond the level of linguistic convention. Certain things will give you a sense of confidence – you see results here and there – but only when things open up to the Deathless will you have your proof. You've seen suffering stop, and nobody can say that you haven't. That's when you know for sure that what the Buddha taught was true: There is a Deathless and it can be attained through human effort.

But the teachings require that you, too, be true. You have to be honest in your effort. When your effort doesn't measure up to what the Buddha taught, you can't say that you've proven his teachings false. You've simply chipped away at them a little bit, but you haven't done enough yet to prove them one way or the other. Be honest with yourself – that's how you can really test the path. In other words, as Ajaan Lee once said, to know the truth of the Buddha's teaching you have to be true, too – true in the active sense: not just knowing true things, but true in your actions. And the proof of your truth comes when you hit the Deathless. That's when you know that you can rely on yourself. As the Buddha said, those who have reached the stream in this way will never intentionally do anything wrong because they've seen the principle of action, the truth of action, and the action of truth. And they'll never intentionally be false again.