The World of Conviction

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Sometimes you read that the Buddha was a really nice guy. He had some interesting ideas. He didn't push them on anybody. He didn't think that they were necessarily true for anyone else, but they had worked for him and they might work for you. He didn't mean them as absolute truths.

But when you actually look at his teachings and the claims he made—that he achieved unexcelled supreme self-awakening, and he had tested it from many angles—the fact that he didn't push his ideas on people didn't mean that he wasn't 100% sure about them. It's simply that he realized that he wasn't anyone's creator, and he wasn't anyone's father, aside from Rāhula, so he wasn't in a position to make demands of you. But he was sure that if you were sincere in putting his teachings to the test, you would find that they were true. All he asked was that you had enough conviction that you'd be willing to give them a fair test.

Here again, there's a lot of misinformation out there: that there's no faith in Buddhism. It's all very rational. But even rational teachings require some faith, require some conviction.

And in this case, it requires a fair amount. You're going to be sitting here focusing on your breath, restraining yourself from doing a lot of other things you would rather do. You hold to the precepts, again, restraining yourself from doing things you might want to do. So you have to have some sense at least that it's worth it.

Conviction comes in here. It's why the Buddha lists it as a strength and as a quality that he hopes becomes dominant in your mind, because it asks you to rethink who you are and the world you live in.

We know what that means. Your sense of who you are in a particular world is a state of becoming, so he's asking you to take on a new state of becoming: The world you live in, if you have conviction in the Buddha's awakening, is a world in which someone has gained awakening through his own efforts and is articulate enough, and observant enough, to know how to teach it to others—and compassionate enough to *want* to teach it to others. And his compassion is pure. There was no compulsion that he teach.

There's that story of how, after he gained awakening, he thought about how subtle it was—the realization he'd come to—and he wondered if it would be a waste of time to try to teach it

to anyone else. The Brahmā Sahampati read what was going on in the Buddha's mind and was alarmed. Here the Buddha had gone to all this trouble to gain awakening and he might not share his knowledge. So he came down from his heaven, got down on one knee, and pleaded with the Buddha: "Please teach. There are those with little dust in their eyes. They will understand the Dhamma." The Buddha surveyed the world with his own knowledge and realized that that was true. So he decided to teach.

The commentators get tied into knots about this story. The idea that the Buddha could even entertain the notion of not teaching others bothers them. But it's tied into the fact that when you gain full awakening, you're totally free of debt, with no obligation to anybody. Yet in that state of no obligation, he had the compassion to teach and to go through all that effort—walking all over northern India for forty-five years, teaching the Dharma, establishing the Vinaya, establishing his fourfold *parisa:* monks, nuns, lay-followers, male lay-followers, female lay-followers. That was a lot of work.

So think about that. Here's someone who's gone through all that effort to show the path to total freedom. We live in a world where that path has been shown. What does that mean about us? It means that we have the capability to follow that path. And if we have any sense of gratitude at all, we should really give ourselves to the path.

This requires that we straighten out a lot of things inside our minds because we have many different identities. A lot them would rather not be bothered, they'd be perfectly content to live an ordinary life. But then there's that one part of the mind that would like to be free and feels so stifled by conventional society, conventional values. There's a large part of society that wants to teach you how to treat that part of your mind with disrespect.

Years back there was a movie called, *The Devils,* about a priest and a nun in the Middle Ages. In the first scene, the nun's walking around with her head at a 90-degree angle because she's so warped from lack of having giving herself over to natural desires. You could tell where the movie was going. I walked out—because it seemed so unhealthy to treat the idea that the mind that desires purity, the mind that desires a true happiness, should be mocked.

But it wasn't just that one movie. It's a theme throughout our society: making fun of people who want to keep their virtue pure, making fun of people who want to find a happiness that doesn't involve sensuality.

The Buddha's saying that if you give respect to the part of the mind that wants genuine happiness, a happiness that's totally harmless, you will benefit. So he's asking you to assume the

identity of someone who wants genuine happiness.

That will require that you sort out all your other identities that don't fall in line with that, that feel threatened. This is what the teaching on not-self is for: to realize that the different identities that you have, have been gathered from who knows where—lots of different places, lots of different situations in which you observe yourself taking on a particular desire, getting some benefit from it. Sometimes you observed accurately; sometimes not accurately. The fact that the observations were not accurate doesn't mean that that particular sense of self is going to be weak. Sometimes it's the most tenacious.

So this will require sorting through your many selves, and learning how to dis-identify from those that really are not in your true best interest.

But it's a noble task. That's the other feature of the Buddha's teachings, that it confers nobility on all the people who practice it. There's the convention of nobility that's based on birth, based on family inheritance, which is always very questionable: Where did they get all that money?

That's not the kind of nobility the Buddha's talking about. He's talking about the nobility of a mind that wants to find a happiness that doesn't die, and is willing to do whatever is needed to find it—as long as it causes no harm.

The truths that inform that path are also noble. Someone once asked, "What's noble about clinging? What's noble about craving?" What's noble about them is not so much the clinging or the craving in themselves, but the attitude that the Buddha's truths about these things advise. You realize that your suffering is not caused by anything outside. There may be bad things happening outside, but the fact that the mind is suffering comes from your own actions, your own clingings and cravings. So you're taking responsibility and learning to step back from the very things that you cling to, that you hold on to, and say, "I need to comprehend these, so that I have no more passion for them." That's what's noble about that truth.

The same with the second noble truth: You step back from your craving. You realize, "I have to abandon this craving for sensuality": the fascination with thinking about and planning sensual pleasures. Craving for becoming: taking on more identities. Craving for non-becoming: craving to destroy any identities you have that you don't like. The fact that you're willing to step back and abandon them: That's what's noble about that truth.

So this is the becoming that the Buddha has you assume as you take on the practice: that you live in a world where awakening is possible, true happiness is possible, release is possible,

and you live in a world where you can become noble.

Think of the ajaans in the Forest Tradition. Most of them were born into peasant homes. Someone looking from outside might say, "Where are these people going to find nobility?" They might say "Well, the fact that they would put up with their sufferings stoically: That's noble." But they just didn't *put up* with their sufferings. They realized that they lived in a world where it was possible to find a way out, and they made the sacrifices that were needed.

So when the Buddha asks that you have conviction in his awakening, that's what he's asking: that you assume that you live in a world where true freedom is possible, and you through your efforts can find it—and you'll be ennobled in the process.

Those are good assumptions to make. All he asks is that you take them on as working hypotheses. You don't have to swear on a stack of Bibles that you believe. Simply look at your actions, see where they're causing harm, and figure out how not to cause that harm. That's all that's asked.