

The End of Uncertainty

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Very few things in life are certain. Even the thoughts we *know* to be true: To what extent are they really true? If you think of truth as the correspondence between your thought and the thing it represents, no thought can be totally true. Each thought is just a sketch. There's no one thought that can comprehend all the many levels of truth out there. Each thought is just an approximation.

So the question turns from representation to one of pragmatism: To what extent is the approximation useful? It may leave a lot out, it may not really encompass the thing, but if it serves a purpose, the thought is useful. The question then is, what's the best purpose for thoughts to serve? That's where you have to look for a truth that's not just a thought, something you really can be certain about in and of itself. And there's really only one truth that can pass that test, only one truth you really can be certain about, and that's when there's suffering and when there's not. You don't have to ask. If you experience it, you know.

And right there is where the Buddha staked all of his teachings: suffering arising, suffering passing away. Everything else he taught is arranged around that, even Right View: It's right to the extent that it helps put an end to suffering. Your thoughts are skillful or unskillful, your words and your deeds are skillful and unskillful, depending on the extent to which they put an end to suffering.

So always keep this principle in mind as thoughts come in and out of your mind. You may have heard that the Buddha taught, say, that there is no self. To what extent is the non-self teaching skillful? Where is it not skillful? Those are the questions he would have you look at, not the question of whether there is or is not a self. There are a lot of things that could be true, but this may not be the right time to think about those things. The Buddha has a teaching on Right Speech, where he says that speech can be true or not true, beneficial or not beneficial, welcome or unwelcome. He said to speak only those things that are true and beneficial. And as for the question of whether they're welcome or not welcome, he said look for the right time and place to speak.

The same principle applies to our thoughts. There's a time and a place for different types of thinking. There are times when having a strong sense of self is very useful, very beneficial, and other times when it's precisely the thing that gets in the way. The question is, "How do you know?" And the answer is, "Through trial and error" – something we don't like to hear. We'd like to have a nice formula set out. Sometimes the Buddha does set out a formula for us, but in many areas he doesn't, precisely because it's more important for us to gain our own sensitivity to our thoughts and their results. When you think something,

what happens as a result? And particularly, to what extent does it cause stress? That's what you've got to look into, and that's why we're meditating here: to get a greater sense of sensitivity as to what's causing stress in our minds, to see how it's not necessary, to see how we can let go of the cause. Then, when there seems to be relief, keep watching it for a while, because there may still be some stress in there.

The Buddha maps things out in terms of levels of stress. Even in the practice of Right Concentration, there are levels of stress. Just because the mind seems still doesn't mean that the job is done. Even when there's a great sense of luminosity or of all-encompassing awareness, the job may not be over. You've got to learn how to keep looking. I've known some people who've been through the sort of education that aims at fostering self esteem, and the problem with that is that it fosters complacency. It teaches them not to learn how to judge the results of their actions. Everything they do is supposed to be good, a cause for self esteem, and yet they may be doing a lot of harm. So the important thing is for them to learn how to be sensitive to the harm that comes from their thoughts, words, and deeds.

This applies not only outwardly, but also inwardly, in the practice of meditation. When you do something, look for the results. When you say something, look for the results. When you think something, look for the results. When you work with the breath, look for the results. Breath training is an especially good way to learn how to be sensitive to the results of your thinking. There are different ways of focusing on the breath, different ways of conceiving the breath, different ways of dealing with the hindrances. And your job is to learn how to be sensitive to the results of those ways, to figure out which way of focusing is right for right now, which way of thinking is right for right now, which way of being still is right for right now. There are some guidelines, but the most important thing is to learn how to judge for yourself, for without that sensitivity there's no way you're going to see the really subtle levels of stress in the mind. This is where and why we have to be observant.

When the Buddha talks about developing mindfulness and concentration, he places a lot of emphasis on alertness. In the few places where he actually defines alertness, he points to being alert to what you're doing. In the body, when you move your hand, be alert to the fact that you're moving your hand. When you look left, look right, be alert to the fact that you're looking left, looking right. Then moving into the mind: When there are feelings, be alert to what you're doing in the feeling, in the perception, in the thought fabrication, in the consciousness. Each of these things contains an element of fabrication, an element of present intention. Do you ever notice that? Do you see it happening? If you can't yet see it happening, look at what you *can* see that you're adding to the present moment. And be sensitive at the same time to any sense of stress there. See what you can do to minimize the stress, for only when you learn how to minimize the stress that you *can* see, do you start becoming sensitive to the

subtler levels.

In this way you learn how to be a connoisseur of your actions, and particularly a connoisseur of actions and events in the mind. A connoisseur of food has to develop a very refined palate; a connoisseur of music, a very refined ear. What you're trying to do is to develop a refined sensitivity to what's going on in the mind. This requires a whole cluster of mature attitudes concerning how you respond when you do things right, when you do things wrong, so that you can learn from when you've done things right and done things wrong. If you get depressed over a mistake, that's unskillful. Notice that. If you get careless after doing something right, notice that as well. The Buddha doesn't tell you not to take pride in being skillful. Actually, a sense of pride, a sense of satisfaction when you've done something right is an important inducement in the path. It gives you the juice you need to keep going. But you've got to be sensitive to when and where that sense of pride turns into carelessness.

The same when you do things wrong: You have to recognize when you've made a mistake, but you can't let that recognition become debilitating. Again, learn to be sensitive to the spot where the recognition of a mistake leads to unskillful reactions and learn to cut it off at the pass. As you get more sensitive to the results of your actions and to the alternatives open to you, you don't have to follow through on unskillful patterns of thought. As the Buddha said, if you had to stick with the patterns or habits you already have, there would be no sense in teaching you. It wouldn't do any good. He says it's because people *can* learn to be more skillful: That's why he taught.

So learn to be alert to what you're doing, alert to the results of what you're doing. Even a simple thing like focusing on the breath is an important way to develop your powers of alertness, your powers of evaluation and judgment. Learn to be a connoisseur of your breathing, and then a connoisseur of the thinking that goes around the breath. That's when you find yourself arriving at something really certain, even more certain than the arising and passing away of suffering. It's the total ending of suffering. That's when you know for sure that you've done things right. There's nothing more certain than that.