

Conviction & Truth

October 19, 2015

There's a passage where the Buddha asks Ven. Sariputta if he takes it on faith that the five strengths lead to Awakening, and Sariputta says, "No, I don't take it on faith. I know." That's because he had developed the strengths and learned how far they can take him.

As for most of us, we're not there yet, so we have to go on faith.

This is something a lot of us don't like to hear because we've been burnt by faith, by issues of faith in other traditions. But you need to have a certain amount of faith or conviction in the path if you're going to practice it.

People used to say, "Buddhism is a religion that doesn't require faith or belief or conviction. You give your assent to only what seems reasonable." If that's as far as you going to go, simply giving or withholding assent, it doesn't require much faith or conviction. But if you're contemplating putting the teaching into practice, if you want to know that it's true, you have put your heart into it with some conviction, because it asks a lot of you. You have to change the way you act, change the way you speak, change the way you think, change the way you relate to yourself and to other people. It's a very thorough training.

If we decide that we want it to be proven for us before we undertake it, it's never going to happen. Actually, we have to prove ourselves. To learn whether the Buddha's teachings are true or not, we have to be true. To turn our conviction into knowledge, we have to be true. In other words, we have to look at where our behavior doesn't measure up and then bring it up to the standard.

Part of this requires that if you're going to become someone who can pass judgment on the teachings, you have to be the kind of person whose judgment is reliable. This is one of the reasons why we practice meditation, so that we can make our judgment more reliable, make our gaze steadier, and our sense of what's really a defilement in the mind a lot more subtle than it's been in the past. This is how we prove ourselves.

Remember, too, that the path is what you might call a truth of the will, as opposed to a truth of the observer. It's like a truth of the observer in that it's supposed to be observably true for everyone across a board, but who's going to observe the path? Only the people who actually put it into practice, or people who actually follow it. You have to put in your own element of wanting it to happen before you can really develop it and test it.

Of course you're not going to know – until you've actually completed the path and the factors of the path come together – whether it works or not. That's when you can know whether this path really does lead to the deathless. The Buddha described the deathless as something that really exists, but you can know that truth for yourself only when the path has developed enough so that the factors come together and can provide an opening to that dimension.

So you want to look into yourself: Do you have the quality of truthfulness within you to be the sort of person who can really gauge the path?

Thinking like this helps to nourish your effort, because in the five strengths, conviction leads to persistence, but conviction doesn't act on its own. There has to be the desire to really know, to take it beyond mere conviction if you're going to be persistent. And one of the ways of motivating yourself is to think about this quality of truthfulness.

How true are you in following the precepts? How true are you in developing concentration, developing discernment, and all the big and little qualities of the mind that go along with the path?

You want to check yourself all-around to see if you are really following the path all-around. Are there some really big blind spots in your practice, or in yourself? You have to look at things from all angles—and test yourself from all angles as well. You come to realize that the element of conviction in the path is something you can't just sit there and watch. It has to push you into action—because after all this is a path whereby you have to do the work. No one else is going to do it for you, and you realize the consequences of not doing the work.

Here's the possibility of putting an end to suffering, and even before you put a total end to suffering you can begin to see—as you put the path into practice—that many forms of suffering are falling away. There's the stress, of course, of having to put the path into practice, but a lot of the really heavy forms of suffering that come from *not* following the path, from not observing the precepts, from having a mind that is not really concentrated: You can see that those are falling away.

And so as you work on the path, it begins to make more and more sense and to give some indication that maybe this is where you really do want to put in more of your effort.

But as the Buddha said in that analogy of the elephant, however much the tracks on the ground and the scratch marks in the trees may look like signs of a big bull elephant, they're not really sure. They might be signs of something else—of dwarf elephants with big feet, or of tall females with tusks. But you don't give up on the signs simply because you're not sure. You really want the bull elephant, so you have to keep following, following, following the signs. You have to put things into practice. You have to put in the effort.

That's an element of wisdom. I've talked in the past about how when Ajaan Lee described the qualities of the mind that you bring to mindfulness practice, for him the wisdom quality is ardency, which is pretty much the same thing as right effort combined with heedfulness. In other words, you put your whole heart into trying to bring into being the qualities that the Buddha recommended, and to abandon the ones that he said have to be abandoned. It's wise to do that, because if you don't do that, how are you going to know? How are you going to know whether the Buddha's teachings are true or not? How are you going to know what your potential as a human being is?

The Buddha says that it's possible for human beings to put an end to suffering. And if, as he says, you don't need any help from any outside power, then it must be possible to develop your own good qualities. You've got the potentials within you. To what extent are you going to actualize them and make them really skillful?

It comes down to your truthfulness. Do you really want to put an end to suffering? Do you really want to test your potentials? Or would you just rather coast through life and leave this question unanswered?

To learn the truth, we have to be true. To learn the truth about the Dhamma, to learn the truth about ourselves, we have to be as true as we can, as circumspect and all-around in our practice as we can. We have to prove ourselves, and only then can we be in a position where we can prove the Dhamma.

So, take that as inspiration. The Dhamma asks a lot, but it promises a really huge reward. At the very least, you develop qualities in yourself that take you in the right direction, that will pull you away from a lot of suffering that otherwise you'd be creating for yourself.

The question simply is, how far are you willing to go?

