

Becoming a True Person

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The world needs more true people—those who are accountable and compassionate in their actions. Human society, to be livable, has to be based on trust, and people true in this way are the only ones really worthy of trust. The Buddha offers a way to train people to be true, starting with their experience of pain.

Pain, he once noted, sparks two reactions: The first is bewilderment—we don't understand why it's happening—and the second is a search for a way out. In his words, "A person overcome with pain, exhausted in mind, comes to search outside, 'Who knows a way or two to stop this pain?'" (AN 6:63) We wrack our brains trying to figure out a way to escape from pain, and when we're at our wits' end, we look for help outside. This is the reaction of a newborn infant suffering from physical pain, crying for its mother, and it's a reaction that, in more sophisticated forms, stays with us until the problem of suffering, both physical and mental, has been fully solved.

Which means that, for most people, this reaction stays with us throughout life and into death. Our life in human society is shaped both by the fact that we feel pain and by our search, conscious or unconscious, for people who can tell us ways to stop that pain.

It also means that our search is aimed at finding three kinds of truth: a true reality—the ending of pain; true information on how to reach that reality; and true people: those who have direct knowledge of how to end pain—in other words, they really know what they're talking about, and aren't just reporting hearsay—and who are compassionate enough to be truthful in sharing what they know.

Now, because our search comes from bewilderment, it can lead in many directions, with varying degrees of success. Again and again, we've been easily duped. Seeing the need for a reliable response to this search, the Buddha offered his teaching on suffering and the end of suffering. However, his response went beyond simply showing how to end pains that have already arisen, and encompassed a knowledge of how to prevent them from arising in the first place. Instead of just putting out fires already started, he showed how to reach a dimension where the fires couldn't start. By encompassing this dimension, he turned the ordinary search for an end to pain into what he called the noble search. The ignoble search, he said, looks for an end to pain in things that age, grow ill, and die. This kind of search is ignoble because its answer to the problem of suffering is simply to offer more suffering: more things that will change, leaving you where you were before, if not worse.

The noble search, on the other hand, looks for something that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, and doesn't die, for only when your mind has found something

beyond the reach of aging, illness, and death can you be totally beyond the problem of suffering. The Buddha claimed to have completed the noble search, and in completing it he had also found that the path to the end of suffering was something other people could accomplish as well. So he offered to teach them how.

In this way, he was offering all three kinds of truth to satisfy our search: the end of suffering—*nibbāna*—as a true reality, the Dhamma as true information on how to get there, and himself as a true person—someone who was speaking from direct, reliable experience and who had the compassion to report that experience accurately.

Yet he also saw that the nature of that path, and the process of getting others to follow it, required not only that he be a true person but that his listeners also become true people as well.

A great deal has been written on the topic of *nibbāna* as a true reality, and the Buddha's teachings about the path as true information, but very little on what might be called the social truth of the practice—what it means to be a true teacher and what is required to become a true student. However, this social dimension of truth is at least as important as the other two, for without it you'll never know how true those two really are. If you don't know how to judge a true teacher, you can easily be fed wrong information. If you don't know how to be a true student, you won't be in a position to judge how fair you've been in putting a teacher's instructions to the test.

The truth of the teacher begins with two aspects: telling the truth as you see it and guarding the truth (MN 95; MN 140)—i.e., being very clear about where you get your information. These two aspects are necessary in any teacher, but they're not enough to satisfy a potential student searching for a way out of pain. To be genuinely satisfying, the teacher should be committed even further to the truth: to have knowledge based on direct experience, and to have the qualities of heart and mind that can reliably test that knowledge to make sure that it's a trustworthy guide to others. When you're searching for a way out of pain, you legitimately want more than the teacher's "personal truth," i.e., subjective feelings about what feels true. You want knowledge that you can apply effectively to your own experience of pain. To satisfy this requirement, the teacher needs to have developed enough mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment not only to find the truth of *nibbāna*, but also to test that experience to make sure it's the real thing.

In other words, the teacher has to be earnest and accountable. This quality of accountability is what turns the teacher's truth as a person from a mere personal truth into a truth with an objective, social dimension.

All of these ways in which the teacher should be truthful are directly related to compassion: In terms of telling and guarding the truth, the Buddha noted that the act of teaching has to be based on compassion for it to be pure (AN 5:159). As for the teacher's accountability and earnestness: Any teachers who've allowed

themselves to be lazy or to drop back in the practice can hardly be described as compassionate to themselves or to those who depend on them.

This combination of truth and compassion underlies the first two tests that the Buddha recommends a student apply to any potential teacher of the path. To know if such a person is reliable, he recommends spending time with the person and taking note: “Are there in this venerable one any such qualities based on greed... aversion... delusion that, (1) with his mind overcome by these qualities, he might say, ‘I know,’ while not knowing, or say, ‘I see,’ while not seeing; or (2) that he might urge another to act in a way that was for his/her long-term harm & pain?” (MN 95)

A third test relates to the quality of the Dhamma taught by the teacher: It should be the sort that’s “deep... hard to realize... beyond the scope of conjecture... to be realized by the observant” (MN 95). In other words, you should look for signs that the teacher is not only speaking from direct experience, but also has a level of accountability suggesting a level of experience beyond the ordinary.

As for the truth of the student, the Buddha once noted that he looked for two qualities in a person he’d be willing to teach. On the one hand, the person should be observant; and on the other, be “not fraudulent, not deceitful, one of a straightforward nature” (MN 80). In other words, he wanted a student who would report truthfully and accurately what he or she had done, along with the consequences of his or her actions.

The Buddha’s emphasis on telling the truth derives from two things: the nature of the path he taught to the end of suffering, and the nature of the student’s relationship to the teacher.

In terms of the path, the Buddha analyzed suffering into two kinds: the suffering or stress inherent in the fact of change, and the suffering that comes from the mind’s own unskillful actions, harming itself through its craving and clinging. The first kind of suffering weighs on the mind because of the second kind. If you can get rid of craving and clinging by making your mental actions more skillful, to the point where they cause no harm either to yourself or to others, then no suffering weighs on the mind at all.

So the path will require looking at your actions, the intentions on which they’re based, and the results they lead to, to see exactly where you’re being unskillful. If you don’t have a habit of being truthful in reporting your actions to others, it becomes very easy to lie about them to yourself. And if you lie to yourself about your actions—claiming either that they had no consequences, that the consequences don’t matter, or that they didn’t cause harm when they actually did—there’s no way you’ll be able to follow the path.

This is why the truthfulness the Buddha is looking for in a student is like the truthfulness the student should look for in a teacher: the truthfulness of being accountable. This is also why a basic prerequisite for following the path is that you be honest in observing what you’ve done and in reporting your mistakes to your teacher.

This is where the importance of your relationship to the teacher comes in. Only if you report your mistakes frankly to the teacher can he or she help you locate the source of your unskillfulness so you can do something about it. And only if you respect the teacher enough to see the importance of being truthful in your interactions will you be likely to listen attentively to any criticisms the teacher has to offer. If you can't accept criticism, you won't be able to make the needed changes in the ways you act.

In light of the connection between truthfulness and compassion in the teacher, it's interesting to note that the Buddha looked for truthfulness in the beginning student, but not necessarily for compassion. He never explained why, but it's a point worth considering.

Part of the answer may be found in the Buddha's instructions to his son, Rāhula, when Rāhula was still a child. Essentially, he was teaching Rāhula how to accomplish two things at once: to overcome the hindrance of uncertainty and to replace it with the awakening-factor of discernment. As the Buddha mentions elsewhere (SN 46:51), the general outline in both cases was to pay proper attention to which qualities in the mind were skillful and which ones were not. In teaching Rāhula in detail how to do that, he was also encouraging the two qualities he looked for in a student: being truthful and being observant.

The Buddha's first instruction was for Rāhula to develop a strong sense of the importance of telling the truth: If he felt no shame at telling a deliberate lie, he would lack the necessary quality of being a contemplative.

Then, before attempting any action in thought, word, or deed, Rāhula was to ask himself what consequences he expected from the action. If he foresaw any harm, either to himself or to others, he shouldn't follow through with the action. If he didn't expect any harm, he could act, but he had to look at the results coming up in the course of the action. If he observed any harm, he should stop. If not, he could continue. Then, when the action was completed, he should reflect on its long-term consequences. If it did cause harm, he should feel ashamed at having caused that harm, should resolve not to repeat it, and should talk his mistake over with someone more advanced on the path. If he detected no harm, he should take joy in the fact and keep on training (MN 61).

What the Buddha is doing here is teaching Rāhula to devote his powers of truthfulness and observation toward compassionate ends. By measuring his actions in terms of the harm done or not done, Rāhula would become more sensitive to the repercussions of his actions.

Now, the Buddha could have limited the notion of doing harm to mean nothing more than harming yourself. But in other teachings, he shows that you also get harmed when you harm others. He offers two reasons why.

One reason is the impersonal principle of karma: If you hurt other beings, the results of that action will come back at you. Or as he once told a group of boys who were catching little fish:

*If you fear pain,
if you dislike pain,
don't anywhere do an evil deed
in open or in secret.
If you're doing or will do
an evil deed,
you won't escape pain
catching up
as you run away. (Ud 5:4)*

The other reason why harming others is a way of harming yourself is that other people love themselves just as much as you love yourself. If your happiness depends on their pain and suffering, they won't view your happiness with admiration or affectionate eyes. In fact, they won't stand for it. They'll do what they can to end it (Ud 5:1).

This is why the Buddha said that when you break the precepts against killing, stealing, lying, etc., you're actually harming yourself. If you really want to harm others, you get *them* to break the precepts, for then that bad karma will become theirs (AN 4:99).

So, in effect, when the Buddha was teaching Rāhula to do no harm, he was teaching him to look beyond himself to develop the desire to avoid harming anyone at all. But instead of basing his motivation on compassion, Rāhula was taught to base it on intelligent self-interest and a healthy sense of shame: the shame that's the opposite, not of pride, but of shamelessness. It's the shame of a good social conscience and high self-esteem.

The notion of shame comes up twice in the Buddha's instructions to Rāhula: shame over telling a deliberate lie, and shame over having caused harm. Now, shame is a social emotion. It's based on a desire to look good in the eyes of people you respect. In this case, Rāhula was encouraged to look good in the eyes of his noble teachers. Knowing that they were compassionate in their desires for him to be skillful and would judge his actions by their harmlessness, he was encouraged to adopt their attitude, not through innate compassion, but through a sense of indebtedness and gratitude to them.

Think back on the original question sparked by pain, and the social dynamic it creates. You want to find a way to stop pain, and you look for help from others. When you find that help, the proper response is a sense of gratitude. The healthy sense of shame growing from that gratitude is the attitude the Buddha was encouraging Rāhula to foster.

It was from this attitude of shame that Rāhula was to develop compassionate aims, beginning with compassion for himself and spreading out into the world.

So, for the Buddha, genuine compassion has to be based on truthfulness. And it's easy to see why. People who claim to act on compassionate motives but don't

see the importance of being truthful lack a basic ingredient in social conscience: the respect and gratitude implicit in a felt obligation to tell the truth to everyone, regardless of how you feel about them. When people lack this ingredient in their conscience, it's easy for them to claim compassionate motives when actually causing harm—and hard for them to take an interest in learning about that harm and changing their ways. Their compassion is compassion without accountability, a dangerous and deluded combination. Although their intentions may be good, they're not necessarily skillful. And their lack of skill can get in the way of following the path.

So if you want to know if the Buddha's teachings about the end of suffering are true information, and if the deathless happiness of nibbāna is a true reality, it's important to develop your own truthfulness in being an earnest and accountable person. That's when you'll know whether the Buddha's truths satisfy your own desire for truth. In the meantime, as long as you work on developing truthfulness, your sense of social conscience will become more reliably compassionate, bearing genuinely good fruits, both for yourself and for the people around you.