

THE AUTHORITY OF THE EXPERIENCING SELF

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Who do we give authority to in our spiritual lives, and why do we give it to them? Who do we listen to, and why do we believe what they say? Anyone who has been involved in the American Buddhist community should be aware of the abuses of authority that happened not too long ago. People who had titles, who were given authority, abused that authority and the people who had trusted them. Of course, this kind of thing happens in Christian churches as well, as in the child abuse scandals in the Catholic Church or the periodic scandals involving Protestant ministers. The abuse of spiritual authority can happen anywhere.

So what is the source of spiritual authority? How do we know when to believe in a teacher, or a teaching? How do we know when something is true, or worth entrusting ourselves to?

What I'd like to suggest is that the true source of authority in the spiritual life is your *self*. You could not recognize truth outside of yourself, in some teacher or teaching or writing of some kind, unless it was already present within you. That's how you recognize truth. We've all had that feeling of listening to someone and saying inside yourself, "Oh! yes! That's true!" Or reading something and having that feeling. If the truth wasn't in you already, you wouldn't have that feeling of recognition when you hear it or read it.

You might be thinking, "But my self is confused, I have all these contradictory ideas and I don't know which are true." So the matter of the self is not easy. We have many selves actually, different selves that we show to the world in different situations. The self I'm talking about now is the self that is behind all those other selves; it is the *experiencing self*, the self that experiences what all the other, outer selves are doing.

It is this experiencing self that recognizes the truth. It is this experiencing self that is the source of spiritual authority, that tells you what is true or not true, what you can believe in, what path you should be following or what decision you should make. It is this

that causes that feeling of recognition when you encounter something that seems to have the ring of truth in it.

How can we get in touch with this experiencing self? You are already in touch with it, or you wouldn't be reading this right now. People who read writings on topics like this are interested in it because there is that part of them that wants to know the truth, that wants to awaken from all of their false selves. If you were totally out of touch with your experiencing self, you would never be reading something like this.

So it's really a question of deepening your sense of the experiencing self, of being able to locate it when all of your other selves are confusing things for you. I will address myself here to two types of people, people who are fairly new to the spiritual life and those who have already had some kind of awakening experience. The situation of each is a little bit different. First I will address those who are new to spirituality, and then after that I will address myself to those who have already come to some degree of awakening.

For those who are fairly new to spirituality, that is what meditation is for—to deepen your sense of the experiencing self. There are two sides to meditation. First, there is the settling. You are allowing yourself to relax, allowing your mind to become more settled. But it's not just about settling; the other side of meditation is a probing into your self. You don't want to just be in a passive state; you should be probing and testing what you are experiencing. "Who am I? What am I? What is true?" It is this twin process of settling and then probing or questioning that brings the experiencing self to light. And it's not just in meditation; this ability to settle your mind and to probe the truth of your experience carries over into the rest of your life. It just takes practice, and that is what meditation is, an exercise for practicing the state of mind needed to bring the experiencing self into recognition. Actually, it is the experiencing self that calls you into meditation, or you wouldn't have the desire to even try it.

Those of you who have had an awakening experience have encountered the experiencing self directly. That is what it is, that sudden sense of recognition of some hidden truth, a truth about your "true self." Here the problem is to come to trust that self. The awakening opens up a kind of intuition, but you might feel shaky about trusting it and need some kind of affirmation so you search out teachers and teachings to tell you what you already know, to help you trust in it more. But usually what happens is all kinds of

doubts arise, and our mind goes all kinds of places instead of directly to the experiencing self. Instead it goes back to a memory of the awakening, or thoughts about it—what it means, was it real, and all that—or imagining some kind of future experience. Anything except resting in the experiencing self and trusting it. But it is trusting the experiencing self that will lead you to the experiences and insights you need to become more fully awakened. It will lead you where you have to go, but you have to trust it and not let your mind drag you off in all kinds of other directions.

So the situation is slightly different for those who are new at this, and those who have had an awakening experience, but the main point is the same. It is the experiencing self that is the true authority in the spiritual life. Teachers and spiritual writings and other outside expressions of truth have value, but the key thing is the authority of the experiencing self. Don't just rely on teachers and teachings outside yourself, which can lead you astray, and don't just rely on your inner sense, because your various selves need to be probed for the experiencing self to be drawn out more fully. Use the outer teachings to draw out the inner truth, and use the inner truth to test the outer teachings. Don't just take my word on this—test it out for yourself!

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