

THE AUTHORITY OF THE EXPERIENCING SELF

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Good evening. I'm very pleased and honored to be speaking with you this evening. I was invited here by one of your members, but I won't tell you who, in case this turns out to be the worst dharma talk you ever heard. *[audience laughter]* I don't want you to blame them!

I'd like to talk tonight about spiritual authority. I just met our host here this evening. When I talked to her on the phone this afternoon, I guess she was putting together this brochure, and she asked me my title. I said, "my title?" She said, "yes, are you an ordained minister?" I said, "no." She said, "well, are you a lay preacher then?" I said, "no." "Well then, are you an initiate in some tradition?" I said, *[pause]* "no-o-o." *[audience laughter]* I think at that point she was getting a little panicky. *[more laughter]* I said, "well, I'm a former professor, and I have a Ph.D., does that help?" She said, "yes! great! We'll put that in!" *[more laughter]*

Well, I've been involved in putting together speaking programs, and I know you need some way of telling if someone might be worth listening to. You don't want someone coming in and making no sense. Titles give you at least some clue about that, so they're not totally meaningless. So I'm a former professor, if that means anything to you. Anyone who's been to college knows it doesn't necessary mean I'll be a good speaker. *[audience laughter]*

But it got me thinking about authority in the spiritual life—who we give authority to, and why we give it to them; who we listen to, and why we believe what they say. Any of you who have been around the American Buddhist community for very long, even for just a few years, must be aware of some 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 can happen anywhere, like with the child abuse scandals in the Catholic Church that have been in the news recently. It happens everywhere. Not that everyone abuses authority, but 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 for us, or worth entrusting ourself to?

What I'd like to suggest to you, 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, in listening to someone—maybe not right at the moment, but at some time—and saying inside yourself, “oh! yes! that's true!” Or reading something, and having that feeling. If the truth wasn't in your self, you wouldn't have that kind of feeling.

You might be thinking, “but my self is just all 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, though, 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 for you.

So how can we get in touch with this experiencing self? Actually, all of you here are already in touch with it, or you wouldn't be here. People come to groups like this for a lot of reasons: to meet people, to get out of the house for a while, curiosity. But there is also that part of yourself that wants to know the truth, that wants to awaken. You know in coming to something like this that it's possible that that part of you might be affected

somehow, and you wouldn't come if you weren't open to that. If you were totally out of touch with your experiencing self, you would never come to 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 your other selves are confusing things for you. What I want to say about this is directed 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. So, first I'll address those who are new to spirituality, and then a little later I'll say something to those who have already had some experience.

For those who are fairly new at this, that is what meditation is for. We started tonight with a meditation period, and I don't know what methods you might be using but there are really 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 to the experiencing self, 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 leads 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.

All right. I guess we have time for questions now?

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