

## Sources of Truth

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Now, I want to announcement this well. Is this volume okay? It's a little bit loud for me, but if it's okay with you, I'll manage. So next, in two weeks, on the 24th of August, we'll have a community meeting here, and it's kind of a nice time to get together after the usual meeting. Sunday morning, and we'll meet in the outer hall, maybe around like 11:15 or something like that. And the idea is that to talk a little bit about IMC, the growth of IMC, the challenges of IMC, the opportunities of IMC, just kind of check in with folks.

So I'll talk a little bit. I'll be there and so it's in two weeks. Next week I won't be here. I'll be up teaching a retreat in the Sierras, which is kind of nice. And one of the reasons why we do it that day is that it works for us to have community meetings when there's five Sundays in the month. Because the other four Sundays we always have something.

Like today we have the potluck, the tea and the... And so it doesn't happen that often that we have five Sundays, but when we do the fourth one, we kind of slip in. That's this kind of thing. So to share something that's been in my mind that has all kinds of wonderful implications, all kinds of areas of our life. It begins with a story in the time of the Buddha, where the Buddha visited this town and the people in town heard the Buddha was nearby or was there, and so they came to see him.

And they said to the Buddha, a lot of spiritual teachers come through town. And they'll disparage the other teachers, and they'll claim that only they teach the truth. So we ask you, Buddha, who is teaching the truth? Right. That's a reasonable question, I guess. And we want to know from you, do you have some idea who's teaching the truth?

Well, the Buddha doesn't answer the question. He kind of avoids the question the way the question was asked. Because probably the question of truth is complicated. And it's a quagmire. Truth is just, you get pulled into that world of, they see, you know, different religious

truths, different kind of truths and there's maybe, and then to make a claim that you have the truth over everybody else's truth, it's a kind of a headache. Maybe it's unnecessary.

So instead, the Buddha begins by offering this group of people that there are sources of truth which are not reliable. And so he says, don't rely on these 10 sources of truth. So these are common sources for which spiritual teachers, religious teachers, all kinds of people, politicians, all kinds of people will make claims based on these criteria. So don't go by oral tradition. Back then they had no books. So back maybe now you said, don't go by what you read.

Don't go by oral tradition. Okay. Don't go by a teaching lineage. So like here we are at IMC. And so just because I say something, I say, oh, this is part of the Buddhist tradition. I'm going to quote from the Buddha. The very thing I'm doing here. Be careful. Don't use this for the truth. A teaching lineage. Yeah, I'm part of a long teaching lineage. You know, I can go through my list of my teachers and my credentials by who I've studied with. Don't go by that. If you want the truth.

Don't rely on common talk. Just because a lot of people say and talk about this is the truth. That's not, doesn't make something true. And I'm reading from scripture. The Buddha says, don't go by scripture. Okay. So, well then you have to rely on your logic. So reason it out and make it logic for yourself. It says, nope. Don't go by logic. Because you can talk yourself into all kinds of things following a logical argument.

And don't go by inference. Don't go by implication. Don't go by intuition. Don't go by, well, it seems like that implies that this is the truth. And then I don't know the difference between logic, but it also adds reasoning. Don't go by what's reasonable. That seems pretty reasonable. I'll take that as a truth. And I've known people. I remember once I was very surprised by a Buddhist monk who we were in a group of teachers and monks. And the question came up, you know, would you believe in rebirth and why? And so this one monk said, yeah, I believe in rebirth. It just feels right. Well, I guess that's okay. He wasn't claiming it was a truth, but still, I always thought, what is that? That was...

And then I don't know the next one, how they differ from the other, but don't go by just because you thought about it. And I think that one of the things I think that means you made it up. Just because you could figure it out and make something up. You woke up from a dream, and now you know the truth because it was in the dream. So, I don't know if you need to be careful for the next one, given the context of what's happening here. But so, don't go by something because of the competence of the teacher. Or because the person is one's own teacher. So maybe some of you think of me as your teacher. Not good enough. Don't go by

that.

So, oh, that's a phenomenal list. And it doesn't take a lot of analysis to appreciate that a lot of religions, a lot of spirituality, a lot of politics, a lot of families, a lot of cultures are based on some of these sources of believe what's true, what's right, what goes. And sometimes people absorb this at a very young age. And it just seems like this is the truth because it came along with how they learned a language even. It just seems like it's... But in fact, they learned it from a tradition. They learned it from others. They learned because it's common. It's all kinds of things.

So to begin getting underneath, where do we get our truth from? There's a wonderful teaching by the Buddha. Now, you shouldn't take this as truth either. Nothing, the Buddha says. But he made this very interesting suggestion that if you want to claim something as true, do people a favor and tell them upon what source, what basis you're claiming the truth. So if you're taking it as true because it's your faith, tell them that. It's my faith. If you think it's true because you've reasoned it out, say that. If it's part of your religious tradition, that's the basis, say it. It's a tremendous respect for other people. If you qualify where you get this idea from, this is a truth. You might say, well, it's my own experience. Oh, okay, I guess I've had a different experience. The authority of experience is somewhat important for oneself, but maybe not for others. Experience is kind of, turns out the half of what an experience is, my guess, the percentage is an interpretation. But we often don't see it that way.

So we do people a favor by saying, oh, I got it in the news today, you know, or I got it down, and, you know, at the pub. Or, you know, just, where did you get that from? Oh, it just felt right. Right. So that kind of creates a kind of more open discussion, allows for a little bit people know where it comes from, and you can decide whether or not to participate, or to participate, or to offer where your sources are. I think it's very respectful, because then people can go check it and follow up on it and find out for themselves. Yeah.

So, in a sense, the Buddha sweeps away these ten common sources for authority, religious authority. But then he shifts the conversation. And this I think is really wonderful to watch how he does this. He's talked kind of in, they ask for an abstract, they ask an abstract question, what is the truth? He replies in relationship to that in an abstract way. And he doesn't answer their question, but he says, be careful. And now he shifts the conversation to direct the conversation to their own experience, to their own life experience, what's happened to them.

So he turns the attention not from ideas, but back to themselves. So this is a wonderful way to turn it around. And so first he does this. So he offers five pairs of criteria by which we can

personally assess for ourselves what to do and what to not do. So they want to know about the truth. The Buddha is interested in how you live, what you do in your life, and what you avoid doing. So there's a kind of pointing to what's really practical.

Now, believing in something, as being true is a doing. Not believing something is not doing, not believing that. So even belief fits into this category of what is concerned with conduct, activity, what we do and don't do, what we don't do in our speech, what we don't do or do with our bodies, and also what we do and don't do with our minds, the mental action. So he uses five criteria. At least three of them are really key to what the Buddha is all about. And two of them, you don't see emphasized that much, but two of them perhaps are mentioned here because he's talking to people who aren't Buddhists. They're just people in this town. The Buddha came to town. They went to ask him a question. And these are things that... I'm glad some of you have paper. Write them down. and memorize these things.

- Are they unwholesome or wholesome?
- Are they blameworthy or blameless?
- Are they criticized by the wise or praised by the wise?
- Do they lead to harm or to welfare, to benefit?
- Do they lead to suffering or to happiness?

So three of those are very experiential for oneself. Wholesome and unwholesome is something we can feel for ourselves because we can either feel they're healthy, they're nourishing, they bring a wonderful feeling of clean vitality, or they don't. Leading to harm and welfare, we can have a sense, I'm harmed by this. I'm harmed by doing this. I'm harming other people by this. or it produces welfare, benefit. And if you're not sure what it is, it's harmful or beneficial, maybe it's just as well not to do it. Hold off if you can. And then leading to suffering or to happiness, to leading to some kind of emotional pain that you did this, or it leads to emotional happiness, inspiration, uplift, because you did this.

So he's offering these two criteria. These criteria. the kind of paired criteria that I imagine are like a fork in a path, in a road, you know, in the path through the forest. And you can choose. Do you take one road or the other? And maybe one step doesn't make much difference where you go. But even one step in one direction is... over many, many steps later, puts you far away from where you were. It's like this analogy I like of two parallel lines never meet, never go further away, until you kind of nudge one slightly. And it might be a long time you don't see any difference in distance between them, but over years they become immensely far apart from each other. So the choices we make can have a huge impact.

And some people make choices over and over again that are harmful to themselves. And they know it, but they can't help themselves perhaps. And it makes a difference. And what's wonderful about the Buddha's teachings is that in his teaching, that at any step you can take the other step. It doesn't really matter how many steps you took down a different, you know, harmful way. What matters is the next step. So you don't want to be weighed down or feel caught or feel come out. It's trapped by the weight of what's happened in the past. What matters is the next step. And that's where mindfulness puts us. Mindfulness puts us in the next step.

And so what's the next step? Is it wholesome or unwholesome? Is it going to make kind of nice, healthy feeling to do it? Does it lead to harm or welfare? And this is where it's kind of delicate because sometimes we choose something that is uncomfortable, but it's actually good for us. It's beneficial in the long term. And so we have to kind of be able to have some sense of what is a, you know, that not just the, you know, instant gratification, but what is delayed gratification? What is beneficial over time?

And then the second and third, blameworthy and blameless, this is not popular in Buddhist circles in the West. What is criticized by the wise and not criticized the wise, there's a, I feel almost like a, we're supposed to kind of, really not listen to other people and just kind of not criticize ourselves at all. Self-criticism is an illness in much of our culture. And this idea of blame, I mean, that's puritanical. We shouldn't be doing that. But one way to understand this, and I don't know if these are the right translations from the ancient language. So there's ways of understanding these five criteria. So I'll go through them and then you'll hear me talk about blame and Praise, and I'm not going to talk about the positive versions of them.

Wholesomeness relates to psychological health, virtue, and skillfulness. Blamelessness draws on basic instincts for fairness, kindness, and honesty. Praise from the wise taps into self-respect. I believe we naturally feel unsettled when those we respect for their wisdom are disappointed in us. So imagine you're going to make a decision and you personally, you most respect in your life. So what person you think is wise or kind or really something that you value, how they are in the world. And, you know, and you decide to, I don't know, take all your grandmother's money out of the bank account and go to Las Vegas and lose it all gambling. Your poor grandmother... So then you go find that wise person, the person you really respect the most, and say, hey, by the way, guess what I did? Well, that doesn't feel good. There's a kind of self-respect, certain kind of valuing that, oh, this doesn't feel good. So this is the wise people are helpful to keep us being careful about what we do. Stay close to them.

And welfare refers to fulfillment and flourishing. to flourish. And happiness are physical and psychological sensations of uplifting well-being. Those are pretty good. So the idea is all of these is something we can know for ourselves directly. So the Buddha says these are the criteria. And then, now he's really going to shift the attention to these townspeople and he's going to ask them direct questions for what they know for themselves.

So, When you have greed, is that wholesome or unwholesome? And apparently they're wise enough for the Buddha, at least. They say, oh, greed is unwholesome. It doesn't feel good when you're caught in the grip of greed. Is doing what's blameworthy, is greed blameworthy or blameless? It's kind of blameworthy. Is it praised by the wise or criticized by the wise? Yes. Well, if I go back to my grandmother and tell her what I did, I think she would not praise what I did. I think she would feel that was kind of a poor choice. And does it lead to harm or to welfare or greed? Does it lead to suffering or happiness? So they all, luckily for them, because the scripture, maybe, the Buddhist wrote the text, They all agreed with the Buddha that these things are not.

Then he does the same thing for non-greed. And non-greed in, the word non-greed in Pāli, the negative just prefix word, implies things like generosity, implies the positive corollary. And when he asked them, what about that? Then they said, oh yeah, those things are wholesome. Those things are blameless. Those things are praised by the wise. Non-greed is conducive to welfare. Non-greed is conducive towards happiness. So he's asking them to reflect and think about for themselves what they've learned.

So what he's asking people to do is to think ethically, to think in ethical terms, in what in modern world we might call ethics, and be one's own ethical thinker about what to do and what not to do. and not to rely on external sources of authority, except maybe a little bit inspired by what your grandmother, I think, about you taking all your money, her money. And so then it goes on, and after they answer his question, he goes, when you know for yourself... These actions are unwholesome. These actions are blameworthy. These actions are criticized by the wise. These actions, if undertaken and practiced lead to harm and suffering, then you should abandon them. It's very contextual.

This particular teaching I'm giving here is based on what's called the *Kālāma Sutta*. Some of you know it, K-A-L-A-M-A. And it's a fairly famous in the West. But sometimes people only quote one phrase from the whole text, which is, I only rely on what you can know for yourself. And they don't say anything more about the context. And that's a dangerous teaching. Because just knowing something by yourself in a very open, expansive, no guardrails around it, is a little bit dangerous. And here, it's very specific what he says. They'll read it the positive

corollary. But when you, Kālāma, know for yourself these actions are wholesome. These actions are blameless. These actions are praised by the wise. These actions have accepted and undertaken lead to welfare and happiness. then you should live in accordance to them.

So the criteria for knowing yourself has to do with these wonderful qualities. And I'm calling it ethical. The Buddha doesn't really have a word that really is a good fit for our English word ethics. And so for the Buddha, this criteria could also be called criteria on the path to liberation. Right? could be called spiritual for the Buddha. It's about how to live your life in all aspects. These are very useful criteria, even in deep meditation. In the deepest kind of meditation you come to, you can still ask yourself these questions. And you can still find your way in deep meditation by seeing the fork in the road and taking the positive fork.

And so the Buddha shifts the focus away from what the Kālāma say, the concern around the truth, to what they can know for themselves. But he offers them criteria of what the Buddha thinks is important. So is it important to be concerned with what's wholesome, to follow that? Is it important to avoid what's blameworthy? Is it important to... to have the praise of the wise. Is it important to focus on what brings welfare and benefit? Is it important to focus on having happiness? That's for you to decide. That's for you to decide. Is it more important to focus on things that make you miserable? Is it more important to do things that bring stress? Is it more important to do things that make you unhappy or make you, you know... feel like drained and dispirited by what you do, that's for you to choose. But I say this because I see plenty of people who choose the unhealthy, stressful direction. A lot of people are willing to sacrifice their own welfare because they have something they think is more important. Sometimes it's out of fear and maybe good reason. We have to do, I have to do this because I'm going to end up in poverty if I don't. I have to be greedy. I have to kind of get stressed, you know, because otherwise, you know, who's going to take care of me? I have to discipline my children harshly and critically. I have to be angry and to them and, you know, filled with hate, because that's how you get the world to behave better. I have to have a war because that's how we make ourselves safe. I have to, it goes on and on. A lot of people sacrifice their own welfare.

So not a few people are going to say, well, that's fine for the Buddha, but he doesn't know my life. He doesn't know the stresses I'm under. And I have to do this. And that's the question. Do we have to? And how important are these criteria? Yeah. Can they be a reliable criteria for living a wise, beneficial, useful life where we can take care of ourselves, maybe even take care of the world? And here's one area where I find it very interesting and maybe crucial. The time of the Buddha, you know, I like to say he lived in the Bronze Ages. He lived

a really long time ago. And at a time when most human communication... was direct. Most people, most things that affected your life was happened in your village, happened in the local kind of within this eyesight of where you were. And so, you know, there was kind of much clear what was going on. In our global interconnected world, a tremendous amount of things affects us personally, affects our society that we don't see. And now with technology, with institutions of all kinds, with governments that are connected to people's lives in all these interconnected ways, with economic systems, corporations connected to so many complicated ways, we don't see what's going on. Most people don't understand what's going on. And so... Do we understand what brings welfare and what brings harm? Do we understand what's wholesome and unwholesome in terms of taxes, in terms of economic systems? People with different political views probably might share all these same criteria, but they interpret it, they find it in different ways, that yes, having more taxes is wholesome and beneficial for the world. No, we believe having less taxes does the same thing. We have the same concern. And how do we decide who's right? Do we because we adhere to a political position? A lot of politicians come to town, De Buddha. Which one of them is saying the truth? He might give the same teaching when you know for yourself. So I don't know if that's going to... This is not going to provide answers to political questions. Right. But here is where it will provide answers for. And this is what I think is very profound, is that if you pick up a political view, for example, the way you pick it up, for you, is it wholesome or inwholesome? Is the way you pick it up, blameworthy or blameless? Is the way you pick it up, praised by the wise or not praised by the wise? Is it, does it lead to harm in yourself or to benefit? Yes. Does it lead in yourself to happiness or to suffering? What political views you have is distinct with how you hold them.

And I've seen wonderful debates between people in radically different positions, like I've seen one on abortion, where it was really impressive how the people with radically different views, the opposite sides of the spectrum kind of around abortion... could come together respectfully, debate their positions, and start as friends and end as friends. We don't see those examples very often. People, there's a lot of strife around right and wrong, about positions, holding on. And I think what the Buddha is pointing to, what I'd like him to be pointing to, is how we act in the world is phenomenally important for ourselves and for other people. And so these criteria, look at yourself, the choices you make, what you pick up and what you do. Even if it has to do with politics, even if it has to do with opinions about the economic systems that we should live under, all kinds of things. Am I holding this view, am I holding this opinion in a good way, in a beneficial way, in a wholesome way? And do I know the authority, the basis upon why I have this view? Right? Oh, it's just a politician said it, so it must be true. Oh, I've



studied it. I spent the last year reading about electoral systems. There's a whole complicated, very sophisticated study on different ways to hold elections in a democracy. with all kinds of very fascinating, very thought-out ways that increases the voice of everyone and gets a little bit more the popular view to win as opposed to sometimes the extremists can win one side or the other. And so in different places in the world, they're experimenting. Some cities in the country, some places elsewhere, they're experimenting with different electoral systems. So... Of course we should gerrymander. The other side did it, and we'll do it. And then nowadays the governor of California says, we're at war around gerrymandering. Maybe. That's very dangerous language. So we're talking about electoral systems, and someone says, you seem to have an opinion here. Where's that from? Well, I spent a year studying it. And let me offer you some of this wonderful book that's written by two people on different sides of the election electoral system kind of thing, laying out their points of view. Why don't you read that and see if it's something, what happens to you? That's very different than, boom! So many of us think we're experts. So many of us think that it's obvious what should happen. So if someone says, you know, what kind of electoral system do we have? It's obvious. Why is it obvious? So how do we hold these things, what Buddha is pointing to is not just because there are different spiritual teachers that come to town. There are different politicians, different talk show hosts. There's different all kinds of people. on the web, on the TV, on social media, and everywhere who are making claims. What do we do with those claims? What are the claims we want to make? I think this is an important topic for our society, for our world. And so it's in this context today that I wanted to offer you the Buddha's criteria.

And so I'll offer you these five one more time, and then I'll stop.

- When you know for yourselves, when you know for yourselves, these actions are wholesome.
- These actions are blameless.
- These actions are praised by the wise.
- These actions lead to welfare.
- These actions lead to happiness.
- then you should live in accordance to them.

I think it's a remarkable teaching. And if you don't want to live by those, Buddhism has no requirement, but I would like to know why. So those are my thoughts today.

And because we have tea in a little bit and have a chance to meet each other if you'd like, and we still have some minutes before the end of the Dharma talk time, It would then be nice if you said hello to each other, people near you, and maybe share a little bit about the pros and

cons of what you heard me teach. And so you're welcome not to just sit and be quiet and close your eyes and wait until the end or leave if you'd like. But if you could turn to maybe a couple of people next to you and say hello, introduce yourself, and... And just look around, make sure that no one, if everyone turns to one direction, leaves one person in the middle alone, it's kind of not so nice. So just maybe look around, make sure everyone has a little group to talk to. Please.