Test Everything

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It would be really useful someday to make a collection of fake Buddha quotes, things attributed to the Buddha that had nothing to do with anything that he really said, or only a very glancing relationship. One I remember seeing was “Doubt everything, the Buddha,” which is hardly what he said. It would be better to say, “Test everything,” because that changes the dynamic. When you’re free to doubt everything, you’re the one who has to be satisfied by somebody else’s explanation. But if you’re asked to test things, you’re the one who has to put things to the test, and you have to put yourself to the test. And some things, in order to test them, require a lot of effort on your part. This is why conviction is one of the strengths on the path. The only way you’re going to test the Buddha’s teachings on mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment, is if you put a lot of effort into them, a lot of time, and make a lot of sacrifices. That’s why Mundane Right View includes as one of its propositions that there are people who know this world and the next. They know the principle of karma through direct knowledge and through right practice. In other words, there are people who know more than you do. That’s a matter of conviction. Conviction is something that has to be tested, but it’s your working hypothesis. It’s what gets you going to begin with, keeps you going. There are times when the practice hardly unfolds on its own. Someone raised an issue recently saying that the practice is something that just happens naturally. You don’t really do it, you just allow it to happen. In the same way that when you open your hand, the cool breeze that blows across it is not something you created, but you do have to make the choice to open your hand again. You have to keep it open. It’s not just that opening your hand is a relaxed position, it’s just easy to get there. That’s hardly what the Buddha taught at all. There are some people, he said, who have a quick and easy practice. There are others whose practice is quick but it’s painful, others slow but easy, and others slow but painful. Of course, if we could choose, the way you choose on a menu, everyone would go for the quick and easy practice. But you can’t choose. A lot of it has to do with your past karma, the strength of your defilements. The stronger your defilements, the more painful the practice is going to be. You can take it as pretty certain that most of the people whose practice was going to be quick and easy were collected by the Buddha when he was alive. So here we are, left with a long practice. It requires a sense of faith, a sense of conviction. This has to do with the sense of authority that the Buddha assumes. He has the authority of an expert. He didn’t create us. He doesn’t claim to be a god. So he can’t simply tell us what to do and have us feel obligated because he created us. The Buddha does present himself as an expert. He’s gone through many paths. He’s explored lots of paths, and he can remember them all. And he can see which path works and which paths don’t. So he’s willing to give us advice based on his experience, based on the skills that he developed. So conviction means having faith in the Buddha. Accepting the fact that the Buddha seems to be an expert and you would do well to try to develop his skills to see if they lead to the happiness that he promises. So it’s not a matter of changing the Dhamma to suit our preferences. We have to change ourselves to fit in with the Dhamma. This is one of the principles that Ajaan Sawat would talk about an awful lot. He said that one of Ajaan Mun’s favorite topics is practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. In other words, the expert tells you, “This is what has to be done.” You say, “Okay, I’m going to give it a try.” And you do it with respect. You do it with conviction. You know that you don’t really know yet. Knowledge is something that comes only with awakening. Real, confirmed knowledge, confirmed conviction, comes with stream-entry. Confirmed knowledge comes with aroundship. But you look at the path and it seems likely that this is going to lead somewhere good. At the very least, it’s a good path to be on. It may have its difficulties. It may have its barren stretches. But what does it ask you to do? It asks you to have conviction, be persistent, develop mindfulness, concentration, discernment, goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, gratitude. All of these are good things to be developing. So we approach the path with a certain humility. And the Buddha is encouraging us to have faith in our own abilities to test the path. It’s something we can do. But at the same time, we have to remember that there are people who know more about this, people who are more experienced on the path. At the very beginning, when the Buddha asked Rahula, “Test the teachings in his actions,” he said, “Make sure that when you’ve done something unskillful, you talk it over with someone who’s more advanced on the path than you are. You want to tap into their experience.” So you’re not left with trying to reinvent the dharma wheel every time you make a mistake. And at the same time, you need to compensate for your own blind spots. This is the way in which admirable friendship is the whole of the practice. Because without someone to point out your blind spots, and to suggest possibilities that might not have occurred to you, it’d be a long uphill slog. And it’d be hard to maintain it, hard to keep it up. So we take refuge in the Buddha as an example. We take refuge in the Noble Sangha as an example. This is what human beings are capable of. This is what human beings can accomplish. And then you try to internalize their qualities to see if they really work as promised. Sometimes this means patience. The results are not going to happen as quickly as you wanted them to. And sometimes the results seem to disappear. And you find yourself back at square one. But you have to remember, the mind is a complex thing. You go back to square one because there’s some unfinished business back there. And there’s another kind of patience, the patience when the mind does get into concentration. And you say, “Okay, what’s next? What’s the next step?” And the patience requires that you stay with that state of concentration. This is what requires heedfulness, because sometimes it’s all too easy to say, “Well, my mind is rested enough for now. Now I can think about something else or do something else.” But the concentration has to be mastered. It requires sticking with it well past the point where your immediate need for rest or refreshment has been taken care of. You’re working on a skill here. You want to keep the mind focused on the spot that you’ve determined for it to stay. Because when you’re going to try to develop insight, it requires that the mind be very, very steady and not be moved, even in the slightest way, by the currents that come through it. So the practice of meditation is not just a matter of technique. It’s also a matter of cultivation of good qualities of the heart—conviction, humility, respect, gratitude, patience—that willingness to test yourself as you’re testing the Dhamma and to give the test everything you’ve got.

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