

# Authority, Opinions and the Buddhist Canon

## ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 I hear that sometimes people ask, well, what would Shinzetsu say about this?

00:00:11 That gives me pleasant sensations in a sense, pleasant self-referential sensations, pleasant

00:00:17 feel.

00:00:18 But also, immediately when I hear that people say things like that in my talk space is,

00:00:26 don't they realize these are just my casual opinions about things?

00:00:32 Don't they realize how little I know about enlightenment?

00:00:37 Don't they realize how little any teacher knows about enlightenment?

00:00:44 I understand that people want to appeal to authority.

00:00:48 It's convenient in a sense.

00:00:51 Basically, there's traditionally in India and also in the Western world, three bases

00:01:02 for knowing things.

00:01:05 There's direct experience, there's logical inference, and then there is reliable authority.

00:01:14 What is distinctive about the Buddha as a teacher is that he rejected reliable authority

00:01:23 as a basis of knowing.

00:01:25 He essentially said it's direct experience and logical inference.

00:01:30 Just because a very good person says something doesn't mean it's necessarily true.

00:01:35 Just because some ancient scripture that everybody believes in says something doesn't necessarily

00:01:41 mean it's true.

00:01:42 And just because somebody that's meditated for 50 years or 60 years says something doesn't

00:01:50 necessarily mean it's true.

00:01:52 It's their casual opinion.

00:01:53 It's the best they can come up with.

00:01:56 And I think it's really important to keep that in mind.

00:01:59 Does that mean that you shouldn't listen to what these teachers say?

00:02:02 No.

00:02:03 We have to listen because, yes, there's a lot that can be learned.

00:02:09 But it also has to be taken not as some sort of authoritative pronouncement.

00:02:15 It's at best a finger that can sort of point, and yes, this person has some

experiences

00:02:22 that I don't, or has more experience than I do, so yeah, I can listen to what they say.

00:02:28 But to go beyond that, to think that, to make it carry more weight than just that person's

00:02:35 casual opinion or best that they can come up with, I think is to miss the point.

00:02:43 We just do our best to formulate things as best we can.

00:02:52 So I just wanted to say a couple words along those lines.

00:02:57 Yes, you can make use of authority to a certain degree, but I don't think that we need to

00:03:09 give it more clout than it really deserves.

00:03:15 Also it's sometimes asked, well, how does what this teacher or that teacher say map

00:03:24 onto what's in the scriptures or what's in the canon?

00:03:28 I guess the Western religions, the Abrahamic religions, tend to call it the scriptures,

00:03:34 but in Buddhism they call it the canon.

00:03:37 Means the same thing.

00:03:39 Unfortunately, the people that are responsible for the Buddhist canon, the Buddha, his immediate

00:03:46 disciples and so forth, are not now alive, meaning we can't dialogue with them.

00:03:54 If you ever come to a retreat with me, what you'll see is characteristic of the way I

00:04:01 teach is that when people ask me questions, very seldom do I just give an answer.

00:04:08 I sometimes do.

00:04:10 But in most cases I find I have to ask a little more.

00:04:17 What did you mean by that?

00:04:21 I think I understand what you're saying, but it could be this or it could be that.

00:04:24 Could you clarify?

00:04:25 It's very difficult for me to just answer a question directly.

00:04:31 I find that interaction is needed.

00:04:34 A back and forth is needed.

00:04:38 There is no way that we can have a back and forth with the Buddha or his immediate disciples.

00:04:46 It's one way.

00:04:48 All we've got is what is in these books.

00:04:52 These books were not written down right away.

00:04:56 It was quite a while before they were written down.

00:04:59 Some people might claim, well, it was all perfectly memorized word for word.

00:05:03 There is something of that memorizing tradition in the Indic way of doing things.

00:05:10 But the fact is, even if it was word for word, that's still not enough.

00:05:16 Not really.

00:05:17 There would have to be a back and forth to see really how does what, say, I, as Shin

00:05:24 Zen Yang, am teaching, how does that map on to the Buddha?

00:05:27 I'd have to be able to dialogue with him.

00:05:31 And I can't.

00:05:32 He's gone.

00:05:34 So we can look to the scriptures, and yes, we can get a lot from it, and we should.

00:05:41 But once again, I have rather modest expectations with regards to how really sharp the communication

00:05:58 can be between the scriptures or the canon and us, given that it's a one-way street.

00:06:06 And so it's a kind of humility to understand that, yeah, you can make use of it, but you

00:06:14 can't dialogue with it.

00:06:17 And therefore, don't impute more to it than it can deliver in terms of your understanding

00:06:27 the path to classical liberation.