

Question 25:

How can you really be sure that anything the Buddha said is really the truth or what he actually meant? Isn't it true that nothing was written down for 400 years after his death? Would you agree that perhaps significant things the Buddha said may not have been transmitted? *From Michael Moshenrose*

Answer:

The Buddha's teachings were first formally written down as the Pali Canon in the first century B.C. in Sri Lanka, centuries after the Buddha passed away. However, Buddhists have faith in the authenticity of the Buddha's words as recorded in the Pali Canon for two main reasons. First, the monks who memorized the Buddha's words and passed them down to their student monks until they were ultimately written down, were highly skilled in memorization, having been trained in an academic and monastic culture which placed extremely high value on the ability to memorize teachings accurately. They also were highly motivated to memorize the teachings accurately due to their deep devotion to the Buddha and Dharma, and were highly capable of memorizing due to their simple monastic lifestyle, pure and uncluttered minds, and extreme level of mental concentration, which is not seen in today's world. In fact, the teachings were not written down due to fear that monks' memories could be inaccurate, but because of fear that the teachings may perish along with the many monks who were dying at the time due to political conflict, economic decline and famine.

Second, as the Buddha emphasized, "ehipassiko," come and see. People who practice according to what is written in the Pali Canon find that the teachings definitely work to calm the mind and make it wholesome, to enable morality in thought, word and deed, and to sharpen concentration, insight and wisdom. In simple words, come and see whether it works, and when you see that it works, it must be correct.

As to whether the recorded words are what the Buddha actually meant, there is some room for doubt as to the interpretation or translation of some passages in the Canon. However, Buddhism encourages questions and investigation as to the teachings, and recognizes that teachings may be understood on different levels and that it is very difficult to convey in words the deepest levels of experience. Words are only guidance pointing to the Ultimate Truth, but cannot fully convey that which is beyond worldly experience. The best way to find out whether the teachings as written are correct is to attain purity, insight and wisdom that will allow you to compare your experience with the teachings.