Conviction & Confidence

April 5, 2016

It was fourteen years ago that Ajaan Sawat passed away. So tonight’s a good night to stop and think about some of his teachings. He’d begin his meditation instructions by telling you to develop a sense of conviction, a sense of confidence, both in what you’re doing and in your ability to do it. The purpose of this is so that you really give yourself to the practice, give it your full attention, and tell yourself, for the time being, you’re not going to be doing any other work. You’re going to be doing what he called the work of the religion, which is to train the mind. Of course, the work of the religion is for your sake, for the sake of putting an end to suffering. But that’s not just a selfish thing, because if you can put an end to your suffering, you have much less of a burden on other people and you have lots to offer them. You can set them, at the very least, a good example, which is what the world needs. After all, each of us has to decide on our own actions. We can’t go out and save other people from their actions. If you go interfering with other people’s actions too much, they start reacting. But you can have the influence of your example. So the example outside has to come from within to be a thoroughgoing example. That’s why we train the mind. And because the mind is so complex, it does demand your full attention when you’re training it. It’s as if you have lots of little minds in here, like a mother chick trying to gather all of her baby chicks together. It takes a while to get all your little minds into one mind, to gather them in one place, right here at the breath, and to keep them there. So it’s good to have a sense of conviction in what you’re doing, that this really is important work. And it really will make a difference. A sense of confidence that you can do this. Those two things together give you the strength you need in order to stick with a practice and to do it well. Another one of Ajahn Swat’s teachings was that when you’re sitting here and you notice anything that’s a disturbance in the mind, tell yourself, “I’m okay. That’s stress.” To the extent that the mind is quiet, that’s the path to the end of stress. Because it’s very easy when things come popping up in the mind to get interested in them. Things aside from the breath, things aside from your concentration. You want to have that label ready at hand. There are a couple passages in the Canon where they talk in these terms that whatever arises is stress arising, whatever passes away is stress passing away. That’s the basic label you want to put on things, at least while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. As you’re engaged in the work of the world, then you have to take things on in other terms. But for the time being, you can free your mind from those things by saying, “Well, that’s just stress. A thought about work comes up, that’s just stress. A thought about other people comes up, that’s just stress. Whatever comes up is just stress.” You focus on developing the quiet that you can develop around those movements in the mind. And then as that quiet gets more firm, you can look into, “Well, why do these things keep popping up?” It means you have to look a little bit deeper. This was another aspect of Ajahn Suwat’s teachings, not so much something he would talk about, but something he embodied. There was a point where someone had told him that Ajahn Mahambo had recognized Ajahn Suwat as an arahant, and he wouldn’t let himself believe it. He kept looking, looking, looking in his mind. Then after a meal he turned to me and said, “You know, when Ajahn Mahambo said that I was an arahant, that wasn’t the case at the time.” Then he proceeded to talk about something he’d seen in his meditation the previous night that he hadn’t seen before, which meant that he didn’t rest content with whatever level of stillness he’d been able to find, whatever level of understanding he’d been able to find. Because there’s one thing to say, “Okay, the mind is still. And these things come popping up, and you can just sit back and not get involved.” But it takes another attitude to ask, “Well, why are they popping up? What’s in there?” And as he said, when you see any stirring in the mind, any fabrication in the mind, you can always assume there’s some ignorance there. For the sake of the path, that’s a good assumption. Because it makes you question. Things that you take for granted seem to be okay and no problem at all. Maybe there’s a problem there. Try to raise your standards. Keep them high. So your confidence is not just the empty kind of confidence that grade school teachers try to give their students when they put little gold stars all over their papers. It should be the confidence that comes in. You’ve learned a skill, and now you want to use that skill to see if you can take it to a higher level. When you talk about using concentration, this is where you really see this in action. You try to take the concentration out in the world, and for the first part of this, just simply maintaining it as you go through the day. You’re going to lose it many times in the course of the day. But you can pick it up. When you lose it, it doesn’t get too dirty. You can pick it up again, brush it off a little bit, and then go with it. This is where the confidence comes in, that you can do this. You can keep at it. It’s like learning a language. There are the days when you think, “I can do this,” and you actually do a lot better on the days when you think, “This is too much for me. You’re not going to do very well.” So remind yourself, even though you drop the concentration, you pick it up. Try to maintain it. And then try to notice what caused you to drop it. That’s when you begin to see into the mind the types of things that pull your attention away. And you ask yourself, “Why? What’s the allure there?” Sometimes it’s simply that the mind gets distracted by loud noises and sudden things, and other times it’s something else. Something is popping up, a little defilement in the mind. Once you look here, listen there. You’ve got to watch for that. It doesn’t mean you don’t look or don’t listen all the time. Sometimes you look or listen, but see what’s being fed here. And then if you try to stop the looking and listening, what part of the mind complains? The more stillness you can get in the mind, the more easily you’ll be able to hear these things. You’re lowering the level of background noise in the mind. So things that were buried in background noise before come to the fore, come out into the open. The more continually you can maintain that sense of being with the breath, energy, and the body as you go through the day, the more you’re going to see. Because it gives you a sense of comfort, a sense of well-being, the more easily you’ll be able to admit when something is going off course, when the mind is feeling weak, and hungry, it’ll make excuses for all kinds of things. But when it’s well-fed, then it’s in a better position to see that something is really going amiss, that it’s nothing you want to identify with. So simply taking the concentration into your daily life and trying to maintain it throughout all your activities. It helps you see a lot more clearly what you need to abandon in the mind and what other things need to be further developed. The steadier your concentration, the more you’ll see. Sometimes the concentration on its own is not enough to help you undo some of the attraction you find for things that excite greed, aversion, and delusion. This is why concentration on its own is not the whole path. There are other factors as well. But as the Buddha said, the other factors are supports for the concentration. So it becomes noble and right concentration. It really does the right work in the mind. But again, to maintain that persistence, you have to have conviction. Otherwise, the other voices in the mind will pull you away. They’ll say, “It’s too much to do. You’re asking too much of yourself. You’re being too hard on yourself.” And it goes on and on and on. Especially in our culture, there are lots of voices that try to pull you off center. And it’s very easy for the mind to take them up and agree with them. So put this other voice in your mind, Jon Swartz’s voice, and have confidence in what you’re doing. Have conviction in what you’re doing. Because it is the work of the religion, and it’s work for your sake, for the sake of the best part of you, the part that wants true happiness.

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