Conviction as Your Companion

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When you sit here talking to yourself, who are you talking to? There are passages where the Buddha said that we go through life with craving as our companion. It’s craving that whispers into our ears. It says, “We want this. I want that. Don’t want this. Don’t want that. Now we’re going to go about getting what we want or doing away with what we don’t want.” And craving can be pretty blind. You have to be very careful about what desires you talk to, that you bring into the conversation. The Buddha recommends a different friend inside, a different companion, conviction. Technically, this means conviction in the Buddha’s awakening. But as it relates to your actual decisions as you go through your life, it means taking on a couple of working hypotheses about the power of your actions, which of your actions actually would be skillful or worth following through with. Because there’s that part of the mind that calculates, “Is it worth doing this? Is it worth giving up that? What are the results going to be?” Especially long-term results. And the Buddha’s basically saying, “Take the knowledge that you gained on the night of your awakening and bring that into the calculation that your actions really do have long-term consequences based on the quality of the intention that you act on.” And the quality of the intention is not just good versus bad, because there are some good intentions that can be pretty diluted. You mean well, but you’re not paying careful attention to what’s going on, to what you’re doing, to the results that you’re getting from your actions. Instead, you want to work on developing skillful actions based on reflecting on your intentions, reflecting on your actions, judging the results of your actions, and then making adjustments. The Buddha said this is a good friend, this conviction that we have inside. There’s an interesting passage where he says it’s basically because we suffer that we need conviction, or that we are inclined to conviction. After all, if we weren’t suffering, who would care? You could do what you wanted, nothing would happen, nothing would harm you, nothing would harm anybody else. You wouldn’t have to necessarily believe in anything at all. But the problem is that our actions do follow patterns of cause and effect, and they’re no respecter of persons. In other words, they don’t make allowances for you just because you’re really a good person at buttering up somebody. If you do something unskillful, the short-term results may be affected by your ability to please people. Long-term results are not. The Buddha admits that there are cases where there are people who kill and steal and have illicit sex and lie and take intoxicants because they amuse somebody in power by doing this. In other words, they kill the enemies of the king, they steal from the enemies of the king, they have illicit sex with the wives of the king’s enemies, they tell a clever lie as a joke, or they’re good drinking buddies. They get rewarded, but those rewards don’t last. So what this means, as you’re practicing, is that you have conviction that the intentions you act on as you meditate will really make a difference. This is the basic principle we’ve learned from observing the precepts. As the precepts are designed, they focus on your intentional actions. If you inadvertently step on an insect and inadvertently take something you thought was yours but belonged to somebody else, it doesn’t count as a breach of the precepts. So the focus is on your intention. And then as we start to meditate, we get even more focused on our intention. We make up our minds that we’re going to stay right here. And then we respect that intention. We protect it. It’s an intention based on conviction. One of the strangest things you hear is when people say, “Well, in Buddhism there’s no room for faith. The Buddha doesn’t want you to believe anything that you can’t prove for yourself.” That’s only half-true. There are a lot of things he says you can’t know until you’ve actually worked on the path. And so you take the counsel of the wise into consideration. And you take a pragmatic proof. In other words, you look at your actions and say, “Actions based on this particular belief lead to good consequences or bad consequences.” You can check that out. If you believe in the power of your actions, of course you’re going to be more careful about how you act. If you don’t believe in the power of your actions, it’s very unlikely that you’ll go out of your way to do anything especially good or to avoid anything especially bad. So that’s a pragmatic proof. It doesn’t really prove anything, but it makes it look likely and reasonable that it would be a good idea to act only on your most skillful intentions. So listen to the voice inside that encourages you in that direction. That’s the voice of conviction. And that, the Buddha says, is your path. There’s just so much in the path that we don’t know until we hit stream entry. But if we’re convinced that our actions can do this, can do this practice, then when you meet up with an obstacle, you don’t immediately give up. There must be a way around it. It’s like a person lost in the woods. If you believe there’s a way out, there’s a possibility that you’ll find it. If you don’t believe there’s a way out, you give up. And that for sure is going to guarantee that you’re not going to get out. You have to remind yourself, “You got in there somehow. There must be a way out.” So you look for it. And you don’t get discouraged. Think about the Buddha as he followed his path, as he tried to find the path. One of the qualities that kept him going was conviction that there had to be a way to put an end to suffering. He didn’t have any proof at that point. We at least have the testimony of those who, like the Buddha, followed his path and got good results. He didn’t have anybody, aside from his conviction, as his friend. So when we take the Buddha as our example, the Buddha as our model, remember that he was a person of conviction, strong conviction. You look at the different lists that he places conviction in. Conviction is a strength. It’s a form of wealth. It’s the foundation post for the practice, when he compares the practice to a fortress on a frontier. You look at the old architectural manuals they have in India. The foundation post is the most important thing. It’s what gets the building started. It holds everything up until all the various pieces come together and strengthen one another. You have to have a good foundation post. So when you find yourself getting discouraged on the path, remember, other people have faced worse problems than you have, and yet they were able to get around them. They’re human beings. You’re a human being. They can do it. You can do it. When you have something in your mind, the voice in the mind, that tells you these things, then you’ve got a good friend, a good companion inside, the kind of companion that’s worth nourishing. So look at your companions, and you’re sitting here talking to yourself. Try to get a sense of the tone of voice, the things these different voices say. Try to recognize the voice of conviction, and remind yourself, “This is your best companion. As long as the mind needs a companion, this is the best one to have.”

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