Strength of Conviction

August 11, 2024

When we meditate, when we do goodness of any sort, we have to believe in what we’re doing. Otherwise, when we meet up with an obstacle, we tell ourselves it’s not worth it. We destroy our strength even before we started. We live in a world where we depend on strength of body and strength of mind. As long as you’re young and healthy, strength of body is something you can depend on, but it’s not always going to be there. Sometimes when you get sick, and sometimes if you’re lucky enough to live long enough, you get old, and strength of the body begins to wane. We hear a lot of people saying, “Well, when you get old, you just have to continue eating well and exercising, doing all the things that helped keep you fit when you were young.” And to some extent you can, but the body is made to fall apart, to wear down. As the texts say, it’s subject to abrasion, it’s subject to rubbing, it’s subject to all kinds of things to wear it down. You have to depend more and more on strength of mind. You have to believe in what we’re doing. That in meditating we’re actually working on a project that’s going to be worth all the effort that goes into it. That’s what conviction is all about. You read about the Buddha, how he came to Awakening through his own efforts. And if you’re convinced of that, you say, “Well, here’s a good example I can follow. Maybe I can’t make it all the way to Awakening, but at least I can believe in the fact that when I do something good, the results will have to be good, and they’re going to be worth it.” And so you give yourself encouragement all along. When he gave Dharma talks, we give what they call instruction, encouragement, urging, and rousing. One part handing over information and the instruction, and then he would urge, rouse, and encourage. That was to give you the mental strength to be convinced, “Yes, it’s going to be worth it.” So learn how to do that for yourself. Urge yourself, “This is going to be good. You need to develop good qualities, because when you get old, that’s what you have to depend on. Those are the only things you’re going to depend on.” You rouse yourself, you realize there’s going to be difficulties. This is why the Buddha uses so many images from warriors, elephants going into battle, people going into battle, not falling faint, not falling away. Continue doing what they have to do. Of course, in this case, you’re not battling with people, you’re battling with your own defilements, your own skepticism, your own laziness, your own lack of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. You can’t let these things take over. This is why the five strengths of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment are also called five faculties. The word faculty here comes from the Pali word indriya, which is related to inda. The king of the gods. In other words, there’s something that’s in charge. You want these five qualities to be in charge of your life. And they all depend on conviction. As one of the Johns in Thailand once pointed out, when the Buddha discusses discernment, he does say it comes from just getting the right perceptions. It comes from conviction. The Buddha himself, when he first decided he was going to teach, he announced, “Over the door is to the doubtless, let those with ears show forth their conviction.” In other words, you believe that when you found a good example like the Buddha, it’s really worth following. Because what else do we have in life? All the good things in life get subject to aging, illness, and death. As you get older, you can’t see things, you can’t hear things properly. The sensual pleasures you used to enjoy are nothing. Not so much, not so enjoyable anymore. As you grow ill, the things that you used to enjoy to eat just are not enjoyable anymore. Because when you die, you don’t have any access to these things at all. You’ve got to find a sense of confidence that you can build good qualities in your mind that you can depend on. This is why conviction goes together with heedfulness. Heedfulness is the realization that there are dangers in life, but you can overcome those dangers through your own actions, if you’re careful. The Buddha gives an example of a monk in the forest. He realizes, “Okay, I’m young now, but someday I’m going to grow old. When I grow old, it’s not going to be easy to practice the Buddhist teachings. I better practice now while I can, so that even when old, I don’t suffer.” The same applies to a monk who’s healthy, a monk who’s alive. A monk who lives in peaceful times. As long as times are peaceful, it’s easy to practice. When things get unpeaceful, when there’s war, when there’s rebellion, when there’s a split in the Sangha, there’s a lot of arguments and a lot of difficulties that make it hard to practice. So before those things happen, you want to practice and train your mind so that you will continue to be happy. The mind can have its own internal sense of happiness. It doesn’t depend on things outside, even when things outside fall apart. So conviction goes together with heedfulness. When the Buddha gives examples of how to convince yourself of his teachings, he says there are cases where all you have to do is read about the Buddha, you find it inspiring, and use that sense of inspiration to convince you that this is a good thing. In other cases, you may be skeptical when he talks about karma and he talks about rebirth. You tell yourself, “Well, I really don’t know these things and I wonder if anybody else can know them.” Well, the Buddha himself said, he came to awaken, he stepped outside of space and time. It’s only when you step outside of space and time that you really can understand space and time, what’s going on in space and time. So you give him the benefit of the doubt. And as he says, “For a course is a good action.” You tell yourself, if there is rebirth and it is shaped by your actions, then you’ve made yourself safe. If there’s no rebirth or your birth is not shaped by your actions, at least you behaved in an honorable way, in a way that wise people will praise and will give you no trouble, won’t create any hostility. Now those arguments will work only with people who do care about what wise people think. They have a sense of shame around wise people. It would be a shame to behave and to think and talk and in ways that would go against the principles of wisdom. They also care about the results of their actions. When you don’t create the hostility inside yourself, you don’t create hostility outside. And even if it turns out that nothing you do actually is what creates hostility outside, at least you’re not creating hostility inside your own mind. That way the mind lives more peacefully. So this is the kind of person the Buddha would want to have as a student, someone who cares about the results of actions, wants to be responsible, and is willing to listen to the wise. Because this is a training where you have to learn a lot from other people. Because ultimately you have to do the work yourself. Though you have a sense of shame around people who are wise and compassionate, that sets you on the right path right there. So these are the qualities that lie at the basis of our strength. Conviction, heedfulness, a healthy sense of shame, and a healthy sense of responsibility. When you have these qualities in your mind, then you can go far. It’s on these qualities that you build all the other qualities you’ll need to keep the mind protected when aging comes, when the pain of illness comes, when death comes. You’re going to need a lot of discernment not to suffer. That discernment requires a mind that’s still, that’s constantly with one object so it can know when other objects come in. And a mind that’s mindful. In other words, you would learn lessons from your practice and then you keep them in mind so you don’t forget. All this starts with conviction that there’s somebody out there who found the way to the end of suffering through his own efforts. And as he said, his ability to do that didn’t depend on anything superhuman. It depended on qualities that all human beings can develop. Ardency, heedfulness, resolution, and you can develop those qualities as well.

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