Responsible Conviction

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Meditation is a process by which you develop good qualities in the mind. Qualities like mindfulness, alertness, ardency, concentration. We do this because we believe in the power of the mind. We’re not just on the receiving end of material events. By working on the mind from within, you can make big changes in your life, big changes in the world around you. That’s because we have conviction in the power of the mind. That’s why we’re here. That’s the basic message of the Buddha’s awakening. On the night of his awakening, he gained three knowledges. The first was knowledge of previous lives. He saw that this was not his only life. He’d been born many, many times before. And his breaths went up and down, up and down, up and down. And the question was, “Why?” So the second knowledge, he asked that question and began to see the whole world dying and being reborn. It was based on their actions. Their actions were based on their intentions and their views. The quality of a good view and a good intention could lead to actions that would have good results. Bad views and bad intentions would lead to bad results. So that was the power of the mind to shape the world. The next question was, “Can we use that power of the mind to escape from the world?” In other words, to find a happiness that doesn’t depend on outside conditions, a happiness that doesn’t change. And he discovered that, yes, he could. Not only could he, but anyone who developed the good qualities of the mind could do that as well. A lot of the things we don’t know. We won’t know them until we can awaken ourselves. We’re not going to get awakened until we follow the path. So to follow the path, you have to have some working hypotheses, some working assumptions. You remind yourself that, “Yes, it is true that I don’t know.” But these are good things to believe. To believe in the power of the mind. To believe that your skillful intentions will lead to happiness. And if your intentions get really skillful, you can go to a happiness that doesn’t change at all. The Buddha compares this to being an elephant hunter. The elephant hunter goes into the forest. He’s looking for a big elephant because he needs a big elephant to do some heavy work. He comes across some very large footprints. And they look promising, but he doesn’t know for sure that they’re the footprints of a bull elephant because there are dwarf females with large feet. They might be theirs. But because they look promising, he follows them. He finds scratch marks up in the trees. And again, he doesn’t come to the conclusion that those must be coming from the tusks of a big elephant, bull elephant, because there are tall females with tusks. They might be theirs. But again, they look promising, so he follows them. Finally he comes to a big bull elephant out in the middle of the field. That’s when he knows for sure that’s the elephant. He’s caught the elephant he wants. In the same way as we practice, we practice virtue, we practice concentration. Even psychic powers come with a concentration. And those count as footprints and scratch marks. They’re promising, but they don’t prove things yet. So we gain our first glimpse of awakening. That’s when we know for sure that the Buddha really did know what he was talking about. Because with the first glimpse of awakening, you step out of space and time. And stepping out, you realize that you’ve been going through many lifetimes. You don’t know all the details, but you know that your experience of time has gone for a long, long time. And it’s been going on because of your actions. So from that point on, you’re always very careful about your actions. And your conviction in the Buddha has been confirmed. So you have no more doubts. Because you found a happiness that didn’t involve any of the aspects of the body or even events in the mind. You stop identifying with those things. So you’re freed in a lot of ways. And your conviction is confirmed. But until that point, you need to be very clear about the fact that you believe in what the Buddha said, and you want to take it on as a working hypothesis. In other words, you let what he said influence your actions. Because what he said is a bunch of good things. Let your good intentions, your skillful intentions, really do it. You yield good results. It gives you confidence in your own goodness, in your own potential for goodness. But it also says that you can’t be heedless. Because not all good intentions are skillful. You have to learn from following your good intentions and then seeing what happens when you do. And you begin to realize more and more where your delusion was. And that the effort that you put into this is effort well spent. It is something that’s good to believe. Otherwise, if you believe that your life is totally determined by forces from outside, you’re helpless. Or if you believe that you simply have to follow your own nature, well, what kind of nature do you have? You don’t know for sure. Some people like to say, “Well, I believe in my good nature.” And the idea of having to believe in rebirth seems below me, beneath me, below my dignity. But people who believe in their innate good nature tend not to grow. They just fall back on what they feel right doing or they want to do. Whereas the Buddhist teachings stretch you. Again, some people think the teaching on rebirth is childish, that it’s comforting. But it’s really scary that you could be reborn as almost anything because you don’t know what kind of actions you’ve done in the past. You do good now, but there may be some bad actions in the past. Or as you approach death, who knows what’s going to happen? Your views might change. They could delay your good results. So rebirth is not a consoling prospect. It’s scary, which is why you want to be really heedful about developing good qualities in the mind, so you can have that glimpse of awakening yourself, because that shuts off all kinds of bad possibilities and greatly reduces the amount of suffering that you’re going to have in wandering on. The power of the mind is so powerful that even when the body dies, the mind doesn’t stop. It keeps on looking for new places to go, new places to take on new identities. So you want to train that power so that it goes to good places, places where it can continue to practice, which is why conviction in the Buddhist teachings is not a childish thing. It’s actually very adult and very responsible. Because you think about, whenever you act, you always calculate. The effort that goes into the action and the results that will come from the action. The question is, how long do those results last? The Buddha is saying that they can last beyond this lifetime into future lifetimes. Now, you don’t know yet. You haven’t seen that for yourself. But it would be irresponsible to close off that possibility, especially since such wise people keep telling us that, yes, the mind is there. But the mind is that powerful. So you have to be responsible for how you use that power. So we can say that our conviction is responsible. In other religions, when they have conviction in the teachings, it’s basically faith that someone will take care of you. But here the Buddha is saying, you have to have conviction that you can learn how to take care of yourself. That’s what it means to be responsible. That’s what it means to be a mature adult. So this is why we practice. This is why we meditate. To develop the qualities we need to be mature. Because you can read the teachings and agree with them, and talk to yourself when the mind feels low. You can use the Dhamma to talk to yourself. But without the sense of well-being that comes from concentration, it’s easy for the mind to run out of strength. And without the mindfulness that you develop by sticking with one thing, like the breath, it’s so easy to forget the lessons you learned. So conviction here means that you’re ready to work, ready to be responsible. It’s probably the most mature attitude you can develop.

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