The Foundation Post (outdoors)

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When he was meditating with the Chan Fueng and listening to him teach meditation to other people, he used two words more than any other. When you’re meditating, he said, you have to use your powers of observation. One. Two, you use your ingenuity. What do you observe? You observe your actions in the present moment. You try to be ingenious in your actions in the present moment. What this means is you watch what you’re doing and then you look at the results. And if they’re not good, you ask yourself, what could I do better? And you give it a try. The Buddha himself said that when he was looking for a student, the two qualities he was looking for in a student were one, truthfulness, that whatever is arising in the present moment, the student would be truthful about it. Whatever he was doing, he would be truthful about it. And two, he’d be observant. It comes down to the same thing. What it points to is the importance of your actions in the present moment. What you’re doing right now makes all the difference in the world. I don’t know any other religion that gives so much importance to actions in the present moment. There are some religions in the time of the Buddha that said everything depended on a god having built it, created it. Others said everything depends on your old karma. There’s nothing you can do in the present moment to change your old karma, so you just have to put up with it. But as the Buddha said, if you believe in that, there’s no way to put an end to suffering. There’s nothing you can do to put an end to suffering. Because everything you do is going to be either the result of somebody else’s creation, or it’s going to be totally determined by what you did in the past. There’d be no way out. His explanation is that the things we get in the present moment, some of them come from the past, but what we make out of them in the present moment depends on our decisions right now. As we get started in the meditation, started in the practice, there’s no way we can know that for sure, but we notice that it does give us hope. It offers a way out. It makes us responsible. If you believe these things, if you have conviction in these things, you become a more responsible person and you also become a person with hope. This is why when the Buddha gave his analogy of the practice as being like a fortress at the edge of the frontier, he said that the main post of the fortress, the post that went up before everything else, was conviction. The Buddha couldn’t prove to us that our present actions make a difference, but he said if you believe this, one, you’re more likely to be responsible, and two, it offers a way out of the suffering of the world. Formally, they say conviction means conviction in the Buddha’s awakening. But this is what it comes down to. After all, how did the Buddha awaken? He awakened through his own efforts. What did he have that other people didn’t have? We had good qualities of the mind, but those good qualities of the mind came from his developing them out of the ordinary good qualities that everybody has. So the meaning of the Buddha’s awakening spreads into our lives as well. It points to a potential that we all have. We have those good qualities. We can develop them, too. And again, at this stage in the practice, you may not know for sure this sort of thing is confirmed only with the first taste of awakening. But if you believe these things, there is a pragmatic truth. You’ll be more likely to act in a skillful way, and you’ll have the motivation that offers you hope. When the Buddha discussed conviction, he gave the analogy of an elephant hunter looking for an elephant in the forest. There was a man one time who came to see the Buddha. He was very impressed. He went back and told his friend, “That Buddha is really a Buddha,” he said. “How do I know?” Other people come and they’re planning to argue with him, and even before they open their mouths, he’s converted them. So the friend hears this, and he’d like to see this Buddha, too. So he goes. He tells the Buddha what his friend had told him, because the friend had given an analogy. He says it’s like being an elephant hunter going into the forest and seeing big elephant tracks. And even though you can’t see the elephant, you know it’s going to be a big elephant. Well, the Buddha said that’s not quite the case. The intelligent elephant hunter goes into the forest and sees big footprints in the forest. He’s looking for a bull elephant because he’s got a big, heavy job that he needs a big bull elephant to do. But when he sees those big footprints, he’s not for sure that those are the footprints of a big bull elephant. Why is that? Because they’re dwarf female elements with big feet. They might be theirs, but it looks promising. So he follows the footprints. Then he sees scratch marks up in the trees. But even then, he doesn’t come to the conclusion that it must be the scratch marks of the bull elephant’s tusks, because there are tall females with tusks. It might be theirs. But still, it looks promising, so he continues following the tracks. He finally comes to a clearing, and there it is, a big bull elephant. That’s when he knows for sure. In the same way, the Buddha said, when you practice meditation, your mind gets quiet. That’s like the footprints of the elephant. Even if you start gaining different powers through your concentration, remembering past lives, reading the minds of other people, those are like scratch marks up in the tree. It’s still not proof that this is the path, or that the Buddha was awakened. It’s when you have your first taste of awakening yourself, you say, “Oh, the Buddha knows what he’s talking about.” That’s when your conviction is confirmed. But up to that point, things look promising, so you follow along. The Buddha says our current actions are important, so we look at our current actions. This is one of the reasons why we meditate, because we have to keep watch over our minds. You try to get the mind in a place where it can stay and watch the present with a sense of ease and well-being. So you work with the breath, make the breath comfortable. Put aside all other thoughts right now. You don’t have to use them to burden the mind. Focus directly on what you’re doing, because that’s the message of the Buddha’s awakening, the awakening that we have conviction in. It’s that your present actions are going to be important, so you want to be very clear about what you’re doing and why, and what the results are. And if the results don’t come out as you like them, well, you have the power to change what you’re doing. This is why we say that if you believed that everything was created by a god, you wouldn’t have the choice to change your actions. If you believed everything came from your past actions, you wouldn’t be able to change your actions. It’s because we believe that what we’re doing is important, and then we take advantage of that. We say, “Yes, we can change.” As the Buddha said, if people couldn’t develop skillful qualities, or abandon unskillful qualities, he wouldn’t have bothered to teach. But it’s because we have that ability, that’s why he taught. This is why when they talk about having conviction in the Buddha, it extends to his dharma, the teachings he left behind, and also to the noble sangha, the people who have practiced well and have gained results by following this practice. But conviction doesn’t stop just there. After all, if you’re convinced of the power of your actions, you have to act well and do your best to act well. This is why another aspect of conviction is having virtues that are pleasing to the noble ones. And these virtues have two qualities. One is that they’re consistent. You take the precepts and you don’t make any excuses, you don’t make any exceptions. You take the precept not to kill, you don’t kill anything, no matter how bad the provocation. No matter how inconvenient the pests are, you find some way to deal with them without killing them. No killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lies, not even white lies, no intoxicants. You hold to these precepts in all situations, with all people. Because you’re convinced that your actions are going to shape your future. And why do a bad job of shaping it, just as they shape the present? So you hold to the precepts. But at the same time, you don’t use your precepts as an excuse for looking down on other people who don’t follow the precepts. You’re not doing this to become better than other people. We’re doing this because the mind has its diseases of greed, aversion and delusion, which get in the way of it seeing clearly what it’s doing. And so we hold to the precepts as standards for our behavior. It’s like taking medicine. So there’s no need to look down on people who are not taking their medicine. Just keep on taking yours. Now, to make sure your precepts are solid, you have to have mindfulness and alertness. And John Fung had a student one time. She saw her friends going to the monastery to take the eight precepts, so she decided she’d take them as well. And the afternoon of the first day, she was walking past one of the monks’ huts and there was a little guava tree. And she told me later, it seemed like one second, one of the guava fruits which was nice and ripe was sitting on the tree and the next second it was in her mouth. And John Fung happened to be nearby and said, “Hey, I thought you were going to take those precepts. What’s in your mouth?” She’d forgotten that she wasn’t going to be eating anything in the afternoon. And as a reminder, when you’re taking the precepts, the big precept you have to take is the precept of the mind. In other words, you have to be mindful and alert about what you’re doing. So this is one of the reasons why we practice meditation, is to develop our mindfulness and alertness so we can be sensitive to what we’re doing and why and what the results are going to be once we’ve done something. So you stay with the breath. You have to keep the breath in mind and you have to be alert to whether the mind is staying with the breath or not. And if it’s not, you bring it right back. If it is, you try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breath is going, what you can do to make it even more comfortable. As you develop these qualities in the meditation, then they spill over into your daily life. It’s one of the reasons why the Buddha said our precepts foster concentration, but concentration can also help with our precepts. He gave the analogy of two hands washing each other. Precepts wash your concentration. Your concentration washes your precepts. Your precepts and concentration wash your discernment. Your discernment washes your precepts and concentration. All three aspects of the path help one another along. So you don’t have to wait until your precepts are pure before you meditate. You don’t have to wait until your concentration is perfect before you gain discernment. You take what you’ve got. You try to practice the precepts, you practice concentration, you try to develop your discernment as best you can. And these three qualities help one another along. But what underlies them all is that quality of conviction. There are going to be obstacles in the path, and if your conviction is weak, you’re going to get turned back by the first obstacle. Pain arises in the present moment and you stop. It’s like digging down, trying to find gold underground. You run into a rock and you give up. Whereas if you realize, the message of the Buddha’s awakening is that your present actions make the difference. You realize that even though, say, there may be pain that may be coming from your past karma, how you relate to the pain is a matter of your present karma. And that can make all the difference in the world. After all, the Buddha said pain is a noble truth. It was through understanding pain that he gained awakening. So instead of seeing it as an obstacle, see it as an opportunity. Because what we have in the present moment is a combination of the results of past actions plus our present actions. And sometimes even though we may be getting bad things coming at us from our past actions, we can make good things out of them. It’s like being a good cook. You may have all different kinds of vegetables and fruits in your kitchen garden. And if you planted some good fruits and vegetables, you have good things. If you have some bad ones, well, they’ve got bad things coming in. But a good cook can take even bad things and make good food out of them. Think about shrimp paste. What is it? It’s rotten shrimp. Fish sauce. It’s the juice that comes out of rotting fish. And not to be unfair to the Thais, what is cheese? It’s moldy milk. We can make good things out of these things. So in the same way, pain comes up. Learn how to see it as an opportunity to understand pain. Distractions happen in the mind. Use it as an opportunity to see how does the mind switch on itself. You make up your mind you’re going to stay with the breath and a few seconds later you’re off someplace else. What happened in between? Well, here’s your chance to learn, to watch, to understand, to be observant. If you believe in the importance of your present actions, you’ll be very observant about your present actions and that gives you the opening to get out. So in this fortress of our practice that protects all the good qualities of the mind, this is why conviction is the main post. In Thailand they call it Sao Aek, the first post that goes up. Even when they build cities in Thailand, in the old days they would put up a post in the middle of the city, symbolic of the fact that this is where the city has its foundation. And everything else grows out of that. So as long as that initial post is good and solid, everything else will have a chance to be good and solid as well. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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