

Strengthening Conviction

January 1, 2012

Meditating, strengthening the mind, is very similar to strengthening the body. You have some strength to begin with, and you use that strength to develop further strength. In Thai, the word for exercising is *awk kamlang*, which means to put forth energy. And in putting it forth, you gain something in return. So as you meditate, you have to use what strengths you already have if you're going to gain further strength.

They list five strengths altogether in the standard list: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. The fact that conviction comes first shows that it's important. As one of my teachers in Thailand once said, you notice that the list leading up to discernment doesn't start with concepts or ideas. It starts with conviction. Discernment comes from conviction—provided, of course, that it's conviction in the right things.

Traditionally, this means conviction in the Buddha's awakening, that it's not just one of those facts out there in history. It's a fact with implications for what you're doing right here and right now: the idea that someone, through his efforts, could find true happiness.

And his ability to find that happiness was based on the qualities of mind that were not peculiar to him. They're qualities that we all have to at least some potential form. The implication there, of course, is that if he can do it, you can do it, too. And because he found this way and was expert in gaining that freedom, you treat his words the way you would treat an expert's words. Not necessarily something that you are forced to believe; you simply trust that because he knew what he was doing, his explanations of how to do it deserve some special respect.

So there are a lot of implications to the having conviction in the Buddha's awakening. And, of course, there's going to be a part of the mind that resists this. After all, his story could be just one of those many stories that comes from the past—and we've heard lots of those—or maybe it wasn't transmitted properly. Maybe the principles that he said were universal, actually applied only in his culture.

There are lots of ways that we can develop doubts and uncertainty about the path. So let's look at how the Buddha said to deal with uncertainty. First, of course, you ask yourself: What are you being asked to believe? You're being asked to believe that your actions have an impact.

That the quality of the mind with which you act is going to have an impact on the results of that action.

That it's possible to learn from your mistakes.

That you do have freedom of choice.

Where the Buddha is asking you to take this a little bit further than normal common sense, of course, is that, by following this principle you can go all the way to true happiness, a happiness that won't change.

The first principles are very easy to except. Still, though, it's interesting: There's part of the mind that, many times, would rather that its actions *not* have results, especially when you know you're doing something unskillful. So you have to ask yourself: What is the state of mind that

would want to doubt these things? Is it a state of mind that you'd like to go with?

Sometimes that state of mind is just a matter of your own defilements: your own greed, your own aversion, your own laziness, your own delusion. Sometimes those attitudes are fortified by ideas we've picked up from our culture.

There's an awful lot in Western culture that goes against the Dhamma. It teaches you that greed is good, that true happiness is impossible, that the happiness that can be bought is good enough. It teaches you that if you don't follow your sensual desires, you'll end up twisted and mentally unbalanced.

There's a lot in Western culture, that feeds on our greed, aversion, and delusion, that encourages our greed, aversion, and delusion. Like that cartoon in *The New Yorker* several years ago: A man is standing in front of a magazine rack, and the names of the magazines are all the seven deadly sins. Our culture encourages these things.

So when you start to have doubts about the practice, become uncertain about the practice, you have to ask yourself: Whose values are speaking? And what's the quality of the mind that's speaking here? You want to step back from these things. It's not that you don't listen to your doubts at all, but you do want to figure out which doubts are coming from honest uncertainty, and which are coming from other agendas. Which of these voices do you want to identify with?

Of course, there's the simple doubt of not knowing. But you also have to realize that if you wait for true knowledge, absolute, certain knowledge to come, you're going to die first. We live in a world of uncertainties. We have to take gambles as to what effort will be worth expending to get a reward—in terms of pleasure, well-being, satisfaction—that's commensurate with the effort we put in. This is a part of human life that makes us uncomfortable. Most of us don't like to think about how much we're taking on faith as we go through the day. Even just believing that the world is going to go on as it has been: There's no guarantee.

So you have to realize that there's always going to be an element of uncertainty as you make choices in life. This is where you have to balance what seems to be a safe choice as opposed to an unsafe one; a likely choice as opposed to an unlikely one; a noble choice as opposed to an ignoble one. And you look at the Buddha's teachings and they fit all the right criteria: being safe, noble, and likely—that there is a pattern to the principle of cause and effect.

Even if it doesn't work out that that is the way things are, you've developed good qualities in the present moment. There's a certain sense of satisfaction coming from that, a certain sense of nobility that you've acted on your higher impulses rather than on your lower ones.

So you have to be willing to commit to some things before you learn any undeniable truth. This is a principal that Ajaan Lee repeats over and over again: that you have to *be* true in order to *find* truth. You have to say: I'm really going to give myself to this particular course of action, this particular way of approaching life, and then see what comes out as a result. You have to give it time; you have to give it energy. Without expending the energy, you're not going to get the strength of conviction in return.

And so you look around. Who are the people who followed this path in the past? In my own case, one of the things that really convinced me that this is something worth looking into was meeting Ajaan Fuang. I remember when I had first learned about Buddhism. The idea that someone could practice to be free of greed, aversion, and delusion, sounded like a dead person. It didn't sound attractive at all. Then I met someone who had devoted his life to the path. He was very alive, very alert, very wise. He inspired a lot of trust. And, as he said, this wasn't how he had started in life. He said he owed it all to the training.

I compared him to the other people I'd known, other possible ways I could live my life, and his seemed the most likely to show good results. It was a risk with a lot of uncertainties, but I felt inspired by his example.

This is why it's good to read the stories of the *ajans*, people in the recent past who have given their lives to the practice. Sometimes it's easier to relate to people who live closer to us in time—although if you read the *Theragatha* and *Therigatha*, you realize that the problems people face in training their minds are not so different now from what they were back then.

So you look at the life of those who have practiced, and then you give it a good try. Notice which qualities of the mind the Buddha says are unskillful, which are skillful. Learn to recognize the skillful ones, recognize the unskillful ones in your own mind, so you can develop skillful ones and abandon the unskillful ones, and see what happens.

This is not the sort of thing that you just try on weekends. You ask yourself: If you don't give yourself to this kind of life, this kind of practice, this kind of belief, what kind of belief are you giving yourself to? What habits are you training yourself in? We don't usually think about that. We just live our ordinary lives, and don't particularly think of it as a training in any way. But maybe we're training ourselves in laziness, maybe we're training ourselves in an unwillingness to commit. Is that something you want to train in?

What it comes down to is the fact that we're always making choices. All too often we don't really realize what we're choosing. So at the very least this question—"Do you want to place your faith in the Buddha's awakening?"—forces you to realize that you are making choices, you are training the mind in one direction or another. Is it the direction that you want to go? What kind of hope does that direction hold out? The Buddha's direction holds out the hope that maybe there really is a true happiness that's not dependent on conditions, that's not going to leave you because of aging, illness, or death. If you want to find out if that is a genuine possibility, there's only one way to do it: Do whatever the path requires. That's the only way you're going to know.

So do you want to know this? Whether this is true or not? That's what it comes down to. Or are there other things you'd rather know? Things that strike you as more important? More desirable? That's the kind of question we all have to ask ourselves. The problem is that, all too often, we pretend that the question has already been answered without our having to do anything, without our having to put anything out, to expend any energy or any effort. But we're always putting energy into something. Why not put it into something that holds out the promise of something special?

This is one way of overcoming your doubts: seeing when you put energy into something and asking yourself: What kind of results do you get? Are they the kind of results that you want? Are they commensurate with the energy you're putting into them? What kind of happiness would really satisfy you? What vision would you like to have for the possibilities of human life? If it includes the possibility of a true happiness, then this is the path that works. If you just listen to the words, you won't know. But this is the path that provides that possibility. And it's up to you to decide whether you want to test it or not—keeping in mind Ajaan Lee's words: that it's through being true that we find the truth.