

Conviction in Charge

May 29, 2018

Tonight's Visakha Puja, the full moon in May, in which we're commemorating three events in the Buddha's life: his birth, which was on the full moon in May; and then, thirty-five years later, his awakening, which was on the full moon in May; and forty-five years after that, his final passing away into total nibbana, which was also on the full moon in May. So we stop to take stock of what these events mean in our lives, even though they happened 2,500–2,600 years ago. Their primary meaning is what the Buddha proved about the power of human action to find true happiness. Of course, he proved it for himself. And it's something we have to prove for ourselves.

They say that on the night of his passing away, the devas sang songs, played instruments, sprinkled flowers down on him, sprinkled incense down on him. He told the monks around him that that was not the proper way to pay respect to him. The proper way was to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma: in other words, to practice the Dhamma the way that he did. After all, as he said, he found true happiness by developing qualities in the mind that everybody has a potential for: resolution, heedfulness, and ardency.

Resolution is the determination to stick with this question of how to find true happiness.

Heedfulness is realizing that your actions make a big difference. You have to be very careful about what you do and say and think, because actions that come from skillful intentions can lead you to happiness. Actions that come from unskillful intentions can lead to unhappiness. And because this is a principle that is in operation 24/7, you have to be alert 24/7 and careful 24/7.

Ardency is the whole-hearted desire to do skillful things to the best of your ability.

Now, the Buddha never said that he could prove these principles to other people simply by talking about them. But he did say that it is a strength for each of us to take them on conviction: in other words, to take them as working hypotheses. After all, the principle that our actions shape our lives makes sense. But there's no way we can really prove it. It may be an illusion. We can't prove it ahead of time. But we *can* prove it through the practice, by adopting it as a working hypothesis and then carrying it through. The Buddha promised that it would lead to good results. That's something we take on conviction. He said that this conviction is a strength, and that we should develop that strength to the

point where it becomes what he called a faculty—(*indriya*) in Pali, which is related to the word Indra, the name of the king of the devas.

When a strength becomes a faculty, it basically takes charge of the mind. It becomes the major determining factor in what you do and say and think. And from conviction come other strengths as well.

There's the strength of persistence, where you can stir up the energy to keep with it, because conviction that doesn't result in action is empty conviction. That is, it never gets a chance to be proven. So we'll say, "Let's act on it." And because the Buddha does promise that it will lead to an ultimate happiness, you can take those as words of encouragement so that you can stick with the effort, even when it gets difficult. There's one place where he says even if tears are running down your cheeks with the difficulty of the practice, it's worth sticking with it because those tears don't last long, but the results of the practice *will* last long. And conversely, if you give up, the results of giving up will also last long. So you find ways so you're not doing this with tears down your cheeks. You motivate yourself, finding ways in which you can encourage yourself to really want to do this.

And then you want to be able to keep this principle of conviction in mind. That's what mindfulness is for. When you're making your choices as to what to do and say and think, you keep in mind the fact human action can lead to true happiness if you do it right. And are you sticking with that original intention to find that true happiness, or are you wandering off someplace else? And who's in charge? Is your conviction in charge? Or is your greed, aversion, or delusion in charge—or somebody else's greed, aversion, or delusion in charge? Because the mind is complex. It's like a committee. It's got lots of different opinions in here: your own opinions, other people's opinions that you've picked up. You have to keep in mind the fact that you have to be very picky about what you choose to follow in the mind. When you choose the right voices, the mind can settle down: Choose the voices that say that it's good to have the mind still. It's good to have the mind solid and unperturbed.

Because there are other voices out there that are saying that you should always be sensitive to every little change out there. But you have to realize that a mind that is solid is a mind that can see itself clearly. You want to remember that. You remember all the techniques that are taught to bring the mind to settle down: the things that you actually find work for you; have worked for you in the past. You want to keep those on file so that when issues come up in the mind, you have some ideas of what you can do so you're not at the mercy of whatever comes into the mind. You can be more in charge, or your desire for happiness can be more in charge.

Conviction is also the beginning of discernment. The Buddha said that discernment begins with asking a question of people who seem to be happy, “What when I do it will lead to my long term happiness, and what when I do it will lead to my long term harm and suffering?” This means, one, choosing the right people to ask this question of. You look for people who have integrity and honesty. They’re generous, virtuous. They have conviction, too. They’re pure in their dealings with other people and they have resolution. In other words, there’s a good solidity to their minds so that they’re not knocked over by the ups and downs of life. That gives you reason to have conviction in them. Then you also need to have conviction in that question because, after all, the question assumes that your actions actually do make a difference, and it assumes that long-term happiness is possible. The discernment lies in realizing that long-term happiness is better than short-term, and in choosing the right people to ask.

So conviction, when you really develop it, develops into other strengths as well: persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. And these things reinforce one another, leading you to a state of mind where you’re clear about what’s going on. You see clearly what in the mind leads to suffering and what in the mind can take you away from suffering. You do your best to develop what’s going to take you away from suffering and to abandon what will lead to suffering.

And eventually, the Buddha said, you come to a realization, as things begin to open up in the mind, that there really is a dimension that you can touch in the mind that is truly happy and doesn’t depend on conditions at all. That’s the point, he says, where your conviction is confirmed or verified. He makes an analogy of an elephant hunter. There was a time when someone went to see the Buddha and talked to him for a while. He came back from his conversation very impressed. He said to a friend, “This Buddha, he’s really awakened.” The friend said, “How do you know?” The first person said, “Well, I’ve seen other people come. They want to argue with him and disprove his teachings. But even before they have a chance to open their mouths, they listen to his Dhamma and they’re totally converted. It’s a sign he really is awakened. It’s like seeing footprints of an elephant in the forest. You see big footprints, you know it’s a bull elephant. In the same way, the fact that the Buddha can win over people in this way indicates that, yes, he’s truly awakened.”

The friend said, “Well, I’d like to meet him some day.” So the friend does go see the Buddha and he tells him about what the first person had said, mentioning the analogy of the elephant’s footprints.

The Buddha replied, “Well, that’s not the correct way of using that analogy. Suppose an experienced elephant hunter goes into the forest and he’s looking for a

bull elephant because he needs a big bull elephant to do work for him. He sees big footprints, but because he's experienced he realizes he doesn't know for sure if those are the footprints of a bull elephant. Why is that? Because there are dwarf females with big feet. But because they are big footprints, he follows them. He comes onto scratch marks up in the trees. And he still doesn't come to the conclusion that those are the scratch marks from the tusks of a big bull elephant because there are tall females with tusks. Maybe those are their scratch marks. But, because the footprints are big and they look promising, he keeps following. He finally comes to a big bull elephant in the middle of a clearing. When he actually sees the elephant, that's when he knows he's got the elephant."

The same way, the Buddha said, there are footprints and scratch marks all along the path. There's a sense of well-being that comes when you get the mind in a strong state of concentration, and even various psychic powers that can come from the concentration. The concentration itself is like the big footprints. The psychic powers are like the scratch marks. They seem promising but they're not proof. The real proof comes when you've had your first taste of awakening. You see that there is really something deathless that the mind can touch and that it's the ultimate happiness. You also realize that you've found it through your own efforts: through developing your conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment—all of these things together.

This is how we confirm for ourselves our conviction in what the Buddha said or in what his awakening means for us: that our actions really do have this power. The conviction gets confirmed when you see that, when it develops all the strengths, it really does lead to the deathless.

So on a night like this, when we're thinking about the Buddha's awakening and what it means for us, try to remember these five strengths and the duty of putting them in charge. That means, whatever comes up in the mind, you ask yourself: "How does this relate to the quest for true happiness?"

And you do that with another quality the Buddha talks about, which relates to his resolution: the fact that he wouldn't rest content with skillful qualities. In other words, as long as he hadn't reached the ultimate level of skill, he wouldn't say, "This is enough." He kept looking for ways to improve his skill. He actually called this a form of discontent. He was not content with how skillful he had been so far. He wanted to see if there was something more, something more, until he reached the point where there was nothing more—in other words, nothing that could go further than what he had found. It's when we develop these qualities that we're practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. And this is how we show genuine homage, genuine respect for the Buddha.

So tonight we've done it both ways. We've shown respect with material things: with the candles, flowers and incense. The incense is a symbol of virtue, in that the Buddha said the scent of virtue goes against the wind. The flowers are a symbol of concentration: the flowering of the mind. And, of course, the light of the candles is like the light of discernment. Those are symbols. What you want to do is develop the genuine qualities in your own mind. As you do that, you're practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. You're showing homage to the Buddha. And you're paying homage to your own desire for true happiness.

Sometimes it's thought that the Buddha said we're all innately good. He never said that. And there's nothing in his teachings that depends on our being innately good. But he's got a teaching for people who want to find true happiness and want to know: Can their efforts lead to it? For those people, he said, the answer is Yes. And he shows the way.

So we're paying homage both to him and to our desire for happiness that's true, a happiness that we can depend on. To get there requires that we learn how to depend on ourselves. As the Buddha said, if you can't depend on yourself, who can you depend on? So it's through developing skillful qualities that we learn to find something inside that we can really trust. It takes time because there are parts of the mind that you can't trust. But, luckily, they're just parts of the mind. There are other parts of the mind that really do want to do this well, and you encourage those parts. They're called ardency. They're called resolution. Heedfulness. The qualities that the Buddha used, that he developed, and that we can develop, too.