

Strength of Conviction

May 25, 2009

To live a good life, you have to come from a position of strength. What that means is that to do the right thing, to say the right thing, and to think the right thing consistently you have to come from a place where there's as little fear as possible.

And although it's useful to have the support of a community outside, there are many times when you're living in situations where the community's not there. You're dealing with people who don't share the values of the Dhamma, who have other priorities, other agendas. And you have to develop your own inner strength to maintain your practice in the face of those priorities and agendas.

In other words, you have to learn how not to accept them and not get sucked into other people's values when you're sure that your values are on the skillful side: wanting to act and speak and think in ways that are harmless and actually promote well-being both for you and for the people around you. So you want both the body and the mind on your side.

In the body, we work with the breath. The breath is the most basic of all the elements in the body; it's what keeps us alive. And it's through the breath that we know the other elements of the body. We tend to think of ourselves as being first aware of the hard part of the body, the solid part of the body, while the breath comes in and out of that. But it's actually through the breath that we know the solidity, the warmth, the coolness, or the movement of the body.

So we try to work with the breath in a way that feels refreshing, nourishing, and strengthening, not only while you're sitting here with your eyes closed, but also as you go through the day. Try to keep that center very firmly inside and keep your awareness filling the body as much as you can.

As you're sitting here with your eyes closed, this is an ideal time to work with the details: the subtleties of how the breath energy is flowing, what kind of energy feels good right now, what kind of breathing feels good, and how to breathe in a way that you're not squeezing energy out of the body. Our cartoon ideas of breathing often involve getting the out-breath out as much as possible. But when you're dealing with the breath in the body, you don't have to squeeze that out. In fact, you want to keep it as full as you can.

Think of every little cell in the body being filled and nourished, refreshed with energy. Ask yourself if there are any parts that feel starved, any parts that feel like they're not getting enough breath, or the breath is being squeezed out of them.

What way could you breathe so that they would feel full, refreshed, energized—all of them, all at once? This way, good breath fills the body, and your awareness fills the body as well. This is how you maintain your boundaries.

If you're not filling your body with your awareness, you often let the emotional energy of other people come in and invade your space. While you're talking with them, while you're trying to empathize with them, you take in their energy. Then you find that you're stuck with it, and it doesn't really accomplish anything. It's actually possible to empathize perfectly well with other people without trying to take in their energy, take in their pain.

You know what pain is like. You know what suffering is like. But you also know that the best way not to get sucked into your *own* thought worlds is to be able to stand apart from them a bit, observe them as events, and see where they come from so that you can actually do something about them. The same principle applies to other people's thought worlds and emotional worlds as well. You don't have to take them in. You can observe them, you can empathize without having to allow their energy to invade you.

In this way, you've got your body on your side. You're with the body. If you sense any fluctuations in the energy, you can ask yourself, "Was that from a physical cause or from a mental cause?" Then deal with it. And often, dealing with it, the best first line of defense is to work from the physical side. How can you change your breathing to mend that tear in your bodily energy, to reweave the energy, to darn it the same way you'd darn a hole in a sock to get everything back, all connected again?

This is where you've got the body on your side. The next thing, of course, is to get the mind on your side, although to say "the mind" disguises the fact that you have many minds—many ideas, many attitudes. There are many "yous" in there. Some of them are actually helpful for the practice; some of them are not. So you try to get all the committee members on the same page. I once asked Ajaan Fuang what you need to believe in order to do the practice. He said to believe in one thing: karma, the principle that your actions really do bear results, and you really can develop skillful actions. You're not stuck in old habits. You have choices. You can train the mind. And the quality of the mind determines the quality of the action.

This is why we meditate: to get the mind in good shape so that the actions it chooses are skillful, harmless, and beneficial. And the word "action" here means not only your physical actions and your words, but also the thoughts that go through the mind, because those are actions, too. They have a result. There are certain patterns that you think over and over again. Those become engrained in

the mind and then they're like ruts in snow. As you're trying to drive down the road, then wherever the ruts go, your car gets pulled in that direction. That's where the nerve pathways have been connected.

So you want to keep reminding yourself that your choices do matter. They are important. And even though the results of good actions may not show up immediately in your life, you can just chalk that up to past karma because your past actions have results, too. It wouldn't be fair to insist that "I want my nice, good actions in the present moment to have the power to shape my life, but I don't want past actions to have any power over my life." They will influence the range of choices that you can choose from. As long as you keep trying to choose the most skillful of the options available to you, you're opening up the possibility for more skillful and more skillful and more skillful opportunities.

This is why the traditional definition of conviction in the practice is conviction in the Buddha's awakening, because what he saw was that there is an aspect of the mind, a process of awareness, that doesn't die with the body. It keeps going in the same way that when the dream ends, your awareness doesn't end. You dream another dream, and then there's another dream. If you were to ask what went from the first dream to the second, you'd realize that's not a proper question. The dreams all happen right here. The same principle applies to rebirth. Wherever you're aware, it's always right here—whatever you're aware of. But your sense of what's around "right here" is going to change, and what you're going to latch onto to make it "right here" is going to change, too.

Notice that "here" is something created by the mind. Your sense of here or there is part of the process of becoming, and the things you latch onto become the seeds for different worlds of becoming. Fortunately, you have choices. Your past karma is like a field, as the Buddha says, filled with all kinds of potential seeds. What you water right here in the present moment: That's the seed that's going to grow. So you look to see what potentials are here right now that you can develop and will lead you in a skillful direction. And have the conviction that always the right choice—the harmless choice, the beneficial choice, the choice where you find that your benefit coincides with the benefit of other people—is the direction you want to go in.

As you work on this process, you find it takes you deeper and deeper into the mind to see where, in the mind's own dealings, it's causing suffering to itself. The thoughts it latches onto that then create a sense of being burdened, constricted, restricted in your choices: You can see how they happen. And you try to ferret out the cause. What are the mental elements, the mental events that lead you in the direction of suffering? What can you do to put an end to those events? How can

you put an end to those cravings? How can you drop the cravings when you see them arise?

This doesn't mean you live wholly without desire. In fact, certain desires are an essential part of the path. The desire to do what's skillful, to abandon what's unskillful: Those kinds of desires you nourish. But the desires that make you want to look for nourishment in sensuality, nourishment in creating more little worlds in the mind, the desire to destroy what you feel you are: Those are the kinds of cravings you have to watch out for. You have to learn how to identify them.

Getting to that level starts with trying to be skillful in your daily activities because it's all of a piece. You're doing something that can either be skillful or unskillful. When you follow that process into its subtler levels, you discover that that issue of skillfulness and unskillfulness is what underlies the four noble truths. The four noble truths are ways of looking at experience. You're not so much concerned about who you are; you're simply concerned with which actions are skillful and which actions are not. What's causing suffering? What's not? And as you focus on these things, you find that the mind gets greater and greater strength to make the right choices because you see very clearly that if you make the wrong choices, you suffer. Not only you, but people around you suffer as well.

This way, regardless of what worlds of possibilities are presented by your past actions—your past karma—you don't have to suffer. That's when the mind is really strong, and it goes beyond even the strength of conviction and the strength of persistence, of mindfulness and concentration and discernment. It finally arrives at a strength that's totally independent, where it's not just conviction. It's knowledge that keeps you going, for you've confirmed it in yourself. You've developed that strength within yourself, and you can see how far it can lead you.

So when we talk about conviction in the Buddha's awakening, it basically means conviction in your own ability to keep making the skillful choices and to benefit by doing so. Then by exercising that ability, you find greater and greater strength inside. You become more independent. You're less and less dependent on the community around you. That's what the Buddha means when he says "freedom," that kind of strength when you're no longer constricted by the options around you. You no longer have to suffer when things are bad or suffer when things are good. You don't have to suffer at all.

It's important that you maintain the conviction that this is possible. Regardless of what the people around you say, regardless of what your work is like, or what the economy is like, or what politics are like—or all the other things we get obsessed about in the world outside—you need this ability to be totally free and independent. And it's not a selfish process when you do this, because

remember that when you're dependent on other people, it's like feeding on them. You're trying to get strength from them. And the world is a feeding frenzy. So it's good to have at least one person pulling out of the frenzy—one less burden for the world, one more good example.

So do what you can to maintain this sense of strength, the strength of conviction. Any relationships that tear it down, any activities that wear it away: You have to ask yourself, "Do I really need those relationships? Do I really need those activities?"

This path toward freedom that's built out of these strengths: You've got to give it your highest priority if you want to keep it strong, keep yourself strong, and keep the practice strong. Otherwise, what are you doing?