

## *Strength of Conviction : 1*

*April 9, 2020*

The practice requires strength. In times of difficulty, it requires a lot of strength. Fortunately, the kind of strength that's needed is something we can all learn how to muster. We have the potentials within us. It's simply a matter of knowing where to look—and having the heedfulness that reminds us that, Yes, if we're going to find a way out of the difficulties, it's going to depend on us, so we're willing to gather our strength.

The Buddha lists five strengths that are important for the practice: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. Of the five, conviction is the most basic. All the rest depend on it.

One of the Thai ajaans once said that we tend to think that discernment comes from reading a lot, from having a lot of ideas and developing our thoughts, but it actually comes from conviction. Because what kind of discernment are we looking for? We're looking for the discernment that finds a way out. And for that kind of discernment, we need to believe that there is a way out. Whatever insights we develop have to be based on that conviction if they're going to be helpful.

So it's good to look at the causes that the Buddha lists for giving rise to discernment, all the way down to conviction and to the causes that give rise to get conviction. He lists four, what he calls the four stream-entry factors. Now, this term can mean either the four factors *for* stream-entry or the four factors that *constitute* stream-entry. And because we're not there yet, let's look first at the factors *for* stream-entry.

They start with finding a person of integrity—someone who, when you live with the person, you gain a sense that you can really trust this person and that this person has a fund of knowledge that's deeper than what you've got. The Buddha says there are two tests for such a person. The first is: Does this person have the sort of greed, aversion, or delusion that would get him or her to claim to know something he or she didn't know? And if they do, well, you know they're not people of integrity. The second test: Would this person try to get someone else to do something that was not in that person's long-term interest, that was actually going to be harmful for that person in the long term? If so, you know that a teacher like that is not the person you want.

But, you've got to have integrity yourself to make these judgments. You have to be honest. As the Buddha said, the kind of student he was looking for in you was someone who was honest and observant, because you're going to be learning from your actions. And if you can't be honest and observant about your own actions, then it's hard to be honest and observant about other

people's. If being less than honest is normal for you, you're going to assume the same thing for other people—that they're less than honest—and it's going to be hard to figure out who has honesty and who doesn't. So you have to look to your own integrity. Are you willing to make changes in the way you act, the way you speak, the way you think if you see that they're harmful—even if it's hard to change? If you are, then you can judge that quality in someone else.

Once you've found someone you feel you can trust, then the next factor is that you listen to the true Dhamma. Here again, you test it—and here again, the testing requires that you have some qualities that make you a fair judge. You look for the Dhamma that can be put into practice and then try it out. Think it through first: Does it make sense? Does it seem like it's going to be a good thing? What part of the mind is attracted to it? And if it's the part of the mind that you feel is honorable and trustworthy, then you follow through. This, the Buddha said, is where you give rise to the desire to practice. And then you try it out. See what results you get when you act in line with that teaching.

This requires the next factor, which is appropriate attention. You ask yourself: "How does this teaching apply to me, to my suffering, to my unskillful actions? Where do I measure up? Where do I not measure up? If I don't measure up, what can I do to make improvements?" Because appropriate attention means looking at things in terms of what's skillful and what's not skillful, but also realizing that there are duties: Skillfulness is to be developed; unskillfulness is to be abandoned. So you give it an honest try. And you're honest about your ways of judging: Did you really understand the teaching? Did you actually follow through? Did you get the desired results? If there's anything still lacking, you try to make up the lack.

Because we're heading toward the fourth factor, which is practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. This means practicing for the sake of dispassion. Someone once asked me, "Does dispassion mean that you have a robot-like attitude toward other people?" and that's not the case. The Thai ajaans talk about it more as sobering up: You've been intoxicated with youth, intoxicated with health, intoxicated with life, and now you're beginning to realize that these things are shallow and undependable, that they're not worth pursuing, that there's something better worth pursuing. That's when the mind begins to sober up.

And that's when you've got strength in conviction. Because conviction is sober. It's going to be needed to make an effort, because that's the strength that builds on conviction: the strength of persistence. And sometimes that effort is going to require that you do things that you don't like to do and to put up with difficulties when you'd rather not. The path requires a lot of endurance, a lot of restraint.

But you have to ask yourself: “Do you have goodwill for yourself?” It’s interesting that the Buddha couples his discussions of goodwill, not with just expansive feelings of niceness, but with endurance and restraint. You endure other people’s misbehavior. Not that you don’t try to correct it when you can, but there are times when you simply have to endure it for the sake of the harmony of the group. You restrain your own actions, your own speech, your own thoughts, the ones that will be destructive, but you do it out of goodwill, a desire for true happiness, a sober desire for true happiness.

So when you have these four qualities—you’ve found someone trustworthy, you’ve heard the true Dhamma, you apply appropriate attention, and you practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma: That’s when you have a strength you can rely on. Heedful. Sober. Circumspect. A sign of maturity.

As someone once said, this is a religion for grown-ups. This doesn’t mean that young people can’t do it. They can, but they need to have a grown-up attitude. And, of course, not everyone who’s old has a grown-up attitude. But it is something you can develop. And that maturity is what makes you strong. With it, you can withstand a lot of things that otherwise would break you. That way you can develop the mind in the right direction—beyond intoxication with youth, intoxication with health, intoxication with life—to build a path that goes beyond what you’ve ever known before.