

## *Strength of Conviction*

*December 5, 2020*

As the pandemic wears on, you want to make sure you don't wear out. You look around us and you see a lot of people misbehaving. It's because of a lack of strength. A lack of endurance.

It's when people feel weak and threatened that they misbehave. They create a lot of suffering for themselves and for other people. When we look at that, we should take it as a lesson. We want to make sure that *we* don't fall into that pattern.

So we've got to look for strength inside. But we look first outside for good examples. There's the example of the Buddha, the example of his noble disciples, all the way down to the ajaans.

We have to remember that they were human beings. The Buddha wasn't *born* the Buddha. The arahants weren't *born* arahants. They *became* that way—though they obviously had some merit from previous lifetimes from the good deeds they'd done. But there was still work they had to do. If they'd simply leaned on their past good actions or past good merit, they wouldn't have gotten very far.

So that's the first lesson: You're not stuck where you are. If you want to make progress, though, you've got to take what goodness you've got and learn how to develop it further. And we look to the example of the noble ones to see exactly how they did that.

There are five strengths. There's strength of conviction, strength of persistence, strength of mindfulness, strength of concentration, strength of discernment. *These* are the things that carried them through. Whatever the difficulties they had to face—and there were many—these were the strengths that they were able to fall back on, and able to develop, all the way to the point of the deathless.

There's that passage where the Buddha asked Venerable Sariputta, "Do you believe that the five faculties—which are the same as the strengths—lead to the deathless?" And Sariputta said "No, I don't believe, I *know*."

This is something we can find for ourselves. And the strengths begin with strength of conviction. Strength of discernment is the one that makes them all solid. But we have to remember: Discernment doesn't come simply from things you've read—it doesn't come from perceptions, or *sañña*. It comes from conviction: *saddha*, conviction that there's got to be a way out. There's got to be a way to survive hardships and come out not only surviving, but *thriving*.

And what do we base that conviction on? Conviction in the Buddha's awakening. Now, that's not simply a belief that the awakening happened. We try to think about: "What did the Buddha awaken to? *How* did he awaken? What lessons can we learn? And how can we apply them to our lives?"

Because conviction isn't something that's just about who you believe in or what you believe in. It's what you *do* based on what you believe. If it stops with believing somebody or believing something but you don't act on it, it's not really conviction. It's simply an opinion you hold to. But conviction means that you take those opinions as working hypotheses and you actually *work* on them. You base your actions on them.

So how did the Buddha awaken, and what did he awaken to? He awakened through his own actions. This is a principle that underlies everything else he taught: that action is real, that we do have choices, and that we're responsible for our choices. If you don't believe in that, then you're going to be careless in what you do. You say, "Well, couldn't help myself. The stars made me do it." Or "Some outside deity made me do it." Or, "physical laws, simply working themselves out." You get irresponsible. If you really believe in your actions, the first thing is you've got to be responsible.

But we believe in more than that. Think of the Buddha's first knowledge. Consciousness doesn't have to depend on the body. As he saw, his consciousness continued as a process that went for eons and eons and eons. He once commented that if you have a limited understanding of how long this has been going on—and for him, "limited" meant 40 eons, and you know how long an aeon is, it's *hugely* long: Even that much, he said, was limited. If you have a limited understanding of transmigration, you're not going to see how it's connected with kamma. Actually, the process of consciousness, as long as there's craving, can keep on going because consciousness and craving keep feeding each other. This was an insight into time: that time has gone on for a long time, it can go on for a long time into the future, too.

So think about that. Like that character in *Through the Looking Glass* who would like to think about two or three impossible things every day, before breakfast, it's good to think every day about the huge length of time that we've been around. That helps put things into perspective. As the Buddha said, the amount of tears you've shed is greater than the water in the oceans. The amount of *blood* you've shed, having had your head cut off—for having been a thief, for having been a highway robber, for having been an adulterer—in each case, is more than the water in the oceans.

So it's good to think about that vast stretch of time, to give rise to a sense of *samvega* as motivation to want to get out. Because as the Buddha saw, we can go to many different kinds of rebirth, up and down, and there's no place where you can stay and say, "Okay, that's it." You rise and then you fall. You fall and then you rise.

Ajaan Maha Boowa once made a comment that people who like to plan their next life really don't believe in rebirth. They say, "Okay, I'll make merit here, and that'll take care of everything next time around." I saw this in Thailand. There's that story I've told you of the nun who was sponsoring a hut at Wat Asokaram. I stopped by at a construction site one day. She was directing the workers, and the hut was coming out really nicely. I asked her if she was building her palace for the next lifetime. She said, "No, this is my vacation home. My palace is already built someplace else."

You get it all planned out like that, thinking that once you've gotten there then everything is going to be solid and secure. But no, it's going to fall away, too. So think about this. Give rise to a sense of real *samvega*, which basically means terror. Think of how long this has been going on—how much longer it could go on if we don't get our act together.

The Buddha's first knowledge was knowledge of time. His second knowledge was more a knowledge of space: seeing the whole universe, with all the beings in the universe dying and then being reborn in line with their karma. This is when the Buddha was able to begin to see a pattern. He had trusted in the principle of karma up to that point—after all, if he hadn't believed in the power of action, he wouldn't have tried to find a path of practice. But this is where he *saw*: that karma comes from your intentions. Your intentions come from your views. And they have an impact on whether you're going to experience happiness or suffering.

So you've got to be very careful about your views: how you talk to yourself. This is one of the *huge* ways in which we make ourselves suffer. Our cravings, are basically our "selves" talking to our "selves." As the Buddha said, we go around with craving as our companion. And there's a constant conversation.

Our craving, of course, is going to skew the way we view things. When we have a strong desire for something, we can convince ourselves that the desire must be right. Then we rearrange our views, or rearrange our ideas of what's right and wrong, to serve that desire. This is why, again, there's so much trouble in the world. People's views change very quickly in line with their cravings.

This is one of the reasons why, when the Buddha found the noble truths, he said that they really are *noble*. They don't change. They're unalterable. Your craving runs up against them and it smashes. Now, of course, this doesn't prevent

people from trying to change the noble truths. But then they're not going to get the advantage of believing in them, and having faith in the Buddha's awakening.

So, the Buddha saw in the second knowledge that your views are what make the difference. Then the question is, "Is there a set of views that could inform the way out?" And that's what the four noble truths are. Instead of looking at beings, going through worlds, he turned around and looked at his mind, and just saw events: Views. Intentions. Basically, instances of name-and-form.

When he looked at things in those terms, he was able to step back from a lot of his preconceived notions and see simply, "Okay, where's the stress? What's causing it? Is it possible to put an end to it by attacking the cause?" And the answer was: Yes. "Okay, what are the qualities you have to develop, what are the things you have to do in order to do that?" That's when the knowledge of the path came.

Of course, he had already been practicing part of the path already in terms of virtue and concentration. What was left, of course, was the discernment. That was the last piece. When that piece fell into place, then there was an opening that went to the deathless. His question always had been, "Is there something that doesn't die?" And here was the answer: "This is it."

So when you have faith in the Buddha's awakening, that's the ultimate thing you have faith in: that there *is* a deathless element that can be touched at the mind. It can be found through your own efforts, and it's more than worth whatever difficulties you may encounter in following the path.

So it's good to think of those huge dimensions of space and time that the Buddha awakened to in the first and second knowledge. No matter how big they were, there was something that was outside of them, which he found in the third. This could be taken as a destination, something that would not change. "The permanent" is one of the epithets for nibbana. "Nibbana" itself is an epithet—it means "unbinding." Others are "harbor," "refuge," "security," "the unaging," "the undying." That's what we have faith in.

As long as you haven't touched that, it's good to remind yourself: This is a possibility. And take it as your working hypothesis that this is going to be *the* worthwhile goal. Anything else you might take as a goal is worthwhile only in relationship to this. Anything you take as a goal that's going to get in the way of this, you have to remind yourself: "This is just going to lengthen the amount of you're hanging around in suffering—in this process of samsara. Wandering on.

So we take the Buddha's awakening as *the* major event in world history—and as an event that has immediate repercussions, immediate implications, for what we're doing, right here, right now. *Every* right here, *every* right now.

It provides us with a challenge, but it also provides us with hope. And whether that hope is going to be a live hope or an empty hope really depends on our own actions. The amount of faith we have in this possibility is going to be a huge contribution to the strength that allows us to muster whatever courage, whatever endurance, whatever persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment we're going to need. It all gets based on this.

Now this *is* faith. We call it “conviction” to avoid the fact that “faith” is the F-word in modern Buddhist circles. But it's good to remember that it's not the kind of faith that rewards believing in things *because* they're irrational—which you find in some versions of Christianity—the kind of faith we've been running away from. It's basically believing in something that *is* rational, but you can't prove it until you've actually acted on it. That's when we know. Like Sariputta that time—at that point he didn't need faith any more, he didn't need conviction any more. He'd found the deathless. He *knew*.

So if you want to know if he was right or not, you know what you've got to do. But it's good to contemplate the Buddha's awakening every day and the implications it has in terms of the picture you hold of space, the picture of time, the picture of *possibilities* in space and time—and then going *beyond* space and time. That helps to keep the events of each day in perspective, in which case the difficulties of the pandemic don't seem so difficult after all.

Because we realize that the *real* difficulties are dealing with the parts of the mind that are recalcitrant, that resist, but they're no bigger than we are. Our only problem is we tend to identify with them. But when you look to see things in terms of the four noble truths, where we don't think in terms of “beings” going through “worlds,” but simply events in the mind, it makes it a lot easier to cut away your attachment to things that you've held on to for so long. And that's where you find the strength of your conviction will really help.