

Conviction & Confidence

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Ajaan Suwat used to recommend that when you start meditating, try to develop an attitude of confidence and clarity. Those are the meanings of the word, *pasada*. Then he'd say to combine that attitude with conviction, or *saddha*—conviction that you're doing something really worthwhile. We're not here just going through the motions. We're working on something that's really good: training the mind. Whether the results come quickly or slowly is not the issue. We're working on something that's noble. There's dignity to what we're doing. We're stepping back from our usual concerns, our usual appetites, and looking carefully at the implications of our actions, realizing that if we're going to act in a way that's responsible, we really have to take responsibility for our minds. And that's what meditation is: taking responsibility for your mind.

So you need the conviction that this is worthwhile and the confidence that it can be done. The word *conviction* traditionally covers four things. The first three are conviction that the Buddha really was awakened, conviction that his Dhamma is well-taught, and conviction that the Sangha of noble disciples has practiced well—in other words, they have practiced in such a way that they've reached awakening, too. When conviction in these three things is confirmed by your first taste of awakening, it issues in a fourth quality, which is that your precepts are clean. In other words, you're firmly established in the five precepts.

So even though your practice may not have reached the point where your conviction is verified, that you've really seen that these things are true, it's good to cultivate that conviction as much as you can. You cultivate your precepts. You cultivate your conviction in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Those passages we chant every evening—the recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha—are actually descriptions of what verified conviction is like. Some of the words may seem strange, but it's useful to reflect on the ones that resonate, the ones that seem relevant to your practice.

To begin with, reflect on the fact that the Buddha was awakened through his own efforts. He was able to put an end to greed, aversion, and delusion. That's why he's a Worthy One. That right there really merits conviction because it reminds us that it is possible through human effort to put an end to suffering. It is possible through human effort to cleanse the mind. Sometimes you hear the idea that the ego is so corrupt that anything it tries to do is going to be corrupted as well. That idea closes off all the doors except for one: the hope that somebody is going to come along and save you. But that hope is irresponsible.

The responsible attitude is that you're responsible for the actions of your mind. You really can choose. And fortunately your motives are not always corrupt. As the Buddha said, you can take advantage of the fact that you want true happiness, and develop some noble qualities out of that. The qualities of purity, compassion, and wisdom come from taking your desire for true happiness seriously.

So these things are possible. They're part of the range of possibilities of being human. That right there is a challenge. The Buddha, in effect, is asking you, "Do you want to live your life keeping this possibility open or do you want to close it off?" Some people actually do want to close it off. They don't like the responsibility that comes with the possibility that true happiness can be found through human effort, that the mind can be cleansed through human effort. It asks a lot. But then, what is life like when those possibilities are closed off? Pretty miserable and confined.

I remember when I first went to Singapore. I marveled at how planned everything was. But the sense of marvel was not totally positive. They had everything laid out for you: where you were going to be born, what you were going to do as a child, where you were going to get your education, where they would channel you when you'd go to work. They had things planned out for your retirement, and then for your death. It gives rise

to the feeling that you might as well go ahead and die and get it over with, if that was going to circumscribe the totality of your life. But thinking about the possibility that true awakening can be found through your efforts: that breaks through those circumscribed limits. That's not part of anybody else's plan, but that can be part of *your* plan. And to whatever extent you can nurture that conviction, it keeps your heart nurtured and nourished as well.

As for the Dhamma, the Dhamma is well-taught. The Buddha set things out clearly. I've been reading recently about the Romantic attitude toward religious texts, which is that people who write religious texts are those who've gained a sense of oneness, of the deeper parts of themselves in oneness with the world around them, and they just express poetically how wonderful that is. The way they express it, of course, is going to be determined by their cultural background and their personal talents. So the differences in their modes of expression don't really matter. You can interpret their writings as poetically as you like because they were just expressive poetry to begin with.

But the Buddha wasn't that sort of teacher. He said that the things he experienced through his awakening were like the leaves in a forest. He didn't waste his time telling us about all the leaves. He gave us the handful of leaves that shows how to gain awakening for ourselves. He wasn't just expressing how wonderful it is to be awakened. He gave us directions for how to do it. And his directions are very precise, very clear.

There's a passage where he contrasts his way of teaching with what he calls training in bombast. Training in bombast is where you're taught things that are very poetic, that sound very high, very lovely, very inspiring, but no one is encouraged to ask what, precisely, they mean. After all, in bombast there really is no precise meaning. It's all just vague, high-sounding words. But, as the Buddha said, he taught cross-questioning. Your training with him was in cross-questioning. When there was a teaching you didn't understand, he encouraged you to ask, "What's the meaning of this? What's the purpose of that? How far should this word be taken?" That way, wherever there are any doubts or uncertainties, you can clear them up.

And the Buddha himself was open to cross-questioning. In fact, he took it so seriously that the next-to-the-last thing he said before passing away was to ask the monks, "Does anyone have any questions, any doubts, any perplexity about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, the path, or the practice?" He made the offer three times, and even then after the third time, he said, "Okay, if you're too embarrassed to speak in public, just inform someone sitting right next to you." That shows how earnest he was, in that he didn't want to leave any doubts or perplexity behind.

So when we study the Dhamma, we're not dealing with bombast or vague poetic expressions. We don't have all the uncertainty of trying to figure out, "What on earth does this symbolize? Is this an allegory?" The Buddha's teachings are like a training manual. They're meant to be put into practice, telling you specific things to do. Now, in some cases he does leave an open question here and there, but it's a question that causes you to grow when you try to figure out the answer on your own. If you're trying to get the mind to settle down, he says, watch the breath as it's long, watch it as it's short. Train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out. Train yourself to calm the sense of fabrication that comes with the breath. The meaning of these instructions isn't obvious, but you can figure out how to do them on your own through experimentation. Trying to figure them out is a good exercise for your discernment.

Before teaching breath meditation, he'd encourage you to develop an attitude of patience. He said to be as nonreactive as the earth. People throw disgusting things on the earth, and the earth doesn't shrink back in horror. It just sits right there. The same with the other great elements. You can use water to wash away dirty things, and the water doesn't complain. Wind blows dirty things around, yet the wind doesn't complain. Fire burns dirty things, yet fire doesn't complain. In other words, you try to develop that quality of solidity and imperturbability so that you can really observe things, to overcome any tendency to push or pull to get quick results, and then getting frustrated and falling back—getting discouraged, wanting things to be a certain way and getting frustrated when they aren't. If you're going to learn from your meditation, you've got to develop an

attitude of patience and solidity that allows you to sit with things, however they are, and really see them for what they are.

Pose the question in your mind and just watch, try different approaches, because the Buddha didn't stop his meditation instructions with equanimity and patience. He went on to teach the 16 steps of breath meditation, most of which involve training, experimenting, and using your ingenuity. There's an intentional element to this practice. You're trying to figure out a skill, sensitize yourself to a certain area of your experience: either the body or your feelings or the state of your mind. Notice where there's stress and then figure out how you can calm that stress.

In other words, these are things you do. You don't just sit there. You don't give up trying to improve things. If things aren't working, you develop a confident attitude: There's got to be a way out of here, but you simply haven't figured it out yet. The problem lies in something you're doing. Maybe you're pushing in the wrong direction or up against something in the wrong way, but you can change that if you step back and watch for a while.

The Buddha has it all very clearly laid out, so that we don't have to keep starting from scratch every time we practice. You just learn how to apply general principles to your specific case. In this way, there's a creative element in the practice. But you can rest confident that things were laid out clearly. Whatever's there in the Dhamma is meant for you to use as part of the path to awakening. When you find awakening, you don't have to have anybody describe it for you, or tell you how wonderful it is. You know what it's like for yourself.

As for conviction in the Sangha, that they've practiced well, that's useful for when comparing yourself to the Buddha seems a little bit unreal. You look at the members of the noble Sangha: men, women, young, old, educated, uneducated, rich, poor. Some people practiced quickly, got quick results; other people took a long time but they finally got the desired results. Sometimes it's most inspiring to read about the ones who were having the most difficulty, because you look at their difficulties and say, "Well, mine are nothing compared to theirs." Yet in the midst of their discouragement, they could find something worthwhile. And they had the conviction that carried them through, even when things looked pretty bleak. Their conviction was what enabled them to find a way out.

It's like being lost in the woods. If you think there's no way out, you're not going to find a way out. But if you're convinced that there must be a way out, you keep looking and looking and looking, and regardless of how long it takes, the conviction that there's a way out is a necessary part of finding the escape.

The fourth element of conviction is learning to keep your precepts pure. It may seem strange to list this as a kind of conviction, but for the Buddha, conviction isn't just conviction in ideas; it's something you actually put into practice. It has to find its way into your actions. If you really do want to develop compassion, wisdom, and purity, you've first got to look at your actions: What are you doing? What's the impact of your actions? How scrupulous are you about doing things the right way, the harmless way? The more you find that you can stick with your precepts, the more confidence you gain in yourself. At the same time, you're developing the essential qualities of mind you'll need for the meditation: mindfulness, alertness, being observant, so that your actions are not at odds with your principles.

When progress in your meditation seems slow, you remind yourself, "At least I'm not harming anyone." That's something to treasure. When you look at the way the world is, everybody seems to be shoving everybody else out of the way, to get—what? Something that's going to slip right through their fingers. All they have left is the memory of the horrible things they did, which is no treasure at all. But here we're developing treasures. We've got the treasure of conviction, the treasure of virtue, the treasure of a sense of shame, i.e., your sense of your own self-worth, that you would be ashamed to stoop to harmful actions. The treasure of compunction: that when you think of doing something harmful, you just pull back and say, "No, I can't do that," for fear of the harm. You've got four of the seven noble treasures right there.

When you bring this attitude to the practice, you're starting with a good foundation. You're ready to learn from the meditation regardless of how well or how poorly it may go. You're not so neurotic or brittle that

you have to pretend that there is no such thing as poor meditation. Sometimes the meditation just doesn't work. Okay, it doesn't work. Recognize that it's not going well and pose some questions in your mind. Exactly what's going wrong? Tease things out. Is there something wrong with the breath, something wrong with the body? Is it the state of mind you're bringing? The beliefs you're bringing? Something that happened today and got you all stirred up?

Learn how to separate these things out, so that regardless of how well or poorly the meditation goes, you know how to learn from it, to learn how to benefit from it. The lessons you learn, the benefits you get, may not be the ones you planned, but you've got to learn how to appreciate them so that your sense of conviction stays strong and gets more and more reliable. You learn to appreciate the results that you *do* get, regardless of whether they're what you wanted in terms of the bliss, the rapture, whatever. There are a lot of other important things to learn from meditation, you know. And when you learn how to recognize them, they're all good.