

The Strength of Conviction

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If you're lost in the woods, you're more likely to find your way out if you believe there is a way out. If you don't believe there's a way out, you give up easily. You run into a rock; you run into a tree; you run into a stream. They seem impassable, and you give up.

But if you believe there's a way out, then you feel, well, there must be a way around the rock, around the tree, over the stream. You put more energy into finding a way, more ingenuity and persistence, because if you haven't found the way out yet, it's simply a matter of not having found the right path or not having followed it long enough. And because of that belief, you're more determined in your pursuit, and you're much more likely to find your way out.

This was why, when the Buddha listed the five strengths with the fifth being discernment—the discernment that leads to the end of suffering—the first item in the list is conviction: conviction that your actions do matter and ultimately, of course, that there is a way out. Having this conviction helps you get around problems in your meditation. If the mind has trouble settling down and you believe it can't really settle down, then it's never going to settle down, because you won't put the effort into it. You won't use the ingenuity you need to get it to settle down, and you won't apply the persistence. This is why it's important that you develop this sense of conviction: There *is* a way out. The mind *can* be trained. The energy you put into the meditation is not wasted. That conviction leads to the second strength, which is persistence.

We're fortunate. We're in a much better position than the Buddha was. He didn't have a guide to his path. He basically had to slash his way through the forest. We, however, follow a path that's already been cleared. Of course, as we sit here and meditate, the path may not appear all that clear as the mind wanders off to the left, wanders off to the right, stops and looks at the flowers and the birds. But we know we have this path. You stick with the meditation, stick with your meditation object as consistently as you can, and you find that the mind will change. It'll gradually grow more and more tame.

As with so many processes in nature, it's a matter of time. Say you have a wound on your hand and you apply a cream to heal the wound. It's not the case that you simply apply the cream once and then rub it right off. You apply the cream and you have to let it stay there for a long time for it to do its healing work. Some of the disturbances or illnesses in the mind are the sorts that require that

you simply stick with your meditation object. Over and over and over again, keep coming back, coming back. Of course, persistence here doesn't simply mean brute effort or brute strength. It means *right* effort, the appropriate effort, checking to see what works and what doesn't work.

This is how the remaining strengths come in. You have the mindfulness and the alertness not only to keep your meditation in mind, but also to keep in mind what you did and then notice the results that come from what you did. That way, if the results aren't what you want, you can try changing what you've done. In other words, sometimes when you bring the mind very forcefully to its object, it rebels. Well, is there a way you can lure it in, tempt it to stay with the object, make the object more interesting, more attractive—develop greater interest in what, for instance, the breath is doing for your body?

It's a simple process—breathing in, breathing out. But it can have a huge impact on the health of the body, the functioning of the different organs, your posture, the flow of the blood through the different parts of the body, which parts are not getting enough blood, which are getting too much stagnant blood. Try to make a survey of how things feel in the body. Sensitize yourself to these things, and this sensitivity becomes a strength in the practice.

Then as you stick with it long enough with a sense of conviction, mindfulness, and alertness, concentration does develop. But concentration can develop in many ways. We read about it in the texts, and it seems like a very simple ladder. You go through this stage and then to the next stage. You hit the first jhana. Then you let go of directed thought and evaluation, and you go to the second jhana. It sounds like a single stairway through the mind. But the mind is more like a jungle. Or you can compare it to the chaparral out there with all those coyote paths. Some of the coyote paths go nowhere. Some of the coyote paths, only coyotes can follow. Some of them, you can follow. And you find yourself sometimes wandering around in the chaparral, trying to find a path that you can follow to get out.

Well, the mind is even more complex than the chaparral. It's got lots of little paths. And often, we have lots of paths that work—at least, they work for different purposes. When I was practicing with Ajaan Fuang, there would be times when the mind would get into a state of wrong concentration—wrong in the sense that it wasn't right on the path. But as he pointed out, some of these wrong states do have their uses, so you don't just throw them away. They can provide a resting place for the mind when things get difficult. They may not provide that broad, full-body awareness that you'd like, but there are times when

you simply need to nail the mind down to one spot in the midst of a lot of pain or confusion in your life. And it's good to know that you can do that.

So as you focus on the breath, don't expect that it'll always settle down in the same way. Sometimes you find yourself suddenly focused on the earth element in the body. Everything gets very solid. And depending on how you feel about it, it can be either very pleasant or very unpleasant. It's unpleasant when you want it to be something else. It can be pleasant when you want it to be that way. If you find it unpleasant, ask yourself, "Well, what is this good for—this steely state, this heavy state, this solid state?" It has its uses, so learn to recognize them. Then try to gain a sense of how you got in there—and also of how you can get out when it starts getting unpleasant or too much.

This is how concentration practice fosters discernment as you begin to notice the ways of the mind: how it focuses on things, how its attitude can change an experience from pleasant to painful, from painful back to pleasant—all depending on your perception, all depending on the feeling, all those elements of fabrication or the elements of name in name-and-form. What you see as important, what you see as unimportant: This can really change how you experience the body, how you experience a state of mind. This is the way you begin to see the principles of cause and effect in the mind.

It's not the case that you get the mind really concentrated and *then* start thinking about discernment. You have to use your discernment in the process of developing the concentration in the first place. This is how discernment gets developed. Once it's developed, then you can use it to lift things, to move things around, to pierce through obstacles. And this is how conviction leads to release—the conviction that you *can* master the ways of the mind. You can use these basic skills of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, along with the lessons you learn from them about perception, about feeling, fabrication—all the aggregates, all the components of your mind: It's through learning these lessons that you can find your way out.

This was one of the Buddha's great insights: that these aggregates we carry around can be fashioned into a path that leads to the end of having to carry anything around at all.

So sometimes it may seem like you're simply mucking around in your old mind states, and it can be discouraging. Well, you're learning about them. Take this as an opportunity to say, "Well, at least I'm observing these things, not simply to accept them—well, to accept the fact they exist, but also to accept the fact that I can approach them a different way. Instead of making a burden out of them, I can make a path out of them." That's something you have to accept as well, that

you *can* change. You hear about radical acceptance. Well, the Buddha's type of radical acceptance means accepting that you can take these elements of suffering and reconfigure them radically until they turn into a path. This is how the Buddha did it. And if you have conviction in his awakening, you realize, "Okay, I can do this, too."

So never let anybody tell you there's no way out, that you have to accept things as they are, that what we have right here is already nirvana. It's not nirvana, but it can be reconfigured into a path that leads there. And that's a much more hopeful message. It's a message that helps provide you with conviction so that you can find the way out.