

## *Strength of Conviction : 2*

*April 10, 2020*

When I was young, I was impatient to grow up because I believed that grown-ups could get to do whatever they wanted. There came a time though, when I was a teenager, when I began to realize that that was not the case. In fact, grown-ups had to do a lot of things they did not want to do. I remember mentioning that to my mother, and adding, “Why should I want to grow up if I don’t get to do things I want?” The look of dismay that went over her face has stayed with me for a long time.

Since then, having met Ajaan Fuang, I realized that grown-up life was not as bleak as I had begun to see it. As Ajaan Fuang himself had said, Ajaan Lee had shown him the brightness of life, and that was what I was learning from Ajaan Fuang. But to get to that brightness does require we do a lot of things we don’t like doing: the things that we believe will give long-term benefits for which we have to sacrifice our immediate desires, our immediate pleasures.

That’s one of the reasons why the practice requires conviction. After all, we’re practicing for nibbana but we’ve never seen it. The Buddha can’t take nibbana out to show us. Nobody can take it out. Ajaan Maha Boowa once said that if those who attained nibbana could take it out and show it to others, nobody else in the world would want anything else. That’s all they would want. But it can’t be shown. It can be talked about. And we can see the good influence in the lives of the people who have practiced. But from our point of view, it’s all a matter of conviction. But it’s the strength we need.

When the Buddha talks about conviction, it comes down to three things: one, who you believe; two, what you believe; and then three, what you do as a result. Last night, we talked about the four factors for stream-entry. In that case, who you believe would be people of integrity; what you believe is the true Dhamma; what you do as a result is that you develop appropriate attention and you practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma.

Now there’s another list of stream-entry factors: These are the factors *of* stream-entry or that *constitute* what it means to obtain stream-entry. And even if you’re not there yet, these factors give you an idea of what kind of conviction you want to confirm. You use conviction in four things or in four ways. It gets confirmed at stream-entry, but you’re trying to develop conviction in all four things all the way through, all the way up to stream-entry.

The first three factors are conviction in the Buddha, conviction in the Dhamma, conviction in the Sangha.

Conviction in the Buddha means specifically conviction in his awakening: that he really was able, through his own efforts, to attain the end of suffering,

and that the Dhamma he taught was well-taught. In other words, he knew what he was talking about. He was a reliable person, honest and observant—and with very high standards. As he once said, the secret to his awakening was, one, an unwillingness to rest content with skillful qualities and, two, an unwillingness to give up in the effort, no matter what it would take. So that's the kind of person we have faith in, we have confidence in. It means also, of course, that we try to develop those qualities in ourselves. So that's who you have faith in or who you have conviction in.

This also includes the Sangha, the noble Sangha: the people who have practiced well, practiced straightforwardly, practiced for the sake of knowledge, practiced masterfully, as we chant every night, every night. We have conviction in them, with the idea that it's not just the Buddha who could gain awakening. Other people can follow his teachings and gain awakening as well. That gives hope for us, because the basic message there is that if they can do it, we can do it. They're human beings, we're human beings. This is something that is possible.

As Venerable Ananda once said, that way of thinking is a form of conceit, but it's a conceit to be developed. It leads ultimately to the end of conceit, in other words to the stage where you don't need to compare yourself with anyone else anymore because you've found the ultimate happiness, so why compare? That's why this conviction is a good form of conceit to develop, because it gives you the confidence you need for the path.

So those are *who* we believe, the people in whom we have conviction: the Buddha and the noble Sangha.

Then there's the Dhamma, *what* we believe. The Dhamma's basically telling us that we live in a world where awakening is possible, and that we are people who can attain it. That's the message underlying all the Buddha's teachings. It's often an unspoken message, but it's shown simply by the fact that the Buddha cared enough to teach. As he once said, if people could not develop skillful qualities, there'd be no reason for him to teach. If they couldn't abandon unskillful qualities, there'd be no reason for him to teach. We do have that choice. We do have that ability. We do have that freedom. That's the assumption underlying all the Dhamma.

So we may not *know* that we have that freedom—after all, no one can prove freedom of choice, no one can prove determinism—but if you take freedom of choice as a working hypothesis—and you take as a working hypothesis the assumption that you do have the potential within you, that you have what it takes—then you're not cutting yourself off. You're opening doors. You may not know how far the doors can go, but at least you're not closing things off. You're not closing off those possibilities. That's what we have faith in, what we believe.

And there's the question of what we *do*. In this case, we practice the precepts that are pleasing to the noble ones. As they're described in the Canon, they're untorn, unsplattered, unspotted. This refers to holding to the five precepts. We hold to them all the time, in all circumstances. But at the same time, we don't glorify ourselves for our precepts. We don't look down on others who can't follow the precepts. In other words, we don't create ourselves or fashion ourselves around our precepts. We do them because we know they're good for us. And we value the precepts.

I've been alerted recently there are some people who say that the traditions that hold to the Vinaya are suffering from pride and conceit, which is a sign that they're not awakened and therefore their teachings are no good. But as the Buddha advised, you hold to the precepts even more than you would hold to your life. Now, as long as you haven't yet gotten to stream-entry, there will be an element of pride. There will be an element of conceit to keep you going. Just make sure you don't let it turn into a club to beat other people.

But there is a sense of honor that goes with following the precepts. You know there are times when you could break the precepts and you could benefit and you can probably get away with it, but you take it as a point of honor that you won't. And to whatever extent there is a sense of self in that point of honor, to the extent that you need it, go ahead and develop it.

In ancient India, there were branches of Buddhism that actually would get their students to break the precepts in horrible ways to get rid of their pride. But that's actually very destructive. It destroys a healthy element in the personality, a healthy element that's required in the practice: that you have a sense of honor.

Now, once you've reached stream-entry, your precepts are solid. In other words, you've seen the principle of kamma, confirmed for yourself that, Yes, the Buddha was awakened, he did know what he's talking about, there is a deathless and it is the end of suffering, the Dhamma he taught was well-taught, the Sangha has practiced well—and you've seen that it was your own lack of skillful actions that had concealed this from you.

Once you've seen that fact, you'd never intentionally want to break the precepts again. At that point, you don't need any conceit to maintain them. Whatever sense of self remains is required for the practice of concentration, for the practice of discernment. Here again, there will be that element of conceit that Ananda talks about: "If the noble ones can do this practice, if the awakened ones can do it, I can do it, too." So you recognize that conceit for the sake of concentration and discernment, but you don't need it around your precepts anymore at that point. Until you reach that point, hold on to your sense of honor.

So this is what conviction means for us. We're convinced in the possibility of awakening, that it's something human beings can do. We're convinced that we can do it, that the path has been cleared. And then we actually carry through with those beliefs. As for the kind of people who say, "Hey, I believe  $x$  and believe  $y$ ," but their actions don't fall in line with  $x$  or  $y$ : You wonder what they really believe. Your true beliefs have to come out in your actions. So be careful to make sure that your sense of who you believe and what you believe is really solid, and then it'll show in what you do.

And that's when your conviction is complete. That's when it's a strength—the strength that can keep you going even in the downs of the practice. It's not up, ever up, up, up all the time. There will be downs; there will be fallow periods. But keeping your conviction strong is what will see you through.