

Conviction in the End of Suffering

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There are some people for whom the four noble truths seem to be like this: Things are inconstant—that's the first one. Things are stressful—that's the second. Things are not-self—that's the third. And I can learn to be okay with that—that's the fourth. Now, those are not the Buddha's four noble truths. But it's something you hear again, and again, and again.

The Buddha's truths are very different. There's stress, suffering, which comes down to clinging. There's a cause for suffering, which is craving, and there's a cessation of suffering that comes from putting an end to the cause. And there's a path of practice that leads to that cessation: the noble eightfold path.

Now, this is radically different, because that third noble truth is special.

The four noble truths are a value judgment. There's the craving that leads to suffering, and then in the noble eightfold path that leads to the end of suffering and stress, there's desire. So you've got desires that are not worth following and desires that *are* worth following. You have to be able to judge the difference, because the ones that are worth following can take you far.

As the Buddha said, we're practicing for the sake of seeing something we haven't seen, for reaching something we haven't yet reached, for attaining something we haven't yet attained. Which is why the four noble truths, and the third truth in particular, require a certain amount of conviction. We may see that, "Yes, when I hold on to things, there is suffering, and craving is the reason I hold on. And the path of virtue, concentration and discernment seems like a good thing." But that third truth, that's the one you've got to take on conviction. Yet as the Buddha points out, conviction is a kind of wealth. It's a strength.

Often we don't think of it in those terms. We've been through so many instances where we had faith in someone or conviction in some principle, and it turned out not to be true, that we're afraid of having conviction. It seems to be putting us in a position of weakness. But, you can ask, what is the Buddha asking you to believe? He's asking you to believe that you do have it within your power to put an end to suffering. It's something you can choose to do. And that requires that you assume that you have choices, and your actions do have an impact. What you're experiencing right now is not totally determined by what came from the past.

Now, this is something you can't prove. That old dilemma between freedom of choice and total determinism: There's no way you can really prove it one way or another by running experiments. But you can run a pragmatic thought experiment in your mind. How are you going to act if you believe that everything is predetermined?—say, by your DNA, or by the stars, or by simple physical laws? How are you going to act when the noble course of action requires sacrifice? What would be your motivation for being willing to sacrifice, to do something noble? If your life were at stake, what would you do? How can you be sure that

you'd stick with the moral course, the honorable course, even though it meant that you might have to lose your life? It requires assuming that things are not determined, this path that we're going to follow, because it does require a certain amount of sacrifice.

When I went to see Ajaan Fuang the first time, I happened to ask him about rebirth, and he started out by saying, "Well, the only thing the Buddha has you believe in is karma." But when you get into karma, you realize it has to include rebirth as well, because if your experiences are shaped by your actions, not everything you're doing in the present moment can explain why you're experiencing certain things: There have to be some things coming from the past. Not everything in your experience in this lifetime can be explained by your actions in this lifetime. And if your past actions had no impact on the present, then your present actions would have no impact on the future.

So these things all go together, and believing in them is a form of wealth and strength. Again, we sometimes think if you believe in things you can't yet see, it's very easy to be fooled. It's a position of weakness. But the Buddha points out that conviction in the power of your actions gives you energy to be willing to do things that otherwise you might be too lazy to do. It gives you the strength you need in order to overcome your greed, your aversion, and your delusion—and it reminds you that death is not the end.

For a lot of people for whom death is the end, the current pandemic is really cause for dismay. And of course, there really is dismay in the fact that so many people are dying, and there seems to be no end in sight. But when you realize that death is not the end, it gives you the courage to keep on doing what you know is right, even in the face of overwhelming odds—because you're being asked to have conviction in the fact your actions have a power, and that they're not snuffed out.

These are good things to believe. Now, it is possible to come to know that they're true, but that requires that you take them on first as working hypotheses. Some people say, "Well, the Buddha didn't teach you anything that you can't prove for yourself," which is true. But the proving requires that you first put a lot on the line. Spend time being generous, observing the precepts. Spend time practicing concentration, developing discernment into the areas where the mind is less than honest with itself. Take these things apart. You can follow this path only if you have a certain amount of conviction that it could be true.

Then, as the Buddha said, when you reach stream-entry, your conviction is verified. In other words, it doesn't suddenly appear then. It's not the case you were doubting, doubting, doubting all the time and not willing to put out any effort because of your doubts, and then suddenly you changed your mind. It's because you put in the energy that was required, and then you found that the results more than exceeded your expectations.

By arriving at the deathless, you step out of space and time. And in stepping out of space and time, you begin to realize that time did not start for you at the date of your birth. It went way back further in the past. You may not know the details, but you do know that there's

something that goes way, way back. And you realize that you were able to reach that deathless dimension because of your actions, the choices you made right here and now. That's how stream-entry confirms or verifies your conviction in the principle of karma and your conviction in the Buddha and his four noble truths.

You realize they really are true. They really are noble. Up to that point, you don't really know. As you think about it, it's like traveling to someplace you've never been that's going to require a lot of energy and a lot of time. You have to believe that that place is there, and that it's worth going to, especially when you run into hardships along the way. When you get there, the confirmation is dependent on your conviction, but also, at the same time, your conviction has to be right so that it hasn't skewed your view to make you see things that are not actually there.

So if you want to go see Mount Fitz Roy, you have to believe that Mount Fitz Roy exists, because it takes a long time and a lot of preparation to get there. But you get there and you find that it's true. There it is—you've seen it with your own eyes. It's not because you believed it that you'll make it suddenly appear when it's not there. It's there. But it's because you believed it that you made all the right choices to get there.

There are so many things in life that are like this. The fact that the world is round: You tell this to a child, but the child has no proof. But as you grow up, you discover that when you're going to fly from Los Angeles to Paris, say, you fly over Greenland. If the world were flat, that wouldn't make any sense. But flying over to Greenland is faster than flying in what would look like a straight line on a flat map.

There are a lot of things that you have to assume before you discover them. And the end of suffering is one of them. In the meantime, you find that the good actions you do along the path are all that: They're all very good. You're asked to be virtuous. You're asked to train your mind, to have some control over your thoughts. You're asked to be very discerning about what's going on in the mind. All of these are good skills to master, and they don't save all their rewards for the end. They give you rewards all along the way. It's simply that the reward at the end is of a totally different order. As I said, it's beyond your expectations.

So the conviction that allows you to get there is a form of wealth. The Buddha lists it as one of the noble treasures. And why do we gather wealth? For the times when we're going to be meeting with hardships and difficulties, and it's good to have some resources to fall back on. And conviction is precisely one of those resources that helps you get past a lot of difficulties. Think of the people in the past who had difficulties in their practice but were able to get around them. There's nothing in the human mind that the path is not equal to. It's just a question of whether *we* are equal to the path. The more inner wealth you develop, the more you find that you actually are.

Of course, right now you're simply hearing these words, and these are words you have to take on conviction. If you feel that conviction really is a form of wealth, then you'll be able to find the extent to which they are true. If you don't, then you'll never really will know, because

you won't have tested them. But conviction is what allows you to put them to the test and to come out with a fair judgment of how true they actually are.