

Conviction & Focus

January 18, 2022

When Einstein was old, he addressed the question of why it was that a lot of the great discoveries in physics were made by young thinkers, young physicists, and young theoreticians, and not by older, more mature ones. His conclusion was that when you're young, you have lots of time ahead of yourself. You're not afraid of devoting your energies to one line of thought or one particular problem. Whereas when you're older, you don't see that you have much time left, so there's the fear: "If I devote myself to this problem and it turns out to be a dead-end, that's a waste of valuable time, of which there is so little."

I don't know if his analysis is correct, because a lot of young people can be scattered and distracted, wondering if this life choice or that life choice would be worth following. But it is true that when you don't feel there's much time left, it's hard to pursue any activity, for fear that you won't be around to finish it, or it won't be worth putting the time in to finish it.

I thought of this when someone raised a question a week or two ago. It was during a session on aging, illness, and death. We talked about helping a person who's about to die to think about the good things that he or she has done. Someone objected, "Why tell other people what to think about while they're dying? Can't you just let them think about whatever they want to? Let them be."

Well, letting them be would be kind if you felt there was nothing for them to do at that point, that everything in life was behind them so they should be allowed to relax and take the path of least resistance. But even though there may be very little time left in this lifetime, you have to stop and think: The Buddha teaches us that death is not the end. There's a lot of time after death. That puts things in a different perspective.

It's that element of conviction that gives you the strength to keep on doing skillful things—even as you get sick, as you get older—as you're about to die. You realize that every bit of right effort is worth it. It pays off. Which is why conviction is listed as one of the strengths. In fact, it's the first strength.

The Buddha gives two lists of strengths all together. There's the list of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. That's the standard one in *The Wings to Awakening*. Then there's another one, the strengths of a person in training:

conviction, a sense of shame—a *healthy* sense of shame— compunction, persistence, and discernment. The two lists have conviction, persistence, and discernment in common. Those are the core strengths. It's from them you can extrapolate the other four when you're convinced that your efforts will be worthwhile.

Say, as you're getting older, you start to think, "Maybe, it's too late for me to expect much in my meditation. I've got a lot of old ingrained habits." Remember that there have been people who started meditating at a late point in life, and did very well. Ajaan Fuang had a student who started meditation after the age of seventy and became quite talented.

Part of it was because her illnesses forced her. No medicine was helping her. The medicine of meditation did help her. So she latched on to that, and was very determined to see it through. She realized that even if she died very quickly soon after she started meditating, the fact that she had been meditating would be a useful skill to have. After all, when you meditate you're focused on one thing. You're not letting yourself get distracted. You're learning how to put up with pain and not be bowled over by it, and how not to get all fuzzy and blurred out by pleasure.

These are precisely the skills you're going to need as aging comes in, and the mind starts wandering around thinking about the past, because you don't like to think about the future. The future doesn't seem to hold much, but you think about things in the past: the pleasant things that get you nostalgic, or the unpleasant things that fill you with regret. In either case, it's a waste of time.

You need this ability to stay focused. Your conviction that you'll need these skills will help keep you motivated to exert right persistence; developing what's skillful, abandoning what's not, and to use your discernment as to what's really important in life: trying to get a handle on this problem of why the mind keeps doing things that are going to cause itself suffering. From there, you can work out the other strengths.

A sense of shame: You think of the noble ones who've gone before us, and you'd be ashamed to let your mind wander away, complaining about this, nostalgizing about that, regretting this. What would they think if they saw you doing that? They'd be concerned, and you'd feel embarrassed. That's a healthy sense of shame, a good one to keep you on target.

Compunction: Regardless of what other people might think, you realize that if you indulge in nostalgia or in regret, it's going to be bad for you down the line. Now, if you lived in the world of that person who complained earlier, the one who said, "Just let people engage in

what they want to because it's not going to make any difference at that point," you're setting yourself up to engage in a lot of activity that's going to cause suffering. So compunction here goes together with heedfulness.

Your actions will have consequences even as everything is winding down in your life. That doesn't mean things are going to come to an end. It's just the end of a chapter, and then there's another chapter, and another chapter. You want to make sure that those following chapters are headed in the right direction, so you avoid unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones.

To do that, you have to be mindful. And when you develop right mindfulness, you get your mind into concentration, and that gets your discernment even sharper.

So all of the strengths in both lists can be traced back to conviction that the Buddha was right. We may not *know* yet, but it's a good working hypothesis that even old people can accomplish great things, sick people can accomplish great things, dying people can accomplish great things. No matter where you are in your life, you can do something really worthwhile with your time. You latch on to this hypothesis, and it's not going to lead to a dead-end.

Channel everything you can into the conviction that death is followed by rebirth, and rebirth is determined by the state of your mind. So focus on the state of your mind, realizing that this is your most valuable possession.

The world can be swept away, but you want to make sure you're not swept away with it. It does not endure, but you can find something of enduring value by holding to this practice, by following this path, to the last breath and beyond.