

Questioning Your Conviction

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Conviction appears in many of the Buddha's lists of the factors we need in the practice. It's the first of the noble treasures. It's the first of the five strengths, the first of the five faculties. When the Buddha compares the practice to building a fortress at the edge of a frontier, conviction is the foundation post.

You have to understand a little bit about construction practices in Asia to understand what that means. Whenever you build a building here in the West, you lay a foundation. Over there, they set up a post. That's the beginning of the construction. Even when they build a city, they put up a symbolic post. That's what they call the *lak muang* in Bangkok, and there's also one in Chiang Mai and quite a few of the other provincial capitals in Thailand. Every one is covered with a shrine. The post was the first thing that was set out when the city was to be built. They were very careful about the time and the place to make sure that it would be auspicious.

So conviction is the very beginning. Conviction in what? Conviction in the Buddha's awakening. That's the standard answer. But what does that mean for us? Well, think about the Buddha's awakening. He found an end to suffering through his own efforts, and he did it by developing qualities that were not exclusive to him. As he said, he had heedfulness, ardency, resolution. These are all qualities that we can develop within ourselves as well.

So conviction basically means conviction in the power of human action, at the very least, to make a difference between whether you're going to suffer and whether you're not going to suffer, and ideally, conviction in the power of human action—*your* human action—to lead to the end of suffering. As the Buddha encouraged you, if he could do it, others can do it as well. Human beings can do it. You're a human being. You can do it, too.

However, conviction here is not an unquestioning conviction. It's a conviction that the Buddha encouraged us to test. As when you're setting up a building, you put the foundation post in the ground and then you try to shake it a little bit to make sure that it doesn't shake, to make sure that it's firm. In the same way, the Buddha doesn't tell you to be unquestioning with his teachings. In fact, he encourages you to test them. That's because he believes in the power of action to make a difference.

That's how beliefs can be tested. If you didn't believe that actions could make a difference, then how could you test anything? Whatever else you believed, it

wouldn't make any difference at all. But here, we're making the assertion that because you believe certain things, it's going to have an impact on your actions. And those actions, in turn, will have an impact on the happiness or the pain, pleasure or pain, happiness or sorrow that you meet with.

So this is the kind of conviction that you want to shake a little bit. Ask questions. The Buddha himself asked a lot of questions in the course of his awakening. And you look at the teachings of the ajaans: They were not people who simply believed what they were told. As Ajaan Mahā Boowa once said, try to prove the Buddha wrong. Don't simply follow in line with what you hear.

Look at the teachings of the various ajaans: Take, for instance, the teaching that everything is impermanent or inconstant. The ajaans like to point out that there are certain things that are constant. Ajaan Chah talks about how things change, but the way they change is constant. There are constant rules to the way things change. Things may be "not for sure"—as he likes to say, "*mai nae*"—but they do follow certain patterns. If they didn't follow certain patterns, we'd be up a creek as we tried to put together a path of practice.

Ajaan Lee also likes to point out how certain things don't change. As he said, your lower lip never pushed way up to become your upper lip. Your hand never became a foot. Your foot never became an eye. In his explanations of the three characteristics, he says, "Before you're really going to understand inconstancy, stress, and not-self, you have to take what's inconstant and make it constant. You take what's stressful and make it easeful. Take what's not-self and get it under your control.

In other words, you take this mind, which is so quick to change, and you try to keep it focused on one thing continually. You take this body, which has its aches and pains, which, when you sit for long periods of time, usually can get very stiff, and you learn how to sit for a long period of time with a sense of well-being. You take your thoughts, which seem to be beyond your control, and you learn how to control them, keeping them focused on one topic, the topic you want. And see how far you can go with that.

Ultimately, as he says, you have to end up letting go of both sides: what's constant and inconstant; stressful, easeful; not-self, under your control. But before you really begin to understand these three characteristics, you have to push against them. See how far you can go before they push back.

There's something in the Buddha's teachings that encourages that. On the one hand, he does have us be convinced in the power of action. This is one the teachings that he defended most, one of the teachings that he had to go out of his way to explain, again and again and again.

We tend to think that karma was something that everybody believed in his time. Well, people believed in action, that there was such a thing. Most people did. But there were people who believed that action was unreal. And a lot of the people who believed in action believed that it was powerless: You can do things, but it's not going to have an impact, or else what you do is the result of forces coming in from the past over which you have no control now. Those kinds of teachings the Buddha rejected. He had to explain his teaching on karma again and again: that there's a pattern for good actions leading to good results, bad actions leading to bad results, but it's not totally deterministic. Not everything is shaped by the past. What you do now can make a difference in what you experience now, too.

So you have to experiment to see what you can do. Think about his teachings on the five aggregates. In his second sermon, he asked the monks: "Can you say, 'May my form be thus. May feelings be thus. May they not be thus?'" The same with perceptions, thought-fabrications, consciousness: In each case, the five brethren said No.

So which is it? Can you do things, or can you not do things with these aggregates? Well, you can do *some things*. And it's the *some things* that are important. It's in that area of *some things* that you can actually create a path out of those aggregates that'll take you to where you want to go. Once it's taken you there, though, the factors will fall apart. But that doesn't matter, because you've arrived.

And you arrive because you've tested things, you've questioned things. To what extent can you change your form? Well, you work with the breath. How do you change your feelings? You work with the breath. You can change your perceptions more directly. Sometimes this takes willpower. You're used to perceiving things in a certain way, and the Buddha recommends—or Ajaan Lee recommends—other perceptions. The tendency of the mind is to fall back to its old perceptions. But you're trying to see: How far can I push in another direction?

That's because you want to make a path. The path is something you do *make*. It doesn't happen on its own. The same principle applies to thought-fabrications. And if you want to change what you're conscious of, well, you can change your form, feelings, etc., and the quality of your consciousness will change. Spread your awareness to fill the whole body. That's something that can be done. You can create a path. We may not have total control over the aggregates, but we can control some of their aspects. They do give us enough leeway so that we can create the path to the end of suffering. That's all we really need.

So conviction doesn't mean you simply believe everything you're told. Especially when you have conviction in your actions, you can use your actions, then, to test: How far can you go, through the power of your thoughts and your words and your deeds?

This is why the Buddha made it such an important part of his training that the monks be trained in cross-questioning rather than trained in bombast. To be trained in bombast means that you listen to beautiful words, but you're not encouraged to ask what they mean. The teaching is there for the glory of the teacher, who gets to say really profound-sounding things. When you're trained in cross-questioning, though, you're encouraged to ask: What is the meaning of this? How far does this go? The teacher's encouraged to give you clear answers. The teacher's also encouraged to question *you*.

It's through this cross-questioning that you make your way from conviction to knowledge. There's that famous passage where the Buddha asks Ven. Sariputta, "Are you convinced that the five strengths of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment lead to the deathless?" And Sariputta says, "No, I'm not convinced. I know." And how did he know? Because he questioned things, tested things, tested himself.

So even though conviction is the foundation post, it's not the whole building. And before you put up the whole building, you want to make sure that the post is really strong. So try moving it around until you're convinced that it's really firm, so that the solidity of the mind is based not only on conviction, but it also becomes based on knowledge.