

Conviction

July 23, 2017

Close your eyes and watch your breath. Start with a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths and notice where you feel the breathing. Focus your attention there. Then see if the breath is comfortable. Is it too long? Is it too short? Too deep? Too shallow? You can make adjustments.

Try to give the mind a good place to settle down in the present moment, so that it can see itself clearly. If it's not settled down here, it goes running around and then it can't see what it's doing when it's running around. Everything is a blur. And when your mind is a blur then you can't really trust yourself, because all kinds of things can come up in the blur, and then sneak out into your thoughts and words and deeds. You want to see clearly when a thought comes up to do something: Where is it coming from? And then you have the choice: You can go with it or not.

There's a belief that we actually have a choice, and that's an important belief. Some people say we have no choices at all: Our lives are ruled by our DNA or by the stars or by some outside force or just by physical laws, so that whatever we do, we have to do. We think we have freedom of choice but we don't really have it.

But if you believe that, you're throwing away an important treasure: the treasures of your actions. Because people *do* make choices, and if you believe that you can make choices, you tend to make better choices. You don't just go with whatever comes up. But if you don't believe that you have choices, then you tend to go with whatever comes up, and you've thrown away a really good opportunity.

Your actions, your potential for actions, potential for making skillful choices: That's really a treasure. And your conviction in that principle is also a treasure. This is why the Buddha lists it as one of the treasures of the mind: having conviction. Officially, that's interpreted as conviction in his awakening, but what was the message of his awakening? That true happiness can be found through human effort, and if you try with enough wisdom and enough persistence you can find true happiness, too. After all, the Buddha didn't say that he was a god who came down from some special place with special powers. He took the powers that we all have within our minds in a potential form and he actualized them. He turned them into something really powerful in his mind. And he laid out the path so that we can do this, too. So when you believe in his awakening, you believe in the principle of your own actions: that you have the choice to create a genuine happiness in your life. That opportunity is there.

So regard that belief as a treasure. Don't let anybody tear it away, don't let anybody erode it away. Because then what would you have? You'd have nothing. Your life becomes one of a

victim of forces outside your control, which is not a good life to live. It's a better life to say, "I'm going to take advantage of the fact that I do have choices and make the best use of them."

As the Buddha said, you don't really know that principle for sure until you've gained awakening and you realize, Yes, your choices were genuine. In the meantime, you have to take it on faith. But this is a good thing to have faith in. It's not anything unreasonable. And it's the basis for all the goodness in our lives, the fact that we can choose to do skillful things.

As the Buddha said, if people couldn't choose to do skillful things and avoid unskillful things, there would have been no purpose in his teaching. In other words, if we were all automatons or robots, there'd be nothing to teach. But that's not the way we are. We can change our ways. And we start by training the mind, getting the mind clearer and more under control. So when something comes up, you know whether it's good or bad, and you can have the determination to go with the skillful alternative. In the beginning, you have to take that on faith, as a matter of conviction. But as you act on it, you find it really does make a difference in your life, and your conviction gets more and more confirmed.

So this is a good working hypothesis to take on. And it's a treasure because it protects the treasure of your actions, the potentials that you have as a human being. You can find true happiness if you learn how to understand the ways in which you're causing yourself suffering that you don't have to. You can have a change of heart and that'll change your ways. And that's where the real wealth lies, in the results of changing our ways.

But it starts with this treasure inside, the treasure of conviction that our actions really do matter, they really do make a difference, and we have the choice. Hold on to the choice of believing in that, and it makes a lot of other things possible.