

Saddhā (3 of 5): Conviction

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on March 18, 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to meditate together. I certainly appreciate the chance to meditate with others. In these morning talks this week, the theme is the Pali word, *saddhā*. It is often translated into English as 'faith,' sometimes as 'confidence,' and sometimes as 'conviction.' Today I'd like to talk about the aspect of *saddhā* that fits the English word 'conviction.'

In my vocabulary, the word 'conviction' is a powerful word. In fact, I feel some caution around it. If a person has a strong conviction about something, it can be dangerous. That person could just go ahead and do what they feel is right, regardless of the impact on other people. But conviction can also be inspiring. It's the strength of having confidence in something that can override the obstacles in our life. Conviction can strengthen our effort in what we try to do, supporting persistence in spite of difficulties.

In Buddhism, this word *saddhā* has a strong association with the activity of practice, of spiritual development and growth, and of being mindful and present for our experience. To have a strong conviction that this is valuable allows us to persist – rain or shine, easy or difficult – because the conviction is really clear. There's certainty in conviction.

The English word 'conviction' has Latin roots, meaning literally to "conquer with." *Con* in Latin means 'with,' and the 'viction' part is from the Latin word *vincere*, which means to 'conquer' or 'win.' In the English-speaking circles where I travel, there is a strong tendency to downplay war imagery or metaphors for Buddhist practice because it seems violent. But in fact, we find that the metaphors of war are often used in Buddhist texts, not for the purposes of war or violence, but to emphasize, I think, the heroic effort that is needed to overcome afflictive states of mind – aspects of our inner life that are causing harm. The danger of the war metaphor in the word 'conquering' is that sometimes it can reinforce people's ideas that something in them is wrong or bad. It can reinforce the self-criticism or self-deprecation that many people may struggle with already. We have to be very careful with this language. But maybe, occasionally, it's useful.

The idea of conviction in Buddhism is used when someone has overcome challenges, especially their own psychological challenges having to do with clinging, attachment, craving, or being caught or entangled.

In my first years of Buddhist practice I was in awe when, from time to time, my mind got quiet, still, and soft enough in meditation so that the thoughts, feelings, and motivations I was entangled with, swirling with, caught up in, and agitated by in everyday life quieted down. To feel the quiet and peace absent of those swirling agitations was like a homecoming. I felt like:

Now I am really myself. Now I can breathe. There is breathing room for me here. Now I am no longer distracted from myself, distracted from life. I am here in a full way.

One way of understanding what had happened in the course of those meditations is that I had temporarily overcome, settled, or conquered these forces, which in the past had conquered me. I had been just going along under the command of these mental forces that were running me. It became so clear that I was under their control when I sat to meditate, and I felt this swirl of being pulled into those thoughts over and over again.

To no longer be caught by those afflictions – to have overcome them and become free of them was really eye-opening for me. I became convinced that this was possible. I had a clear sense that I didn't have to live in an agitated mode for the rest of my life. I had a conviction that, "Yes! There is another way."

The other way is to become free of those afflictive thoughts – to conquer them. We get the upper hand over them. The advantage of using words like 'conquer' implies strength – a power of certainty, a power of practice, a power of presence. 'Freedom,' on the other hand, has a feeling that doesn't necessarily imply the same thing. It may just mean that now nothing is bothering me, and I can go along as before. But if we really have become stronger through the practice, then the practice is more portable, and we can meet obstacles with the conviction that, "Yes, I can do this. I can practice through this."

The idea of conviction really comes in the wake of seeing the difference between being caught and not being caught. That is what gives birth to conviction. It's not about the conviction of a creed or a belief, but rather about the possibility of personal transformation.

In the Buddha's teachings, he used a particular phrase that could be translated as 'conviction,' and which is related to the word *saddhā*. It is a partner to *saddhā*. It is confirmed faith. The Pali phrase is ***avecca pasāda***. *Avecca* comes from the word "to know something for yourself." *Pasāda* refers to a kind of faith or confidence that is serene and peaceful. Some translators translate this phrase as "unshakable confidence." Maybe "unshakable conviction." Or because *avecca* means what you can know for yourself, it is faith, confidence, or conviction based on what you know for yourself.

When an idea is unshakable, it's like:

Now I know this is possible. I'm not always in touch with it. But I know – I have had the experience. I know these things can be put down, and I don't have to be caught in their grip.

And then one has the conviction that, "Yes, this is worthwhile. This is a path to become free."

One reason I like the word 'conviction' and its association with conquering is its relevance when our life challenges are huge. Sometimes people get sick with Stage 4 cancer. They may have all kinds of personal challenges or losses. They live in war zones, or in times of social crisis, as we are now with Covid-19. Our whole society has really been turned upside down and disrupted.

Here in the Bay area we are "sheltered in place," with laws telling us to stay home, except for essential trips out. This is a huge disruption in our life. In this time and place, what is called for? What is it that we want to muster and arouse within ourselves? What becomes most important?

The more we are challenged, afraid, or distressed by all the changes we are facing, the greater is the value of conviction:

I know something that I value, believe, and have faith in – something different than the conviction that fear should drive my actions. I have conviction that I don't have to live in and be motivated by this distress. There is another way.

To have faith and confidence that have power allows us to fully engage in our practice – to be honest, clear, present, and compassionate for our experience of this life. That is the direction to go. That is what we want to base our life on. That is what we *will* base our life on – rather than mindlessly or habitually succumbing to other forces that are not beneficial for us.

To have conviction to do what is beneficial. To have conviction that there is a possibility of freedom, and of overcoming the obstacles we live under, especially those that are psychological. It isn't easy. It takes time. It takes patience. It takes love. It takes compassion. It takes a lot of care, but it is worthwhile.

I hope that as you develop and continue in your practice, you too will develop a peaceful, maybe even happy, conviction in the value of your practice.

Thank you.