# Deepening Trust

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 46:02

This morning, the question came up about trust and how perhaps the practice can be seen as ever-expanding circles of trust or widening spheres of trust. And that was precisely the topic that I had in mind for my talk this evening, so that is what we will explore together.

Fairly early in my practice with, at that time, my teacher Gil Fronsdal—now my colleague—he said something about trust and the trustability of practice that has been an ongoing exploration for me. This ended up in his book, so I'll quote it from there: "The present moment is trustable if we are present for it."

For me, early on in my practice, this wasn't so intuitive. And certainly for many of us at various times in our practice, the present moment doesn't feel terribly trustable. If we're caught in anger, caught in confusion, it doesn't feel very trustable. And yet the full quote says, "The present moment is trustable if we are present for it."

Exploring that, what we do begin to see is that if some kind of reactivity is arising in the mind, if we bring wise mindfulness to it—this pairing of sati and paññā—to whatever is arising in the present moment, then the experience is trustable through the mindfulness. It's the wise mindfulness, the mindfulness and wisdom together, that carry the trust. And yet this is an evolution in our practice, an evolving understanding, and not necessarily in a linear way.

Philip was talking the other night about practice unfolding in uneven ways. Sometimes we gain some wisdom in one area and not in another. It's similar around trust. There are ways that we learn to trust some aspects of our practice at certain times, and then at other times we have to begin to discern when the mind is not so trustable. Exploring this evolution of trust, I like the sense of a deepening trust—that the trust gets more and more rooted in us.

There's a teaching the Buddha offers where trust—the Pali term I'm using is saddhā, sometimes translated as faith, confidence, or trust—appears at the very beginning of a list called the five faculties. These are five qualities of mind that in a sense describe the evolution of our practice, the arc of our practice. And yet to me, it's more of a spiral than an arc.

The first of these five qualities is faith. The very way we step onto the path begins with some kind of faith or confidence or trust in something that we've heard, a teaching, some wisdom. We hear that, some part of it resonates with us, and that inspires us to engage with what we've learned.

This is the second of the five faculties: energy. A sense of confidence in some aspect of the teaching inspires an energy to engage with these teachings. And that leads to the cultivation of mindfulness, which

is crucial in the wisdom. The wisdom teachings of the Buddha really are framed around understanding our experience through mindfulness practice. So the engagement is towards mindfulness—we engage with becoming aware of what's happening in the present moment.

As we do that, that's the third of the five faculties: faith, energy, mindfulness. Energy and mindfulness together with a sense of direction to the practice lead to the fourth of the five faculties: a stability of mind, concentration.

With that stability of mind, again from the perspective of the exploration that we started with, we had to start from somewhere—hearing some kind of teaching. Turn towards your experience and see what it is like to be a human being having that experience. Perhaps this is a very basic way to frame some of the fundamental wisdom of the Buddha.

As we explore faith, energy, mindfulness, and concentration, then the wisdom—the fifth faculty—begins to arise not as an idea, not as something that somebody has said to us, but as direct experience. We start to really get it. Oh, I see why it's useful to do this. I see why it's helpful to turn and watch anger, to watch confusion, rather than just being lost in the story of it. We directly experience some sense of release or freedom around that state, even as it's continuing to arise. This is some of the wisdom that I spoke about a few talks ago.

We begin to directly experience the wisdom, and this supports our sense of trust in the practice. It encourages us to engage more, which leads to more energy, more directing the mind towards mindfulness, concentration, and more wisdom. These deepen in a spiral. We begin somewhere—we have to begin basically from just hearing the teachings. Yet as we engage, which is so crucial to our practice here, faith is what inspires that engagement. Faith is a stepping onto the path, a sense of trust that, well, maybe this will be useful.

And so this is a kind of description of how our practice evolves through these five faculties—faith being the seed from which the practice really flowers.

It can be helpful perhaps to explore a little, to reflect on this quality of trust or faith or confidence. I know for myself that the word *faith* was not so evocative. In my upbringing, it was connected with believing in something that was not possible to know. And that just didn't really work for me. So the word faith has been something I've had to play with for a while. The word *trust* is a little more evocative for me.

What is it that we trust? In our usual lives, what is it that we trust? We trust so many things that are not so reliable. We place our trust on having things—that's what will make me happy, that's what will be reliable. If I have things, if I've accumulated things, if I can arrange my world to be filled with what I want and arrange it to not have things I don't want, that's what will be reliable. But that's not such a helpful place to really place our trust. As we see here, things are quite unreliable.

We place our trust on being someone, on having things, on having people hold certain opinions about us.

We try to live our lives such that people will think a certain way about us. And we've seen our own minds—how reliable is it for somebody to have a certain opinion about you? It's not very reliable.

Sometimes we place our trust in our emotions. Not that we'd necessarily do this consciously, but in effect, as we are living our lives and perhaps lost in a reactive emotion, when we're acting out of that reactivity, some part of us has placed trust in the beliefs of that emotion—that acting on this is what is going to bring happiness in some form or other.

It's quite humbling to see what we place our trust in, how unreliable it actually is.

And so the exploration of trust in the practice is beginning to look for perhaps a place that might be a little more trustworthy. This takes some honesty in our own exploration of where we place our trust, beginning to recognize that the usual ways we have approached finding trust, placing our trust in the world, are not reliable.

In my own experience, I was in such a state of dukkha, of suffering, and at some point someone sent me a book that gave me some orientation around the teachings. This was my first real opening to the Buddha's teaching, even though I had read some of the Buddha's words fifteen years earlier.

It's interesting, I think, how the conditions of suffering—at least in some of us—are really needed to be able to hear the hard medicine of the Buddha: that placing our trust in things of the world is not reliable, and that turning to experience, cultivating mindfulness with a perspective of *what's this?*, with the understanding that stress and suffering are not inherent in what we're experiencing but that the reactivity of the mind is what creates most of our suffering.

There is going to be unpleasant phenomena in the world, of course. And yet the way we've been engaging so much before we really step into the practice is through adjustment—trying to adjust the world for our own minds to be at ease. And thank goodness that's not required to have the heart really at peace.

Yet as we've said over and over again, that heart at peace doesn't mean that we don't then step into action in the world to address injustice, to address things that cause suffering. In fact, that very opening of the heart leads us to want to act to alleviate suffering in the world. And yet this medicine of turning toward our own heart, seeing where we are clinging, where we are struggling—we have to hear this teaching. And sometimes we have to be suffering in order to hear it.

That was the case for me at least. I had read the teachings of the Buddha fifteen years earlier and thought, "Oh, that's a good idea. I'll try that." And it just never really landed. Then when I was really struggling, when I felt like—as it says in the suttas sometimes—"Does anyone know a way or two out of this suffering?" At that point, when you hear something that points you in the direction of freedom, you might be willing to actually engage with it.

And so that's a kind of beginning level of trust in a way—that we hear the teachings, and whether or not

they make sense to us, whether or not it makes sense to think about paying attention to anger, bringing attention to reactivity, whether or not that makes sense, perhaps we're willing to try. We're willing to run the experiment, willing to engage. And that is really the place where trust begins.

All of you here on this retreat, I would say, are well beyond this level of trust. You would not come on a month or two-month retreat without this sense of willingness to engage. And so there it is—there is some sense of trust in the practice.

And yet, there are times when we forget. We forget about why we're doing this. Breathing in, breathing out—what does that have to do with anything? We forget. And then we remember. And we forget, and we remember. So even this level of trust is not always so even. We have to remind ourselves: this is the value, this is the purpose of the practice.

Something calls us to engage, something calls us to explore, to try to put these teachings into practice. And this is where the next level or unfolding of trust begins to happen. We start to engage. We begin to see little moments of wisdom arising, like I described a week or so ago—the seeing of how turning towards experience with mindfulness, a reactive experience, leads to a sense of, "Oh, this is just frustration. I can watch this." And what a difference in experience between being caught by frustration and knowing it. Or we see the arising of a pattern, a conditioned pattern, a habitual pattern. And just in the seeing of it start to get put together, the mind understands that way lies suffering, and it lets it go.

So we see directly, very experientially, the value of what we've been engaged in. The wisdom starts to grow. And this back and forth—actually, I see this deepening of trust, this ever-expanding trust, as a kind of flow between wisdom and trust, wisdom and trust, wisdom and trust. As trust deepens, wisdom can deepen. And then trust can deepen and wisdom can deepen.

The direct experience of understanding the value of this practice begins to deepen the wisdom, which inspires trust. We have a direct recognition: it's not just words, it's not just a good idea. It's actually useful. It's actually helpful.

At this point, trust can become less about a sense of a leap of faith. And there are times in this practice when I think faith is an appropriate word for this quality of trust, especially early on at the beginning of the practice. There's a sense of not being sure how this is going to work, or why this is valuable, but we've heard somebody that we respect say, "Yes, this has been really helpful to me." Or we see in a teacher something, and they say this transformation in this being has come from this practice. And so we think, well, there are some examples out there. Maybe that's worth trying.

At first it is a kind of borrowing the faith of others—borrowing that sense from my friend who sent me that book in the first place. She said, "This has been really helpful to me. Try it. It'll help." It's like, okay, I don't know, but she said it worked. So just kind of borrowing that trust.

And yet it doesn't take very long once we actually turn to engage before there's a sense of understanding

directly how it's useful, how it's helpful. Trust begins to be more in our own system. We understand. We trust our own experience. We're no longer having to borrow from somebody else.

And yet that deepening of trust, that unfolding of wisdom—as I talked about in the talk on wisdom, those wisdoms come and go. Wisdom, then delusion returns. We have a deepening of trust and then suddenly it's like, "What? Did I really experience that? I must not have experienced that. I must be fooling myself." At that point, we may need to draw not only on the trust from our friends and our teachers, but we can begin to draw on something else. We can begin to recognize coming in and out of that wisdom-delusion cycle. When we've seen that cycle happen multiple times, we begin to recognize: oh yes, wisdom comes and goes.

And so when delusion has come back, we can borrow trust from ourselves. We can remind ourselves, "Yes, I know this is being caught by a reactive emotion right now. That's what's happening. It's impermanent. It's unreliable. It's causes and conditions. It's not forever." So we begin to recognize the coming and goings and can draw on our own experiences of trust to help us continue the practice.

In a way, over time, the trust in practice shifts from trusting what others say, to trusting our own sense of capacity to engage, to trusting wisdom—a kind of letting go of even identity in the trust. We begin to trust wisdom itself.

There are some edges to trust. Some of my own edges I'll explore with you; you may have different edges. But I have found that there are places or times where it's like, "I've trusted this far, but I don't know if I can go any further." There are places at the edges of our practice where we wonder, "Can I really? Is that really practice?"

As the mindfulness starts to get more continuous, as there's a steadiness and a sense of capacity for the practice itself, we learn: I can sit. I can pay attention to my breath. We start to trust some of our own capacity for practice. And yet at some point, we even have to let go of that. We have to shift. There's an edge around practice where there's a shift from engaging with the practice, the doing, the picking up of practices to create states of concentration or to have experiences heading us in the direction of wisdom.

This is very familiar to us in a way—we engage with the teachings, we begin to see things in a certain way, certain clarity of mindfulness helps us see patterns clearly. We see how things are constructed, conditioned. We may start to recognize a very clear unfolding of experience. And we think that's what the practice is. That's what's trustable. And it is trustable, but it's not the only way. Sometimes we have to let go of what we know we trust in order to expand and open into new terrain, to open to the not-known, to what's unfamiliar.

So we start by beginning to explore what it means to trust just what is arising right now. Just this moment. Not needing to or trying to necessarily do the practice, but shifting more towards being. Just knowing what's here right now. We begin to trust the wisdom to know experience, rather than feeling like, "I have

to do it." This is a kind of weakening of the sense of self around the practitioner, a trust that wisdom and mindfulness know their way.

This is not an easy edge of trust. It can be rather ragged at that edge, where we may at times be able to let go of the doing and simply witness, simply know any experience. It doesn't matter what's happening. It absolutely does not matter what the experience is. Mindfulness and wisdom can know it. Dhamma understanding, Dhamma wisdom can arise with any experience, any time. It's not just about sitting in silence on the cushion with our eyes closed. Dhamma wisdom can arise while cutting an apple, while flushing the toilet, while sitting anywhere.

This trust that Dhamma wisdom is available at any moment supports our engagement all the time. Greg the other day mentioned a poem from the Therīgāthā, one of the nuns' verses. It's a beautiful image. This nun is sitting on a hillside looking out over the fields. She's sitting near her kuti, watching farmers plowing, doing their work. And it raises a reflection in her mind. She says, "Just like the farmers work in their fields, I have been working for years on this practice. Why am I not free? What am I doing wrong? I've been following the Buddha's teachings and I'm not free." And then she remembers that it's not about thinking about it, but just about the experience in any moment.

She washes her feet. The water runs down the hill and she watches the water run down the hill. She gets up, aware of getting up, walks to her room, aware. Aware, she sits down on the bed. Aware, she takes a pin and pushes the wick and the lamp down. As the light goes out, her mind is freed.

Any moment, it's possible. We have no idea when that will happen. And yet, we have to be available, present for it to happen. So that's an edge of trust for us—beginning to let go of some level of control over the doing of the practice and opening to just what's here.

Another edge of trust: as our practice gets more continuous, as the mindfulness gets more continuous, sometimes it can start to show us actually more gaps in the mindfulness. Sometimes people describe, after being on retreat for a few weeks on these long retreats, "I'm way less mindful than I was when I got here." And it's probably more likely that what's happening is that you're more aware of when the mindfulness slips out.

This slipping out of mindfulness, as mindfulness gets more continuous, can be an edge for us. We can doubt. We doubt ourselves. We feel like we need to double down. That's our usual response when we see the mindfulness slip—I must not be trying hard enough. Double down, make sure I stay continuously mindful. And that can be helpful at times. I'm not saying that's never a good idea. It can be helpful at times.

And yet there are times when doubling down, that bringing up of effort in order to do the practice, actually gets in the way. I talked a couple of talks ago about the level of mindfulness and seeing certain experiences, how sometimes as mindfulness gets stronger, it's like mindfulness is searching out subtler

experience, or new experience, or unfamiliar experience—and that's where mindfulness can slip out. If we double down at that point, that added energy or effort is a grosser experience. It gets in the way of seeing where the mindfulness is trying to go.

And so this is a place of trust. It's not about trying to stay mindful, but rather, instead of bringing the effort up, bringing the interest up. Where does the mind go as it slips out? Where does it go? If we can be interested there, instead of just trying to hang on to mindfulness with what we're used to being mindful of, then it's possible that we might be able to open into something new and unfamiliar that we've not seen before.

This takes some trust—the willingness to let the mind slip out and just keep trying. Oh, there it goes again. Can I be curious about that? And that may lead to being able to open into these perhaps new, unfamiliar experiences, maybe even things that we wouldn't even think were related to being mindful.

So often we have this idea about mindfulness looking a certain way—more and more clarity. That's what more and more mindfulness would look like, we think. More sharpness, more preciseness, just bits of seeing very clear pieces of experience. And in so many ways the deepening of the practice often happens through experiences we're completely unfamiliar with. They may be vague experiences, they may be diffuse experiences, and not this clear, precise kind of thing.

And so learning to trust—again, we begin to trust: Am I aware? And not judge or decide the quality of our awareness based on what is known, on what the experience is. Aware. Aware and have no idea what I'm aware of. You're aware. That's enough. Aware and not knowing.

This movement towards not knowing, I think, is a direction of the deepening of the practice and the deepening of trust. It's hard to trust letting go into not knowing, into unfamiliarity, into vagueness, into we don't know what. And so this is an edge of trust for us. We cling to anything that feels familiar. We cling because we can't fathom what it is we're letting go into.

And yet that is a direction this practice is asking of us. We have no idea the depth of letting go that has to happen. We don't know what's on the other side of that letting go. And yet we slowly learn to trust—at least in my own experience, slowly learn to trust this experience of release. Feeling the unconstricted heart that follows from release. We slowly begin to trust that.

So over time, we begin to trust this right mindfulness. We trust mindfulness and wisdom. We begin to recognize when they're present, when they're not present. We begin to recognize when the mind is actually trustworthy—when mindfulness and wisdom are present, the mind is trustworthy. There's nothing to fear from anything that arises. It's a great experience of safety, that place of having mindfulness and wisdom so established that there's just no fear. Anything can arise and it's known.

And yet, this seeing of when the mind is trustworthy, when mindfulness and wisdom are present, also comes with recognizing when mindfulness and wisdom are not present. So we begin to discern when it

may be appropriate to step back to other levels of trust. To step back and acknowledge: this mind is not capable in this moment of just being with, just watching the arising of this habitual pattern. That habitual pattern is taking me down the rabbit hole. The capacity of mindfulness and wisdom in this moment is not able to just watch it and remain trustworthy.

We need to discern that. We need to discern when it's time to step aside, maybe turn our attention away from a particularly tangled pattern, or just bring in, draw on some of those borrowed wisdoms from ourselves. This is impermanent. This is not self. Can I just know this as best I can?

So again, it's not this continual, ever-deepening, one-direction movement toward trust. Mindfulness and wisdom have waves to them. We need to learn to ride those waves.

In the deepest letting go, we really just—it's such a stepping into not knowing. If we really start to look at our experience, we recognize we have no idea what's going to happen next. The next split second is unknown. And this is an edge of trust for us too. It can create a sense of fear when we recognize that. It feels like we are standing on the edge of an abyss, and we're asked to step into the abyss. It's that level of not knowing in the next moment.

This can be hard to trust, hard to live in that space. And yet what we see is that as we step into the abyss, trusting that step into the abyss, we land at the edge of the abyss, having to take the next step into the abyss.

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