Faith (Saddhā)

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 26:50

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Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa
Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

Let us first be clear about what saddhā means. It is not faith as belief. It is faith as confidence and trust. Throughout this essay, that is what I mean by faith—confidence and trust.

I first came across Buddhism while I was teaching in New Guinea at a Roman Catholic school in Papua New Guinea. I read a book by a Franco-German philosopher and philanthropist called Albert Schweitzer, who argued that Buddhism was life-negating and Christianity was life-affirming. This left me with a residual dislike of Buddhism, since I was definitely life-affirming and prone to bouts of self-indulgence.

After my year's teaching, I went down to Sydney. I cannot remember how I came across a book written by an Irish Jesuit priest called William Johnson, titled *Christian Zen*. It was published in 1971, so we are talking about ancient times. This was 1972, and it struck a chord, so I walked up the road to the shops, being aware of myself all the time. It felt really odd, so I stopped.

It was only on returning to the UK, around three years later, when my life fell apart, that this Zen came to mind. I wrote to the Buddhist Society in London, and after a bit of a story, they put me in touch with Vajra Bailey, who held a Zen class. She is sprinkled in our pond here. She was only living a bus ride away from where I was living in Birmingham.

She led a group in a zendo, which was a large front bedroom she had dedicated to the purpose. We kneeled on benches facing the wall. She came over and gave me, shall we say, a gentle punch in the back to straighten my posture. Then all she said was, "Watch what comes up."

By the end of that forty minutes, I was absolutely convinced that this would get me through my crisis. I became an aficionado. My life took on meaning. I felt elated, purposeful.

Most of you, I am sure, have been through that stage. It is called serene or clearing faith—the first of four levels of faith. I do like Roshi Suzuki's word for it: beginner's mind. Some of you will know that classic book. It is serene because you really feel happy you have found a path, and clearing because it gives you direction where before you were searching here and there.

Now, the greater the effect, the greater the danger that after the initial phase dies down, the meditator

stops practicing. Although the effects can change a person's life quite radically, as the sense of progress falters and the practice becomes boring, that is when they leave. But if after this phase there is a continuing interest in the Dharma and a deepening of practice, especially through retreats, then the faith becomes firmer.

Much here now depends upon a guiding teacher and a supportive group. This is all new territory, and we all need support and direction. I was really quite fortunate to find this teacher with a dedicated zendo who was knowledgeable. She was a good teacher. And more, there was a monastery, Throssel Hole Abbey.

At that time, my interests were fueled by reading people like Alan Watts, Christmas Humphreys, and Walpola Rahula—authors I do not think many people know now. The number of books on Buddhism was really small compared to today with the deluge of books, articles, and websites.

As I began to understand the teaching of the Four Noble Truths and karma, my faith grew to a convinced confidence, especially through the practice of Zen. So much so that after a year I took jukai, which means taking refuges and precepts. I still have my wagesa—it is like a collar which symbolizes the monastic robes. This level is called convinced or anchored faith.

One can practice from two bases. There are those who are liberated by faith and those liberated by wisdom. All that means is that everybody has a natural inclination a bit more towards faith and devotion, or a bit more towards the intellect. We all have some of each. Some get connected through the chanting, through connection with a teacher, through a heart connection, through reading and contemplating the life of the Buddha or famous teachers like Ajahn Mahā Bua and Mae Chee Kaew. This inspires them to practice and experience direct experiential understanding without too much—even very little—intellectual knowledge.

The classic example of this is Cūḷapanthaka, who had followed his very clever brother into the order.

However, he was so dull-minded that he said of himself, when he learnt a new verse from the Buddha, it knocked the one he'd just learnt out of his head. So his brother said he may as well go back to lay life.

When the Buddha heard this, he went to see him. Comforting him, he gave him a very simple exercise: to take a clean cloth and keep rubbing it all the while saying, "removing the dust, removing the dust." As he saw the cloth becoming more and more soiled, he realized that his heart was similarly soiled by defilements. He began to purify the heart and regained its original purity, realizing the cause of the defilements was unwholesome desire driven by a false identity of self. He awakened, fully liberated. So there's hope for us all.

Now, there are those who are drawn by understanding the Dhamma, driven by intellectual curiosity. They still have to purify the heart of defilements, but insights come from careful investigation in their practice based upon that intellectual understanding. This is very much like how a scientist might work.

The classical example is Sariputta, whom the Buddha named General of the Dhamma. He was able to discern all the moments, all the little stages in the practice of absorptions, the jhānas, and the practice of vipassanā. It took him two whole weeks to achieve liberation. This is contrasted with Moggallana, the other chief disciple, who was devotional, driven by absorptions, jhāna, heartfelt states. He only took a week. And he gained the six supernatural powers: clairvoyance, clairaudience, mind reading, recollection of past lives, various other powers, and most important, the destruction of the defilements.

Now both paths have their danger. The faith-liberated can become drowned in devotion and be happy just to stay there. And the wisdom-liberated can fall into the delusion that they understand the Dhamma so well—might even have written a book—that they must be liberated.

A classic example is the monk Poṭṭhila. He was an excellent teacher. Many of his students became liberated, but not him. And the Buddha actually called him "Tuccha Poṭṭhila," which means "empty Poṭṭhila" or "useless Poṭṭhila."

Swallowing his pride, he went to one of his students for guidance, but the student realized he was too intellectually conceited and said he couldn't help him. This happened with all his other liberated students until at last one of them directed him to a young boy, a sāmaṇera, seven or eight years old, who was liberated.

Again swallowing his pride more deeply, he listened to the boy, who asked him: how would he get a snake out of an anthill which has six openings? Snakes often live in abandoned anthills. Poṭṭhila said, well, all you have to do is close up five of the holes. And the boy told him, "That's what you've got to do. Close up the five outer senses and watch the mind." In no length of time, Poṭṭhila became one of the arahants.

This is something we can reflect upon. What is my leaning? Am I a devotional type? More the intellectual type? Both demand the practice of moment-to-moment mindfulness and vipassanā. But the relief here is that the devotional type need not be worried if they don't understand the finer points of the Dhamma. And the intellectual type need not be concerned that they don't have much devotional feeling.

At this stage, the possibility of falling away from the practice is still there. If in the first phase it was simply lack of progress after the initial inspiration, here the great enemy of faith is doubt—and a special type of doubt: skeptical doubt.

Wholesome doubt that leads to careful investigation and continued practice is exactly what the Buddha expects us to have. He says all that in the Kālāma Sutta. He tells us not to believe anything whatsoever until we ourselves know by our own direct experience whether it's true or not. And indeed, it's that very exploration that leads to liberation, that cuts through delusion.

Doubts can arise about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, one's teacher or lineage, and of course oneself. The Buddha said he was fully liberated from suffering. He said the end game was Nibbāna. But how do we know there isn't something beyond? And it doesn't sound so good to me. Either it's some sort of

unconsciousness, or an awareness aware of nothing. And what about God? Some universal intelligence and heart that we're all part of? What sort of doubts have you come up with in yourself about the Buddha-Dhamma?

The Buddha never presented his teachings as "thou shalt believe." It was always explained, given with encouragement. Whenever people approached him with opposing views, he would listen and point out the weakness of their argument. Once the person accepted that criticism and was ready to listen, then of course he would explain his own understanding.

So it is with us. When we come across teachings we don't agree with—for instance, the usual stumbling block of rebirth—we must approach them with care. We don't use the word reincarnation so as not to be confused with Hindu teachings. Actually, the word reincarnation literally means reborn in the flesh, whereas rebirth simply means life after death.

Now, we may be of the convinced opinion that this is not possible since we're only the body. I was once on a train going out of London and a football crowd came in. They sat right opposite me, these two men, and one of them said to me, "Are you a Buddhist monk?" I said, "Yes, I am." He said, "Well, I don't believe in reincarnation." It was as direct as that.

I said to him, "Do you actually know what happened? Whether there is life after death or not?" He said he hadn't had any experience like that, and he tacitly agreed with me that he didn't know. So I said to him, "Well, why come to a conclusion?" And his friend turned to him and repeated, "Yeah, why come to a conclusion?"

When we come across these sorts of teachings that don't agree with our particular understanding, instead of denying them or feeling we have to give them the benefit of the doubt, just leave them on the back burner. Wait for more experiential information through our practice. It might not come till we're dead, you know.

There's also faith in the Sangha. Here the word does not refer to the ordained monks and nuns but to the ariya sangha, the noble sangha—those who've attained one of the paths and fruits. This of course includes lay people. Ever since the time of the Buddha there have always been those who've achieved these attainments. According to the tradition, once the dispensation fails to produce such exemplars, the teachings would become intellectual and devotional and eventually just empty ritual. They are the inspiration that infuses the whole dispensation, such as the Mahasi Sayadaw in our tradition. They're the ones who keep reaching the heights and become assurances for us that we can also achieve that.

When it comes to teachers, there have been some unfortunate, shameful cases—I think I'm right in saying all around sexual behavior, mostly male teachers abusing and taking advantage of women devotees. In general, one tends to idolize the teacher. They are someone special in our lives and we expect them to behave to the standards that they ask of us.

In such cases, the student may be overcome by discouragement and doubt in the teacher. On reflection, if they have doubt in the teacher, they might overcome that doubt when they remember the benefits of the teaching, and they may continue to stay with the teacher, acknowledging them as a good spiritual guide. However, when there's a serious breach of conduct, that can make the student even doubt the Dhamma. Consider how you would feel if information from various sources proved that the Buddha was having affairs with many nuns and monks. There was a case, actually, where it was discovered an abbot had a long affair with one of his students. It just broke the community.

But in general, most overcome their disenchantment over their teachers, just recognizing that they expected too much. That's what happens when you idolize somebody. I did.

Skeptical doubt becomes especially difficult to overcome when it is doubt in ourselves. Whatever the cause within our upbringing and life so far, what we may be left with is a lack of confidence in our own reasoning, decision-making, even how we feel about ourselves—our self-worth. This tends to be projected onto others, so we feel lessened in people's eyes and our self-esteem lessens further.

It can affect our lives deeply. We go for a job, get it, and then doubt we can do it, even though actually getting the job probably means we can do it very well. We have a growing relationship with someone but then can't decide to form a close relationship. The relationship fails and further reinforces our self-doubt. It can be a fear of failure, so the person sets impossible perfections, just reinforcing that self-belief. It can lead to chronic anxiety about everything we do. Is this what I ought to be doing? Is it right? Is it wrong? It can actually become a form of mental illness called imposterism, where the person feels themselves to be false or pretense.

I think we all suffer from some level of doubt, but hopefully it doesn't prevent us from saying and doing what we ultimately decide. In my own life, it took me two years to decide to join the Sangha, and then I determined only three years. I don't know what happened. It was such a radical thing to do. I was building up a career in teaching, owned a house, and had a growing relationship.

So the desire kept scratching at my brain. Finally, I went to see my teacher at the Birmingham Buddhist Vihara, Sayadaw U Rewata Dhamma, who was a Burmese monk. And he said I was too old. I was thirty-seven.

Well, frankly, it came as a great relief. Right, I thought, now I can get on with my life. But the fact was that the urge just wouldn't leave me. I kept thinking how wonderful it would be to spend just three years in an establishment that supported you to simply meditate, meditate, meditate.

So after six months, I went to see him again. This time he said that since I was now a teacher—I was doing beginners' classes and such—I was needed at the centre. Again I went away, but the relief wasn't so great. Indeed, I think there was a touch of disappointment that time.

Time passed, and again the urge returned. Not a simple desire, but something truly cloying that wouldn't

leave me. So I trusted in the practice. I had to stop thinking about it. I hired a bungalow in the heart of Wales that a friend owned and went there for two weeks. I just stopped all that pros and cons business and simply sat. By the end of two weeks, my heart spoke with absolute clarity. When I went to see my teacher again, he just said, "Okay."

But at least it was an exercise in being certain.

Skeptical doubt, of course, is the last of the five hindrances. When we find ourselves in this sort of doubt, it's always wise not to get caught up in those mental proliferations, the ruminating. Rather, as always, just see it as an occasion to heal oneself of that gnawing doubt by feeling it in the body, usually around the chest. Sink into the agitation. Investigate the various tones of the sensations—insubstantial, impermanent, and so on. There's no need to try and fix the problem. By allowing the emotion to manifest, that turbulence is discharged. And remember, no energy is lost. It's always transformed to the opposite, to the wholesome.

When it lessens and passes, just acknowledge the relief and perhaps the equanimity and clarity that arises. Even if only we've learned how skeptical doubt works and operates and fools us.

Of course, positive doubt—curiosity, the wonder of an artist, the philosopher, the scientist—galvanizes our investigation into the Dhamma, both the understanding and the insight practice.

Now, the third level is called accumulated or aspirational faith. This only applies to people who've taken the vow to become fully self-awakened Buddhas. That is, you have to be reborn at a time when the dispensation has disappeared, and the person has all the qualities needed to become self-awakened.

In Theravāda, the Bodhisatta vow is not the same as the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva vow. The Mahāyāna tradition transformed the vow into refusing to be fully liberated until all beings are liberated—a great compassion thing. I'm not sure how that works out since all beings are meant to be innumerable. But I think it's best to see it as an aspiration.

There was a famous monk in Sri Lanka, Venerable Balangoda Ānanda Maitreya. He was on retreat with the Mahāsi Sayādaw when the monastery I stayed at, Kanduboda, was opened in the mid-1950s. During his rise through the vipassanā ñāṇas, you arrive at a place of equanimity just before you have the insight that brings you to a level of attainment. And he remembered that he'd taken this Bodhisatta vow at the time of the Buddha. He said he remembered the faces of Sāriputta and Moggallāna, but not the Buddha. It's a shame.

According to the tradition, he cannot go any further. He has to stop there. He will now take many rebirths during which he will hone all the ten perfections to the point that he'll be ready to be reborn as a human being—as a man, unfortunately. Because in the tradition, time is circular. You always have the same situations repeating. Those of you who know the twenty-eight past Buddhas—they've all got Pāli names and they've all got two famous disciples.

When he's finally reborn, he'll be able to go through the paths and fruits by himself, as Siddhattha Gotama did, and then establish a dispensation. Venerable Ānanda Maitreya was a professor, vice-chancellor of the monastic Vidyodaya University. He was driven by that vow somewhere in his consciousness. But again, it's not absolutely secure because he's not attained one of the paths and fruits.

Skeptical doubt can still arise, yes. And he said of himself that he was honing the quality of understanding in this life.

Now, for those of you who are unacquainted with these paths and fruits, in short, they're all attained by insights into one of the three characteristics of existence: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, not-self. The first is called stream entrant, where all doubt in the Buddha Dhamma disappears. The second insight into one of those three characteristics goes deeper, lessening the power of unwholesome desires over us. Although the stream entrant must go through seven rebirths, the once-returner is almost there. The third one, the non-returner, is no longer attracted to sensual desires and therefore doesn't become a human being anymore—he remains in the higher realms. And the Arahat, of course, is liberated from all becoming.

So we've come to the final, the fourth level: the realized or unshakable faith, which is when we become one of these, when we become a stream entrant. That's the beginning. That's the entrance into the path. Such is the direct experiential knowledge of one of those three characteristics of existence that it dispels all doubt in the Buddha Dhamma. Some are happy and satisfied to have attained this path. After all, it's a great achievement to have risen out of the delusion that has caused persistent rebirth, sometimes into the animal and hell realms. That's not possible anymore for somebody who has achieved this path and fruit. And for some, it becomes an inspiration and a goal to continue.

As faith in the Buddha Dharma grows, there comes a time when a person wants to commit themselves. Traditionally, this is done by taking refuges and precepts. The refuges, of course, are the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. When the first mendicants wanted to follow the Buddha, he simply said, "Ehi Pasiko"—come and try. It's called the First Ordination. After that, when the Sangha started to produce Arahats, it became what we now call the Three Refuges, and it eventually became the Lay Ordination. As people joined the Sangha who were not so pure-hearted, who were not so advanced, the Buddha started to make rules as safeguards. Eventually the rules of the Vinaya grew to 227, so the monastic ordination really becomes quite an intricate ceremony.

Everyone will have their own reasons for taking refuges and precepts. In my own case, it came as a great relief. Having left the Catholic Church, which had given me a sort of moral and devotional basis, I was drawn to the atheistic existentialists and found at least a reason to live—may as well make a go of life. But with my life crisis, that was taken away, and I looked for a way to heal the heart suffused with turbulence. At that time, therapy as we know it today was hardly known, or at least I didn't know about it. I probably would have thought of it more in terms of psychiatry. I think this was lucky, for these days my first port of

call would have been therapy or counselling. This may very well have helped me out of the hole I was in, but it would not have given me the spiritual depth of Buddhism. I may never have found a spiritual path as such, but remained happy with just being okay.

Buddha Dharma offered me something more—Nibbāna, transcendence—and taking refuges and precepts gave me a focus. From then on, everything I did had to be in line with the Buddha Dharma. There's no problem with reading other spiritual texts, with yoga, qigong, all sorts of therapies. Anything is viable so long as I feel it is helping me along the path.

Faith is foundational, and it's always brought up together with insight, with wisdom. Faith gives us that courage and commitment to practice. In the Visuddhimagga, the commentary by Buddhaghosa, it is said that faith is like a water-purifying gem, dispelling the fogginess of delusion and doubt. The practice brings insight, which confirms the faith, and there comes a point where faith becomes steadfast on the ground of insight into impermanence, reactivity, and not-self.

So where are you when it comes to faith in the Buddha Dhamma? Is it really established? Have you taken refuge and precepts? If not, why not?

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance and have not brought confusion, and that by your devotion to the practice you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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