Faith

Greg Scharf · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 51:39

If we were to look at the motivation that would inspire us to undertake a spiritual life, a life in meditation—whatever form that might take, however we might hold that in our hearts and minds—each of us would find something particular and individual. But if we look beneath our own personal stories, I think we would all find, in some way, at some point, a connection to some sense of dissatisfaction or a lack of ease. Some connection to a feeling that things just are not quite right in our lives, in the world. You could say a connection to stress or suffering—seeing this personally in our own lives, seeing how it manifests in the world. This connection leads us to look for some sort of answer or understanding of the human condition in relation to that.

If this weren't true on some level, there wouldn't be a lasting energy for our practice. If it were merely a motivation of curiosity, for example—and this quality of curiosity is really important, essential on any path, this desire to know, to understand—but in and of itself, it may not be enough to sustain us in the long haul. Curiosity only goes so far as a kind of inspiration.

For this sense of dis-ease or lack of satisfaction to really serve us and lead us to a genuine spiritual search, to lead us to a search that goes to any real depth, we need to really touch the depth and breadth of the insecurity that underlies that stress or suffering. We need a meaningful relationship to dukkha, to what is called dukkha in Pali. A familiar term to all of you, I know—you don't spend any time around places like this without hearing dukkha a lot. But I think sometimes we can fall into a somewhat superficial relationship to this word, so I'll start out tonight by talking about it a little bit.

We can think of dukkha as just pointing to unpleasant sensations in mind and body, difficulty in that way. But fundamentally, this quality of dukkha points to the fact that inherently, by its very nature, life in this conditioned realm—life in samsara, you might say—is fundamentally flawed a bit. It just can't ever be quite right. It can't be made right. It points to the fact that it's not always smooth sailing.

This is not the pessimistic view that is sometimes ascribed to Buddhism—"life is suffering," right? That's a misunderstanding of this teaching, a misunderstanding of the teaching of the Four Noble Truths, the first noble truth, the noble truth of suffering. It's not a statement that life is suffering, though one hears this sometimes in the world. It's not that superficial. Of course we have good times, happy times. It's not like it's all a complete drag all the time. We have ups and downs. But a practical assessment of the human condition points to this unevenness.

I heard Joseph Goldstein give a definition of dukkha as being two parts—I don't know which part is which—but having to do with the hole in a wheel and an axle. It's an axle that doesn't fit quite right, a

badly fitting one. The image is like an old ox cart where it's a bumpy ride. It doesn't fit well, so it's a square axle in a round hole or something like this. We get a bumpy ride. It's up and down. It has that quality. And this is just the nature of this conditioned life, isn't it? We all get that bumpy ride.

But suffering in relationship to that is another thing altogether.

We can understand dukkha on the level of painful experience, difficult experience, experience associated with bodily life and the process of aging and illness and all of the things that happen to us if we live in a body—difficulties, turmoils of mind, dukkha in that way. And then there's this more subtle understanding, this quality of insecurity or unreliability, which is an intrinsic part of everything, whether pleasant or unpleasant.

This is important: pleasant experience is also imbued with this quality of dukkha, because it's not secure, it doesn't last. A definition from the Buddhist dictionary speaks to this: "The term dukkha is not limited to painful experience, but refers to the unsatisfactory nature and the general insecurity of all conditioned phenomena, which on account of their impermanent nature are all liable to suffering. And this includes also pleasurable experience." Hence, unsatisfactoriness or unreliability or liability to suffering would be a good translation of this.

On this level, this quality of dukkha points to a kind of inner anxiety or unsteadiness that is the result of the constant change of things. Pleasant experiences don't last. Things don't stay the way we want them to. Things fall away, they fall apart. Everything is changing. It pervades all of life.

Somehow, I think we get conditioned—perhaps out of our culture and the things we see in media—to believe that we're supposed to be able to get it all right, so that it's always how we like it. And that somehow if we can't manage this, it's our fault. We're not trying hard enough. We're missing something. As though it were possible. As though life could somehow be like a TV commercial where everyone is beautiful and having a really good time. As though it's supposed to be like that, as though that were a possibility.

But the deal when we take birth in this realm is that we get the full range: pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, happiness and sadness, all of these worldly conditions. The ten thousand joys and the ten thousand sorrows, as it's sometimes spoken about. That's what we get. We get the whole deal. That's part of what this is.

We think it's bad news or a mistake, and secretly we're holding out some hope that we're going to find the key—maybe through our meditation—that's going to get it to where it's always pleasant and always the way we like it. None of us would admit that if anyone asked us, but sometimes I think we secretly hold out a little hope. As though, okay, maybe that's what enlightenment means—it's only pleasant all the time. Secretly we're kind of hoping that's the deal we're signing up for here.

But the Buddha had bad days and backaches and had to deal with people he would really have preferred

not to deal with. Yet suffering in relation to all of that was not there.

We're not going to be able to get it to where it's always and only the way we like it. That's not possible. And so we really have to open to this truth. The reason it's the first noble truth is that really opening to it fully is where we start. It's where the Buddha started. This is the beginning point of our practice. Because until we really open to this truth, we're always going to be looking for a way out or a way around it. We'll be turning to that which is, by its very nature, incapable of providing a lasting, satisfactory happiness. We'll be turning to that which is not reliable.

But opening to dukkha will lead us to turn towards something which might actually be a reliable source of real, true happiness—of peace.

Ajahn Chah put it this way: "In Dhamma practice we begin with the truth of dukkha, the pervasive unsatisfactoriness of existence. But as soon as we experience this, we lose heart. We don't want to look at it. Dukkha is really the truth, but we want to get around it somehow. Dukkha is a noble truth. If we allow ourselves to face it, then we will start to seek a way out of it. If we are trying to go somewhere and the road is blocked, we will think about how to make a pathway."

There's a core teaching that it's said came to the Buddha on the night of his enlightenment, on the night of his awakening, through the three watches of the night. This is the teaching on dependent origination or dependent co-arising—paticcasamuppada in Pali. One of those great Pali words. They roll off the tongue so nicely. Pali just adds another syllable when you want to extend the meaning of something.

This teaching is a chain of causal links, which I'm not going into tonight, but it shows how, with ignorance as a causative factor, through this chain we arrive at suffering. It's a very deep, penetrative understanding of the law of cause and effect, and how ignorance leads to suffering in our lives and in the world.

that's kind of an extension or a following on from dependent origination. It's called transcendent dependent origination, familiar to many of you, I'm sure. This teaching begins where the other one leaves off. It begins at dukkha, and it extends what happens with dukkha as a causative factor. In this teaching, the opening to the understanding of dukkha is seen as the cause for the rising of faith or confidence—saddha in Pali. Dukkha, seen as leading to the rising of faith.

And then there's another chain of causal links: faith, saddha, confidence, trust, leading to the arising of joy, leading to the arising of rapture, of deep joy, spiritual joy, leading to tranquility, happiness, concentration, knowledge and vision of things as they are. This leading to disenchantment, to dispassion, to emancipation, and to knowledge of destruction of the taints, of the cankers, of the kilesas. Dukkha leads right to liberation.

Opening to dukkha as this starting place in terms of our practice leads then to this quality of confidence or faith. But we need something to have faith or confidence or trust in. We open to dukkha so that we see there's a problem here, something we have to do something about. And then hopefully we can encounter

something that points to a possibility for an understanding that will lead us through these stages to peace, to freedom.

Quite a few years ago, one of my teachers asked me to name the one thing that I thought was most important in our practice—the one thing, pick one thing that would really be the most essential quality of mind, of heart leading to the unfolding of the path. I remember at the time I said I thought perseverance: steadfastness, stick-to-itiveness, doggedness, some quality of keeping going. It seemed like a good answer. We're not going to get very far if we don't stick to it, on anything we might do.

Then I asked a friend of mine, a meditation teacher, the same question, and immediately, without thinking, she said faith—the most important thing. I thought it was a trick question that I had not gotten right somehow at the time. I was struck by that. It wasn't my first response.

This quality of faith—the Pali word is saddha. Faith, I know for some people, points to something that this word does not point to, because it's not a faith that is a kind of belief. It's not a belief. So confidence, maybe, or trust. But I'll use the word faith tonight. What I'm pointing to is a kind of inner strength of confidence. This is a core issue, a real fundamental aspect of the practice and the path.

Without this quality of faith, no real effort will happen in our practice. We need some sense that it's worth doing, it's worth making effort, because it's not easy to keep going on this path.

The teacher Sayadaw Tejaniya speaks about faith in an interesting way in terms of what are called the five spiritual faculties. This is a quotation from a teaching he gave: "When there is faith or confidence, saddha, effort will arise. When there is effort, virya, the second of these five faculties, mindfulness will become continuous. When mindfulness, sati, the third of these, is continuous, concentration will become established. When concentration, samadhi, the fourth of these spiritual faculties, is established, one begins to see things as they really are. Seeing things—this is the wisdom, the fifth of these spiritual faculties, pañña. When one starts to understand things as they really are, faith strengthens, and so on. With the strengthening of faith, effort becomes more balanced and continuous, and so on."

There's a circular feeding around through these spiritual powers or faculties. We can see faith is really essential in that flow.

When I went to my very first meditation retreat quite a while ago, I had never meditated before. I went to a ten-day retreat on the suggestion of a friend who was meditating. I said I wanted to learn how to meditate, and she said, "Here, sign up for this ten-day retreat." I had no idea what I was getting into. Literally, I hadn't meditated for even a second. My friend made me promise to stay for three days because she thought I would probably run away. She thought I was a good candidate to bolt out of there. And I did think about leaving every day—not just once every day. The teachers didn't look so much like my idea of what great spiritual masters might look like. They looked kind of like me. I was a little disappointed.

No white robes or flowing beards or whatever I might have had in mind. But what they said made sense to

me. They seemed to be actually telling me the truth. It resonated in that way. Every day, at least something resonated in a way that felt like, oh, people are telling me the truth.

And the thing that I think got me the most was that there was nothing I was supposed to adopt as a belief or a stance or a philosophy. It was just, check it out. See for yourself. This is the beauty of these teachings. It's summed up in the word *ehipassiko*—come and see for yourself. *Ehi*, come. The beauty of the teachings is just check it out. See for yourself if there is value or benefit here, directly in your own experience.

And so there was this sense of possibility that came from that time. There was this confidence that the teachers had that I think I borrowed every day. I borrowed a bit of that confidence, that faith that they seemed to have so strongly. And then by the end of that first retreat, I felt I had tasted some of that possibility very directly for myself. It seemed like strong medicine. It seemed to work despite me, because I wasn't a model yogi by any means. But something seemed to happen. It was like magic to me.

And so there was this bright kind of faith there initially. Yes, okay, I could do this. This is possible, even for a schlemiel like me. That was the feeling. I can take the next step. Martin Luther King once said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." That was the sense. I had no idea of the trajectory of things, but there was this confidence that I could take the next step.

In the texts, sometimes they have technical definitions of terms like faith. Faith is described as a confidence that allows us to enter into or set out to cross something. There's an image there—it's said to be the confidence that allows one to set out across a flooded area, to cross a flood, to enter into new terrain, to enter into unexplored territory. Which is really what we do every time we sit down. We think we know what's coming. We do get familiar with the inner terrain of this mind and body and heart, but who knows? We don't know.

It's said that faith should be regarded as a hand, because it takes hold of profitable things, of useful things, of good things. I like that image of faith as a hand that takes hold of that which is helpful for us, profitable. And faith is likened to what's called a water-clearing gem. They have this image in the time of the Buddha, in that part of the world, of there being a kind of gem that had this function, this ability to purify water—to clarify and purify, to settle out impurities. And you could see this quality of confidence or faith as purifying in the way that it helps us to see what matters. It helps us to get our priorities in line and see what's worth doing.

So we could see faith as a kind of energy, an energetic quality of mind and heart that has this ability to seek out that which leads to freedom, that clarifies what's important and meaningful in a life. It takes hold—like that hand that takes hold of useful things—it takes hold of this energy and leads to effort, leads us to actually set forth on the path.

And we could say that faith combines this wholesome yearning for understanding, for freedom, for liberation—wholesome desire, this *dhammachanda*. It combines that with aspiration, a determination to

fulfill that yearning, with a trust that it's possible to actually set out on such a journey. That we could realize greater ease in our lives and find balance with the changes that are just an inherent part of life. The ups and downs that will come. Some balance with that. The ability to be with the good times and the joys and the happiness without demanding that they stay, letting them fall away when they change, without grasping at them, without falling into addictive patterns. And conversely, the ability to be with difficulties, with sorrows and that which isn't so easy, without being crushed by that or falling into despair or a state of struggle, struggling with the truth of things.

And so we see this yearning for freedom

This aspiration for liberation — we could see this as the desire to be free of the habits of mind, free of the habits of reactivity that lead to suffering. Free of the defilements of mind, no longer under the sway of greed and hatred and delusion, of confusion, of all the ways that these root causes of suffering manifest.

I think it's important for us to reflect on some quality of aspiration in this regard, this movement to freedom. Really to bring it into our minds and our hearts. Not maybe so much as some kind of goal or a naming of a goal — goals, they may change over time. But we can reflect on it in terms of a direction that we're steering in, a course that we're setting sail with a compass heading. We can hold an aspiration as a direction that we're aiming towards. There's a dynamic aliveness to this, where it's not so much a fixed goal of a journey, but a steering towards greater freedom, towards realization. We see what leads in that direction, and we make that our compass heading. We see what leads in the opposite direction, and we steer away from that when we become aware of it.

This quality of faith — sometimes initially, as I was describing for myself, it may arise in relation to a teacher. Or perhaps we may read about or have heard about some inspiring figure that brings a quality of faith, that points to this possibility. Think of someone like His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who seems to serve as a source of inspiration to so many people — people who have no idea who he is, but there's something about him, about his being, that people find inspiring. Or someone else, maybe Dipa Ma, some of us may have heard about or read about. A great teacher, a very inspiring figure. We can find qualities of confidence and faith, this kind of bright faith that comes in relationship to people like this who just inspire us so much, who point to this possibility. These are real living beings.

Some of the beings I've met when I've traveled to Burma — for me there's one monk in particular who's the happiest being I know. He's so light. I'll travel all the way to Burma just to sit with him for a little while. He brings so much joy, and these things inspire us, bring faith. Because this is someone I know, someone I get to spend time with, by some grace of God or some good deeds I did sometime in the past.

These people, these beings that we hear about — or maybe we're lucky enough to meet — they point to the fact that this path actually can be walked to some place of great depth, maybe to completion. The Buddha said, when he said, if this were not possible, I wouldn't ask you to do it. Figures like this point directly to that truth, to that possibility for us. We draw confidence from that because we get a sense, tastes at times:

"Oh, I'm following the same path. Or at least I'm walking in the same direction. Maybe it's not the exact same route, but it's going that way." And it strengthens this bright faith that we may begin with.

But then we have to do the practice. We have to actually slog it out. And it's not easy. So we have to find a deeper source of strength.

I was thinking about this first retreat. I remember how high I was after that — I just thought, "Yes!" And then it started to wear off. "What happened? What did I do wrong?" So I wanted to get back on retreat as soon as possible to get it back, as though that were the point, as though there were something to get back in that way. And then it wasn't so easy. It wasn't so sweet. It was hard work, with a lot of doubt coming up. "It's too hard, I can't do it. It was fake somehow." This initial, bright kind of faith that may come like that — it's tender.

It's not sustaining in the long run. We borrow others' faith. We get this bright faith, but it can get swept away. And so we need a more mature, deeper sense of trust and confidence to continue. This unfolds if we can stick with it, if we have enough to keep going. I know for myself it just didn't take very much to keep me going.

We can see the need for this more mature, deeper kind of faith in terms of the hindrance of doubt, which is something we all have to work with over the years. It's going to come up at times. We're sitting there thinking, what does this have to do with anything? What does watching my breath have to do with liberation? This quality of confidence is an antidote to this. We find it in different ways—reflecting on inspiring beings we may have heard of or know, reflecting on the qualities of the Buddha.

Because we're going to run up against it. Think of the Buddha on the night of his enlightenment. He was a pretty good yogi. And he's assailed by the armies of Mara—all these torments and awfulness, and then seductions. Finally, the last thing Mara used, after everything else was exhausted, was doubt. Who do you think you are? What gives you the right to sit there and say, I won't get up? To make that kind of determination: let my bones, sinews, blood—let it dry up. And the Buddha just touched the earth to bear witness.

This doubt will come at times, whether we're fairly new to practice or we've been at it for thirty years. There are times when it will assail us. But our willingness to open to the moment, to the truth of the moment, to really just directly touch—this is how it is right now, let me be with this—begins to strengthen this quality of faith, of confidence, this willingness to be with the truth of things. We take our stand on reality, and this begins to strengthen this quality of trust. It leads to surrendering to the truth of the moment, which really opens the heart to a deeper kind of confidence.

We find a strength that allows us to not be perfect and to stay steady anyway. I think for myself, this is one of the greatest gifts of the practice over the years—the willingness to not be perfect, to not do it perfectly, to allow that for myself. A huge gift. And we find this confidence that we cannot ever really totally blow it

in this practice, because we always can start again in any moment. That's all we are doing all the time anyway. So no matter what, right now, we can start again. We start to really taste the truth of that, and our confidence grows.

There's a beautiful line out of a poem called "Verses on the Faith Mind" by the Third Zen Patriarch: "To live in the highest realization is to live without anxiety about non-perfection." To live without anxiety about non-perfection. To me, this points to a couple of things. It points to a deep acceptance of the inherently imperfect, unreliable, flawed nature of conditioned existence, of samsara. And it points to a confidence where we allow ourselves to be who we are in the moment and to not take everything so personally. We don't have to try to fix ourselves or fix reality or fix life, or try to control it to be any particular way.

When we start through this opening, we start to touch a more mature faith. This mature, bright faith can arise at times of difficulty and challenge in our lives. It's one of the times we start to find this—when we get through something that's really hard. I think of my first long retreat, when one of the teachers suggested resolving to sit without moving for an hour. Big deal, right?

But I didn't think I was going to make it. When I did that, I couldn't move. My resolve was so powerful. I thought I was going to die there. The combination of physical and psychological dukkha was so intense. Ring the bell. Ring the bell. Oh.

But then when the bell rang, I didn't move. It's just—I could. That was what I needed. But I just remember thinking, if I could live through that, I could take anything. Do you remember how much confidence and strength came from something as simple as that? We all have stories like this. I remember my first long retreat in Burma, being pushed beyond what I thought possible in terms of effort and tiredness. We get through these things. We find, "Oh, I can't take it," and then we discover, "Oh, I can take it. I actually can." It's good to reflect on times where we find we're actually stronger than we think we are.

We can develop faith in another way—by looking at our relationship to the whole realm of our mental world, of thoughts and thinking and all that goes on there. We start to see the uncontrollability of that whole world and how these things arise. We don't choose them. We're minding our own business and this stuff just comes, whatever it might be. And we start to see that we don't have to inhabit that whole world, take it as reality, live in the universe that gets created there. We start to see that it's just empty phenomena. It's just nature. It's just mental energy, this effervescence of conditions and causes coming and going. We see the fleeting nature of that mental world. If we don't identify with these things, they just come and go. We don't have to struggle with them. We don't have to believe in them or buy into them.

And so we start to discover this stronger, more mature, more verified faith where we see for ourselves in our own experience that this practice actually is leading to greater ease and freedom in our lives. We start to touch that in some way. And things we've heard, teachings we've heard, move from the realm of the theoretical to something we see has practical application. This is just something we start to notice has

happened. We see that it's happening. It's happened on its own.

It might come in a deceptively simple way. We hear over and over again teachings on impermanence—all things are impermanent, that which is subject to arising is subject to passing away. We hear this a gazillion times, and then we start to see that there's some way in which a deep understanding of that has taken root. That's not something we figured out. It's not because we decided to believe in it or adopt it as our philosophy. We start to see that it's actually informing how we live. It's permeating our existence in a way that's subtle but profound and transforming.

We see that if we try to hold on to that which is changing, we're just setting ourselves up for suffering. And if we just sit with the truth of this, with the truth of impermanence and change, a lot of struggle and fight starts to fall away. This connection to a deep understanding on a pre-verbal, almost cellular level starts to inform our lives—the rhythms of change, the rhythms of nature. We see, "Oh, that's just in there now." It's informing our very being and the depths of our being. It's in there. We see that actually there is wisdom. Wisdom does arise. Understanding does come.

And so we have this more verified kind of faith, and we start to live more from that place. We start to find a faith, a trust in the quality of awareness itself and the knowing mind. We see that awareness can hold anything that arises, that awareness is not affected by that arising and passing, that flow of change—it can hold anything.

We start to see that the awareness of fear is not afraid. The awareness of anger is not angry. We touch that purity of knowing. We start to touch a truth that was there all along, because the truth is always the truth. There's an inner wisdom that's always been there. We start to touch that place inside the heart that knows the truth, because we're swimming in it all the time. We start to trust that.

And this is pointing towards a real unshakable kind of faith or confidence. There's nothing that arises internally or externally that can really shake that. And there's an understanding—maybe it's a long path—but our confidence in the onward-leadingness of the practice, in the trajectory of things, is strong. A deep abiding sense of that.

We see, of course, that these habits of mind and heart die hard. It's a big project. But we have this faith and confidence that we're moving in that direction, that the momentum is powerful and strong, and that this untangling is happening, will happen, does happen. It's an organic process that results from our willingness to show up and be there with the truth of things.

And we start to really touch into this possibility of a deep balance of mind and heart in the direction of our highest aspiration—this possibility of the deepest peace.

I'll end tonight with a couple of short quotations from Ajahn Chah. He has such a beautiful, simple way of saying things:

Do not try to become anything. Do not make yourself into anything. Do not be a meditator. Do not become enlightened. When you sit, let it be. When you walk, let it be. Grasp at nothing. Resist nothing.

You will reach a point where the heart tells itself what to do. Try to be mindful and let things take their natural course. Then your mind will become still in any surroundings, like a clear forest pool. All kinds of wonderful, rare animals will come to drink at the pool, and you will clearly see the nature of all things. You will see many strange and wonderful things come and go, but you will be still. This is the happiness of the Buddha.

The Buddha taught us to lay down those things that lack a real abiding essence. If you lay everything down, you will see the truth. If you don't, you won't. That's just the way it is. And when wisdom awakens within you, you will see the truth wherever you look. Truth is all you'll see.

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