

Faith or Belief

Bhante Bodhidhamma · A Foundation Course in Buddhism · 25:19

Foundation Course 2, Talk 6, Buddhism, Belief or Faith

I wonder what you think would happen in the world if all the religious systems, ideologies, philosophies, psychologies, all the ismologies, were to disappear. Do you think we'd be any the poorer for it? Or do you think we would somehow start afresh? Or would we return to a barbarism? I suppose the underlying question is, how did we get where we are in the first place?

According to some religious systems, truths are revealed to us by supernatural means, but the Buddha said that all his discoveries were realized through his own endeavour and his alone. That's why we call him the *Sammāsambuddho*, the fully self-enlightened one. Furthermore, he was quite clear that whatever he discovered concerning the fact and the end of suffering could also be discovered by each individual. The truth, the *Dhamma*, is said to be realized by the wise for themselves.

This is a very important point in Buddhist understanding. No matter what the Buddha taught, he was not a saviour. He could not end our personal suffering for us. Each person has to find that end for themselves by their own endeavour. The Buddhas only point the way.

The way, the truth, the Dhamma can be a very subjective thing. If we begin to study the ismologies, all these isms and ologies that have been developed, to the impartial mind it's no easy task to discover the truth as an objective thing. Unfortunately, human beings can't point to something and say, that's it, that's the truth, the ultimate transcendent truth. If it were so, we'd have no disagreement such as whether there is a personal God or not.

To make it easier for us within the scope of this talk, in which we're trying to decide whether Buddhism is a belief system or a theory meditators are trying to prove true for themselves, I'd like to use the Buddha's own description taken from a discourse I shall be quoting more fully later on. Truth is that which, after observation and analysis, agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of all. This is the Dharma, the truth, the law, and its noble characteristics are that it makes sense, it's reasonable, and that it is to the benefit of all. I'm sure that most philosophers and religious leaders would agree to this baseline definition, but the Buddha, of course, means that it should be the aim of all individuals to come to such realization for themselves.

What has been essential then in the past to the development of all the systems, and essential to any future development, even if there is almost complete wipe-out of knowledge, not so unthinkable in our nuclear age, is the human desire to realize the truth. If a person living now does not have that desire in them, then

all the religions, philosophies and so on are indeed of no avail anyway, since without that desire a person simply won't seek.

Marx said that religion was an opium of the people. It put them into a pleasant dream state, a delusion in which they could be easily manipulated. A lot of people would argue that that's what seems to have happened to Marxism and other communist ideologies themselves. The underlying question here seems to be, why do people become followers and never leaders, disciples and never masters? I'm not here suggesting some anarchic system wherein everyone wants to be a chief leader, but more, why do people never become truly individuals? Or as modern psychology would have it, individuated or truly self-actuated.

There are many psychological reasons, I'm sure, as to why this is. But here, I'd like to centre on what happens when we believe something. It seems that when we believe something, we give up the struggle to find out whether what we have come to believe is really true or not. By belief here is meant to accept without criticism or personal investigation any statement made by another. Once we've taken this belief position, we blindly accept whatever is said to be true.

If you tell young children that Father Christmas is coming down the chimney, they believe it. I did. I wrote letters and sent them up the chimney. If I was still doing that now, people might think me a little eccentric, to say the least. But I've heard other children questioning it. And I wrote secret letters asking for this and that. Since they never came, I realized it was all just a joke. So I stopped believing there was a Father Christmas. But while I believed in Father Christmas, I felt great. I felt really secure that I'd get everything I wanted. I was really happy. But of course, I was living under a delusion.

I personally believe this to be a very healthy thing to do to children. When they find out adults have tricked them, it should create a healthy scepticism. They lose their gullibility. There's no way you can fool a five-year-old who's discovered adults don't always tell the truth.

This happiness in my delusion about Father Christmas, ignorance is bliss, has an unfortunate side effect. For while I believed, that very belief blocked my investigative faculties. It stifled my intellect. Worse, that belief destroyed the fine line between knowing a statement because I believe it to be true and knowing a statement because I discovered it to be true by my own experience. In other words, belief becomes knowledge. By force of my willingness to believe what my parents told me, by force of my own imagination, I believed Father Christmas to be as real as the presents I got from him.

Although this seems rather trivial when talking about a child's belief in Father Christmas, when we look into history, we see so many examples of belief systems and what happens when someone undermines them. We need to remind ourselves that a belief system in Buddhism is seen as a self-definition, the self of opinions, views and judgments. I am what I believe. I am my opinions. If someone argues against what I believe and I win, I feel good. If in the argument I lose, I also lose my temper and call the other a fool. To actually change some of our cherished opinions can be very hard indeed.

In the Middle Ages, for instance, people believed that man was the centre of God's creation, and therefore that the whole universe revolved about the earth, man's dwelling place. If you look up at the sky, that seems to be reinforced by observation. Indeed, the sun, moon and stars do appear to revolve around us. When Galileo discovered through his new telescope that in fact this was not so, he was told by the church authorities to be silent, or else he may find himself burnt as a heretic.

In the Cultural Revolution in China, anyone even suspected of being a capitalist roader, or of believing that communism may not have it all right, meant imprisonment or execution. In our present-day secularist state, any idea of bringing some moral judgment to bear in laws concerning abortion, surrogate motherhood, and so on, are considered contrary to the idea of personal freedom. This idea of personal freedom can be taken to extremes. In America, study after study has shown that pornography is a chief factor in developing sexist attitudes and in influencing men towards sexual violence. A law enabling women victims of pornography to bring civil actions against pornographers was repealed in the federal courts. The pornographers claimed it was against their constitutional right of free speech. They won, even though the courts accepted that pornography was a violation of women's civil rights to equality and safety from violence. The right to free speech, it seems, takes precedence overall, even when it's harming individuals and society. Here in this country, racists consider it part of free speech to go around insulting people. It's now against the law, but not after a lot of damage had been done to community relations.

One of the outcomes of any belief system, religious, ideological, or whatever, is that the believers form a closed system, which not only has an answer to everything, but which has penalties for those believers who begin to doubt. If I didn't believe in Father Christmas, maybe I wouldn't get any presents. What happens to me if I don't believe in God anymore? If I don't believe Buddha was a fully enlightened being? Suddenly, I'm full of fear, and each system has horror tales of what happens to those who dare to leave. This is also true of Buddhism, when it had become an established religion. It's the way we human beings always like to build secure fortresses. But is it what the Buddha wanted? I think we can safely say that this was exactly the opposite of what the Buddha wanted.

First of all, there are a lot of discourses written in the Socratic fashion, that is, the Buddha uses a question and answer format to get the listeners to discover for themselves the truth of the matter. Indeed, he uses this way of teaching in the very second discourse he gives on the characteristics of human existence, the transiency, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality of our lives. He asks, is the body permanent or not permanent? If it is impermanent and subject to change, can we say it belongs to a me? Or say it is what I am? Or say it constitutes a substantial soul or self? To all these questions, the listeners answer, no, venerable sir. And so he goes through all the rest of the aggregates, the sensations, perceptions, volitional conditionings and consciousness.

One often gets from the scriptures whole passages where the Buddha is in conversation with one or another individual, usually beginning with a question and answer session. Only when he sees they've got the point does he then give a talk as such to clarify his own teachings. There is always the presumption

that all that needs to be done is to dispel ignorance and wisdom will arise automatically. We are all capable of enlightenment, but we must all make the effort to achieve it. The Buddha's method is to excite a person's intellectual factors, get them thinking for themselves, and then make a clear statement of his own position, allowing the individual room to criticise and question.

The second factor is his direct teaching on belief itself. There seems to have been an oversupply of religious teachers in his time with all sorts of teachings being expounded. A little bit like today, I imagine. The Buddha, while visiting the village of the Kalamas, was approached by them. They complained that one guru came and taught such and such and then another would come, call the other a fool and teach another set of doctrines. The point was that they were all very confused and didn't know what to believe.

The Buddha then gives a talk which can rightly be called a declaration of an individual's right to freedom of thought. Do not believe anything simply because you have heard it, simply because it is tradition handed down for many generations, simply because it is spoken and rumoured by the many, simply because it is found written in your religious books, simply on the authority of your teachers and elders. Not only do we see in this discourse that the Buddha had no desire for people to sell their souls to his teachings in blind belief, but he exhorted them to think for themselves.

There is an incident in the scriptures which reinforces this picture of the Buddha as one who did not want people to be blind adherents. There was a certain Upali who when he had questioned the Buddha and heard him explain the doctrine was immediately converted. He was a major supporter of another important sect at the time and which still survives in India today, the Jains. The Buddha would not accept him as a follower immediately, but asked him to go back to the Jains and stay with them until he was absolutely sure of what he wanted to do. The Buddha knew that often people are caught up in their enthusiasm, only to feel embarrassed once the excitement has worn off. He really did want people to think about things.

The third factor that points to the Buddha not wanting people to have blind belief in what he said is that he would not make any definite statements about matters that could not be verified, could not be proven. He calls such questions undetermined. In a particular discourse named after the wealthy Brahmin he was talking to, Pottapada, he makes it clear the sort of philosophical, metaphysical questions he will not determine or give an answer to. Is the world eternal or not eternal, finite or infinite? Is the soul the same as the body, or is the soul one thing and the body another? Does an enlightened being live on after death or not? Or does he neither live nor not live again after death?

You can see from these questions they are the sort of questions philosophers, both the professional armchair varieties, love to spend a lifetime talking about. To the exasperated Pottapada, the Buddha explains why he expresses no opinion. Such questions, he says, bring no profit and are not concerned with the Dharma. They don't help to refine our moral behavior and develop non-attachment. Nor do they purify the mind and lead to the cessation of desire. Nor to equanimity, nor to supramundane knowledge,

nor to the highest wisdom, *Nibbāna*.

In other words, the Buddha would not be drawn into statements that were of no moral worth and did not lead to the end of suffering. In the context of the times these were the sorts of questions any self-respecting religious teacher was happy to give an answer to, although there was a sect who, like the Buddha, would not enter into such discussions. The point is that the Buddha would not enter into useless arguments about things that could not be verified, could not be proved. To have done so would have put his followers in a position of having to believe something they themselves could not verify and this would have led to an element of blind belief.

So if the Buddha did not leave a set of unverifiable beliefs, he did not leave an empty philosophy or psychology either. And this is the fourth point that shows the Buddha did not want blind believers and indeed simply had no need of such support. The fact is that because he had discovered the truth by his own endeavour, he had also discovered the path to the truth. The Eightfold Noble Path is the great discovery of the Middle Way. He doesn't have to say to people, believe me, for I know this is true. He is free to say, this is the truth, now you can discover it for yourselves, whether it is true or not. Firstly, by the use of your own intellectual powers, and secondly, by direct experience, through practicing the Eightfold Noble Path. What is more, through the practice of *Vipassanā* Insight Meditation, you will discover the Absolute Truth for yourself.

In other words, the Buddha is not simply saying that he's enlightened, but that everyone can become so, and he leaves us the actual method by which we can achieve it. He doesn't want meditators to remain disciples. He wants them to become masters.

These four points then, his method of teaching allowing the listener to think for themselves, his declaration of an individual's right to freedom of thought, no doctrine that was not verifiable, able to be proved to be true by each individual, and lastly, the actual method and practice he left whereby individuals can prove all this to be true for themselves. All of this points to the Buddha not wanting to have people have blind belief. But he did want them to have faith.

The difference between belief and faith is crucial in Buddhist understanding. By belief here is meant an acceptance of a statement about something that cannot be proved. Here there are two types of statements worth pondering over. If I discuss a Walkman with a friend, I would be trying to define what a perfect Walkman is. A cassette radio, stereo, light earphones and rechargeable battery and so on. We would hopefully eventually arrive at the perfect Walkman. But this perfection only exists in my mind. It's a concept. The perfect Walkman. And this concept has all the attributes named above.

Now suppose I say to my friend, where have you put my Walkman? We are no longer worried about what a Walkman is anymore. We're worried about where the object is. The object, the Walkman in this case, really exists.

Now if we keep these two types of statements in mind, the question of what is something as opposed to where is something, we can see we come across great difficulties with questions concerning the supramundane, the supernatural. If we say a God is the perfect good, for example, a group of people should be able to come to a good definition. But because they have come even to a perfect definition about a God, it doesn't mean, therefore, that he or she exists. Just because I can build up a picture of the perfect human being doesn't mean that person will actually ever really exist. When we come to the question of where is God, now that's where we have problems, because no one has yet found God anywhere, or at least anywhere where another person can also find that God. If God could be pointed to in the way that I point to a person, no difficulty would exist.

These are the sorts of arguments the Buddha would not enter into. That's why he wouldn't say what happened to a Buddha after death. Such things are indescribable, unprovable, in the way that you can prove that the body rots after death.

So here is the first error that can be made by the meditator if he believes in what the Buddha says. There is a possibility of turning a concept into a fact, of believing that a concept actually exists apart from the mind that has it.

Nibbāna, for instance, is never described. It's a bold statement. The end of suffering exists, and it isn't annihilation nor a heaven. But what a person experiences when all suffering has gone is never described. If *Nibbāna* could be described, then it would still belong to this type of existence. All words and concepts can only describe what is possible in our experience as human beings, no matter how imaginative. That which is beyond sense experience, beyond the experience of this world, is by definition inexplicable, undescribable.

So to have an idea of what *Nibbāna* is would actually be a hindrance. For I would be trying to experience my idea of *Nibbāna*. If or when I do experience my idea of *Nibbāna*, I will only have experienced my idea of it, what I think it is. To come to a point where I believe that my experience of an idea of *Nibbāna*, say a brilliant or bright light, is in fact *Nibbāna*, is to be deluded. Therefore, when it comes to such things, the Buddha was silent.

So, if belief simply means saying something really exists which can't be proved, what is faith? Faith has little to do with thinking. Faith is a disposition of the heart. It is a trusting. It is to set one's heart to something. It arouses confidence in us. This confidence leads to an open-mindedness, to a willingness to investigate for ourselves. It arouses energy, courage and determination.

When the Buddha teaches the fact of the end of suffering *Nibbāna*, he does so by way of argument. These arguments we might find persuasive. Because we are attracted by the arguments, we ask, well, how do we know it's true? The Buddha then gives us a method, a technique, which will lead us to such a personal experience, the Noble Eightfold Path.

Again, persuaded by this argument, we begin to tread that path. At first, because we're not sure, we do it carefully, hesitatingly. But as we tread the path, we find that what the Buddha said is true. As we discover for ourselves that little bits of what the Buddha said are actually true for us personally, so we listen more attentively to what he has to say, and our trust in his guidance grows. As our trust grows, so does our dedication to the path.

This trust, this faith, known as *saddha*, becomes one of the spiritual faculties. Without this faith, the second faculty, energy, could not arise. If I don't have confidence in something, I'm hardly going to give it a go. If I don't have confidence to dive off the high plank, I'm hardly going to climb up to it. Without confidence, faith, no energy. No energy, no concentration. No concentration, no awareness. Without these, no meditation at all. And with no meditation, no wisdom can arise.

The five spiritual faculties of faith, energy, concentration, awareness and wisdom all depend on this ability to set one's heart to something. Interestingly, once a person has experienced Nibbāna, this faculty is now called a power. For one who has experienced Nibbāna, their faith in the Buddha's path is unshakable, for now they know for themselves the third noble truth of the end of suffering.

So what exactly did the Buddha want us to have faith in? During the last journey of the Buddha, while he was making his way to Kusinara, where he passed into *Parinibbana*, total Nibbāna, Ananda, his faithful attendant for the last 20 years, begins to get frightened when he realizes his master is going to die. With great anxiety, he asks the Buddha what will happen once he's gone. What will happen to the order, to the teaching, to him, Ananda? Who will guide them? Who will guide him once he, the teacher, has gone?

Here is the Buddha's reply. Ananda, be an island unto yourself. Be a refuge unto yourself. Seek no external refuge. Live with the *Dhamma*, the truth, the law as your island, the Dhamma as your refuge. Take no other external refuge.

What is the Buddha saying here? He's saying that in the ultimate analysis there is only the individual seeker and the truth. The truth, the law, the Dhamma that he taught has six qualities. It is to be self-realized. No one can realize the truth for us. When we experience the ultimate truth of Nibbāna, the fruits are immediate. We experience the results of that experience at once. The Dhamma invites us to investigate it. It will lead to Nibbāna, the liberation of all suffering. And finally, it has to be understood, to be comprehended by each person individually.

This is where our confidence is to be put. But the Buddha also said, who sees the Dharma, sees me. In other words, there is no separation between the truth and the expression of that truth within the person of the Buddha. To put trust in the Dharma is therefore also to put trust in the teacher of that Dharma, the Buddha himself. But once he had gone into Parinibbana, the only tangible thing left for his followers is the actual teachings. That's why he asked Ananda to make it his island, his island of refuge.

This Dharma, this truth, however, is not something external to a person. It isn't a treasure chest to be

found on an island. It is a treasure to be found within a person's heart and being. Therefore, the Buddha asks Ananda to take refuge in himself, to trust himself, to have confidence in himself. All beings are capable of enlightenment. The Buddha is asking us to have faith in ourselves because in the last analysis we can only free ourselves. The Buddhas only point the way. They can't save us from suffering. We have to pull ourselves out of it.

By cultivating this confidence in ourselves, we are also cultivating confidence in all those who've trod the path and succeeded, the noble ones, the *Aryas*, the saints. So it is that by taking refuge in ourselves, we are also putting trust, taking refuge in all those who have achieved the enlightenment, the Aryan Sangha, the community of noble ones.

In this way, Buddhists take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. In this way, they take refuge in themselves. This is all the Buddha wanted his followers to do, not to believe blindly what he said, not to accept the words of the Master without due investigation. He called himself the *Tathagata*, one who has completed the path, the journey. He wants all to follow that path, but with the spirit of investigation, of personal endeavour. He wants us to experiment and discover it for ourselves.

If it stands to reason, if it is conducive to the benefit of all, then put confidence in it, trust it, and most of all, live up to it. The Buddha didn't ask the Kalamas to become his disciples to become Buddhists. If the Buddha's path works for us, then we should work at it.

I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the nirvanic peace within.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.