

Saddhā (1 of 5): Faith

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on March 16, 2020

I'd like to give five short talks on five different aspects of *saddhā*, usually translated into English as 'faith.' *Saddhā* doesn't translate naturally into the English word 'faith.' There are other choices people like. Some people don't relate to, or are actually troubled by the word 'faith.' I want to talk about five different aspects of *saddhā* if I can use 'faith' provisionally. The five translations will be faith, confidence, conviction, trust, and then acceptance. These are progressive in a sense. As practice deepens, we go through these different stages of faith.

The way that *saddhā* is used in the teachings of the Buddha is really a provisional faith. It is a faith that we believe in something enough to try it out for ourselves, to engage in the practice initially, to be inspired by something.

Having something that inspires and gladdens us then motivates us to begin engaging in practice. As we begin practicing and have some experience with practice, that can give birth to confidence – confidence in our ability to practice, confidence in the value of practicing. Now, part of the fuel for practicing is not in the inspiration that comes from the outside, but confidence that has begun growing inside.

As we practice further, confidence gets transformed into conviction. Confidence may be more provisional. But conviction is a certainty: "This works. I'm with this."

With time and more experience, this conviction can lead to a more profound level of trust. We trust the practice. We trust the path. More than anything else, we trust the possibilities of freedom that come with the practice.

With that trust can come a particular form of acceptance – a deep acceptance of presence – to be free, and to live in the world without clinging, resistance, greed, hate, or delusion. It is a deep acceptance that, "This is right; this is the way to live." It is not always easy to accept. There are internal and social forces that give the impression that we have to worry, to be angry, to want to have things, and to be attached.

These are the five steps of *saddhā*: faith, confidence, conviction, trust, and acceptance.

The first one, which I call 'faith,' I like a lot. Faith, more than the other words, is heartfelt. I associate it with what we are dedicated to do wholeheartedly, bringing our whole heart, our whole self into something we have faith in. Some people are troubled by the word 'faith' because it implies that we have to believe a creed. Sometimes in English the word 'faith' is used to imply having faith in a set of teachings. This can be interpreted as blind faith, acceptance that is unexamined, unreflective. But I find it very interesting that the word 'believe' in English is a European word (maybe from a Germanic source) that originally meant to *love* something. It's what we love – as opposed to what we think now, or what we believe.

Where did our love go? When we look at Buddhism and Buddhist practice, the faith that is evoked is not so much a belief in a creed, but rather a *love* for a possibility of a life not rooted in freedom and compassion, but a life that is flowing from sources within of freedom and compassion.

That kind of faith – falling in love with something or valuing something – can come in many ways. It can come from encountering Buddhist teachings, when those teachings really speak to us. For some people, the first time they hear Buddhist teachings, it seems like it's the first time they have heard someone address suffering at its roots, and that offers some possibility of freedom – of resolving the suffering. Some people feel a big, "Aha! Yes!" They are so delighted to have discovered these teachings because no one before in their life had taken this direct, honest look at the depth of suffering in this world.

Sometimes the inspiration, the sense of love, the delight, the heart's attraction to this practice comes from meeting someone who embodies some of the qualities that seem right or resonate in some deep way. This speaks to us!

When I was new to meditation and met other practitioners, their way of being in the world was so inspiring to me. Some of what inspired me was a certain ordinariness, which was extraordinary – an ordinariness in which there was freedom, ease, a deep acceptance, allowing this life. Rather than resisting or fighting things, it was a kind of naturalness in what we do – like life living through us.

Sometimes people come to Buddhism, not through faith, but rather out of desperation. Their suffering is so great that nothing else has worked. So they think they'll try this, "There is the claim that this practice works. And people who do it seem to be happy or at peace. Nothing else makes sense to me, so I will try it." There's not much faith in that kind of desperation. It's almost like giving up. But then, at some point, that giving up gives birth to some kind of change, movement, letting go, and relaxation, which is meaningful. And that gives rise to faith: "Oh, this works."

This happened to me. There was a time in my early years when I kind of crashed out, and reached rock bottom. I kind of just mostly gave up. Now, many years later, I can say that the giving up was so thorough that I let go of so much. Then, what followed from that deep letting go was something I started to have faith in: "Oh, this is the path. This is important. This works."

Then, we can believe in that. The heart sings to it. The heart feels nourished, satisfied, or inspired by it.

So, *saddhā*, as faith, is partly what we can be inspired by, what motivates us to begin our practice, and to engage in our practice when everything else feels difficult. Hopefully over time, there is something that resonates with our heart's capacity to love – to feel an openheartedness about where we want to totally put ourselves into something.

I hope that people who are involved in Buddhist practice – whether in meditation, or the ethical aspects, or the wisdom parts, or any part of it – will reflect on what their heart has faith in, or what their heart believes in. What does your heart love? In that sense, what do you believe in?

I love the expression, "What do you believe in?" because we use that for people. We can say that we believe in people. "I really believe in you" is a powerful statement. It means that we have confidence in somebody. We see value in who they are. We feel that their direction in life is a good one. We value it. So, to believe in someone is a wonderful expression of faith.

As you engage in Buddhist practice, I hope that you believe in yourself. I hope that you have faith in yourself. And I hope that that involves some love for yourself, some inspiration and motivation to really show up for yourself, to really be present in some deeper way – in some way in which faith or awareness is an upwelling from within as much as it is a practice of mindfulness.

May it be that you believe in yourself, that you have faith in yourself. And may that be channeled into the moment to moment engagement in meditation, mindfulness, compassion, kindness – in all aspects of Buddhist practice.

May faith be your companion, your friend, and your support as you go forth with the practice.

Thank you all very much.