

Saddhā (4 of 5): Trust

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on March 19, 2020

Good morning again. I am going to give the fourth talk in this short series on faith – the Pali word *saddhā*. Each day I am speaking about a different aspect of faith. The first day was faith itself, then confidence, then conviction. Today it is trust.

In Buddhism the traditional idea of faith is that *saddhā* is what gets us started in practice. As we practice, it is useful to develop confidence in the practice, and in our ability to practice. As we practice, there comes a conviction that this works – that this is valuable and worthwhile. And, then as we continue in the practice, it is possible to discover a very deep trust.

This trust is multi-faceted. It could be trust in the Dharma – the Dharma being something that is clearly larger and deeper than ourselves, our self-concept, or our identity – the sense of me, myself, and mine; our sense of agency. These are all valid. But it's also valid that there is much more that supports our life.

In its etymology, *dharma* is said to come from the word meaning 'to support' – that which upholds something. We are held up and supported by something that Buddhists call the Dharma.

As we practice, and discover how to relax, be present, be carefully attentive, we discover that more is going on within us – processes and patterns of life deeper than anything we could engineer, organize or make happen on our own. The analogy I like to give for this is chopping vegetables and cutting our finger with the knife. We have the job of cleaning the wound, and perhaps protecting it by putting a bandage over it so it doesn't get dirty. But the actual healing is not something we orchestrate or engineer. The healing of that wound marshals together many aspects of our physiology, immune system, and capacities for healing. It's kind of a miracle how all of these complicated phenomena come together in the body without us having to think about it too much, or direct the show. Our job is to keep the wound clean and protected, so that the natural functioning of the body can operate.

It also works that way for our hearts, our inner spiritual life. We have to keep it clean. We have to protect it to some degree. That is one function of the precepts and ethics. It is one function of living a calm, settled, relaxed life, so that we are creating the good circumstances for something to arise within us – for the powerful healing processes of the heart.

More than just healing, it is also a unification, a gathering together of all the disparate parts of who we are. The puzzle pieces of our life have a chance to click back together – in a way, to reassemble the pieces that life has disassembled from the wholeness of who we are. This process of coming into wholeness is a natural process, which our inner system knows how to do – just as it knows how to heal a cut. To trust that deeper process of coming into wholeness – to trust that Dharma practice, for example, enables, allows, and makes room for it to happen.

But this process is more than just becoming healed and whole. There is also an inner unfolding toward freedom and liberation. When we first begin practicing, we have to make a lot of effort. We have to learn what meditation is. We have to sit down, keep doing it, and come back. But as we begin settling more and more, and we get into the momentum of the practice, then less and less agency is needed from us.

At some point, what is most needed is for us to get out of the way – to not interfere, not try to make things happen. There comes a tipping point, from a time when we have to make the initial effort to a time when almost no effort from us is needed, because there is a deeper wellspring of energy, momentum, and the path of practice that begins to unfold inside us. We can trust that – trust that something really good is happening here. It's not really up to us to do – but it's for us to trust, to get out of the way.

It's a phenomenal thing to discover this trust, and really understand through one's own experience that in all the things that surface in meditation – things that are difficult, and things that are good and wonderful – there is a deep intelligence that knows what needs to appear. It knows what's appropriate to face now, to work with, and to

work through.

Trusting this process – trusting what unfolds and appears in our life from the inside out – and even trusting what comes from the outside in, what happens around us – is one of the potentials of *saddhā*, of faith. It may not seem to make logical sense to trust everything around us. But for someone who practices and understands the deep wellsprings of intelligence, wisdom, healing, and the movement toward wholeness and freedom – when that process has a chance to meet the circumstances of our life, it begins to transform the interface, the meeting place between us and the world. Maybe the world doesn't change directly, but something happens in that interface that makes the situation better.

Sometimes it does influence what happens outside. An angry person comes to you, and you are able to meet the moment, trusting that it's ok to open to it and be present, so that some deeper wisdom of how to meet this angry person can arise. That person might change as a consequence. That's very different than if you are just as reactive as the angry person.

At some point, *saddhā* becomes more characterized by knowing that there is something we can trust. We know that something supporting us in our lives is really good. It's not exactly personal, but it is within us. It's not exactly what we would normally identify as 'me,' because it isn't something we necessarily do, but it is certainly something intimately a part of who we are: close, valuable, and powerful. It isn't something that only we ourselves have. Everyone has it if they tap into it, open to it, and allow this process to come into being.

To trust the depth of what is possible – and to trust it in other people. To see it as something beautiful and valuable in others. They may not even know. Sometimes, giving space to other people, and getting out of their way may enable something deeper in them to surface. Buddhists might call it the Dharma – other people might call it something else. But something living in them comes more from the wholeness of their human being, as opposed to the more limited domain of who we are as represented by attachment to self and our self-preoccupations when it's all about me, myself, and mine – and I have to do things. That is a brittle world. That is a world we can't really trust.

But we *can* trust this deeper place – the Dharma. It is a little hard to articulate. Maybe it is mostly something that we discover for ourselves over time. As the practice deepens and develops – starting with faith, inspiration, confidence, and conviction – then, when the time is right, we discover and recognize something that we can trust. And then, the task of practice – of what we can do (there is always some role that we have) – is to trust it.

Or perhaps more interesting and more challenging is that we can begin recognizing all of the unhelpful things we are trusting in our lives. Even though most people don't use the language of trust, in some sense, people trust their anger, their sadness, their bank account, the economic system – or they trust that if they've got the right relationship, everything will be good. People can be oriented toward, attached to, or looking for all these things as the solution for how to be happy. One way to understand that kind of expecting external things to make us happy is that we grant them a certain level of trust. We trust that *that's* what is going to do it.

As we begin discovering something really trustworthy within – something like the Dharma – the task of practice is to begin seeing, "What is it we trust that is *not* so useful, or helpful, or maybe not even accurate?" Then we learn to come back to the place we trust, and let that be the foundation of our lives. We open to that, allow that, and reorient ourselves – almost to a new life, a life where the depth of the Dharma within us, the depth of our humanity, the depth of our goodness has a chance to surface and grow.

In this regard, it is interesting to think about how our emotional life has basically two layers or levels. There are the afflictive emotions – those that cause suffering, such as anger and greed. Those are the surface activities of our life. They are loud. What we are looking for in Dharma practice is not to reject them, but to discover the beneficial emotions that operate at a much deeper, quieter, softer place inside: kindness, love, generosity, equanimity, and patience.

One value of trusting the deeper aspect of this practice is so that the center and heart of our life, that which we most trust, is at the core of who we are – as opposed to the afflictive emotions on the surface. Then we can hold the afflictive emotions in a kind, generous, and supportive way, without having them control us. Trust.

What do we trust? What do we discover through Dharma practice that is really worthwhile to trust? Then, how do

we stay close to that which we trust? That is the task of practice.

Thank you all for listening, for meditating. I appreciate the sense of wide community and connection through this vehicle of electronics that connects us all. I appreciate that you're here.

We will continue this five-part series tomorrow. Thank you.