

Saddhā (5 of 5): Acceptance + Q&A

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on March 20, 2020

I am going to continue with this series of short talks on the subject of faith, the Pali word *saddhā*. Today's talk is on the fifth aspect of faith: acceptance. Acceptance is not a practice for beginners, but rather for those whose practice is much more developed. There comes a time when some deep level of acceptance characterizes our faith.

This week there has been a progression in the way I've been offering these talks. The Buddha's teachings often follow a progressive path of practice. It is organized by different depths of where we can go in practice. We don't necessarily have to follow that path linearly. People can jump around, go backwards, in a spiral, and their practice still becomes stronger and stronger.

The journey this week begins with the initial idea of faith, which inspires us to start the practice. Then confidence gives strength to the beginning of our practice, when we believe in it, value it, and think it's possible. We believe in ourselves, and have confidence in what we are doing – so we can put ourselves into it. Then as we start practicing, getting feedback from the practice, and feeling some benefit from it, comes a growing conviction that this really works – that this is valuable and important. With this strong conviction, we can give ourselves more confidently to the practice. And at some point, we begin to experience something that we trust. It isn't just *our* efforts happening here – in Buddhist language, the Dharma is happening. The practice is practicing us.

As we put ourselves into the practice, or into the Dharma, forces are released and opened. Conditions come together that allow something to begin unfolding – and this is no longer our doing. We don't make it happen. We enable it to happen; we are the condition for it. At some point, trusting this deeper movement of the Dharma working through us becomes relevant. Then, as the practice develops and moves through us, we have a stronger and stronger sense that we don't have to go back to the old patterns of attachment, greed, and conceit. There is a whole different way of living our life.

Then comes a deep acceptance of the underlying truths of reality and of our life. In ordinary life, this may seem counterintuitive. For example, there is a deep acceptance of not basing one's life on *me, myself, and mine* – not basing one's life on the small ego, the small sense of identification with, and contraction around *me, myself, and mine*.

That we don't base our life on this is not a denial of ourselves. It is actually the opposite. When we base our life too much on the conceit of *me, myself, and mine*, paradoxically it's a way of denying ourselves, limiting our lives, and cutting ourselves off from the wider field of who we are and what moves through us. When we accept that there is much more than the usual understanding of self, to have an appreciation of what in Buddhism is called "not-self" – at some point there is a deep acceptance: "Oh, this is true; this is right." We get out of our own way, so that this acceptance can allow something to flow through us.

There is deeper acceptance of the impermanence of phenomena – the impermanence and inconstancy of life. And sooner or later we change, grow old, and die. There is a deep acceptance that it's a completely natural part of life that we would participate in the changing, flowing nature of birth, death, and the passing of things. Rather than resisting it, or holding on hard to life, or being afraid, there is deep acceptance of and trust in this natural flow of the life going through us, and which we are part of.

There is also a deep acceptance of what is sometimes called, "the patient acceptance of the emptiness of all phenomena." Acceptance that all things are not really substantial in a particular way. They are not substantial as something we can cling to. The Buddha said, "Nothing whatsoever is worth clinging to." To have a deep acceptance that, "Yes, this is true!" is definitely counterintuitive for many of us.

Clinging is so deeply ingrained in us. It is how we know to be safe, how we know how to get what we want. Sometimes clinging has worked. Sometimes people accommodate our clinging. We cling enough to some people, and they want to take care of us. Or we chase certain desires, and sometimes we get them. But there is a cost. And it's certainly a cost that separates us from our innate potential for freedom – from the deep peace

and happiness of freedom that comes from a profound trust in and acceptance of life as it is.

I think that the deepest form of acceptance, trust, and faith does not have an object. It is trust without an object of trust. That may be illogical, but just to be alive and free – to have trust and acceptance – is not about a *thing* we are trusting. If it's anything, it's trusting in not clinging. It's trusting in not holding on. The absence of clinging is not a thing.

A beautiful way I understand this is that when trust and acceptance are deep, other people might think you are very accepting, or at peace. But if you look inside yourself, you don't find that, because at some point, acceptance and trust are not something we do, not something to see. It's like two people who are in difficult circumstances. From the outside, both look very patient. The first person is really triggered, reactive, and upset about what is happening, but works hard to relax and not get caught in the reactivity, and is able to be relatively calm in their demeanor. People see that person as calm and patient. The other person in the same trying situation is not triggered, has no reactivity, and doesn't have to work at being patient. In fact, patience is not needed. It doesn't exist for that person, because there is no necessity for it. Patience in that situation is not something a person is doing, even though that's what others might interpret.

In the same way, as our practice gets deeper, as our freedom becomes larger and larger, as our trust, faith, confidence, conviction, and our deep acceptance of life become fuller and fuller – it stops being something we do. It stops being something we can identify with.

To accept this emptiness, this absence of what had been supporting us for such a long time, is a beautiful thing. It matures when there is no more need for faith – when there is no need for confidence, conviction, trust, or acceptance – because we don't cling to anything. We are at peace. We are at ease. There is no reactivity.

People might see you and say, "Oh, that is a person of faith. That person has a lot of trust, conviction, or acceptance." But if you look inside yourself, you won't find those things. What you will find is your freedom.

May faith support you, and take you all the way to a place of freedom from all clinging, so that you can experience deep happiness and well-being – not just for yourself, but as a gift to others.

May all beings be happy. Thank you.

Q&A

Gil: I'd like to have some interaction with the YouTube audience, and see if there are questions anyone might have.

Participant 1: *It feels a bit off to wish for all beings to be happy when some people are in pain and in very difficult circumstances.*

Gil: Classically, when we do this mettā aspiration or expression of good will, it can also be more specific. It can be: "May all people be safe. May people be free of affliction. May people have ease with whatever their circumstances might be."

When I say, "May all beings be happy," it is really an umbrella term for them to have a greater sense of well-being. It's an expression of my good will, that I care. How exactly my wish will make a difference for the world, I don't know. When I do these dedications of merit or mettā, I often like to reflect practically: "How I can actually do things that make the lives of others somewhat better?"

If the people I am with are sick, in pain, or have some challenge, then when I think about it, I ask: "How in small or big ways I can make their life a little bit better?" But in shorthand, that means helping them become happy.

Participant 2: *How do I deal with fear during these times when people are afraid of getting the virus?*

Gil: There are a variety of ways to work with fear of the current illness that is spreading. For some people, one can be to do a little reading from reputable sources on what this virus is all about – how to care for ourselves,

what to expect from it. Put it in a context that doesn't make it a big monster. It is certainly a challenge for all of us, something to take seriously, to protect ourselves from. But I think that sometimes the imagination gets triggered by the media, the news, or by our own ideas. So be reflective and wise about what is actually going on, and how to take care of yourself.

I find it meaningful to have confidence that I am doing the best I can, given the circumstances. Then, come what may! If I get sick, then I'll do the best I can with that. If I am going to die from this illness, I'll do the best I can with that. I am supported so much by this practice – by what I have faith, confidence, and conviction in – and the trust and acceptance I have. It's so powerfully connected to Dharma practice. I trust mindfulness. I trust the path. I trust non-clinging probably more than anything else.

Even if I were going to die, that is the time for practice. I hope I trust the practice then. I feel that my years of meditation have really taught me that even dying is an opportunity. Even dying is a time when I don't have to succumb to my clinging, or lose touch with my confidence and my strength to keep practicing. Keep practicing.

That said, fear is a very common phenomenon. It can be quite devastating and difficult to live with. I think that anyone who practices mindfulness for any length of time should expect that sooner or later, fear will take center stage in their practice. Part of what we want to do, in an appropriate, careful, gradual way, is to *study* our fear – get to understand it, know it, and learn how to work with it.

One important way for me to work with fear is to feel it in my body. Where is the fear living in my body? One reason this is so helpful is that when I get into trouble with fear, it has been with the stories I make in my imagination. They can be quite vivid. And telling myself the same story over and over again reinforces the fear.

The physical experience of fear is not a story. It is just a physical manifestation of it. When I can feel it in my body, it's easier to just tap into it gently and lovingly. I have the idea of holding my fear in the cupped hands of my awareness. As I hold the fear, and am present for it in my body – feeling the sensations, the butterflies, the tightness, the tension – I'm just holding it gently with the idea that I am here to help my fear feel safe.

Rather than having fear be a problem, the bogeyman, or something unwanted to be pushed away, I imagine the fear almost like a person who wants me to be a safe, calm presence. They will be there, sit with me, and listen. For a frightened person to be accompanied, and have someone sit next to them and hear them, it can really help settle them. It can quiet them and soften the grip of fear. We can do that for ourselves by learning to identify where the fear is in the body, bringing our attention to it, and holding it there. Then we can experiment with ways we can help our fear feel safe. Let it know it's ok for it to be there right now. It's okay for it to exist and be felt.

That is the great mantra for fear: "It's ok." Holding fear and letting it feel safe is an alternative to being swept away in the fear, being preoccupied, and caught with it. It does require a certain degree of strength to find a way to be with it and hold it.

As soon as it feels as if it is too much, then it's important to step away, to go for a walk, go talk to a friend. Do something else until you feel stable enough to come back and do this same thing over and over again.

In the path of mindfulness, slowly over time, you learn to have tremendous capacity to be free while being present for the fear. I hope that is helpful.

Participant 3: *I am confused about the difference between devotion to practice and clinging.*

Gil: That's a nice question. Maybe sometimes they look the same, so it makes sense to be a little confused. If the clinging is just a little bit, maybe it's ok to have some clinging. We can't just expect to hear some Buddhist teachings, and then not ever cling again, or be able to turn it off right away. Even though Buddhism talks a lot about the value of non-clinging, it's not a crime to cling. If we cling, we don't have to feel we are a bad person, or we are doing it wrong. It's just painful if we cling.

And if we don't want to have that pain, then we want to find another way. We want to be careful not to be too negative about clinging, even though the path is to the freedom from clinging. If, within reason, you're a little more relaxed, then if you are mindful, the path is self-correcting. When the time comes to recognize that clinging is a limitation, mindfulness will show you when that is.

So, if there is some clinging with the devotion, sooner or later you will feel it and work through it. But you don't have to be ahead of yourself. Wait until that time comes. If you have some inkling of clinging, it might not be a good time to look at it – maybe later.

With a strong devotion to practice or to Buddhism, if you have a good friend whom you trust, you might ask them if your devotion is a problem for anyone. Does anyone think you are overdoing it, becoming a zealot or something? Sometimes feedback from someone else is good. If they tell you there's no problem, then just continue, and don't worry about the clinging – until mindfulness flushes it out. If your friend says, "You are a little bit difficult these days, because all you ever talk about is what you're devoted to," then maybe there is clinging, and maybe you should stop and take a good look.

Clinging always involves contraction, tightness, or discomfort. But devotion, in its essence, is something that is open and relaxing. It brings a sense of ease, peace, or well-being. It's like the difference between feeling openhearted love and a "Yes" to what is going on, versus having neediness, or wanting to possess something.

That is what occurs to me. If the question comes because you have devotion, then appreciate and value that. Attend carefully to the seedling of devotion, so that it can grow and develop to become a support for you.

Thank you, everyone. I hope that these sittings are nice for you. It is certainly nice for me to come here, sit and share in this way. I hope that you have a quiet, reflective, and peaceful weekend.