

Faith

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One of the big ironies of bringing the forest tradition to the West was that the Westerners who went over to Thailand to study were people who were disillusioned in the religion of their birth and had a very bad relationship with the idea of faith. But they went to study with ajaans who had had a lot of faith in the religion of their birth, and for them faith and conviction were qualities that carried them through.

Think about Ajaan Fuang and Ajaan Suwat. Ajaan Fuang, orphaned at eleven years of age, had no particular talents. He wasn't good at school. One of his teachers tried to teach him to be a musician, he didn't have any talent in music. And as he said one time, it looked like he was going to go in for a life of crime.

Then, around age fourteen or sixteen, he started listening to the Dhamma talks. He had been what they call a *dek wat*, a temple boy, during the years after he'd been orphaned. And temple boys in Thailand are a pretty rough crowd. But when he actually started listening to the Dhamma talks, he began to realize that here he was, poor without much to go by—he had no connections, he didn't have any extended family—and so he must have had a lot of bad karma in his past lifetimes. So his reaction was, "I've got to build a lot of good karma now."

His faith in that proposition, that he could really make a difference through developing skillful actions, was what saw him through. His life as a monk wasn't easy. He had a lot of health problems. During the Second World War, he lived up in the forests of Northern Thailand. He had tuberculosis; he ended up with all kinds of other diseases. But he stuck with it. And it was his conviction in the principle of karma that saw him through.

Ajaan Suwat had a similar story. He wasn't orphaned but he came from a very large peasant family, and large peasant families usually don't have much to hand down to their children. He met a forest monk who said, "Hey look, it's your actions that matter. And the fact that you're poor now: You may have not been generous in the past, but you've got the opportunity now to practice the Dhamma."

So this quality of conviction is what sees us through. When things are going easy, the idea of having conviction doesn't speak that much to us. But when things get hard: We look at our lives, we look at the people around us, the situation we're in—and the last thing you need is something that teaches you to just give in.

The teaching of karma is precisely what tells you not to give in. It places power in your hands. You have to think, "Well, I may have misused that power in the past," and learn to accept that fact as a good sport. We all have bad karma in our backgrounds. It's not the case that you look at a person right now and you can see the sum total of their running karmic balance. We've got lots of different seeds, some of which are sprouting now, some of which are

not sprouting yet—some good, some bad. And so when the bad seeds sprout, you learn to take it as a good sport.

When the good seeds sprout, you learn how to not be complacent—that's what conviction does, too. It convinces you that the good things you've got right now are not there just for you to enjoy. They give you the opportunity to practice further good actions.

This is why conviction is regarded as a strength, and what we want to do is develop that strength into a faculty. The word "faculty" translates the Pali word *indriya*. It comes from Inda, who's the king of the gods. In other words, these are qualities that you want to have dominant in your mind. You want to have them take over, so that they take over your sense of who you are and your sense of the world you live in.

There are three dimensions to what the Buddha has to say about faith or conviction. First is who you believe. Second is what you believe. And then the third is what you do in your interaction with other people as a result of what you believe. In all cases, it centers around the teaching on karma. You believe people who tell you, "Your actions matter." You look at their lives: They have been doing their absolute best to make their actions matter in a good sense.

The Buddha, of course, was the most skilled in that area. And then you look at the teaching he left behind. He gained awakening not because he was some god who came down out of a special place with special talents. He had qualities that we all have, but he developed them. And it's up to us to develop ours. That's the message of his awakening.

So what do you do? You practice. And as you practice, you take on a new identity and you live in a new world. You live in a world now defined by the fact that the Buddha did gain awakening through his own efforts, and there are other people who have done that in his wake. Here we're all sitting here in the same world, the same room even, but we're each in a different world. And it's up to you to choose which kind of world your own inner world is going to be and your way of interpreting the world outside.

Because as we practice, after all, we're taking on a state of becoming. There are things that we have to do, qualities we have to develop. And to develop those qualities requires that you have a certain amount of desire and a sense that you live in a world where that desire makes sense; and that you're the kind of person who can be responsible enough to act on that desire and see it through. That's a skillful kind of becoming, and you want that to be the dominant factor in your mind.

Don't let your moods define you; don't let the moods get in the way. After all, they're irresponsible, they sweep over you and get you to do things and then they run away when the consequences come—like people who tell you to break the law and then, when the police come, they go running off and leave you holding the bag of loot. And, of course, the police are going to catch you. You can't trust your moods and you don't want them to be defining your world and defining your sense of who you are.

The same with things outside. You look at the people around you: A lot of people who would be very happy to define you in ways that get in the way of your exercise of your power to do skillful things. We might think that living in a country like this, where wrong view is all around, we have an especially hard time. But even in Thailand, all the ajaans in the forest tradition lived in a world that was telling them they couldn't do this. They were sons of peasants, the nuns were daughters of peasants, and they were all told, "You don't have what it takes. You have to be someone from a high-class family with power and connections if you're going to get anywhere in life." So they had a lot they had to buck as well. They couldn't let themselves or their sense of the world be defined by other people who didn't mean them well.

You've got the Buddha who means you well. You've got the ajaans who practice his teaching and found that it worked—they mean you well, too. They tell you, "You've got the power in your hands." You're sitting here meditating right now, you can develop your mind in ways and directions that you may not have believed. It's going to take time and it's going to require effort, which is why the quality of concentration and conviction go together. You've got to get the mind together and you've got to be convinced that this is really worth doing. In spite of how slow it may seem, or in spite of the setbacks you may run into, remember the teaching on karma: Karma is complex. So have some faith in that teaching.

Look at the people who have had faith in that teaching and have really done well: little kids from Thailand who had no hope in life, but they gained in wisdom, gained in all kinds of good qualities, because they took seriously the idea that, Yes, we live in a world where people can gain awakening through their own efforts, and it doesn't require anything superhuman. It simply requires that we develop this quality of conviction as a faculty, as an *indriya*, as a dominant faculty in charge of our minds and of our sense of the world around us. So you hold onto that.

Years back, I was up in the Bay Area, and I was going to be giving a Dhamma talk. And there was one woman who'd just come through a stroke. So I wanted to make sure that I gave a Dhamma talk that would be helpful to her. I asked her, "What would you like to hear tonight?" And she said, "I'd like to hear a talk on faith." And something inside me had a sinking feeling because I knew everybody else in the room was not going to want to hear about faith.

But I posed the question at the beginning of the talk, "I'd like to see a show of hands for how many in the room here do you find that in every day in every way your practice is getting better and better." There were no hands of course. So I said, "What do you do to see you through those fallow periods? You've got to have some faith in what you're doing to stick with it."

Then I continued with my talk. Nobody in the room seemed to like the talk, but the woman for whom it was aimed really appreciated it, she drunk it in, because she needed it. Here she was, stricken by a stroke. This was relatively late in her life and she was going to have to fight her way back. And she did.

So it's through faith that we overcome difficulties, through faith that we overcome the ups and downs of the practice, the ups and downs of our own personal lives, and the ups and downs of the society we're in. You want this to be the dominant quality, you want this to define you and to define your sense of the world. You don't want other people, you don't want your vagrant moods to be defining you or the world you live in. You want something more solid and reliable. And that's what the Buddha offers.