

## *Faith in the Practice*

*February 7, 2015*

We hear about the students of the Buddha who heard one Dhamma talk and gained awakening. And some of them seem to have an unfair advantage. There was one woman who was going out on a picnic one day. She took all her servants along, and they played in the park. On the way back, she stopped off and visited the Buddha. He gave her a teaching and she became a non-returner right there, even though she was still wearing all of her ornaments and all the fine clothes she put on for the picnic.

And so we wonder, “Why doesn’t that happen to us? Is there something wrong with the Dhamma talks we’re hearing?” That may be a possibility. <laughter> The other possibility, of course, is that you’re not ready. So the question is, “What do you do to get yourself ready?”

As I’ve said many times before, the Buddha picked all the ripe flowers, the ripe fruit. That leaves us. We’re the ones who have to do the painful practice with slow results. All the quick ones and easy ones: They’ve already gone.

So we need some faith to see us through the long haul. A lot of us cringe at the word *faith*, because we’ve grown up in a tradition where faith meant believing things that are illogical, unreasonable. It’s even sometimes said to be a virtue: the more unreasonable the object of faith, the greater the virtue in believing in it.

But faith in the Buddha’s teachings doesn’t mean that. It means very basically faith in the fact that the Buddha really was awakened. He did it through his own efforts and then he taught the Dhamma well. That immediately transfers the issue to us because, as he said, the qualities that he developed in order to reach that awakening were things that we all have to some extent—not to his extent yet, but they’re things we can develop. He developed them in the same way we develop ours: through heedfulness, resolution, and ardency. Faith is what allows us to be heedful and resolute and ardent.

The reason it’s faith and not knowledge is because we can’t look inside the Buddha’s mind to see how awakened he was. Even though we can read the teachings of the ajans and be inspired by them and say, “Oh, these people sound awakened,” we don’t really know. “Faith” here means belief in something that’s reasonable but you don’t really know it yet. And it’s good to admit to yourself that you don’t know. That spurs you on to say, “What can I do to actually know these things for sure?”

Like the principle of karma: Do you really have freedom of choice, or is there

some evil genius, some evil god behind you making you do things? Or is it just the stars, all very impersonal? You don't really know for sure. But if you assume that you do have freedom of choice, you're more likely to try to make the right choices. You try to use that freedom well.

In fact, the Buddha made that one of the prerequisites for having any kind of practice at all: If you don't believe that what you're doing now is shaping things now and into the future, what motivation do you have to practice? Especially when the practice is going to take time and involve some difficulties.

So you need to have faith that, yes, your actions do matter and you do have freedom of choice. That motivates you to look very carefully at your thoughts, your words, and your deeds, and especially at your thoughts, because your actions come out of your thoughts.

This is why we meditate. We like to think that we're meditating to bliss out for a while, and the meditation does have that possibility, but the bliss here is meant to be used.

This is what's special about the Buddha's teachings in the middle way. It's not a middle way between pain and pleasure—in other words a neutral feeling tone. It's the realization that you can use pain and pleasure as means rather than as ends. For example, there's the pain of knowing that "There's work to be done." But then there's the confidence that comes: "Well, I can do it." The pain is what spurs you on.

As the mind begins to settle down, you really do find a sense of pleasure that comes from simply sitting here still, focused on a very comfortable sensation in the body and learning how to maintain it without squeezing it and cutting it off, or just blissing out: as Ajaan Fuang used to say, "just letting your hands and feet go limp" and just wallowing in it. You want to stay alert at the same time as you're feeling this sense of pleasure because you want to use it to strengthen the mind.

When you have some evidence like this, it's not proof that the Buddha was awakened but it is a sign that this is a way that makes sense. This confidence can then give you the strength to carry through with some of the difficult parts of the practice.

We hear that the practice starts out with virtue and then goes to concentration and then to discernment. But actually, you have to develop all three at once: virtue in your day-to-day actions, while trying to develop your concentration and your discernment at the same time. This way, they strengthen one another.

Now, for most laypeople the five precepts are plenty, but you may realize that you need more than just the five. This is why we have the eight precepts. They add

the principle of sense-restraint on top. And there's no use in asking yourself, "Oh, why does this have to be?"—in other words, why you need to be stricter with yourself. It's like going to a hospital and asking, "Why does that person have nice medicine and why do I have medicine that tastes bad?" It's because your disease is your disease. You face up to that, you accept it, and you do what you can to give yourself more and more motivation to stick with the path—because the more difficulties you face, the more you're going to need faith to carry you through.

I was once addressing a group of people who, I knew from previous experience, didn't like the topic of faith. But I was going to discuss it because one of them had requested it, and she really needed it. So I started the Dhamma talk by asking, "I'd like a show of hands: How many people here find that every day in every way the practice is getting better and better?" There were no hands. There are going to be ups and there's going to be downs, and you need something to carry you through the downs. That's what faith is for. So you figure out ways to motivate yourself.

The Buddha recommends that you strengthen faith through heedfulness—in other words, looking around and seeing the dangers that can come from careless actions. Sometimes you don't have to look very far: You can look at your own past and see that you've done a fair amount of harm through being careless. You can remind yourself, "I don't want to do that again." The Buddha doesn't encourage you to get wound up in thoughts of guilt, but he does encourage you to recognize mistakes and to resolve not to repeat them.

Then he adds an interesting condition. He says then to develop the four brahmaviharas, starting with goodwill for yourself and for all other beings. Goodwill for other beings helps you to realize that you don't want to harm them. Goodwill for yourself helps you keep from getting down on yourself and at the same time helps prevent the idea that "Here I am just helping this person, helping that person. What about me?" You remind yourself while you do the practice here—while you're practicing generosity, practicing virtue, practicing meditation—you're benefiting. This gives you the encouragement, the confidence to go on.

As for concentration, it's the same sort of thing. Some people don't have to develop very strong concentration. We hear of cases where people get just the first jhana and bang! They have their first taste of awakening. Other people have to go through long hours and get the mind really, really strongly settled before they gain the kind of insight that lets them see, "Oh, I'm doing this stupid thing here and I don't have to do it. I can drop it." Again, it's not a matter of fairness or, "Why does that person get away with less concentration than me?" It's not a question of getting away with anything. The question is, "How much concentration can I develop? Whatever the amount I need, I'm going to work at it."

As for discernment, some people find they can very quickly gain insights into the mind. Other people have to ask questions again and again and again. And here, “asking questions” means not only asking questions of the teacher but also asking questions of themselves. They have to contemplate things again and again.

Ajaan Maha Boowa makes this point that when you’re doing body contemplation, you don’t count the number of times that you’ve contemplated the body. You just keep doing it again and again and again, and at some point something will hit you: that the issue is not the body; it’s the mind. You can say that ahead of time, but what makes a difference is when you actually see the movement of the mind: What is the movement of the mind that wants to go to lust, say, or to pride around the body? That first little thought that sets you off say in a fantasy: What is that thought? What’s its purpose?

In other words, you have to look all around and ask questions in lots of different ways before you find *the* point that will make the difference for you. There’s a sutta where a monk goes and visits different monks and asks them, “What is the point that you have to contemplate in order to gain awakening?” One monk says you have to contemplate the five aggregates, another monk says you have to contemplate the six sense spheres, another says dependent co-arising, another says the elements. He gets very confused. “Why don’t they all answer the same way?” So he goes to see the Buddha, who tells him, “Well it’s because for each of them, that was the topic that unlocked things, opened things up.”

He makes a comparison with a coral tree. In India, they have these trees very much like the ones we have in front of the bathhouse here. Part of the year they’re totally bare, part of the year they have leaves, and part of the year they have flowers without leaves. If someone saw it at one season, they would see this tree was just basically sticks. At other times, they’d see it green and other times as red. It depends on when they saw it. It’s the same tree.

So nobody can tell you ahead of time that by contemplating this particular topic you’re going to gain the insight that cuts things through and breaks through to the deathless. Which is why you have to look around and ask questions about this, ask questions about that.

Those places that teach you a *vipassana* method: They’re basically teaching a very subtle form of *samatha* or tranquility. Anything the mind does where it’s told to do something and do it repeatedly: That’s tranquility. It’s not insight. Insight isn’t something you *do*. It’s something you discover while you’re doing concentration. There’s no one guaranteed scientific or whatever vipassana method that’s going to work for everybody. Your particular defilements have their own particular configuration.

So you have to test and test again, probe around, ask questions. If you find you're asking too many questions and the mind's not still again, you go back and get the mind back into concentration.

You've got these three things that you've got to keep balanced: your virtue, your concentration, and your discernment. With time, you find that you can bring them back into balance. This is when you start to see the results that take you beyond the ordinary.

There's that passage in the suttas where the Buddha says that you have to be like an elephant hunter. He's looking for a bull elephant because he's got work that needs to be done that only a big bull elephant can do. He sees large footprints and says, "Well, this looks likely, but I don't know yet if it's the bull elephant I want. Maybe it's a dwarf female with big feet." He goes along and he sees scratch marks up in the trees, "There are tall females some of them have tusks. These might be theirs." But still, the markings look promising, so he follows them. Finally, he sees the bull elephant in the clearing. That's when he knows for sure and his search is at an end.

In the same way, the Buddha said that when you're practicing meditation, the levels of concentration are like the footprints. The scratch marks up in the trees are like the insights and psychic powers you begin to get. But it's when there's a breakthrough to the deathless: That's when you really know you've got a bull elephant. That's when your faith becomes, as he says, verified. It becomes unshakable because it's gone beyond just faith. You've actually seen: This really does work. The Buddha really does know what he is talking about

Until you reach that point, there are bound to be times when you wonder whether this all works and if it's worth it. But again, that's just one of those fallow periods that's very natural in a complex mind.

You know how to generate faith. In other words, you remind yourself that if you don't have faith in your own actions, what is there for you in this world? And it's good to have faith in the potential of your actions rather than trying to place faith in some outside being who may or may not exist or may or may not feel well-disposed to you—or who, in some religions, has already planned to send you to hell but for no fault of your own. I can't imagine how you can have faith in that.

The Buddha says to have faith in something that really is worthy of faith: the power of your actions to find a true happiness. So try to keep being heedful and have faith in what you're doing. Have faith in yourself that you have this potential. And whether it's a long path or a short path, whether it's easy or hard: That's not the issue.

The Buddha once said that if you could make a deal that you'd be stabbed with

a hundred spears in the morning, a hundreds spears at noon, and a hundred spears in the evening, every day for one hundred years, but you were guaranteed that at the end of that time you'd achieve awakening, it would be a good deal. Awakening is that special.

At least that's what he says. So it's up to you to decide whether you want to find out whether what he says is true or not.