

Faith in the Buddha

October 11, 2017

As the Buddha tells it, wisdom begins with conviction. Not a generalized conviction, very specific: conviction in his awakening—that what he awakened to was true, that the way he went about it could enable him to see truths like that, and that these truths are relevant for our lives.

There's nothing unreasonable about these propositions. Faith or conviction in the Buddha's teachings doesn't mean believing in something in spite of the fact that it's not reasonable. These things *are* reasonable but you can't prove them for yourself until you've actually acted on them. They're your working assumptions.

As with so many things we do in life, we can't really know for sure what the results are going to be but we work on certain assumptions. If we don't make the assumptions, we can't do the work. And if we don't do the work, we can't get the results. This is not the sort of teaching where people can say, "Well, I'm not going to believe anything until you prove it for me." You have to prove it for yourself—and you have to prove yourself—in order to learn the truth of these things.

When the Buddha talks about mundane right view, it connects directly to this point. This is the right view that gets you started. The Buddha starts out by saying that there is what is given, there is what is sacrificed. What this means is that giving is a good thing. It's a valuable thing and it actually happens. It may seem strange to have to assert that, but there were people in his time who actually said that giving didn't really happen. In other words, everything you did was predetermined by some outside force, so it wasn't really a gift if you gave something. You certainly weren't responsible for it. So there was no goodness inherent in it.

Others said that giving to other beings, other people, doesn't really accomplish anything because we all turn to dust at death. There's nothing left, so why bother being good to other people? So when the Buddha said, "There is giving," he was asserting that your actions are not totally predetermined by the past, you do have freedom of choice, and the recipients have worth. These are good things to believe. If the Buddha found that someone couldn't even accept the proposition that giving was worthwhile, he didn't really want to teach them. There wasn't much more he could teach. That's where he began.

He also began with the principle of gratitude. He expressed that by saying that there is mother and there is father. Again, there were people who said that because your parents were totally predetermined in their actions, there was no particular virtue in the fact that they gave birth to you, taught you, fed you, looked after you. It was simply a matter of natural conditions forcing them to

do these things. So those teachers said there was no debt of gratitude. Here again, the Buddha is asserting that your parents had freedom of choice. They could have abandoned you. They could have aborted you but they didn't. You're alive because of them, because of choices they made and difficulties they went through. And so gratitude is an appropriate response.

So conviction begins with really basic things like this. And it's good to keep going back to the basics, to remind yourselves that there are so many things in life that we take for granted but we don't really know for sure. And the Buddha is reminding us that these are things you take on conviction and that it's worthwhile to take them on conviction.

From there he goes into the principle that there are good and bad actions. The fact that an action is good or bad is not just a cultural oddity. It's built into the way things are. And actions have results. Again, this is something you can't prove ahead of time but you will find, if you take it on faith and practice in line with it, that if you act with skillful intentions, you're going to get good results; on unskillful intentions, you're going to get bad results. And these results last not only into this lifetime but also into future ones.

At the same time, we're reaping the harvest of some of our past bad actions and good actions right now. This, too, is something we take on faith. There are people who actually claim to be Buddhist but they'll say, "How could the Buddha have known these things? After all, we're just biological beings and all we know is this present lifetime." Of course, that's importing an idea from outside, defining us as to what we are, and then telling us that somehow as Buddhists we're supposed to accept that. But as the Buddha said, if you define yourself, you limit yourself.

His approach was not to say, "This is what a human being is, and therefore this is what a human being can know." He did it the other way around. He explored in his own mind what a human being can know, and when he followed that to the ultimate happiness, he then came back and looked at the question of what a human being is. And for the most part, he tended to put that question aside. Ideas of what you are or what you're capable of doing can often get in the way.

So what you need is simply the confidence that, yes, this is something you can do. Again, this is something you take on faith. Part of the Buddha's awakening was his description of the qualities of mind that he brought to the process, all of which are qualities we all have to some extent: being heedful, ardent, and resolute. You simply take those qualities and you develop them to the nth degree, and they'll take you to something deathless. This is still something that has to be taken on faith. You can't know the deathless until you've actually experienced it through your own actions.

Ajaan Maha Boowa once said if people who had reached nibbana could take it out and to show everybody, nobody would want anything else. Nothing else in the world would sell. This would dominate the market, he said—but it's something that can't be seen unless you've done the work yourself.

This is where conviction moves from mundane right view into transcendent right view, i.e., right view in terms of the four noble truths. What the Buddha said about suffering is in many ways counterintuitive. Suffering is clinging. And the word for clinging in Pali, *upadana*, can also mean taking sustenance, i.e., feeding. And for most of us, we get so much pleasure in life feeding emotionally and physically that the idea that this would be what suffering is goes against the grain. We can't imagine a happiness without feeding. But that's precisely the point. The only true happiness is one that doesn't have to feed. This again is something you take on faith: that the Buddha was able to know this and what he said was right.

So faith and conviction is a matter of trusting the Buddha, trusting his teachings but, as he also said, conviction gets carried over into your actions. If you simply assent to these things without acting on them, then it shows there's no real conviction, because all of his teachings act as imperatives. The four noble truths have their duties. Even with the basic truths of mundane right view—that skillful actions should be developed and unskillful actions should be abandoned—there's an imperative there. There's a duty. So if you really have conviction in these things, you follow through with them.

So this is what it means to have faith in the Buddha: that he knew what he was talking about, that he could know what he was talking about, and that what he was talking about has some direct impact on what you should be doing with your life right now.

After all, the practice is a long one and it needs sustenance like this because there will be times when you do something and you don't see the results for a long time. You need to have conviction that they will come. He has a nice image. He says, "Don't underestimate merit, thinking that it won't come to you or it won't amount to much. Just as a pot is filled with water falling drip by drip, in the same way, little acts of merit, little acts of skilfulness, accumulate. They build up." It takes a certain amount of faith to stick with it. Without the faith, you don't stick with it. You run into difficulties and you give up.

So try to cultivate this sense of conviction that the Buddha knew what he was talking about and he could know what he was talking about. This has a direct impact on how you're going to find happiness in your life. You can't have the practice without faith, simply remember that it's not an unreasonable faith. These are things you can't know for sure until you've tried them.

And the things that the Buddha has you believe are all things that are good, starting with generosity, goodwill, gratitude: things we've already sensed have a

certain goodness to them. The Buddha confirms that but he says that the goodness goes much further than you might think.

These are good propositions and they're worth taking on, because look at what life is without them. When you have faith in these things, there's hope. Without them, the world is a pretty hopeless place. So give them a try.