

# Faith (1 of 5) What Calms and Clears the Heart

August 16, 2021

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

settle, trust, dissociated, Dharma, devotion, confidence, faculty, practice, hindrances, *saddhā*, mud, pond

Gil Fronsdal

Good day. The theme that I would like to talk about is faith. I think my motivation to talk about faith is that lately I've been feeling quite inspired and heartened by the faith quality of Buddhist practice. So I mostly want to be able to share a little of what is in my heart.

There are different qualities of faith. The Pali word *saddhā*, which is often translated into English as “faith,” has different qualities in different contexts, and therefore it is often translated differently. Sometimes *saddhā* is translated as “trust,” “confidence,” “devotion,” “love.” If whatever associations you have in English for “faith” don't work for you, other words might work. Or you might put those aside and just accept the provisional nature of the English translation of *saddhā* as “faith.”

I like the word “faith.” Although this might not be true for others, faith, for me, is not so much a tenet of belief – what we believe, what we have to believe, a belief that we don't have any verification for – but rather, faith means having some kind of trust or confidence in what we call the Dharma. Not the Dharma out there that you read about, but the Dharma that is found in the heart.

One definition of faith in Buddhism that I like is that faith is the attitude or quality that calms the heart. Sometimes it is said to be what clears the heart or clarifies the heart. In the ancient world, the analogy for the idea of clarity is that when a pond is all muddy, as if some animal has run through it, you put a magical stone in the pond to clear all the mud away.

In the same way, faith clears away mud – the mud of our distractions, our preoccupations, all the things we swirl around in. The ancient texts specifically say that there is something about the power of faith – this deep trust that calms the heart – that clears the heart of the hindrances: grasping at desires and aversions, and being pulled into the world of restlessness, resistance, slothfulness, and doubt.

We reach out and hold on to these things or get caught in them. There is something about the deep trust that the Dharma can provide that settles those things, because the hindrances are an expression of mistrust. They are expressions of not having faith in where the heart can settle, where the heart can be at home in itself. When we put faith in sensual desire, we put faith in something that keeps us a little dissociated from ourselves, reaching out beyond ourselves and wanting something. It is the same thing with ill will. Ill will is not a good place to put faith or trust.

Most people are not aware they have faith or trust in ill will. But functionally, that is what is happening unconsciously: “This is how I become safe. This is how I get what I want. This is how I protect myself or how I create myself as a person – by expressing my hostility, my anger, my criticism, and complaints.” So there is confidence in that world of complaints and criticism. What we're doing in Dharma practice is finding someplace to be at ease and to rest in our own hearts and our own being – one that is not dissociating, not reaching out and relating to the outer world in the way that desire, ill will, and doubt do. Faith is what settles and clarifies the heart.

One of the classic purposes of faith in the Dharma is not faith for its own sake, but rather, to provide the resolve, the dedication, the intention, and the motivation to practice and to live in a different way. So faith isn't about passively sitting back and being taken care of in some magical way by what we have faith in. But rather, faith is a certain kind of action: the moment-to-moment steps of Dharma practice, showing up and being mindful and present. As faith gets awakened, the engagement in practice can have the same soothing, settling, clearing quality as faith does, because faith comes along with the practice we do.

When we practice without faith – without this warm-heartedness, this love, this care, this trust – then mindfulness itself can sometimes become a little dissociated or disembodied, as if it is only a technique that we're doing. But when mindfulness comes out of faith, out of deep trust, then it's not dissociated. Mindfulness can be more embodied, more presence-ing, and more inspiring for us.

During this week, I'll talk about the different qualities of heart that come into play around the concept of faith. Tomorrow, I will talk more about trust; on Wednesday about the quality of love in relation to faith; and on Thursday, about confidence in relation to faith. The question is, what do we have confidence in? There are many things, such as the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. On Thursday, I want to talk about faith and non-clinging – the wonderful holding together of non-clinging, like the left and right hand holding each other, and the warmth and the goodness of faith. On Friday, I will talk about faith as devotion that expresses itself in service – in acting for the benefit of others. That act of service can be an expression of Dharma devotion. This is where the devotion of the practice can really express itself.

I hope that I can talk about faith in such a way that you can begin to recognize it in yourself because that is really where faith lives: in your heart, in your inner life. We all have the faculty of faith. So, in Buddhism, you wouldn't say that you had faith in certain teachings because that is more like an intellectual exercise. In Buddhism, faith is considered to be a faculty, like confidence is a faculty, equanimity is a faculty, and loving-kindness is a faculty. We have an ability to have kindness, goodwill, and generosity.

Faith is a faculty, an ability, a capacity that we can develop and grow in. In that sense, it is something that already lives in each of us, though it might be dormant or resting. Maybe the seeds of Dharma faith are sitting waiting to be watered, but faith is there in everyone. I am hoping these talks will have some resonance inside of you with something that you can recognize. So faith, trust, confidence, love, inspiration, motivation, devotion, service – all these are in the sphere of what I'm calling faith or *saddhā*. Thank you.