

Tuesday Dharma Talk: Faith

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Our journey through the *Upanisa Sutta* continues today with the topic of *saddhā, śraddhā* in Sanskrit. In the ancient language, in the ancient text before Buddhism, there have been some scholars who have said that the earliest meaning of the word *śraddhā* in India was hospitality. And I think it had something to do with religious rituals where you're creating a... you're the host for the visiting god for the ritual. So this idea that *śraddhā*, that nowadays is often translated as faith, originally maybe meant something like hospitality, to make it really simple. A welcome works really well for, I think, for doing *vipassanā* practice.

We're here to welcome everything. Welcome it in what way? Welcome it so we can understand it. Like you welcome a guest to your house and you want to know them. You want to learn about them, get to know them well, to welcome that for what reason, so we can learn how to be free in relationship to it, to learn our freedom, to know something well enough that... we're no longer trapped by it, pushed around by it, caught by it, reactive to it.

But we find our freedom. What freedom? The freedom to act wisely. The freedom to act in ways that are beneficial for ourselves, for our world. And to start with the idea of being welcoming, welcoming to everything for these purposes.

So in the discussion of faith, there's also a journey that people have with faith. Some of you could probably write an autobiography of your own journey with faith over time. You have some kind of faith that you have with Buddhism. For some of you, you would start the autobiography by saying you don't like the word faith, and then you're going to use a different word. But, you know, some kind of in the family of words that are like faith. But there's probably a journey. There's probably an unfolding that happens over time.

And even in a single retreat, there can be one way of understanding the retreat, from the point of view of the shifting, changing nature of your *saddhā*, your faith. And so just as with suffering and having five different levels, I'm going to offer you five levels for faith, five deepening

experiences of faith. And I'm going to suggest that these different levels have different words for translating *saddhā*. And some English translators have used these different words. Just some of them, I'm not just making up, except maybe the last one.

So the first is faith. The second is confidence. The third is conviction. The fourth is trust. And the fifth is faith beyond faith.

So when I like the word faith myself, I don't think of it as meaning, as some people, some religions, that it means that your faith means that you have to unconditionally believe some creed that you can't question. I think that's one of the reasons why some people in the West hesitate around the word. But I find that faith, for me, is, of all the words for that family, it's the one that's most heartfelt. It represents some kind of warmth, warm feeling, warm emotion, warm hospitality, warm yes.

And if it does involve belief, then it's the... apparently there are people who studied medieval Christianity, right, in languages, who say that the origins for the word belief was not what it means today, believing some doctrine, believing something is true. But it literally meant what you love. Apparently in German it still means *belieben*. Apparently it also means what you love. And because back then in the Middle Ages, the relationship to God, it was impossible not to believe in God, if you're European, apparently. It's like that was just built into the very structure of reality, structure of language. There was a God.

But the question was not, do you believe in God, but do you love God? And people say, yes, I believe, I believe in God. I love God. So the idea of faith, to me, kind of touches on this area of love. And I think some of us have a kind of a love affair with the Dharma. Then maybe you would call it that before you'd call it faith.

So the first step, the first stage, is faith. And maybe that can be understood. It's kind of paired up with the first level of suffering, unremitting suffering, where you completely identify with it, you completely are it, and there's no sense of anything else. And until, and you have no understanding of how to step out of it, to look back and see it, the suffering is suffering, you're still kind of enmeshed in it. But something happens.

Sometimes I've known people who've met someone, met a teacher, met a monastic, that really inspired them. They never knew such a person, never knew that kind of peace. And I've had a few people like that who were very important in my life. One of them was Mel Weitzman, the former abbot of the Berkeley Zen Center. And maybe it won't sound very special when I describe to you why I was so taken by him, why I thought it was so wonderful to be with him. He was extraordinarily ordinary.

And probably if he stood behind you in the supermarket checkout line, you would probably not think anything. This little guy standing there, kind of ordinary. But there was something about the way he was ordinary, the way that he was at ease with himself, the way that he was present, that moved me, showed you something that was possible. The book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* was also something like that, that inspired me, aroused some kind of faith in me, another way of living, another way of possibility.

And so there's a variety of things that we see that happen that show us there's another way, and we're inspired. Maybe it's another word for faith: inspired. Oh, this is possible. There's a way. There's another way. Something is possible here. This person has something that I want. This person has something which is different. I've never seen this before. This seems like a way forward. This is something to experience.

And so there's a faith, there's a love, there's a welcoming of what that represents. There's a wanting to have something like that. And in the Theravādan tradition, the word *saddhā* is sometimes understood as a form of desire, wholesome desire, good desire, that you want something. You want wholesomeness. You want what's healthy. You want to move forward toward freedom.

And sometimes in Buddhism, any kind of desire gets a bad name, and you're not supposed to have any, some people think. But that's not true. There are very wholesome desires that can be engaged with unwholesomely. And there are wholesome desires you can engage with in a wholesome way. And they're very important to have.

Maybe it can be said that there is no Dharma practice without some desire of some sort, a calling, a yearning, inspiration, some healthy kind of yes, or some desperation, a desperate no. Maybe it's like, no, I can't live my life this way anymore. No, this is impossible. Some people need to reach rock bottom. And finally, finally say no to some way that they're living. Can't do it anymore. Only then does something open. Only then are they ready for some kind of faith because nothing else makes sense, maybe.

And I've known people who have engaged in Buddhist practice on borrowed faith, borrowed confidence, that they trusted someone else who had a lot of confidence and said, well, if that person can have confidence, I'm going to borrow theirs, ride in the tailwind of their confidence until I have my own. So there's this kind of beginning, and probably all of you had a beginning like that, most of you. It might have been not so dramatic. It might just have been, oh, this shows promise. This seems right. This is the way. This is worth trying.

And it could have been very ordinary. In a sense, if you sign up for a community college class,

you usually don't do it unless you have some faith that they have a decent lecturer who's going to take care of you for the semester. You know, you grant a little bit of faith for what you're going to get. And so it might be that simple. And so then we begin. But that's enough maybe to get us to start practicing.

And as we practice, then we start seeing suffering more clearly. We start understanding suffering more clearly. And just that can start giving us some confidence that, oh, they know what they're talking about. Yep, I see. I seem to have a lot more stress when I'm attached, when I'm clinging. I have a lot more stress when I'm screaming fury at my kids. Oh, I didn't realize that's why I have a headache all the time, why my kids are always so afraid of me. You know, something dawns. Oh, look at that, I see. I think they're onto something. They talk about attachment being a source of suffering.

And so there's some confidence now that this practice works. This is right. And there might be other things that show that this is really, you know, it's pointing in the right direction. Some people can begin their practice or can maybe sometimes read about Buddhism, and they have an intuition. They can kind of, in a sense, just out of reach, feel or sense what the books are talking about, what the teachings are talking about. Yeah, this seems right. I can feel this. It's just beyond what I can experience now. It's just beyond my clinging. I can feel the non-clinging. Just beyond my suffering, yeah, just beyond, there's peace or there's joy or happiness.

So a confidence grows. And the confidence can be very important, maybe even necessary, as fuel for engaging in the practice, so that we give ourselves over to it. We really are whole-hearted with it. There's a big yes, I'm going to practice. This is what I want to do.

And hopefully the confidence lasts after you show up at the retreat center. Some people have a lot of confidence before they come. And I've had lots of confidence in looking forward to going to the retreat, and within a day or two of being there, then my confidence gets transferred to the next retreat. That's the one that's going to do it. The mind is kind of odd. At least my mind is.

And in the ancient texts of Buddhism, this is depicted very clearly, that a person develops confidence, *saddhā*, to really pick up the practice seriously. In the ancient texts, where it's kind of idealized, maybe, the person becomes a monastic, and then gets really ethical. And then, you know, everything builds. It just seems like it's really easy back then, because the texts are often hyper-idealized.

But this idea that there's some kind of confidence in something to do this radical life change,

becoming a monastic, radical life change that some people feel drawn to do with this Dharma practice. For me, I spent a couple of years probably really reflecting deeply about what to do with my life as a young person and what direction to take my life. And at some point, my confidence in the Dharma was strong enough that I made that turn to dedicate my life to the Dharma.

And so sometimes that's, you know... but even, you know, to come to a retreat is not a small thing. To come to a two-week retreat, wow, this is a phenomenal thing that people do. Some of you have done a number of retreats, and maybe some of you have done longer retreats. So, like, this is a yawn, you know, two weeks, gee. But the two weeks is a big deal. I appreciate so much that you're here. And to me, it indicates you have a lot of confidence in something, probably more than you realize, to do such a thing, such a radical thing, such a radically different thing than anything our society generally supports.

So then we practice, and it's not just seeing the possibility of the Dharma, having clarity that this really is pointing to something or saying the truth, but rather we start experiencing it for ourselves. That we see, if we let go, that we feel better. There's peace. And that can be in small things. It can be very small things. And sometimes learning it with small, easy places is really a great way of kind of building toward some of the most difficult things to let go of that we have in our life.

And, you know, so if it happens that there's not enough broccoli at lunch, broccoli is your favorite vegetable, and you see that there's probably enough for two people, but there's one person in front of you. But they think it's just enough for one, so they take it all. And you could get angry, you can get upset, you could write a letter to the managing directors about the issue, or the important broccoli issue, and not put it down until the end of the retreat, keep composing the letter, or you can let go. It's okay. I don't have to fight the broccoli war. I can let go. And that's okay. Or letting go is a good idea. I'll try it now. Something small.

So I apologize for the broccoli. Maybe it's a big deal. But, you know, maybe you can reframe it to something that's small for you. So we start learning. Now we have the proof in little ways, proof. Oh, this works. This is right.

We have the proof that we can grow in wholesomeness, that there's an inner transformation that begins happening as we practice, and we feel more wholesome, we feel more connected to our integrity. Wow. I didn't even know integrity was a thing, but it's a thing, it's a feeling, it's a sense that a person can have. It's really nice to have kindness or goodwill. Who would have known? And compassion. Wow.

So, in fact, for me, I've told the story a lot, but I was not interested in compassion when I started my Zen practice. It probably was not in my working vocabulary, the word compassion. It was just like a foreign thing. I don't know. It just wasn't part of my friends' circles. It was not a word we used. And there wasn't any concern of mine. And compassion found me. It kind of snuck up on me.

And then in retrospect, I looked back at my Zen training and realized that one of the most important things that happened there was I got compassioned through it. Oh, I mean, that was pretty cool, I thought. This too, that gave me a lot of conviction. This practice works. This is really good.

And so at some point we get the proof and we're sure this is good. So not only, like with suffering, not only do we see it and be able to step back from it, but we also start seeing that we contribute to it, the part that we contribute. And we start seeing that we can let go of that. We can contribute, not only by not doing it, but we can contribute the opposite. We can contribute into ourselves wholesome things, beneficial things. We could try being kind.

So this conviction... And then as practice grows, there starts to be trust. And we start trusting what's beginning to grow in us, what's beginning to unfold in us. We start trusting what we're starting to feel connected to. We're trusting there's a process at play here that we're not orchestrating, we're not engineering, but it's a process we can really trust. This is good.

I think the first time, maybe the first time, that I really started to use the word trust a lot for myself was a trust I had in mindfulness. I started seeing over and over again that if I just was mindful, things worked out. I could trust being mindful. There were times I didn't know what to do, I didn't know how to respond, the situation was difficult. And so I would just, okay, let's just pay attention, be present, really be present, really feel what's happening here, know what's happening here, look around, give time, give space.

And if the situation allowed for that, then it would happen over and over again, something worked out. Something worked out internally. Something actually, something seemed to work, it worked out externally sometimes. It was just amazing to me that all I had to do was be mindful, be present. So then I started to trust mindfulness, trusted it a lot.

I started to see that as I practiced and was mindful and kind of engaged more in this whole process, that there was an inner process that was a gift. I think of concentration. And when I feel concentrated, or if you have *samādhi*, I certainly have my role sometimes to help make that happen. But I feel very much that it's a gift. And I don't take responsibility for getting concentrated. I take gratitude in getting concentrated. And I'm not innocent, and I'm not

doing anything. You know, I do my part in a certain way. But it really, it's... so there's this inner process.

And I was blown away when I went to Burma and practiced. I was really introduced to this whole Mahasi practice and went through the various unfoldings that that goes through. And I did this practice there. I didn't know anything about *vipassanā*, really, except I just followed what the teacher told me to do. And at the end of the time there, I read a little booklet by Mahasi Sayadaw called *The Progress of Insight* that describes how this unfolding works. And kind of like my experience matched it. I had no idea that this was a natural process I was involved in. It was well-known and, you know, well-understood. And that increased my trust dramatically about this inner process, that the Dharma knows what to do.

The Dharma knows how to unfold. We have our role, but there's something going on here deep inside. So this trust, one way of understanding this trust, is that we trust the refuges in ourselves. The Buddha is in us, the Dharma is in us, the Saṅgha in certain ways is in us, not just out there. Often faith in Buddhism in the Buddha, Dharma, Saṅgha is kind of the external Buddha, Dharma, Saṅgha, which is fine, but there's also the internal. And to begin trusting that, and there I think for me, the core one is trusting the Dharma. For me, trusting the Dharma is just trusting this very deep process that unfolds when we practice the Dharma. Practice the Dharma, you can trust the Dharma. It'll take care of you.

So we're going from faith to confidence to conviction to trust. And that trust can deepen and deepen. And I had a friend many years ago who asked me, you talk about trust a lot. What do you trust in? And I drove her kind of crazy because I said, well, I don't trust in anything. I just trust. That didn't make any sense to her. You're supposed to trust something. But I just trust.

And I suppose what I meant by that was that there was no object. There was nothing that had to happen. There was no thing that I had to trust. I guess maybe it's like just, I trust being present. I trust being alive. You know, does the open hand trust being open? Does it occur to the hand that it trusts? Look, I'm so trusting. Maybe it doesn't have to be called trust. It just... maybe it's trusting freedom. We're trusting, trusting, just trust when there is freedom. Trust when there's space.

And you probably know this little kind of joke or thing about that Dharma practice can give rise to fear sometimes. That's like you're falling. And it's generally pretty dangerous to fall long distances for human beings. And so people might flounder and get afraid and start grabbing at everything in sight, but there's nothing to hold on to. And then they finally decide to look down to where they're falling to. And they look and they say, there's nothing there. It's

just falling and there's no place to hit. You're safe. You're not going to get hurt.

So that somehow the freedom, the absence, the space, is trust. Someone falling through space, they trust. What do they trust? They trust they're not going to get hurt. Trust we're not going to be something. So we're moving into a realm where maybe it's a little hard to talk about.

But then there's the fifth level of faith. And that's the faith beyond faith. In the *Dhammapada*, there's a verse that kind of does a kind of wordplay that's kind of outrageous. Probably it was kind of shocking for people to read. But it's all these ways of talking about someone who's awakened, but all these kind of negative ways. But it's all wordplay. And around faith, they're faithless.

And it's like, wow, you know, you say in English someone is faithless, you better not trust them. So it's probably the same impact in the ancient Pāli text. These *arahats* are faithless. But what it's a wordplay for is that they don't have faith because they don't need faith. They don't need faith that the practice works. They don't need faith that there's a way to practice. They don't need faith in the Dharma because they're free. They're totally free.

They don't need to have faith that there's a way to end suffering. They're at the end of suffering. They don't really need Buddhism anymore. So why have faith in it? They don't need it. So in that sense, they're faithless. But it's probably to get people's attention to, what are they saying here?

But this faith beyond faith, this trust beyond trust, this place where the mind, the heart, is no longer established on anything, no longer holding to anything, no longer oriented to something that's supporting us, orienting toward something that's guiding us, no longer needing to have foundation, no longer needing to be grounded even, because there's freedom. There's no clinging whatsoever. And it isn't that we have to kind of take this to be some kind of final, ultimate, complete thing.

But there might even be times for you, maybe on this retreat, where you can feel your quality of faith that you have maybe can match in some ways, or intuit, or be close to, or be supported by this idea that there are these five different levels of deepening faith. There is inspired faith, inspired welcoming. You're ready to be a host for your experience. You have a heartfelt feeling, yes. Yeah, I believe in this, meaning I be in love with it.

There might be a time when confidence is really at store. You have a lot of confidence, and the confidence is strong because you've had a good nap. Now you're ready. Okay, now I can feel my confidence. I think I can do this now, and I'm ready. And so then the confidence is for

yourself, to yourself. I believe in myself.

And then there are times when there's conviction. You don't have to believe or have confidence because you know. You have absolute conviction based on your own experience. I can do this practice. There's no doubt about it. It doesn't require broccoli. I can do it.

And then there's times when you feel the trust. There might be some difficulty that arises. There's probably no shortage of opportunities for having hard, difficult, challenging times on retreat. But you might be surprised. That's why I've been through this before. I have a practice. I know how this works. I trust that I can get through it. I don't know how, but I trust the practice. I'll just keep practicing.

And then there might be times when you're settled, peaceful, calm, in some kind of very simple, ordinary way, extraordinarily ordinary. And you don't feel any need for faith, confidence, conviction, trust. It's almost like there's something better. And then if you want to try to explain it to someone, you have a new challenge, like the challenge I tried to initiate with you a few minutes ago. Faith beyond faith, trust beyond trust.

So, in giving these talks in this way that I'm doing, I'm certainly hoping that you now don't get involved in striving, that you're like, okay, I know I'm at level two, and by this evening I better be at level four, and I better puff and puff, you know. But there's no need for that at all. Certainly practice with sincerity, but no need to strive, no need to practice with expectation. Wherever you are is the right place to practice.

But it might make some sense of this journey, these possibilities. It might keep you a little more open. It might give you more faith, more confidence, conviction, trust. Yes. This is a good path, this work, you know, this has, there's really something here that's unfolding and developing. And I don't have to be stuck this way. I'm stuck now, but I have confidence this process will work.

It might orient you a little bit to be a little bit more welcoming to the journey, welcoming to possibilities, welcoming to the potential of what can happen here. Not expecting, but welcoming. And perhaps we can think of mindfulness, mindfulness awareness, that the characteristic of it is kind of a welcome, a welcoming. I'm present, I'm here, I welcome what's here, both what's seen and known, but I also welcome what hasn't been seen, what isn't known yet.

It might be some of the most challenging things that still live in your heart, that need to be... one of the best things for it is to finally know that you're ready to welcome it. Finally. Where have you been my whole life? I mean, buried here in the basement in the dark. Or it might

be that beautiful room in your house that you've never opened the door to look in, the room where there's beautiful sunlight always coming in.

And so this idea of being welcome to it all, whatever it is, trusting that you can be open to it all, whatever it is. Have confidence in that. You know from experience, so you have conviction, it's okay to welcome everything. And to be welcoming to the possibility of being changed, the possibility of something growing and unfolding, because that might be better than the alternative, which is believing the opposite, that you'll never change, that you're stuck, that you can't manage if you open up to your experience.

So in this *Upanisa* teaching on the supporting conditions, or the necessary conditions for one thing to happen based on something else, it's suffering that is the condition for the arising of this faith. Suffering doesn't cause faith to arise. Suffering by itself doesn't lead to this faith arising. But without suffering, this kind of Dharma faith won't arise. The necessary condition for Dharma faith is suffering, some honest connection to something that English-speaking Buddhists call suffering, or stress or tension or anguish.

Or I like the word, if I could retranslate the Pāli canon, I would be having an internal discussion with myself: should I translate it as unease or with hyphen, dis-ease? And right now I lean in the direction of dis-ease with hyphen because otherwise it looks like illness. So there has to be some dis-ease for there then to be faith, that there is a way out of dis-ease. There has to be some confidence that freedom from dis-ease is possible. It's appropriate to have conviction based on experience. Yes, it is possible.

So then faith itself, then in the same way, faith, inspiration, confidence, welcoming, is the necessary condition for the arising of Dharma *pāmojja*, usually translated as gladness. And that's a topic for tomorrow. So for today, faith, or whatever one of the words that you prefer, let that support you and guide you and inspire you, so that you can practice with wholeheartedness, practice with sincerity.

And for some of you, practice as if your life depends on it. May your strong sincerity and practice sustain you until we talk about gladness. Thank you.