

Week 1 – Faith within a Buddhist Context

Buddhism level 2 – What makes you a Buddhist?

Each week we'll be looking at different facets of "What makes you a Buddhist?", or more technically, "what does it mean to Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels?"

Sraddha

Usually translated as faith. Or confidence, or trust. Sraddha is from the root "to place the heart upon". Immediately tells us its more to do with heart than head.

Traditionally placing heart on the 3 Jewels of Buddha, Dharma & Sangha.

Faith is a problematic term for many, with connotations of "blind faith"; we won't believe something because we're told it's true.

"Blind faith" is over-reliance on Belief – the more cognitive aspect of faith. It's the eradication of reason, with the heart taking control of the intellect

Sraddha is not faith in the sense of belief, or in the sense of believing to be true something which can not be rationally demonstrated. If we want a definition of faith we may say that it is "the emotional response of what is ultimate in us to what is ultimate in the universe". Faith is an intuitive, emotional, even mystical response to what is of ultimate value.

Sangharakshita, A Guide to the Buddhist Path

The Buddha encouraged us to test his teachings as a goldsmith tests gold: an appeal to our own experience & reason. But there is still room for guidance by the wise!

Recognise that cynical scepticism (refusal to believe anything that's not provable or rationally explicable) is just as much an emotional position as credulity (absolute unquestioning belief): both are looking for certainty

Faith / Sraddha is more of an existential attitude to living in an uncertain world, recognising the limits of our limits & experience without being imprisoned by them. So we need courage to hold faith.

Faith is a confidence in something that's currently outside of our experience, so acting as a bridge to that experience. If we're cynical about everything outside our experience, we'll have few surprises in life.

Grounds of faith

Sangharakshita has talked of 3 grounds: Experience, Reason & Intuition. Consequently faith isn't all-or-nothing; we can't expect to get all the grounds together & final at once.

Faith grows as we acquire greater knowledge & experience. We could talk of different levels: from a provisional, experimental interest that gets us out of house to the Buddhist Centre, meditating even when doesn't really seem to be doing much; through to a completely rooted and urgent confidence in the path & practice, as much confidence as you have confidence in the existence of Paris and your ability to get there if you want to.

Developing Faith

Sraddha probably isn't visited on as a sudden conversion. We can help develop it, eg:

- Fully engaging in Dharma practice on eg. a retreat
- Studying an inspiring Dharma text
- Talking with spiritually-minded friends about what's of importance
- Looking at Buddhist imagery
- Engaging in Buddhist ritual
- Recalling or reading the lives of the Buddha or great sages

Faith & Doubt

Not incompatible – until Real faith, there'll always be uncertainty. We need to distinguish between doubt that drives a process of enquiry & leads to a lightness of touch in how beliefs are held, and doubt that cripples, hobbles, holds us back.

Faith & Inspiration

Although we talked of faith as emotional, it's often subterranean. Maybe we see it more clearly through what we do, how we behave. Maybe when faith becomes very manifest, strong, then it's closer to inspiration. But for most people, inspiration waxes & wanes.

Experiences of Faith

- Keeping on keeping on with Dharma practice, through thick & thin.
- Confidence – in ourselves as good enough to practice, that we have all we need, we're not a problem but the path. A sense of relaxation of anxiety on that basis.
- Confidence in the 3 Jewels, they can take our weight
- State of being existentially concerned – Paul Tillich.
- Acting with boldness in face of uncertainty but a certain faith in the possibility of the outcome
- A sense that there's more to life than is usually manifest: resting on higher values

HOME PRACTICE

Be on alert for the experience of sraddha.

You can use strong experiences as triggers. Ask yourself in midst of positive or negative mental states (however you understand them) – is there an element of sraddha here?

Try during the week to engage in some activity that you think tends to develop faith. Do you feel that it worked?

RESOURCES

Kalama sutta: <http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.065.than.html>

A Survey of Buddhism, Sangharakshita, section of The Five Spiritual Faculties