Faith as a Virtue

August 6, 2024

And John Sawatt would often begin meditation instructions by saying to have a sense of sata and basada. Basada means confidence, confidence that you’re doing something good, that will have good consequences. Sata is a word we translate sometimes as faith, sometimes as conviction. The differences in the meaning between faith and conviction seems to be that you have faith that someone will do something for you, or something will do something for you. Conviction that something has actually happened, that we have conviction in the Buddha’s awakening. We have faith in the path. Because to have knowledge about the Buddha, as he said, requires that you gain full awakening. But in the meantime, we decide that this is a good path to follow and he’s a good person to follow. And having faith in his awakening requires that we take on some presuppositions, some assumptions. Like the first person, the namapada, the mind is the forerunner of all things. We have to have faith in the potentials of the mind. Conviction that the Buddha discovered that they really are true. Principles of action. If you act on skillful intentions, there are going to be good results. If you act on unskillful intentions, there are going to be bad results. Then you look around you and sometimes it seems it’s the opposite. But then he says part of this has to do with the fact that we’ve been here through many, many lifetimes. Results sometimes can take a long time to play themselves out. And so on the one hand we may accept that because we believe that he really did step outside of space and time. He came from a spot where his knowledge really was objective. I think about the factors of dependent-core rising that shape our interpretation of sensory contact. And anything that’s influenced by those factors, your intentions, your perception, your acts of attention, can always be called into question. But if it was somebody who stepped outside of space and time entirely, came to knowledge that was not subject to those things, that’s up to you to decide whether you want to believe in that or not. So in some cases it is faith in him. A conviction is what he’s done. But he didn’t leave it there. He would also provide what’s called a pragmatic proof. That if you believe in the principle of karma, that your actions really do make a difference, make the difference. And that can have results that go for a long, long time. You’re going to behave more skillfully. You’re going to behave with more heedfulness, more care. You’re not going to be complacent. That’s a good thing. Again, you have to ask yourself what kind of people would find that argument appealing. People who do find joy, find a sense of their worth as human beings in being responsible for their actions. Remember the questions that lie at the beginning of the sermon. What will lead to my long-term harm and suffering? What will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? In asking those questions you’re taking responsibility. They go together with two other questions. What is blameworthy? What is blameless? You want to make sure that your actions don’t harm anybody. You want to be honorable in your choices. Those are the kind of people the Buddha would want to teach. As he said, he wasn’t the teacher for everybody. He was the teacher of those who were fit to be tamed. The people fit to be tamed are the ones who are honest and observant. As he once said, that’s someone who is honest and observant, who’s no deceiver come. They’ll teach that person the Dhamma. It leads to release. It leads to freedom. So in a sense, conviction is a virtue. If you take an honest conviction in your own desire to be responsible and to use the power of your actions in an honorable way, you’re willing to step back from your actions and look at them objectively. That’s what the whole principle of commitment and reflection comes down to, based on the assumption that, as the Buddha said, the mind is luminous. Which doesn’t mean that it’s pure, but it does mean that it can observe itself. And you’re willing to step back and observe yourself. And learn when your actions are actually helpful, when they’re not. There are all too many people who make mistakes, and they know they’re mistakes, but they don’t care. They just keep on making them. They keep on making the mistakes again and again. Those weren’t the kind of people the Buddha would be able to teach. There’s another argument that he gives. He’s talking to the Kalamas. He tells them, “Don’t go by scriptures. Don’t go by respect for your teacher. Go by what you see is skillful in the sense of not harming anyone.” He’s by the wise. Who are the people you really do find wise? What do they have to say? So it’s a combination of your own appropriate attention and trying to develop admirable friendship, finding people who are wise, who have conviction themselves, virtuous, generous. Try to emulate those people. When you see that their actions are good, you want to know, “How do you do this?” Some people find it hard to be able to stick with the precepts, but there are other people who can do it. So you find it hard to ask somebody who doesn’t, “How do you do this?” If you have trouble being generous, notice who’s generous. Ask that person, “How do you do this?” What types of thinking go through your mind? So the Buddha’s asking you to develop friendship with people of integrity, which requires that you have some integrity too. So he tells this to the Kalamas. And then he says, “Try to develop the Brahma-viharas. Let your actions be motivated by universal goodwill, universal compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity.” Then if it turns out that there is no rebirth, then you’ve acted in a way that will lead to good results, assuming that your rebirth is shaped by your karma. And if it turns out there is no rebirth, or there is rebirth but it’s not shaped by karma, at the very least you know you’ve behaved in an honorable way, in a blameless way. Again, what kind of people would find that argument appealing, convincing? People have some sense of integrity, some sense of responsibility, the desire to be harmless already. So faith, conviction, conviction in the Buddha’s awakening, faith in the path. These are virtues and they build on virtuous qualities in the mind. So look in yourself. The fact that you’re sitting here meditating means that you have some sense, at least, that what the mind does is important. It’s not just on the receiving end of things. I gave a talk on karma a couple years back, up in the Bay Area. And after the talk, someone came up and said, “Maybe if this is true, it means that my whole life hasn’t been shaped by my DNA.” And she said it as if it were a totally new idea to her. I keep wondering, here you’ve been going to this Buddhist group for a long time, meditating. Do you think about the implications of what you’re doing? I was talking with an editor of a Buddhist magazine one time, and talking about how if someone really believed in the practice, or really believed in the principles of action, they’d have to behave in a better way. He said, “Well, it’s assuming that they act on their beliefs.” Well, if you have a belief but you don’t act on it, it’s a sign you don’t really believe it. You say one thing to yourself and you act in another way. You have to ask yourself, “What do I really believe? What are the lines of reasoning that lead me to make the choices I make?” Because conviction, faith, in the Buddhist teachings means just that, a question of who you believe, what you believe, and what you do as a result. These things must come together for the conviction or the faith to be genuine, and for it to be really virtuous. So as you meditate, try to take responsibility for your mind. That doesn’t mean you’re going to blame yourself for everything that shows up in the mind. But you know that what kind of things you think about, and what kind of thoughts you follow through with, as the Buddha says, bend your mind. So which direction do you want it to be bent in? You can always bend it in a good direction. So you’ve got that opportunity. Make the most of it. Ultimately you get to a state where the Buddha says, “Nibbana is unbent.” That’s what it means. The mind doesn’t incline anywhere at that point because it’s arrived. But up until that point you want to incline your mind in that direction. You want to make yourself worthy of the Dharma, because it is something we can do. You can make yourself somewhat fit to be tamed.

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