

Faith in the Buddha's Awakening

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This practice we are engaged in, the practice of trying to put an end to suffering, is a long-term process. And it has its ups and downs. Sometimes the downs get really down. So you need something to sustain you, to keep you going, even when things get difficult—either in terms of the state of your mind, the state of the body as it gets ill, grows old, and finally winds down and dies, or the state of the situation around you. When things can get not only difficult but sometimes outrageously unfair, outrageously disruptive, you need something to keep you on course.

Remember that famous passage where King Pasenadi comes to see the Buddha in the middle of the day, and the Buddha asks him: “Where are you coming from in the middle of the day?” The king is very frank, unusually frank for a politician. He says, “I’ve been spending my time obsessed with the things that people obsessed with power are usually obsessed with.” And the Buddha gives him an analogy. He says it’s like four mountains coming in, from all four directions, crushing everything in their path. If you were to find out that there was a mountain coming in from the East, another one from the South, another one from the West, and another one from the North, reflecting on the fact that life, human life is so rare, so hard to come by, what would you do?

The king’s answer is, what else could you do but to practice the Dhamma? Now, that’s not the answer of someone who believes that life is just a one-shot deal. It’s the answer of someone who believes that there is something that lasts beyond death, and that your actions are going to determine what that something will be like. And also that what you do is going to make a difference in how much you’re going to suffer or not suffer when those mountains come in, because those mountains, of course, represent aging, illness, and death.

This is why one of the major strengths you need in the practice—in fact, the first of the five strengths that the Buddha lists—is conviction. *Saddha* is the Pali word, sometimes translated as faith. It’s one of those dirty words in Buddhist circles here in the West. Nobody likes to say “faith,” because that’s what we’ve run away from. Anyone with a Christian background has been taught that faith is believing in things that sometimes are very irrational. In fact, it’s a virtue to believe in those things in spite of the fact that they’re very unreasonable: things like Original Sin, or the way redemption is supposed to come about. None of

those things make any sense, and yet the idea is that if you have strong faith in them, that that will carry you through.

So for many of us, the idea of faith is something where you have to check your brain at the door, check your mind at the door, and teach yourself not to ask questions. But that's not what the quality of faith is in the Buddha's teachings. So we use the word *conviction* to show that it's different, but the sense of commitment, the sense of sustenance, the sustaining power is very similar to faith.

Here the faith is in the Buddha's awakening. Now, that one incident has a lot of implications. As you may remember, the Buddha's awakening consisted of three knowledges in the course of the three watches of the night. After he brought his mind to concentration where it was bright and malleable, he inclined it to the question: Is this life the only one or have there been lives before this? And he found himself remembering many, many lifetimes, way back. There is one place where he says, many thousands of eons, many hundreds of thousands of eons, knowing what he was, what his name was, what he looked like. It's interesting the details of his memories: what he ate, his experience of pleasure and pain, and how he died.

What that knowledge showed him was that this life was not the only one, that your awareness does not depend on this body. There is a kind of awareness that's independent of the body. Even though some of the texts talk about consciousness depending on the meeting of the eye, say, and an object of the eye, or the ear and a sound, that's sensory consciousness. There are six kinds. But then the Buddha also says in some other passages that there is a consciousness that's known independently of the six sense spheres. That's the consciousness, that's the awareness seen in awakening.

Meanwhile, sensory consciousness can depend simply on contact at the sixth sense, the mind, and it's there that it can feed on craving, which is enough to keep it going even when the body dies.

So not everything depends on this body or this brain or these nerves. There is a consciousness that can go, a being that goes from one life to the next. The being is made of attachment and its sustenance is craving. The image the Buddha gives is of a fire that goes from one house to another. He says, the fire leaps from one house to the next based on the wind, based on the air. That's its sustenance.

And as to what this "being" is, though, the Buddha doesn't answer the question aside from that a being is determined by clinging. You define what you are by what you cling to. When you finally let go of clinging, then you're totally undefined. But there is an awareness that doesn't depend on the functioning of the body.

That's an important point to take as a working hypothesis as we practice. Otherwise, think of how much you would struggle just to keep this body alive at all costs if you felt that when the body died, that was it. You'd believe that everything would go out like a smashed light bulb: no light at all. Or think of how you'd face death, say, when there's a lot of pain. You'd want to have the doctor come and shoot you full of morphine, shoot you full of all kinds of drugs so you could go out without pain in a total fog.

Even just believing that consciousness survives death, you might want to go out in a total fog too, but then there's the second knowledge that the Buddha had, which is the knowledge of how all beings die and are reborn. In this case, there was a new wrinkle in that they were reborn in line with their actions, which were based on their views. The quality of the action determined the quality of the rebirth. The underlying principle here is that our actions do make a difference. We do have choices. Our actions are not determined, say, by the stars or by some outside gods, by physical laws, or just impersonal fate. We do really make choices. And we are responsible for our choices. So you don't want to be in a fog.

The lesson here is that we have to be heedful in what we choose to do, what we choose to say, what we choose to think. We have to be heedful about our views, about how we understand things. If we believe that action is nonexistent or inconsequential or that it's totally determined, we're going to be very casual and careless in how we act. But if we believe that our actions do make a real difference, we know we have to be very careful. That's the message of the second knowledge.

The message of the third is two things. One is that your experience of suffering here in the present moment is a result of two things: actions in the past combined with actions in the present, "actions" here including actions in the mind. There's an element of intention in how you experience form, feeling, perception, the process of fabrication, and your sensory consciousness. So it's not just that you're experiencing a given that's been provided by the past, you're actually shaping it here and now. On top of that, it's possible to shape it in such a way that there is no suffering. There is no clinging. And because there's no clinging, you stop defining yourself. When there is no definition of you as a person, then there's no rebirth.

That opens a large range of possibilities of what you can do in the present moment, even when things are bad. When you're ill, when you're dying, it's still possible not to suffer from being ill, from being old, from dying. But it requires training.

So these are some of the implications of the Buddha's awakening. Having faith in the Buddha's awakening doesn't mean you simply believe that it happened, but

that you also take to heart its implications for how you live. It gives you a working hypothesis for the practice. Because instead of asking you to believe something irrational or illogical, the Buddha is simply telling you there are these principles that can't be proven until you've actually applied them and put them to the empirical test. If you follow these things, if you hold by them as working hypotheses, you'll find you're able to free yourself from suffering.

After all the question of whether there is a consciousness separate from the body that's not totally dependent on the body, that's one of the things you can't prove one way or the other. There are scientists who say they haven't seen any consciousness, or they assume that everything that we're conscious of has to depend on the functioning of the brain. But that's just an assumption.

The same with the assumption about whether we have free will, whether we actually do make choices and they do make a difference in our lives. There is no way you can absolutely prove it, but there's no way you can disprove it, either. And the question of whether we have the ability to shape our present experience, you can't really prove it until you've seen that you can shape it to the point where you can put an end to any input in the present moment and see what happens then, and see what opens up as a result of that, and what the implications are, what the results of being able to do that are.

So these are things you can't really know until you've gained full awakening, but you can apply these principles in your practice. For example, when there's pain in the body, or there's a destructive emotion in the mind, you could just sit with it and suffer from it, but you don't have to. So you try working with that possibility. What would it be like if you didn't have to suffer from these things? What would that mean? How would you go about that? That becomes the focus of your practice. If you believe it's simply a matter of accepting what's there as a given that you can't change, that totally limits the way you might practice.

Or if you believe that everything is predetermined: I remember how shocked I was to find a number of Buddhist writers in Buddhist magazines who have proposed this as a somehow Buddhist idea—that the past totally shapes the present moment, and you have no choices at all. If you had no choice, why would you be sitting here meditating? Did it just happen to be because of your past causes, or because the way the universe works itself out has you sitting here? If you think that, there's no sense of your doing anything and what you can do to shape things.

So the implications of the Buddha's awakening really do focus right in on how you meditate, how you practice. And they give you the energy, they give you the sustenance, the sustaining power, to stick with the practice even in difficult times,

because you realize that if you do it well, you don't have to suffer from those difficulties. And the rewards are great. It's not just a nice way to pass your time until you die and then *phht!* that's it. There are long-term consequences that go beyond the end of the body. You can choose what you're going to do and you can shape the extent to which you're suffering right now. You can determine the extent to which you're clinging, to which you'll let yourself be limited by the results of past actions.

So this quality of faith and conviction in the Buddha's awakening is an important element in keeping you focused on where the important issues are in your life right now, where the important issues in your practice are right now, so that you can take advantage of this opportunity really to find what freedom is like.

It's good to contemplate on these things, especially when the going gets rough. There may be some roughness coming in from your past karma, but you don't have to suffer from it. You have some choices in the present moment, in how you're going to shape those potentials coming up from the past.

So keep these points in mind because they give you energy even when things seem to be closing in on you. There is an escape. There is an opening. Freedom is possible. And the quality of the mind is much more important than the mere survival of the body. Believing this helps you keep your values straight, that even if you don't get all the way to true freedom this time around, the effort you've put into the practice is not wasted.