Faith in Awakening

February 26, 2023

When I first went to stay with John Fuhring, one day when I asked him about rebirth, he said, “There’s only one thing we ask you to believe when you meditate, and that’s you believe in the principle of action.” The Pali word ‘gama’, Sanskrit ‘karma’. What does that mean? It means you believe that your actions are yours. That there’s some outside force acting through you. And that you actually have choices. The world isn’t such that once it’s got rolling, it just keeps rolling along without any new choices coming in. There’s always the opportunity to make new choices. And the results of your actions are real. And they’re going to depend on the quality of the mind with which you do the action. If you believe in that much, you’re ready to meditate. Because meditation is learning how to act in the present moment. How to act in a skillful way with the belief that it will make a difference. You have the choice to do this, and it will make a difference in your life. As you train the mind, develop the qualities of the mind, the results will keep getting better and better. But this doesn’t mean there won’t be setbacks or difficulties, but it does mean that the general trend is the more you train the mind, the more control you have over your mind, the more you can steer your life in the direction you want it to go. And if you don’t believe in these things, you wonder why someone would meditate. We meditate, particularly focusing on the mind in the present moment, because we are making choices in the present moment that can make a difference. This is where our freedom is. The present moment is composed of results of past actions plus our present actions plus the results of present actions all acting together. It’s the present actions that take the raw material from the past and shape it into what you’re experiencing right now. If you believe that much, you can see the value of training the mind. But traditionally they ask you to believe something further and believe that the Buddha was actually awakened. That too is relevant. Because what did he awaken to? How did he awaken? He awakened to the fact that the suffering that weighs down the mind is something that comes out of the mind. But there’s a path of practice that can get rid of that state of mind that leads to suffering, or those states of mind that lead to suffering. And this can be developed inside too. So this is the important point right here in the present moment. That our actions have the power to take us all the way to the end of suffering. Again, we don’t know yet. But on the other hand, it’s a good thing to believe. Because when you have an opportunity like this and you have to decide whether you believe or not, why believe in the option that closes off the possibility of true happiness? Faith in Buddhism, or the role of faith in Buddhism, is not the same as it is in a lot of other religions. In a lot of other religions you have to place your trust in somebody else who’s going to do something for you. Whereas in Buddhism, the Buddha is basically saying he sets an example. He’s not going to awaken you. But he’s going to show you how to do it. So this means you have to believe in yourself. That you have it within you to do this. And that it’s going to be worthwhile. They say that the Buddha, after his awakening, looked at the world. He saw all the beings of the world on fire with greed, aversion, and delusion. And the reason he was able to see that fire was because he’d put his fires out. Just like those satellites that they send up into the atmosphere, or above the atmosphere, to check on the infrared rays coming from other planets, other stars. As long as the satellite itself is producing heat, it’s not going to be able to detect the heat coming from those celestial bodies. It has to have a shield so that the heat of the satellite doesn’t affect their instruments. In the same way, the fact that the Buddha was able to put out his inner fires enabled him to see the fact that everybody else was on fire. Which is why he had so much compassion, spending 45 years walking all over northern India to teach people. Some of whom believed him and appreciated the fact that he wanted to help them put an end to suffering. There were a lot of people who said, “No, I’m not interested. I’m fine the way I am.” He didn’t try to teach them. But there were some people who were sensitive to see. They could sense that there was something burning away in their hearts. And here the Buddha’s offering them the opportunity to put those fires out. So even though we don’t know yet for sure, we can still decide that it’s a good thing to believe. It opens up opportunities that otherwise would be closed. But we don’t just stop with faith, don’t just stop with conviction. As the Buddha said, it’s a matter of who you believe in, what you believe, and then what you do as a result. You believe in your actions, you believe that the Buddha came to awakening. And so what do you do? You start with observing the precepts. And then you train the mind. Like right now, we’re trying to keep the mind under control. Get it to think the thoughts we want to think. And not to think thoughts we don’t want it to think. That requires a lot of mindfulness, alertness, ardency. But those are qualities we can develop. They lead to the qualities that made the Buddha the Buddha. Because that’s another part of his awakening, is the how. He did it through his own efforts, and he did it through developing qualities that are potentially there in every human mind. As he said, it required resolution, ardency, heedfulness. These are qualities we all have to some extent. Sometimes when we make up our mind that we really want to work at something, regardless of the difficulties, that’s resolution. Ardency, because you can try to do this really well. Heedfulness is when you realize that if you don’t do this, you’re going to be dangerous. So these are qualities we have to some extent. It’s simply a question of learning how to develop them all the way. So make up your mind you’re going to be resolute in staying with the breath. You’re going to be ardent in developing as many skillful qualities as you can in the mind, and getting rid of as many unskillful qualities as you can. And heedful, you’re going to keep watch over the mind. Try to be very careful in how you do this. Try to develop this as a skill. How do you develop skills? It basically comes down to two principles. One is that you commit yourself to doing what you’ve been taught. But then you don’t just leave it there. You reflect on what you’re doing. Are you getting the results you want? If you are, keep it up. If not, maybe you got the wrong instructions, maybe you didn’t understand the instructions, or maybe you haven’t put them into practice properly. So you go back and reconsider things. Try new things out. It’s this willingness to try things out. That on the one hand does depend on a certain amount of faith, that it’s worth the effort to try things out. It also requires some faith in your own powers of observation, which in the beginning may not be all that clear, but you can develop them. The Buddha’s own request for someone who would come and study with him was that the person one, be truthful, and two, be observant. That’s how you reflect properly. Because if you’re not truthful in admitting to yourself what you’ve done, then there’s no way you’re going to learn from it. If you try to hide things from yourself, it can be done for a while. It doesn’t get in the way of learning anything of value. Then being observant, you’ve got to look at the mind. Here we are focusing on the breath. So you look both at the mind and at the breath. Try to figure out what way you can breathe, what way you can focus that keeps the focus together with the breath, so the mind is happy to be here. Because after all, we’re here in the present moment, because this is where the important decisions are being made. And you want to be here consistently, so you can see the connection between cause and effect. Because some causes give their results immediately. You stick your finger in a fire and it’s not going to wait until the next lifetime to burn. It’s going to hurt right away. Others do take time. You plant the seed of a tree and you’re not going to get the full-grown tree for quite a while. So to see the connection between cause and effect, you have to be here as continually as you can. That requires that you have a sense of ease, balance, equilibrium, poise here in the present moment. So you have to believe this is a good thing. You have to believe that you can do it. When you believe that much and really give yourself to the belief, that’s how you come to know. As the Ajahn say, “See if you can prove the Buddha wrong.” They say that because they’re confident that you can’t. In the course of developing the qualities to prove the Buddha’s teachings inside yourself, they’re going to be good qualities regardless. There’s that analogy of the elephant hunter. He goes into the forest and he sees some big footprints. He sees some scratch marks. He’s looking for a bull elephant because he needs a big strong bull elephant to do some work. But because he’s an experienced hunter, he doesn’t immediately come to the conclusion that the big footprints or the scratch marks in the trees have to be those of a big bull elephant. After all, there are dwarf females with big feet. And tall females with tusks. Maybe the scratch marks and footprints are theirs. But he follows them. He sees more signs. Finally though, he gets to a clearing and there’s the big bull elephant. That’s when he knows for sure. Now the fact that the marks look promising and he followed them, that required a certain amount of faith on his part that this wouldn’t be a dry run. He knew that it could be, but things look promising. But when he saw the bull elephant, that’s when he knew. In the same way as you practice, you have to have a certain amount of faith that this is worth putting your time into. You see scratch marks. You see footprints. The mind settles down and is quiet. Sometimes it even gains psychic knowledge of various kinds. But that’s just scratch marks. That’s when you get to the dimension inside that stands outside of space and time. Totally unconditioned. That’s when you know what the Buddha taught was true. There really is an end of suffering and it can be found through your efforts. So this is how conviction turns into knowledge. Not just by hoping someday things will be revealed to you, but by encouraging you to act in such a way that you can learn these things for yourself.

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