

Faith in Awakening

July 15, 2020

A friend whose background was in Zen and Christianity once asked me, “You Theravadins, where is your faith? What do you have faith in? What do you believe in?” Then he added, “And don’t say, ‘faith in the Dharma.’ That’s too broad and general.” It was an easy question to answer. I said, “We have faith in the Buddha’s awakening.”

Everything we do in our practice revolves around that event. It’s one of those events that assigns meaning to other events in time and space. In fact, for those of us who practice, it is *the* event that assigns meaning. We don’t know the full extent of what the Buddha awakened to—after all, he said what he taught was just like a handful of leaves compared to the leaves in the forest—but the handful of leaves does give us enough to go on to decide what really matters in life, how the world works, and how we can make it work for the sake of a true, lasting, and harmless happiness. It gives perspective to everything else that happens. So we have to keep that perspective in mind.

As news of the pandemic gets more and more grim, it’s good to remember what the Buddha learned in his first knowledge: Death is not the end. Craving and consciousness can feed each other, even without the body. They can go on and on and on indefinitely. What the Buddha learned in his second knowledge is that how things go on and on depends on the quality of our actions. The quality of our actions depends on our intentions, and our intentions depend on our views. The third knowledge is that we can escape from all this, and that escape is the ultimate happiness.

We have to keep those facts in mind so that as we go through our daily lives, we won’t get worn down by the tedium and by the apparent hopelessness around us. It’s not just the pandemic. You look at our institutions. The people running them seem to be craven. All they can think about is how this is a time to make money off other people suffering. It’s a very bleak perspective. But you have to remember that what we see in the human world is not everything to the world. It’s not the whole world. It’s not the whole range of possibilities.

You have to keep that larger set of possibilities in mind. That’s what gives meaning to our actions. As the Buddha said, there are worldly treasures—the treasures of money, gold, silver, land, and possessions—but they’re nothing compared to the treasures of the mind. He gave a list of noble treasures: conviction, a sense of shame, a sense of compunction, virtue, learning, generosity,

and discernment. These treasures come down basically to three things: generosity, virtue, and right view. These are the things we can take with us.

Generosity, of course, is a form of wealth. The texts talk quite a bit about the wealth that will eventually come from being generous but also about the wealth that comes to the mind right now by being generous. There's a spaciousness of the mind. When the Buddha described mundane right view, one of the first things he said was, "There is giving," which seems obvious. But he's underlining the importance of being generous—that it's a meaningful act.

If there were just the pandemic, just the behavior of society around us, the act giving would seem futile. But in the larger perspective provided by the Buddha's awakening, generosity is really important. It fosters a quality of mind that provides a foundation for the development of *all* the good qualities of the mind. As he said, if beings understood, as he did, the power of generosity, then even if it were their last meal, they wouldn't eat without having shared.

The same with virtue: Virtue includes a sense of shame and a sense of compunction. They go together. With virtue, you refrain from doing harm. Your motivation is that, one, you would be ashamed to do harm; you realize it's beneath you. And two, your sense of compunction is that you really do care about the results of your actions.

This, too, is a form of wealth. It's a wealth that sticks with you and protects you from doing all kinds of things that would become wounds in the mind. Like generosity, virtue gives you a genuine basis for self-esteem and self-respect in that even though other people may be acting in ways that are not restrained, you have the dignity of restraint. You give yourself value as a human being.

There was that film years back by Fellini, his version of the *Satyricon*. There's one long section where everything is falling apart in the society. Then it suddenly switches to a scene in a garden where two people are behaving in a very dignified manner in spite of everything falling apart around them. In the context of the movie, it seemed rather ironic: this little island of human dignity in a sea of depravity. But from the point of view of the Buddha's awakening, our dignity is a large thing, an important thing to develop, because we are beings who are capable of putting an end to suffering. We are capable of rising above our cravings and our clingings.

That's why the truths are noble truths. When the Buddha talks about the noble truth of suffering, it's not that suffering is noble. But when you realize that clinging is suffering, and you're going to comprehend your clinging to the point of dispassion for it, that's a noble act. When the Buddha talks about the awakened ones being noble, this is precisely the kind of nobility he had in mind. It's not the

nobility of birth or the nobility of having large manor homes. It's the nobility of restraint—the nobility of not giving in to your thirsts.

Then finally, there are the forms of wealth that cluster around discernment. In addition to discernment, there's learning and conviction. The conviction is when we borrow the Buddha's awakening. We don't get the real thing, but we do get part of the perspective—the part that he said would be useful. We keep that in mind. Based on that, we learn the Dhamma. It furnishes the mind with good maxims and good principles so when questions come up, something the Buddha said will run right in and give us some guidance. So again, we're borrowing the Buddha's wisdom.

As for discernment, that's when we develop our own. We see into exactly how the mind creates unnecessary suffering, how it can stop, and how it can master all the skills needed to stop. Discernment, in the Buddha's teaching, is not just knowing things; it's mastering skills. When we have these skills, especially the skills of discernment, then as Ajaan Lee says, even if you find yourself born with nothing but a machete, you can still set yourself up in life, knowing how to use the machete properly. You know how to use *whatever* you find in a proper way.

So keep the perspective provided by the Buddha's awakening in mind. Think of it as giving a sense of what really matters in life. And the perspective it provides is hopeful. Even though things may seem dark around us, we can rise above the darkness. We can rise above the narrow confines of this one life and this one level of being. We can take the larger view, and taking the larger view invests our daily actions with meaning. So even though life may get cut short, it still has meaning, a meaning that doesn't end with death. It has a meaning that goes on.

Always keep that perspective in mind. It's what provides us with refuge and strength, a clear sense of direction, and at least an inkling of what really is possible and what our efforts can attain.