

F a i t h

**An editorial
by
*Xianyang
Carl Jerome***

We generally think of faith as belief in something that cannot be proven as a conviction in the absence of evidence. We commonly call this type of belief “blind faith,” though more accurately it is “cognitive” faith.

If we look closely at the idea of faith, we can differentiate between “cognitive” and “affective” faith. In the cognitive sense, to have faith is to believe something is true without being able to verify it. A belief that the plagues of the Exodus stories actually occurred in ancient Egypt, or a belief that the physical resurrection of Jesus actually happened as a historical event are both examples of cognitive faith.

Interestingly, cognitive faith is generally rejected in Western Buddhism as not conducive to spiritual awakening.* This is seen most emphatically in the often quoted Kalama Sutra AN 3.65 <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.065.than.html> where the Buddha explains how to decide the veracity of a spiritual belief system.

Affective faith, on the other hand, refers to a sense of trust and confidence in and support for a practice or a person or a certain set of values. This kind of faith is more experiential, or intuitive, than intellectual.

In Western Buddhism today faith (saddha) is understood in the affective sense, as confidence in the Buddha as the idealized embodiment the practice, in the Dharma, the teachings, and in the Sangha, the spiritual community that preserves those teachings. The single, overarching goal of spiritual life, is, according to Buddhism, the ending of dukkha. The goal of the teachings and the purpose of faith in the teachings is best understood in this context.

This idea of affective faith in Buddhism becomes somewhat clearer when we realize that the Buddha only claimed to have discovered that certain thoughts, actions and practices lead

to the cessation of suffering. Rather than having invented them either speculatively, discursively, or miraculously, so there is no need for blind faith. Once we begin discovering these “truths” for ourselves, a confidence in the process and the teachings develops. We call that confidence “faith”.

But how do we know we should have faith? For me, faith is confidence and trust in the Buddha-Dharma-Sangha (the Triple Gem) and is the natural result of my practice. In other words, mine is affective faith, which comes from an examination, both on and off the cushion, of my experience with suffering. I suggest you use your practice to do the same thing, to generate faith from your practice by becoming aware of the experience of dukkha. The faith will then be affective and a powerful force for your spiritual growth.

Buddhism does not ask us to believe in anything in particular about the mundane world. It only asks us to look closely at experience. Use your practice to look closely. See if your dukkha is weaker than it was. How much weaker? Is it fading away? Therein is the source of the faith that will sustain your practice.

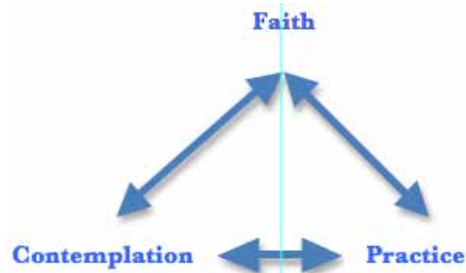
When I saw, dramatically and profoundly, how the practice had brought peace and happiness to my life, when I realized that the tools it gave me really did work to reduce and weaken dukkha. For the last 2500 years those tools, those teachings, have been practiced and preserved for us by the Sangha of Buddhist priests, nuns and monks. That understanding led to my faith in the Sangha, even with its occasional blemish.

Finally, as I realized that I really am already a Buddha, that my own true nature already is the nature of enlightenment, I began to develop a renewed faith, a reverence and appreciation for the Triple Gem as a whole from a place deep inside my practice.

Without faith, I suggest, we cannot get to the other shore. For while the teachings can be secularized, and can be useful when pulled out of context and used, for example, to help us with an anxiety disorder, when we use the teachings simply to get what we want, rather than to end our suffering in the spiritual sense, we are using the teachings unwisely. When our actions are not informed by wisdom, the raft stays securely anchored in the turbulent waters of samsara. Faith is what allows us to lift the anchor and paddle our way to liberation.

Being faithful is so important that, eventually we must ask, how can we strengthen our faith. There are two fundamental ways to strengthen faith. The first is through practice. The second is by through contemplative thought, starting with a contemplation of the four noble truths and continuing with a study of key texts and sutras.

Graphically, it looks like this.



Practice: Practice, especially as it relates to faith, should neither be too loose nor too tight, as the Buddha suggested to the monk Sona in the Sona Sutta. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an06/an06.055.than.html> And we should meditate, as conditions permit, as energetically and diligently and effectively as our karma allows. Doing this will increase faith and strengthen our overall practice.

Contemplation: A contemplative understanding of the four noble truths is always beneficial if faith is

to be strengthened, as well as some study of dharma texts and sutras. For advice on your meditation practice or on appropriate texts or teachings or sutras for contemplation, I suggest asking a qualified, capital “T” Buddhist Teacher. Developing a relationship with Buddhist priest or monastic will not only guide you along the Path in the most beneficial way, but will build and strengthen your faith.

When I see my Teacher’s practice, and witness his movement toward liberation, I am reminded of the veracity of the teachings and faith in my practice increases. Seeing my Teacher shut his sense doors has profoundly strengthened my faith that, by practicing diligently and wisely, I too can bring dukkha to an end.

**This is not the case, however, in some Asian countries where Guan Yin, for example, is seen as a capital “G” God and is worshipped in a cult fashion, or when a Buddha Field is made into an existent place and becomes nothing more than a Buddhist version of a theistic heaven.*

EXERCISE: Consider where you are in your practice now in terms of (1) the strength of your faith, the amount of time and the materials in your contemplative study, and (3) how much meditation you do and the type and effectiveness of your meditation. Place a dot inside the triangle to indicate where you are. Is that where you belong in terms of your understanding of your spiritual journey, in terms of your spiritual needs and growth, in terms of your karma? Do you need to develop or reemphasize one or more of these aspects of practice to grow spiritually? Discuss this with a Teacher, deciding what would be most beneficial for you in this context.