

Faith and the Path

Introduction to the readings for October 31 class
Suttas 85, 27, 70, 53 (paragraph 11), 107, 125, 117, 24
(Optional: 47, 89, 126, 56, 141)

Faith is the seed, austerity the rain,
Wisdom my yoke and plough;
Conscience is the pole, mind the yoke,
Mindfulness my ploughshare and goad.

Samyutta Nikaya 7.11

Walking on the Buddhist path begins with *saddhā*. This important Pali word has been translated into English a variety of ways. Most often ‘faith’ is used. Other common translations are ‘confidence’, ‘conviction’, and ‘trust.’ Probably no single English word captures the original meaning. If we can put aside the negative association faith sometimes has with believing in a creed, faith may better convey the deep heartfelt quality of *saddhā* more accurately than the other choices.

Saddhā is closely connected with the words *pasāda* and *adhimutta*. In MN 91.35 Bhikkhu Bodhi translates *pasāda* as ‘confidence’. The word is often used to describe a quality of mind/heart (*citta*). In MN 142.14 Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it as ‘trusting’ in the expression ‘trusting heart’. It appears as an important and frequent word in the Vinaya where the Buddha admonishes the monks when their behavior ‘neither instills confidence (*pasāda*) in those who lack it nor increases it in those who have it.’ Since *pasāda* also means clearness, brightness, purity, and calmness the word is sometimes understood as pointing to the peacefulness of Buddhist faith – it is not hot, zealous faith.

Adhimutta means to resolve on, incline toward, or to believe in something. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it both as ‘confident’ and ‘decides upon’ (MN 16.15 and 106.4). **The word *Adhimutta* points to the idea that *saddhā* is not an end to itself. Rather it prompts a person to engage in the path to liberation. In fact, *saddhā* is an essential element of the path.**

We saw in our first month’s reading assignment, the Buddha teaching that faith can be misleading. In MN 95.14 he says “something may be fully accepted out of faith, yet it may be empty, hollow, and false” (see also MN75.20). Yet in the same sutta faith is presented as an important step along the path of liberation. Here the faith is not in a teaching; it is faith in the person who is teaching. Faith in a person is appropriate after investigation has shown the teacher to be without greed, hate, or delusion. With faith the practitioner visits, respects, and then hears the Dhamma from the teacher. Having heard the Dhamma, the person memorizes it, examines it, and gains reflective acceptance of it. This in turn gives rise to zeal and striving. Here faith is not blind; rather it is intimately

connected to investigation and examination. It is part of a process that ends in the discovery of truth.

Often in learning a skill or following a path to a new possibility, it is common to give preliminary and informed trust to a person who knows the skill or the path. But once we have developed the skill or walked the path, then faith is replaced by knowledge; we don't have to believe something is possible; we know it is. The same is true with the path of liberation. It begins with faith and ends with knowledge.

According to the Middle Length Discourses, the Buddha was conscious and intentional about teaching so as to awaken faith in the listeners. For example, in MN 68.24 (an optional reading in September) the Buddha explains that he describes what happens to specific liberated people after death because it inspires faith in some followers:

“there are faithful clansmen inspired and gladdened by what is lofty, who when they hear that, direct their minds to such a state, and that leads to their welfare and happiness for a long time.”

Here again we read that faith is a valued part of the path because in motivating people toward a goal, here called “what is lofty.”

Saddhā has been emphasized from the earliest beginning of the Buddha's teaching. In the story of Brahma asking the Buddha to teach, when the Buddha agreed he called on people to “show their faith” (MN26.21).

As you read the suttas assigned for this month please notice what kind of faith arises in people in their encounter with the Buddha and his teachings. What are the objects of the faith? How does their faith prompt them to act?

Also please reflect on the role of faith, confidence, and conviction in your own involvement with Buddhism. How have you come to your faith? What is the basis for your faith? Have you investigated and examined what you have faith in? What function does faith have for you? How does it motivate you? Are there things connected to your Buddhist practice that you have had faith in that have now become something that you know?