



Buddhism Level 2

The Five Spiritual Faculties

Week 2 - Faith



Last week we introduced the idea of the Five Spiritual Faculties which are a way of looking at the balance we need to bring to our 'spiritual life'. We heard how traditional teachings state that they can be arranged into 2 complementary pairs (Faith & Wisdom, Energy & Concentration), with the 5th faculty, Mindfulness, being instrumental in maintaining balance between them.

Within the first pair, **Faith** (or, if we prefer, **Confidence** or **Trust**) can be seen as having a distinctly emotional quality to counter-balance the intellectual nature of Wisdom. The notion of Faith in a Buddhist context is different from that of the same name in religions like Christianity or Islam – it isn't the same as 'belief', which has been defined as 'believing to be true something which cannot be rationally demonstrated'. One well-known western Buddhist, Edward Conze, commented that faith in our tradition is "Generally speaking... regarded as only a preliminary step, as a merely provisional state". Put simply, this means that, until we have enough direct experience to come closer to the true nature of reality for ourselves, we are prepared to accept our limitation and trust in something that others (and, in particular, the Buddha) have described from their experience.

The important point here is that Faith involves taking on this provisional understanding in an **intuitive** rather than an **intellectual** way. For example, we all have a rational understanding of the impermanence of human life, and the fact that we shall eventually die. Although we may have no doubt about this on an intellectual level, our emotional grasp of the real implication of this fact is quite possibly much weaker. However, our emotional experiences, whether joyful ones like close friendship or traumatic ones like ending a relationship, have a potential to bring us a little closer to true reality. This is a crucial part of our spiritual development; in fact Sangharakshita goes so far as to say "The central problem of the spiritual life is finding emotional equivalents for our intellectual understanding". Although we may struggle to find these equivalents, when we do they carry far more weight than our relatively shallow, rational understanding of an argument – in fact, they may leave us deeply affected.

There is a traditional, threefold formulation of faith, called the 'three grounds of faith'. The first - **faith grounded in intuition** - is the initial glimmering that there may be a deeper level of reality. When you have this intuition you don't *know* that there is such a thing, but you have a feeling, an intuition, that there is. Many people today, influenced by a scientific approach to life, and perhaps also disillusioned by Christianity or other religion, distrust faith and intuition to some extent. This is understandable, because the kinds of things that some people have faith in are often not verifiable by reason or experience – to put it bluntly, they are sometimes quite irrational.

The second ground of faith – **faith grounded in reason** – is where that intuitive feeling is tested by reason. It feels right, but is it? Does it make sense – is it reasonable? We sometimes hear of religious faith being opposed to reason, but in Buddhism these things are not opposed. Buddhism is not irrational, and every claim that Buddhism makes to the truth *can and should* be tested for its reasonableness.

The third ground of faith is **faith grounded in experience**, and this is where faith and wisdom come together. In the second ground of faith your intuition was tested by reason – you had to see whether what you had faith in stood up to reason. But reason, for Buddhism, is not the last word on the subject. It's possible to think something through and get it wrong. In the third ground of faith your intuition and reason are tested by experience. The 'experience' that is meant here is the seeing of the way things really are – it is *the experience of wisdom*.

It is also interesting to note that Faith plays a key role in the all-important Buddhist principle of **conditionality**. As we might already know, there is a model of conditionality that is quite different from the endless 'cyclical' round represented in the Wheel of Life (or Wheel of Becoming). In the Spiral Path, each of the 12 factors in turn has the effect of augmenting the next in a sort of 'positive feedback' system which can ultimately lead to enlightenment. The first link in the Spiral Path is *dukkha*, which can be translated as 'unsatisfactoriness'. On an emotional level, this can be seen as a weariness of the imperfections and suffering of mundane life. Crucially, this disillusionment can lead to the strong recognition that we need something entirely different – "There must be more to life than this!" as the saying goes. If we embrace this possibility of wider horizons, of experience which entirely transcends the mundane and unsatisfactory, this is the start of the second link – Faith. In turn, the development of faith eventually leads to the third – Joy – but that's another story!

Of course, for Buddhists, the main objects of faith - those things in which we place our confidence, and to which we feel a positive emotional response – are the Three Jewels. Sangharakshita has described this response in terms of our own *potential* for a direct encounter with reality – in other words, for Enlightenment – responding to *reality itself*. This response could be to the Dharma – the teachings about the nature of reality and how we can move closer towards it. It can also be to the Sangha, in the sense of the lineage of actual and mythic enlightened beings from whom we can take inspiration. Most obviously, it can be to the Buddha himself, as the human embodiment of Enlightenment.

When we feel the need to express our faith to the Three Jewels, this is the beginning of **devotion** in Buddhism. Acts of devotion, even quite simple ones like the traditional act of 'saluting the shrine' or bowing to images of the Buddha, can seem alien and challenging to modern-day Westerners. However, we can choose to see these practices simply for what they are – a physical (and verbal and mental) affirmation to ourselves of the emotional response that we feel for the highest ideals that bring inspiration to our lives.