

## Extracts from “Faith – Trusting your own deepest experience”

Sharon Salzberg

### Faith and belief

With their assumptions of correctness, beliefs try to make a known out of the unknown. They make presumptions about what is yet to come, how it will be, what it will mean, and how it will affect us. Faith, on the other hand, doesn't carve out reality according to our preconceptions and desires. It doesn't decide how we are going to perceive something but rather is the ability to move forward even without knowing. Faith, in contrast to belief, is not a definition of reality, not a received answer, but an active, open state that makes us willing to explore. While beliefs come to us from outside—from another person or a tradition or heritage—faith comes from within, from our alive participation in the process of discovery.

Writer Alan Watts summed up the difference simply and pointedly as, "Belief clings, faith lets go." As I matured in practice and teaching, I found the confidence to say more often, with greater ease, "The tradition says such and such, but I myself don't know." Rather than hiding behind a belief system, I was revealing a growing acceptance of entering the unknown, dwelling in the unknown, bearing the unknown. I was depending on my faith rather than beliefs.

### Faith and questioning

When faith means complying with someone else's dictates, one either has blind faith or is considered by the authorities to have no faith at all. This was reinforced for me many years after my initial sojourn in India, when I was leading a weekend workshop on the topic of faith and Buddhism. In a beautiful canyon outside of Los Angeles, about fifty people were gathered, sitting on a platform under the shade of an old banyan tree. With clear, open vistas stretching for miles, the location was quite apt for discussing the quality of faith.

After opening with some of the classical definitions of faith in Buddhism—to draw near, to place the heart upon, to set forth—I asked if anyone had any questions. Everyone just sat there with no response. As the morning went on, I detected a growing unease as the group continued to meet my comments and invitations to speak with an almost stony silence.

When we reconvened after lunch, a man sitting in the front row of the platform suddenly burst out with, "I came to Buddhism to get away from all this shit!" Then, more calmly, he went on, "For some of us who got faith pounded into our heads when we were young, it brings up a lot of misgivings." With that the group came alive, and person after person expressed their painful associations with "faith."

Many felt they had been forced to believe something that couldn't be proven, and they had been discouraged from asking questions. "The authorities within my religion were very annoyed when I asked, 'How do you know?'" one woman told the group. "They would just say, 'Have faith,' and I never could. Pretty soon I didn't have any faith at all."

Many had been hurt by the religious teachings of their childhood, in which their degree of faith was the measure of their belonging; if they did not have enough there was something wrong with them or they

would be condemned, maybe forevermore. Separating faith from intelligent inquiry casts it as a practice of the gullible.

For a number of people in that workshop, "lack of faith" in their childhood had meant having questions, being uncertain, or maybe even delighting in some aspects of their religious doctrine but not others. Essentially, what they had been denied in their experience with religious beliefs was the sense that they had the right to discover the truth for themselves. They didn't lack faith; they lacked the opportunity to *verify* their faith by examining their beliefs.

If faith depends on believing what we are told, when those beliefs fall apart, we are left with nowhere to stand. A friend of mine began to feel uncomfortable maintaining the Santa Claus myth with her growing daughter, and decided to tell her the truth. She explained that the presents under the tree on Christmas morning were put there by her parents. The child listened to this information, then sadly left the room. A few minutes later she returned to inquire, "Are you the tooth fairy, too?" Her mother said yes, and again the child left, looking sad. Soon she returned with the question, "Are you the Easter bunny as well?" When her mother said yes, the child looked at her fiercely and demanded, "Is there a God?"

For many of us, our inquiry into the nature of life has led to that same predicament: How and when do we trust something as true? What beliefs about life and death are woven into our view of the world? Do these beliefs reflect truth, and can we count on them? If the beliefs crumble, are we bereft of all refuge? Does critical exploration of our beliefs leave us vulnerable and unsure? How can we wholeheartedly have faith rather than a handful of beliefs?

## **Faith and fear**

Being alive necessarily means uncertainty and risk, times of going into the unknown. If we withdraw from the flow of life, our hearts contract. We hold back so much that we feel separate from our own bodies and minds, separate from other people, even people we really care about. In the grip of other intense emotions, like grief and jealousy, we might feel anguish, but fear shuts us down, arrests the life-force. To be driven by fear is like dying inside.

When the suffering is overwhelming, we may try to recoil from how bad it feels by numbing our reactions. Many of us survived childhood in just this way. But, ultimately, cutting ourselves off from what is happening locks us into fear and makes us unable to see that we might find another way to respond outside the small section delineated by the dots, defined by our assumptions.

Faith, in contrast, reminds us of the ever-changing flow of life, with all its movement and possibility. Faith is the capacity of the heart that allows us to draw close to the present and find there the underlying thread connecting the moment's experience to the fabric of all of life. It opens us to a bigger sense of who we are and what we are capable of doing.

To act with faith, however, means not getting seduced by any of its ready replacements. One of the most subtle ways fear can bind us, so quietly that we hardly know to call it fear, is what is known in Buddhist teachings as "fixated hope." Fixated hope, like hope itself, resembles faith in that both sparkle with a sense of possibility. But fixated hope is conditional, circumscribing happiness to getting what we want.

We may, for example, have faith in our children's ability to have a meaningful life, but if to us that means they will grow up to be doctors or lawyers rather than custodians or waiters, what we are really doing is trying to manage life. Any insistence that people or circumstances meet our exact expectations is not faith but another effort at control, bound to end in disappointment.

I am not at all suggesting hopelessness. It's natural to want things to work out in ways that we believe will be for the good. When we are in pain, hoping for things to be another way can be essential to our health and even our survival. When we're unhappy, it is natural to picture how things might be better. True hope can open our hearts and remind us of light when we are in darkness. But when our hope for relief from suffering is based only on getting what we want, in the precise way we want it, we bind hope to fear rather than to faith.

## Faith and metta

One afternoon I was walking up the staircase to my room, as I had done countless times before, barely noticing now the fraying decor and grubby sconces. I was practicing being mindful of my steps, when all of a sudden I encountered what I can only call a tremendous sense of presence, and with it a feeling of release, joy, and love. I felt like a child thrown up into the air by a tender parent, whose loving arms waited to catch me safely back from my transport of freedom.

I don't know why it was him in particular, but the image of the contemporary Indian saint Maharaji Neem Karoli Baba arose in my mind, as messenger of that primordial love. One of my friends who had met him told me, "He was so vast, no matter how far out I went, he was always there." That's what this presence felt like. I knew with sudden conviction that no matter how deep my despair, life was always there and its essence was this inclusiveness I felt as love; it was big enough to contain whatever sorrow or brokenness might arise. Standing on that staircase, with its shabby wallpaper, worn carpet, and dim lighting, I was rocked by faith in that enormous sense of life.

Compassion arose in me, a tender concern for all of us who, within touching distance of such inclusiveness, usually feel so alone. I found myself spontaneously doing lovingkindness meditation for all beings. Suddenly the image of my mother came into my mind. I realized for the first time that her life and her death were really *her* story, not mine. They were a part of my story, but not the primary part. I prayed for my mother, wherever she was, in whatever life form, to be happy, to be peaceful, to be free from suffering, to be as blessed in that moment as I was, held in the generous embrace of faith.

## Epilogue

To OFFER OUR HEARTS in faith means recognizing that our hearts are worth something, that we ourselves, in our deepest and truest nature, are of value. When we live from this knowing, our offering is complete, generous, bountiful. I find this unstinting faith perfectly expressed in one of the verses of Lal Ded, or Lalla, a fourteenth-century mystic from Kashmir. Lalla says:

*At the end of a crazy-moon night  
the love of God rose.  
I said, "It's me, Lalla."*