

The Faculty of Faith/Trust in the Practice (*saddha*)

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 04-14-13.

In the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, the Connected Discourses, the Buddha said:

"Bhikkhus, there are these five faculties. What five? The faculty of faith, the faculty of energy, the faculty of mindfulness, the faculty of concentration, the faculty of wisdom. These are the five faculties.

"One who has completed and fulfilled these five faculties is an arahant. If they are weaker than that, one is ... [a non-returner]; if still weaker, a once-returner; if still weaker, a stream-enterer; if still weaker, a Dhamma-follower; if still weaker, a faith-follower.

"Thus, bhikkhus, one who activates them fully succeeds fully; one who activates them partly succeeds partly. The five faculties, bhikkhus, are not barren, so I say." — SN 48.17, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi

As this quote makes clear, these five faculties of mind and heart are part of the spiritual journey no matter where one is in that process. So I thought I might spend some time with them over the next weeks. One of the advantages of looking at these is that the Buddha gives us some clear ideas of what it means for each factor to be fully developed.

One of the crucial things about the spiritual faculties is that not only must they be developed, they must be in balance for one to experience any kind of deep insights, not to mention the stages of awakening that the Buddha refers to.

What got me thinking about the faculties is a presentation I attended on Wednesday. The presenter was Sara Lazar, a neurobiologist at Harvard. She was brought to MU by one of Donna Strickland's projects, the Center for Contemplative Studies in Higher Education.

Dr. Lazar offered a brief taste of mindfulness meditation, for those who weren't familiar with it, and then presented an overview of some of the research she and other's have done on the effects of mindfulness meditation – which she also defined as Insight Meditation, the practice we do.

She offered some evidence that doing this practice alters both the function and structure of the brain in ways that contribute to less anxiety and depression and more mental acuity, among other things.

What interested me was whether this information had in some way altered how she guides herself in her own meditation practice. Because, I thought, from a practice perspective, all of this scientific research is just more information. And I honestly wondered if in some way this information would alter the practice theory or instructions that we use to guide our practices and that has been passed down from the Buddha? Her short answer was "no." But her longer answer was more interesting.

She commented that what had been most helpful to her own practice was talking to the many very experienced meditators who were her experimental subjects. From hearing about the changes that they had experienced and the ways that they were able to relate to their life experiences, she said she was inspired to be more committed to doing her own practice. But she also commented that she thought that for some meditators, the science gave them encouragement to overcome their doubts about whether it was worth continuing with the practice.

What struck me about this is that she was talking about the faculty of *saddha* which is usually translated as faith, but also as "trust" or "conviction." The reports of the experienced students and the "scientific evidence" helped people have faith in the practice.

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu has said that there are three components to this quality of faith or conviction.

1. **"trust in the ability of wise people to know the ideal path of practice,**
2. **"belief in their teachings, and**
3. **"a willingness to put those teachings into practice."**

—*Wings to Awakening*, "The Five Faculties," p. 137

In the past, and to a large degree in my own training, one had to have faith in the reputation and authority of the teacher. As part of this one would try to evaluate the wisdom of the teacher and reliability of the teachings, by the behavior and reports of the

students, just as Dr. Lazar was describing in her own experience. Sometimes we talk about faith in terms of "blind faith" and "verified faith." This first part of trusting the "wise person" is, at least initially, an expression of "blind faith." Just outright trust and hope that this person has something to offer that will be helpful.

But as we engage in the third part of Ṭhānissaro's model, practicing with the teachings we begin to verify for ourselves whether the teachings are worthy of our trust and belief. And over time, if they seem to be and we continue with the practice, we come to believe in the teachings more and more.

And because the Buddha's teachings tell us that we have to do the work of changing our lives and working with our minds and hearts, this naturally leads to the next of the faculties, energy or effort, which I'll talk about next time.

Faith and doubt are constant companions on this path until one reaches the first stage of awakening, what is called stream entry or entering the stream of the Noble Ones. From that point one has unshakeable faith in the teachings, though perhaps not always in one's ability to make them real in one's life.

Faith is the antidote for the hindrance of doubt. So it might be useful to reflect on what strengthens your faith in the teachings and the practice, so that you can call upon it until the time when your faith becomes unshakeable.