

The Meaning of Faith in Buddhism and Christianity

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Recently I was asked to comment on issues between Buddhism and Christianity. The inquirer was particularly concerned with the appropriateness of using the term Faith in Buddhism. As we understand it, the term Faith in the West carries Christian connotations, essentially trust in a personal God. This applies also to several other terms such as Grace or Salvation and perhaps even Heaven or Hell. We use these concepts rather loosely when discussing religion with our friends.

Interaction and dialogue have been taking place between these religions more frequently as family members are likely to belong to one Faith or another. In the scholarly realm there has also been increasing dialogue between Christians and Buddhists because of the rising interest in, and spread of, Buddhism in western society. Without proper understanding of each tradition and its teaching much confusion, distortion and misunderstanding arises.

Because interaction between the various Faiths is increasing, it is very important that each follower be well informed about the nature of other religions. Dialogue is not only taking place between Christians and Buddhists but with other religions as well. The general principles of each religion should be taught in our Churches or temples so members can be informed, thereby reducing religious friction in families and society.

The process of interaction between Faiths is more than a question of religious beliefs, concepts or words. It also involves culture. Within each religious tradition an understanding of life, values and social relations have developed over centuries. In the United States, because of social and religious freedom, varying styles of life are now penetrating the host culture as never before. In Hawaii, for example, the Asian custom of removing shoes on entering a home has become virtually a standard practice. Of course, forms of Asian meditation have become very popular.

It is observable that belief in karma and transmigration have permeated our language and thought in recent years, becoming part of the modern way of thinking across religious lines. Also the term Nirvana as the ultimate condition of human life has increased in use. Anything indicating bliss and tranquility will be compared to Nirvana.

Zen, a term meaning meditation in Japanese Buddhism, now denotes anything of positive value or requiring expertise to be successful. There is the Zen of motorcycle repair, the Zen of golfing, gardening, tennis and the like. Hence, the penetration of the spirit of Asian culture, particularly East Asia, is gradually permeating western psyche. We are undergoing a cultural process not requiring specific beliefs or integration with traditional western beliefs. This comes about through increasing communication between cultures and our educational process.

Eventually, as the new religious views find supporters and followers in the host culture, touchpoints, that is, points of connection or similarity, will be discovered and highlighted. Discovering such touchpoints makes interaction between varying faiths easier. That is one reason people focus more on the commonalities of Faith than differences which actually may be more crucial. If we already have a similar view, there is no need to convert or change one's standpoint.

On the other hand, we may discover that features of the new Faith system can be integrated with one's dominant traditional view and thereby strengthen one's traditional Faith. We sometimes hear people declare that the study of other religions strengthens their

own Faith. This happens when one absorbs similarities or sees that differences do not threaten long treasured beliefs. Whatever our attitude may be to alternative Faiths, we must assume that there is sufficient commonality of human experience that we can gain a mutual understanding in our views of life. It is much like learning a language. With time and patience we can make links in thought that enable communication.

In the case of the use of terms such as Faith, Grace or Salvation, we cannot use a vocabulary that is too different from what ordinary people use, otherwise communication becomes impossible. It was the case in early China that Buddhist teachers used Taoist vocabulary to explain the meaning of Buddhist teachings. Ancient Christian missionaries employed everyday Greek language and philosophical concepts to interpret Christianity to the native people. In each case, teachers had to explain the religious similarities and differences until the true meaning of the Faith could be clarified and made understandable.

In the case of Faith, Christianity teaches that it is a gift of God and aroused in our hearts through the work of the Holy Spirit. The aim is to overcome the estrangement between God and his creatures as a result of Original Sin. Reconciliation with God is attained through Faith in Jesus. Christianity is rooted in theism with God as the operating cause.

In Buddhist tradition, the estrangement that marks human life, creating our many conflicts individually and socially, are the result of fundamental delusion and ignorance. The ignorance derives from the failure to see our true relationship to Reality and each other and the delusion that we are self-subsistent, independent beings in the world.

In each case, Christianity or Buddhism, Faith is viewed as trust, not self-generated, but brought about by a deep inner movement in one's mind and spirit whether through the revelation of God in Christianity or through the process of awakening or enlightenment in Buddhism. Christianity points to the way of reconciliation with God, Buddhism highlights a deep spiritual awakening to our mutual interdependence with all other beings within all-embracing Reality that sustains our lives.

The essence of Buddhism is awakening to our obligation to life which is symbolized in figures such as Amida Buddha whose Vows reflect the interdependent nature of life. The understanding of these Vows gives focus and meaning to our awakening that we are part of the larger network of Reality, with responsibility to work for the welfare of all beings.

In Buddhism, Faith does not have God as the object or foundation of trust. It does not require belief in a personal God, as in Christianity. Faith, as trust, is not self-generated but arises out of the circumstances of one's life, like the sun brings light into a dark world. Trust is the experience of the whole person and arises naturally as a dawning, a eureka experience, of the true nature of human existence, that we all depend on family, community, and Nature which support and enable our life process. Awakening is the operative word. Buddhism is a religion of awakening (bodhi) or enlightenment.

Consequently, Christians and Buddhists can use the common English word Faith in discussing the basis of their religion. However, it is clear that the foundation of their Faith understanding differs within the respective traditions. Faith in Christianity is not identical conceptually with Faith in Buddhism. Nevertheless, the terms may be used in common in our struggle to facilitate understanding through explanation and clarification. It is here that dialogue becomes important to clarify the spirituality of each Faith.

We should note here that Christianity and Buddhism distinguish belief and trust. Belief is an intellectual action directed at a specific object, as to whether it exists or not, or is what people think it is. Belief deals with what is not yet completely known. So we have beliefs to fill the gap. As knowledge grows, a belief transforms to fact or knowledge. People believed

that the earth was flat until it was shown to be round. A belief can be disproved by further knowledge. Beliefs play a significant role in all religions, but are not to be identified with Faith.

Faith is trust as when a child trusts his father to catch him when he jumps. Or, we trust the sun to rise each day or that the roof will not fall in on us. We trust the order of things which enables our life activities. Trust requires more than a belief in a particular fact, because one's life may depend on our trust; it calls more from us and is more essential for living. Beliefs that God or Buddha exist have no meaning in themselves. Even devils believe in God and tremble. Meaning requires trust that God or Buddha embodies or expresses in some way the truth necessary for living.

Faith involves a transformation of one's approach to life and one's awareness of the truth for one's life. Faith awakens us to our deep obligation to life, while energizing our commitment to the welfare of others as the foundation for living. Faith, even when the root is different, is more holistic, involving the whole person, while belief is simply mental assent to the factuality or accuracy of a given proposition.

Buddhists, unlike Christians, do not speak of God as an entity distinguished from human life or Nature. Christianity declares that the Creator is not the creature. Rather, Buddhism focuses on the totality of causes and conditions that shape our lives. This totality, termed Reality, embraces and energizes all our lives. Because the totality of Reality cannot be conceived, Buddhists symbolize it with images of Amida or other Buddhas. However, it recognizes that such images are a concession to our limited human modes of thought and conception and are, in Buddhist terms, "empty" without external or substantial existence. We may affirm or deny any given concept of God, but we cannot deny Reality denying what we are part of and how it impinges on our lives.

The aim of Buddhist practice is to go beyond forms and conceptions, attaining oneness with Reality itself, the universal life process. Faith in this context is the awareness that we are part of a larger order of things which together works for the uplift and fulfillment of all beings. Through such awareness-Faith, we are enabled to live with mutuality, interdependence and compassion towards all beings.

We live and move and have our being within Reality. This understanding places our egos in proper perspective and offers an alternative to the dog-eat-dog, competitive approach to much of modern life, ranging from international wars to simple conflicts in family and community.

When we explore the meaning of Faith in Christianity and Buddhism, we discover that they both speak to the whole person in order to arouse commitment to promote the welfare of all beings. At the same time they reflect differing understandings of the basis for that Faith, whether in a personal God or the awareness of our interdependence and oneness within the process we call Reality. We may use the term Faith but it is necessary that we clarify its various implications to achieve greater understanding.