

**Just Have Faith**  
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[This article is transcribed and edited from a lecture given by Rev. Seikai at Shasta Abbey in 2000.]

What I want to talk about this evening is something that came out of our recent monastic retreat, which I think you all know we have for one week, twice a year, in the last week of April and the first week of December. I think for any monk, after six to seven days of intense sitting, something is going to come out of that week in the way of teaching for you that is very important. This happened for me this past month; it was not dramatic, not something that hit me over the head, just something that came up in the last day of the retreat, sort of a quiet thing, deep down that said, "Just have faith." Three words. That is what I want to talk about now.

It was very simple and very quiet at the time and one of those little bits of teaching that you have heard monks say dozens of times. Rev. Master Jiyu often said it, and I used to think to myself, 'Oh of course, just have faith, that is what we are here for, what's the next thing? But that one little sentence was loaded with meaning and Rev. Master Jiyu would often use it, I think, as a springboard for talking about a great many other things and because it is so central to our practice, how we live here at the temple, how we conduct our training; faith is right at the heart of it. And interestingly, I think that it is important to know, and important to acknowledge, whether we are brand-new to this path of training or whether we have been at it twenty years or more, that faith is a vital ingredient; it is there from the very beginning. We would not sit down and look at a wall for the very first time unless we had faith. By worldly standards it is a pretty ridiculous thing to do, to sit down and look at a wall and neither try to think nor not try to think. Faith is every bit as important to me now as it was the very first day I became a monk, if not more so, and I'll try to elucidate a little bit on that.

There is not ever a time when every one of us does not have faith; we would not set our alarm at night unless we had the faith we would be alive the following morning. Let's see what the dictionary says about the word faith. There are something like five or six definitions, but the only two I'm interested in are: A, unquestioning belief; and B, complete trust or confidence. These definitions got me to reflect a little bit on my own life and my own religious upbringing. The monks who know me well know that I was brought up in one of the major Christian denominations and went to parochial school and Sunday school, went to church every Sunday and the whole thing. So I was thoroughly indoctrinated in all that and from what I could tell from the way religion was taught to a young, impressionable person, unquestioning belief in what religion taught was pretty much the definition of faith. That is what people meant when they talked about faith. It was to suspend reason, it was to not think critically

about this particular set of beliefs, even though it did not quite add up a lot of the time. As a kid I would ask embarrassing questions, such as, 'If God loves everybody why do some people suffer so terribly and why do other people just sail along, and why do people in other parts of the world starve to death and here we are in America having everything? and on and on and on. And the teachers would just say, you know, shut up.

I do not really like unquestioning belief; to my mind, anyway, that is not what we are driving at in Buddhist practice and in cultivating our understanding of Buddhism. You can believe anything; you can believe that the world is flat, you can believe that the moon is made of cheese, you can believe just about anything and people frequently do. I think that it may be a starting point for some people, unquestioning belief, but it is not really what I would call faith. Unquestioning belief has a kind of stoic quality to it: here you have a text book, you have a formula, it is kind of laid out and you simply have to swallow it and believe it. In Buddhism, the Buddha himself admonished his followers not to do this, and I believe it was in a sermon he delivered to a village of people known as the Kalamas. The Kalama people had had all these different teachers come through; they'd heard from this eminent wandering ascetic and from this other great teacher--they had had all these people come through town and then along comes the Buddha and they said to him, 'We have heard all of these different teachings, so what are we supposed to believe here? We are kind of confused.' The Buddha said, 'Don't necessarily believe anything just because it is the traditional thing to believe, or because it is written down as holy text, or because wandering ascetic X says it or I say it, etc.; what you should do is actually put the teaching into practice and then see whether or not your own experience verifies the teaching.' Whether it will support and prove true what you have heard, whether in the long run this teaching holds water. So that is a different focus. That is to actually put to the test teachings that you hear. Interestingly enough, I think that the second definition from the dictionary here, to have complete trust or confidence, that will actually be the result of doing this.

So we actually sit down and look at a wall and just see what happens. Rev. Master Jiyu talks about going to Japan and being taught how to meditate: sit and look at a wall, do not breathe rough, keep a bright mind, all the things that you have been taught and, as we all know from reading her diary *The Wild White Goose* (or those who were fortunate enough to hear her talk in person) she made a huge amount of progress spiritually as a monk in her first few years in Japan and I think it was primarily because she had the faith to just sit down and take what people told her literally and do it, and it worked. She did prove true what they were saying.

So trust and confidence in the teaching of the Buddha is the natural result of that. As I have already said, it starts with the willingness to put into practice the teaching of the Buddha, and it will evolve over time into a deeper and more complete trust in those teachings, and deeper and more complete trust in all

three of the Three Treasures, the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. We start with sitting down and looking within, which is another way of saying, 'I take refuge in the Buddha.' We sit down and look at a wall with the faith that we might find something more fulfilling, something deeper than all the external stuff. Rev. Master Jiyu used to say that unless you have faith in your own Buddha Nature there is no point in sitting down to look at a wall, period. She was quite blunt about it. So we go with the faith or the intuitive knowledge that we have Buddha Nature, that it is a vital part of us that we can find by sitting down and looking within. That we can experience it for ourselves, that we can become one with it, and that, in the same way that one can wade out into a body of water, we can go further and further out into it and experience it's coldness or warmth, or the strength of it's current, the intensity of it's flow or the lack thereof.

Sitting down to meditate, we begin to discover that really, up until now, all we have done in our lives is learn from other people what we as a society consider to be desirable stuff to accumulate and a whole bunch of other stuff, a matching set of undesirable stuff, to avoid. These are the opposites of life: good stuff and bad stuff; right, good experiences and wrong, bad experiences. We invest so much energy in actively pursuing one half and actively avoiding the other half. But in Buddhism, in Buddhist meditation, that does not wash because what you have to do is just sit down and accept the whole nine yards, the whole kit and caboodle, whether we think we like it or not. And in sitting still, in adopting what Rev. Master used to call the third position, that means really accepting, really sitting still and embracing everything, and that includes our own thoughts. I regard my own thinking as the toughest thing to accept, when you come right down to it.

We learn to come back to that place of just sitting still and accepting, even if it is very mucky, uncomfortable, painful or grievous. For me, as a monk, I live the metaphor or the reality of holding a begging bowl, of looking within and not really ever knowing what I'll see, what I'm going to experience, what thoughts are going to come up, what memories, what emotions, what feelings. I have learned to say, 'Okay, here is my begging bowl, let it go right in there, and I will just accept it.' That is really how we act from a position of faith, it *is* an act of faith to do that. In just sitting there what we are doing is deciding that the 'I' that I use to function within my life, the 'I' that does things and accomplishes things and gets work done and does all this good and noble stuff, that 'I' has to just sit down. We are so used to wanting to get in and fix the problems of our lives; we want to get in and fix our own thoughts. I certainly did. That is how I started in meditation: I sat down and wanted to fix my thoughts so I would not have any bad thoughts, so I would not be distracted. I wanted to fix my mind so I would never get distracted and have it wander off onto things that were neat to think about. But meditation is much more malleable, it is much broader than that, and ultimately runs much deeper than that.

I think I have used the term willingness here—I never seem to get too far away from that word—the willingness to just sit there, not to entertain that which is pleasurable and not to reject that which is disagreeable. That is how we really put faith into practice. It is not the only way but, for us, as Buddhists who take the teachings seriously and want to prove them true for ourselves, that is really the core of our practice. It is the central thing that we do. And we just sit there, breathing in and breathing out. There is not anything wrong with our thinking, there is nothing wrong with anything that we can experience. The so-called disagreeable stuff is actually equal to all of the pleasurable stuff. All the pleasurable stuff is probably a bit overrated, you know, it is pretty much the same as everything else, so what choice do we really have? We need to learn to sit there and accept the whole thing. And, when you actually do that, what happens? Well, darned if our tendencies to stumble over particular situations or get caught up in particular human problems of whatever sort--those things tend to come up over and over and over. And that is what we here in the temple know as having a *koan*. I am not really sure how that word *koan* got started. I know it comes from the Chinese who used the term *kung-an*, and in Japan they mimicked the sound and came up with *koan*. Everyone has a *koan* and, as Great Master Dogen tells us in his *Rules for Meditation*, the *koan* appears naturally in everyday life.

The *Rules for Meditation* are really lovely in that they weave together all this practical information about how to sit together with aspects of things you are going to run into, and some of the deeper aspects of a life of practice. He says the *koan* appears naturally in everyday life. In a way, by this practice of sitting down to meditate and learning to look at and accept everything that comes to the surface, we have in fact beckoned to life, or beckoned to the universe, or however you want to look at it, to show us our *koan*: we have asked for it. Whatever we were thinking when we started, such as, 'I really need to get into meditation and experience the bliss' or experience the peace, or whatever it is we are looking for, pretty soon you realize, 'This is pretty tough, because I keep having to face the same situation which really gets to me, this *koan*.' It simply won't go away and we have to keep facing and accepting it.

Now, we all frequently talk about the Buddhist Precepts and how the Precepts address these areas of human life where we are prone in one way or another to make mistakes and act from a self-centered motivation. So we put a strong emphasis on the Precepts, which are tools to work on ourselves. Having had the *koan* appear, we have to get to work on it, and to get to work on it we need tools. The Buddhist Precepts are 10 very valuable tools, or 16 tools if you want to include the Three Refuges and the Three Pure Precepts. They are for me a very real and very practical way of working on and refining my life. We have been faced with this *koan*, of tendencies to react to particular situations in a way that breaks the Precepts, getting angry, being mean-spirited, feeling adequate or inadequate. 'Do not be proud of yourself or devalue others': that is the Precept

which addresses being inadequate or being smug or proud, thinking there is nothing more we need to learn.

I have been working a lot with rocks lately; I have been hoisting big rocks and putting them in to build a garden and sometimes they have parts that just do not fit. I have to turn them around and around until they do fit. But once in a while I take a hammer and chip away a bit of a knob. The koan can be like a big rock at which we chip away. We have to approach this undertaking with faith and patience because, when the initial enthusiasm of meditating and training wears off, it is a little bit like getting married. When the initial honeymoon period is over, then you are faced with the hard work of making a go of the marriage. So we look for ways to bolster and to nurture our faith. I love the word nurture. In the garden you have all these plants which you nurture, you water and weed and fertilize with the faith that they will grow and prosper and thrive. Nature does the actual growing and thriving. The work I do is sort of on the side. It takes faith, it requires tools, and we need inspiration. We need to find ways to cultivate and nurture our faith.

Chipping away at or boring into our koan is a little bit like drilling through solid rock. I think we can all relate to that. Sometimes it seems just totally unyielding, we seem not to be getting anywhere, but we do it anyway with the faith that we will bore down through this rock and eventually strike water. The water that we strike is the water of the spirit; it is the water that we have flow through us when we meditate. Meditation is part of the refinement process. It is an indispensable part of the refinement process, but the whole of it involves the rest of everyday life and, in a way, that is harder than just the sitting, because that is taking your kit of tools, the Precepts, into everything you do, to all your interactions with people, bringing it into the work that you do.

Sometimes we go through periods of time when we are just boring, just drilling and all we are getting is dust and we are choking on it. Such is life at times, and if we did not have faith that, in the middle of and underneath it all, this is worth doing. It is the only thing to do, it is something that cannot be avoided, and so we continue. We continue with the faith that this is our purpose for living--to refine, to study this koan and, as a result of the effort, which we sometimes call The Great Matter, we will go deeper into oneness with our real nature, the Buddha Nature. There is a lovely line in the *Scripture on the Buddha's Last Teachings* where he talks about flowing water: Even as water, ever flowing, can bore holes in rocks. I think of it often and think what a lovely metaphor it is for those times in training where we just need to keep sitting, we just need to keep applying the effort of accepting. Accepting, accepting and accepting, looking up and having faith. Just as water ever flowing can bore holes in rocks.

Rev. Master Jiyu also used to say that you never know when you are meditating, you only know when you are not. This is to say that you have to avoid getting stuck with a technique which you call meditation, or to get stuck with anything, anywhere. I have used various techniques from time to time and

found them very helpful, but I think the important thing here to remember is that faith is the essence of our meditation and our practice. I cannot say that there is no technique to meditation, but technique, if there is one, is not the important part of the meditation. It is simply a temporary expedient means, like any other piece of teaching that we use, to cultivate our faith. An example is to observe your breathing in and out, which I often do. That is a technique. Maybe my mind is just spinning 85 miles an hour and I need to do something to center myself and stay in the present moment. So, I watch my breath. Breath comes in, breath goes back out. Breath comes in, breath goes back out. It happens over and over and if I stop I am going to die. So why not make good use of something that is always there? Now that is how to use a technique as an aid to meditation. It is not *The Meditation*, it is not the whole of meditation, it is only something that helps that which is deeper. That which flows within and underneath the breathing, that which flows within and underneath and on top of and through all of it, that is faith. The water of the spirit is another way to talk about it. So yes, I agree completely and wholeheartedly with my Master that to really, truly sit in meditation is, in fact, to just have faith. To train ourselves, to make full use of the Precepts, to walk into the unknown, not really knowing what awaits us, that is to just have faith.