

# Talk on Longing Faith

Vajrashura, Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> April 2022, Spring Urban Retreat

## Faith

This is the mind's natural responsiveness to higher values, to what is good and admirable.

- It's intrinsic to us, to human consciousness.
  - It's natural for us to have a response to what is good and admirable.
  - It's a capacity of the mind itself.
- It comes spontaneously and is present in all positive states of mind.

It's not an exclusively religious emotion – it arises wherever people feel an appreciative response to goodness in other people.

- Wherever we witness generous or noble acts being performed.
- It is the foundations of friendship between decent people.
  - Responding to the good qualities in each other.
- Also present in our response to the truth when we hear it spoken.
- Truth that are not just deep spiritual truths, but also in the mundane sense.
  - E.g. someone speaking the truth against an unjust political regime at a cost to their personal safety.

We feel faith when we hear a higher kind of truth.

- The truth that reveals to us the deeper patterns of our existence.
- In particular, when we hear the truth of the Dharma we experience faith.
  - Especially when it is communicated with deep feeling and understanding.
- Not just response to goodness; it's also a response to Dharmic values that underlie ethics.

It's not just a response to people – it also can be indirectly through words on a page, or in works of art.

- Or even an inner source – dreams, visions, insights.
- Might arise when we read a Dharma text, or see an image of the Buddha.
- The Buddha – faith arose with the fourth sight, the wandering holy man.

## ***Faith in Realities / Deep Faith***

This is faith in fundamental existential truths.

- In particular, conditionality and karma.
- When we hear these, we don't just respond rationally in calm agreement, but we might experience a wholehearted assent on every level of our being, bringing satisfaction and even relief.

## ***Faith in Qualities / Lucid Faith***

This is the beauty of goodness as we sometimes witness it in other people.

- E.g. in the Buddha.
- E.g. in individuals we meet in the Sangha.

It is also called 'lucid faith'.

- It's a matter of feeling, akin to aesthetic responsiveness.
  - There's a sense of the beauty of the Dharma as embodied in other people or figures.
- We start to take more and more of a delight in the Three Jewels.
- There is a greater sense of clarity about them, hence this faith is called lucid – clear, articulate.

## ***Faith in Capacities / Longing Faith***

This is faith that arises when we intuit, however dimly, capacities in ourselves, things that may not have yet developed, but which we can develop.

- Might be only very dimly intuited.
- We see that Enlightenment is not just for 'special people', it's something we can develop.

- The seeds of faith are not just outside or above us, they are also in our innermost nature.

It's called 'longing faith'.

- This is a highly skilful form of will.
- We long with the desire to fulfil the possibilities that we have seen before us.
  - We long to realise our spiritual potential now revealed within us.
- Self-confidence is part of this – we are convinced that we ourselves can attain the goal.

Without this longing faith, and a sense of being able to close the gap, faith becomes mere devotion.

- Mere devotion means admiring something from a distance but thinking that it is essentially beyond you.
- Devotion can be beautiful, pleasurable and useful, but is not necessarily linked with insight or a desire to change oneself.
  - Can even be a little unhelpful at times – you may be devoted to someone you look up to, but never suspect or be motivated that you can develop those qualities too, and instead become passive.
- Instead of being mere devotion, longing faith makes you long to close the gap between yourself and the goal.

Yeshe Gyaltsen refers to it as a 'longing for those things which are possible'.

- It's implicit that you understand that these things are within your power to attain yourself.

Also shows the hermetic saying 'as above, so below' – we can recognise Enlightenment because we have something of Enlightenment within us, that longs for a greater Enlightenment.

It involves feeling our own sense of restriction or even lack with our current situation, and wishing it was more like the Buddha, or feeling like the embryonic feeling we have for Enlightenment was much more actualised.

- It's longing to be free of our restrictions, to more fully flower and realise the capacities we feel within us.
- Really desiring for Enlightenment and to be free of the limitations we feel in our lives.

Though you are keenly aware of the limitations of the regular mind and your regular conditions and your regular responses, it's not any kind of self-hatred.

- It springs from the other two types of faith, and so is a deeply positive state of mind.
- We really want to fully realise in ourselves what we intuit in others, especially the Buddha.

It's also flavoured by the transcendental.

- Bhante - lucid and longing faith are tinged by the transcendental.
- The first faith, deep, is not really – it's more about our response to the teachings.
- But particularly longing faith is longing for the transcendental.

And longing solves the problem of mistaking something merely pleasurable for śraddhā, or being interested in pleasure as opposed to genuine śraddhā.

- When we long for something, it's not dwelling in pleasure anymore – it takes us beyond it.

### **The Power of Longing**

Longing is well recognised in religion.

- German word – *sehnsucht* – longing, pining, yearning.
- Theistic religions – our soul longs for return to the completeness of God.
- Sufi poetry such as this one from Rumi.

### ***The Reed Flute's Song***

Rumi – translated by Coleman Barks

*Listen to the story told by the reed, of being separated.*

*“Since I was cut from the reedbed, I have made this crying sound.  
Anyone apart from someone they love understands what I say.  
Anyone pulled from a source, longs to go back.*

*At any gathering I am there, mingling in the laughing and grieving,  
a friend to each, but few will hear the secrets hidden  
within the notes. No ears for that.  
Hear the love fire tangled in the reed notes,  
as bewilderment melts into wine.*

*The reed is a friend to all who want the fabric torn and drawn away.  
The reed is hurt and salve combining.  
Intimacy and longing for intimacy, one song.*

*A disastrous surrender and a fine love, together. The one who secretly hears this is senseless.*

*A tongue has one customer, the ear.  
A sugarcane flute has such effect because it was able to make sugar  
in the reedbed. The sound it makes is for everyone.  
Days full of wanting, let them go by without worrying  
that they do. Stay where you are inside such a pure, hollow note.*

*Every thirst gets satisfied except that of these fish, the mystics,  
who swim a vast ocean of grace still somehow longing for it!  
No one lives in that without being nourished every day.*

*But if someone doesn't want to hear the song of the reed flute,  
it's best to cut conversation short, say good-bye, and leave.*

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*Anyone pulled from a source, longs to go back.*

This is the theistic interpretation, that we long to return to the source.

- Our soul a chip off the block of God and a longing to return.
- Buddhism would look at it slightly differently.
- There is no original state of being one with God which we've fallen from.
- But we do long to fully actualise that which is embryonic within us.
- That longing for fullness is intrinsic to our being.
- There is already something intrinsic within us that recognises Enlightenment and longs for it.

*At any gathering I am there, mingling in the laughing and grieving,  
a friend to each, but few will hear the secrets hidden  
within the notes. No ears for that.  
Hear the love fire tangled in the reed notes,  
as bewilderment melts into wine.*

Longing faith – it can be or seem unheard by others around us in our daily lives.

- One wonders why one feels this longing for something more and yet everyone around us just keeps going on with regular life...
- Love the ideas of the Sufis getting drunk together on the longing for 'the beloved'.
- Sangha is a coming together on the basis of longing for the sacred, the transcendental.
  - And through practising together, our worldliness dissolving away into the wine of practice.

*The reed is a friend to all who want the fabric torn and drawn away.*

*The reed is hurt and salve combining.*

*Intimacy and longing for intimacy, one song.*

We long for the fabric covering the truth to be torn and drawn away.

- We long to realise and see the truth, and see through the veils that cover our true nature.

This longing is to be welcomed!

- Longing is kind of painful, really, but also very moving.
- Falling in love – deep longing.
- It is what will help us to tear the veil away from the truth.
- Like shame, or hrī, it is a very positive state of mind that can actually be painful.

We're very conditioned to think that what is painful is bad, what is pleasurable is good.

- But lots of things that are pleasurable are bad – sugar, revenge, intoxicants.

Longing can be sweet-sad and uncomfortable.

- By definition it is about where we're *not*.
- Longing, definitionally, involves a sense of *lack*, and we don't like feeling a sense of lack.
- And so we turn away from it too easily.
- But actually, it is hurt and salve combining.
- Return to this later.

*A disastrous surrender and a fine love, together.*

*The one who secretly hears this is senseless.*

Dharma is dangerous and makes you senseless to the ordinary world.

- Health warning! For example, Rijumuni.
- When we open to our longing, it will likely make us mad – in a worldly sense.
- We will be senseless, and mad!
  - At least, by worldly standards.
- Sufis rejoiced in this and went out of their way to be considered mad.
- Our longing for the truth and for realising it ourselves should make us at least a little bit mad.

*Days full of wanting, let them go by without worrying that they do.*

*Stay where you are inside such a pure, hollow note.*

We need to stay with the longing that we experience for the transcendental.

- It's easy to think of it as unskilful craving, but this longing is actually very skilful.
- Stay with the feeling of incompleteness.

Completeness cannot be achieved on the basis of the everyday self.

- The nature of the unenlightened mind is that it is incomplete, it is lacking.
- While we have all that we need within us to be happy, much of that is only there in potential for now.
  - This is fine – we're simply incomplete.
  - If we weren't we wouldn't be here now.
- This incompleteness is slightly painful but very beautiful too. It's not entirely comfortable, yet very moving.
- To be human is to long.
- It's by opening up to the incompleteness and pain of the self, and longing for something more, that a sense of completeness comes.
  - Not on the level that we expect it.
- Longing activates a level beyond what the everyday self can analyse or explain.
  - Śraddhā cannot be explained or analysed.
  - What we long for cannot be explained.
  - How longing affects us cannot really be explained.

- Lokkutara – beyond the world.

*Every thirst gets satisfied except that of these fish, the mystics,  
who swim a vast ocean of grace still somehow longing for it!  
No one lives in that without being nourished every day.*

Longing is beautiful – it's a swimming in the Adhithana of the Buddhas!

- You are fish, drinking all day and still thirsty.

Beautiful image – swimming in a vast ocean of grace, of the beauty of the Dharma, yet still longing for it always.

- And being nourished by this longing.

*But if someone doesn't want to hear the song of the reed flute,  
it's best to cut conversation short, say good-bye, and leave.*

Śraddhā is deeply personal and difficult to explain.

- We shouldn't need to explain ourselves!
- Remember being relieved when reading in ordination process that we shouldn't have to explain why we give ourselves to spiritual practice, even in ways that look odd to people outside the Sangha.
  - E.g. going on long retreats, practising lots of meditation, going forth from worldly ties.
  - I remember feeling relief at hearing Subhuti talk about how, in the ordination process, we shouldn't have to be able to explain why we're moved to practice the Dharma – you can't!

We should have the courage to allow our longing to make us mad, in a way!

- Quite a strong poetic evocation of the longing of the Dharma life.

### **Sutra of Golden light**

Turning to the Buddhist tradition now.

- Longing in Buddhism too.
- Sutra of Golden light.
- Bodhisattva Ruchiraketu.

Early part – long praises of the Buddha.

*Each Buddha is golden, shining like pure gold.*

*He has fine eyes, pure and faultless like sapphire.*

*His shapely limbs are as pure gold*

*And his body shines with all the marks of excellence.*

*The Buddha is a blazing fountain of glory, splendour and renown.*

You could say this is the lucid faith aspect – seeing the beauty of the ideal as embodied in others, including the Buddha.

Highlights the need for beauty and eros.

- We need to have a sense of the deep beauty of the Dharma, of the transcendental, to be moved enough to actually act decisively and effectively in the world.

Longing comes out of a sense of the beauty of the goal.

- We keenly desire this beauty.
- Tara – the quick way to wisdom.
- The beauty of the Buddha, the beauty of the Dharma life, the beauty of deep friendship and connection.
- We are moved by beauty more than mere ideas.
- We need a 'transcendental object' to draw us up to Enlightenment.
  - Need to find what that transcendental object is for us.

- Not too far away as to be remote and unrelatable.
- Not too close as to be rather mundane and not very transcendental.

*Constantly, constantly, I recollect the Buddha. And constantly I long for a sight of him. And always, constantly, I make a resolve in order to see the Buddha-sun. Constantly kneeling on the ground, I am consumed with longing to see the Buddha.*

*Weeping pitifully for the sake of the Leader, I long to see him who has attained supreme bliss. I am constantly ablaze with the fire of longing. Give me the cool water of your appearance, Oh Conqueror. Gladden me with your compassion. Out of mercy and compassion show yourself to me. Grant me your appearance, a glimpse of your serene form. For the world with its gods has been delivered by you.*

*For you have shown that all beings Are by nature a dream, like space, like the sky by nature, Resembling magical illusions or a mirage, like the moon's reflection on the still waters of a lake. Empty are all beings, so you have shown.*

*The sphere of the Tathagata is subtle, wonderful and very profound. Among all beings none is able to know it. Now I have no doubt, concerning the sphere of the Buddha.*

*May he therefore, out of mercy and compassion, show himself to me.*

So it's pretty full on! But the Buddha does appear to him and he receives teachings.

- And Bhante's point is that one must stay with painful longings like these into order to break through to deeper understandings.

### **Longing is, definitionally, a sense of lack**

Even Buddhism doesn't help this sometimes – we are trained to not look beyond us for happiness, because worldly things don't make us happy.

- And so we can mistrust all longing.
- But we need to be open to longing for something more – if not, we will not have enough motivation to lead a vital spiritual life.
- This is Dharma-chanda, longing for the Dharma, as opposed to karma-chanda, desire for sense experience.

This positive longing is what gives us energy to throw ourselves into the Dharma life.

- In the Abhidharma, longing faith leads directly to *vīrya* – spiritual vigour and energy.
- We want to close the gap and have the energy to do so.

Spiritual vigour and energy – *vīrya* – begins to appear when longing faith is strong enough to produce effective spiritual practice.

- The strength of vigour depends on the strength of faith, in particular the longing to close the gap between ourselves and the goal.
- It's not just faith, it's also having the maturity to nurture and channel faith effectively.
  - And steer it clear of conditions that dissipate it.
- If we don't have longing, we tend not to have *vīrya*, energy.

Having *vīrya* naturally turns our mind towards wholesome states.

- E.g. you are trying to meditate, but your mind is drifting towards sense desire.
  - You notice what is happening, and get back in touch with faith.
  - Specifically, you feel again how much you long to be less of a mess and more like the Buddha.
  - You summon up the energy that you need to steer your mind away from the sense desire and back to the object of meditation.
  - This surge of energy is *vīrya*.

Vīrya is not just the action of turning from the unskilful to the skilful.

- It's also the turning from the skilful to the even more skilful.
- Thus it's a continuum that leads us further and further, eventually to Enlightenment.
  - After all, we can always be even more skilful.
- We can always long to be even more developed.
- In fact, the more we practice, the more keenly we can long to be Enlightened!

When we don't have longing, we can fall into the opposite of vīrya which is *kausīdya* – inertia.

- Inertia is a moral and spiritual inertia.
  - It is a yielding to the inclination to turn away from the skilful to the unskilful or less skilful.
- Sometimes this is translated as 'laziness', but that suggests merely the absence of energy.
  - Inertia includes a lack of energy, but also it means energy rolling down the path of least resistance.
- Inertia is thus 'energy in pursuit of the bad', or even just the mediocre.
  - From a Buddhist perspective, many energetic activities, such as accumulating wealth, pleasure and power, are actually forms of inertia.
- It ultimately comes down to not really wanting Enlightenment enough – not having enough longing faith.

### Longing Faith can be fulfilled

An important aspect of *longing faith* is the sense that the longing *can* be fulfilled.

- It's a *confidence* that one is, in fact, able to close the gap between oneself and the object of *sraddha*.

This brings us to one of the commonest problems that people have with *sraddha*.

- It seems that the lack of such confidence in one's ability to 'close the gap' is an aspect of *sraddha* that many of us find problematic.
- Despite what you might think, this is not a particularly modern problem. It is discussed in the traditional sources.
- What *is* often different nowadays is our attitude to the problem.
- We tend to view this lack of confidence rather sympathetically in terms of psychological difficulties, lack of self-esteem, and so on.

However, the old texts generally see it – rather disconcertingly – as a form of *laziness*. According to the Buddhist tradition, laziness has three forms.

- There is laziness as everyone understands it – 'the laziness that takes delight in lying down and not getting up'.
- Then there is the laziness that consists of yielding to unskilful impulses when we should resist them.
- But there is also the laziness of *despondency*.
  - This is the state of mind in which we tell ourselves, 'Poor me! What can I do? Not only do I lack *x*, but I also lack *y* and *z*. I'm just not up to it. Ah well, there it is'.
  - This attitude leads to (or rationalises) the giving up of all effort.
  - The tradition unequivocally regards this as a form of laziness:
    - An unwillingness to put forth the *virya*, or spiritual energy, that is needed to close the gap between ourselves and our Ideal.

What if we don't experience this kind of longing? Are we lazy?

- Lots of reasons, but, in a way, the three types of faith are progressive.
- It's much easier to have the cognitive and volitional aspects of faith then lead to more clearly longing for the goal.
- We can reflect very easily upon a teaching, such as change and impermanence – the leaf on the tree for example.
- Then we think of people who really embody this.

- And then we can more easily feel a longing for the goal.

Longing faith is often frittered away by modern life too.

- Modern life preys on a positive longing and channels it into mundane desires, thereby sullyng our minds.
- Since the death of God and the rising of consumer culture, we have been trained to direct our spiritual longings towards the horribly mundane, seeking happiness in new phones, better cars, nicer computers, status, money...

It also shows the social dimension to faith and lack of faith.

- In an environment pervaded by faith, shared with others, we can share yourself more fully.
- But even if we feel faith, we can't share ourselves as much with people who don't share that sense of something more.
- Time spent in an environment where lack of faith predominates tends to undermine one's own faith.
  - Lack of faith is only too common in our culture.
  - Only have to walk through a shopping centre to see this!

Staying open to our desires, rather than immediately trying to satisfy them or drown them out, is a revolutionary act.

- Allowing those desires to deepen and purify.
- Beyond our foundational desires for food, shelter, companionship, it's quite likely that *all* of our desires ultimately stem from a desire for Enlightenment.

I find this when I'm desiring things endlessly – I chalk it down to a craving for *Samyaksambodhi* – complete and full Enlightenment.

- Best thing then is to just sit with this and recognise it as such.
- Use the *virya* it sparks off to long for the Buddha and for the goal.

## **Eros and Beauty**

We need this attraction to the goal to really be effective.

- Subhuti and Padmavajra have been talking about this a lot in the last few years.

*Eros* – that passionate affect and attraction that we feel at times, especially when we fall in love.

- We need this passionate intensity in our Dharma life.
- We need to fall in love with the goal, and so long to realise it and be completed by it.
- We need the courage to allow our stronger desires to be activated towards the Dharma.

Spiritual friendship is one of the main ways of activating this – practising together and sparking each other off in spiritually intense situations.

- 'The real enemy of the spiritual community is coolness' – Padmavajra.
  - It's the 'spectre of Buddhism' – Bhante.
- Our energies need to be activated, and so avoiding the trap of being a 'nice Buddhist', of playing it safe.
  - And we do this by intensity in our Sangha engagements, our friendships.

We need to allow ourselves to be deeply moved by the goal!

- Particularly the goal as embodied in a figure, such as the Buddha or one of the Bodhisattvas.

Bhante – faith like this is weighty positive karma.

- Particularly in lucid and longing faith, it's tinged by the transcendental.
- There's a flavour of the transcendental to this deep longing, for the lokkutara.
- We need to keep clarifying what it is we long for, until it's purely transcendental, such as is evidenced in how Pingiya talks about his relationship with the Buddha:

There is no moment for me, however small, that is spent away from Gotama, from this universe of wisdom, this world of understanding, this teacher whose teaching is the Way Things Are, instant, immediate and visible all around, eroding desire without harmful side-effects, with nothing else quite like it anywhere in the world.<sup>1</sup>

With constant and careful vigilance it is possible for me to see him with my mind as clearly as with my eyes, in night as well as day. And since I spend my nights revering him, there is not, to my mind, a single moment spent away from him.

I cannot now move away from the teaching of Gotama: the powers of confidence and joy, of intellect and awareness, hold me there. Whichever way this universe of wisdom goes it draws me with it.

So we need to be drawn by this universe of wisdom!

### ***My own experience of this***

So to move towards finishing, what is the vision of the Buddha that we long for?

- Who is the Buddha?

One experience I have personally come to this was on my trip a few years ago to India.

- Near the end of my trip, I was lucky enough to travel for a few days with Jnanadhara and Paramabandhu to the caves of Ajanta and Ellora in Maharashtra.

The caves of Ajanta are an old monastery system, with a mix of caves as temples, and caves as small, contained monasteries in themselves.

- And they are truly amazing places – I'd really encourage you to go to them if you are even in Maharashtra.
- Ajanta has a mix of beautiful Buddhist frescos, statues, stupas and wall carvings.
- Sadly the frescos are fading more and more over time, but they're still intensely devotional and beautiful.
- Many of you will know one of the most famous images there – of Padmapani, on the front of Bhante's *The Bodhisattva Ideal* book.
  - Seeing it in person is quite an experience.
- And Ellora is similar, but mainly has statues and wall-carvings.

What really struck me the most from the frescos and the statues is the beauty of the faces, the beauty of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas depicted.

- There is a transcendent joy that shines through them, which is incredibly bright and beautiful and inspiring.
  - You get a sense from them of the depth of refinement and positive emotion in Enlightened states of mind.
- And in many monasteries there was an enormous Buddha in his *gandha-kuti*, his central chamber.
  - These were immense, solid, strong, powerful figures, with none of the limp affectedness that you get in some modern Buddha representations.
  - They are almost unnervingly powerful, transcendent, and very much an embodiment of the characteristics I've just talked about.
- There were beautiful carvings of the Buddha being attacked by Mara, with Mara's legions all around him, shooting at him and trying to distract him.
  - But the Buddha simply sitting calmly in the middle, with his hand in the *dana* or generosity mudra (which is different from the usual earth-touching mudra).
- There was the poignancy of the Buddha on his death-bed, lying nobly and undisturbed in the face of death, with his Arahants and disciples around him in various states of response.

And it must have been such an intense devotion of people working on them.

- Carving out the caves by hand, then decorating them – it was literally the work of generations of devotees.
  - You could see some of the unfinished half-carved caves and really, they were an immense undertaking.
- And it's important to remind you that the end goal was not to have a nice art gallery where you could go and see something interesting.
- It was all done as an act of devotion, it was a place of personal worship.
  - An act of giving to a higher goal.
  - Of getting into relationship with the goal of life, of dedicating one's life to this ideal.
- And all life was present in the frescos, from people to animals to devas, to commerce to family life to politics.
  - What is communicated is a world radically rooted in and centred around the Buddha.

Obviously, they're not used nowadays as living monasteries like they used to.

- But the old Buddhas still sit there, dignified and beautiful.
- The beautiful, calm and radiant attendant Bodhisattvas still stand either side of them, communicating a radiant inner peace and joy.

We found a quieter part of the complex in Ellora, a smaller temple and shrine, and meditated there a number of times.

- It was beautiful, we didn't even have to really meditate – you just sat there and soaked up the centuries of devotion.
- You felt in tune with the radiant peace and joy of the Bodhisattvas, with the stillness of the massive Buddhas.
  - You got a sense of what it would be like to have this inner restlessness that affects us so much throughout our lives, what it would be like to have that stilled.
- Such a thoroughly Buddhist life, centred around the Buddha.

And in that context, the power of longing faith made complete sense.

- Of course you would want to sit at the feet of the Buddha – no other place could there be for me.
- What other response could we have to such an amazing vision of life?
- We are open to a universe, our universe, radically orientated around Enlightenment.
- We are drawn up to the Buddha without any fuss – our longing is instantly met and we experience the joy of being drawn along towards Enlightenment.

Looking at my pictures again – longing for the feelings of completeness that would come from such immersion in that life.

#### Questions:

- What do we long for in our lives?
- What do we do with our longings?
- How do we feel about allowing our longings more space?
- Do we do spiritual laziness, and how would longing faith help us here?
- Do we experience a desire to close the gap between us and the goal?
- Do we experience a longing to be free of our afflictions?