

The Saddhā Concept in Buddhism

H. SADDHĀTISSA

IN BUDDHISM the concept of confidence is referred to in Pali as *saddhā* and in Sanskrit as *śraddhā*. *Saddhā* is not faith, as usually translated, but is confidence born out of conviction. According to Buddhist philosophy it is a purifying mental factor in the mind and has a deeper philosophical meaning than that of mere confidence. Firstly, it is a confidence born out of understanding or conviction of the Four Noble Truths. Secondly, it is a feeling of reverence or esteem which a follower accords to a personality or a set of doctrines. Thirdly, it implies an earnest hope of execution and realizes ethical principles of one's innate morality. Asaṅga, the well known Buddhist philosopher of the fourth century A.D., has pointed out three aspects of *saddhā*: (i) full and firm conviction that a thing is; (ii) serene joy and good qualities; and (iii) aspiration or wish to achieve an object in view.¹ Whatever it may be, it has very little to do with the ardent follower of the Buddha's teaching. Buddhism places emphasis on seeing (*daṣṣana*) things in their true perspective, not on the faith or selfish desire for self-survival which blinds man. If he sees clearly, even the so-called Self (*ātman*) does not and cannot exist. It is very important that one who wishes to obtain unfailing success in spiritual progress have confidence in the Dharma because such development is based mainly on confidence. Because inner development is so based, one who lacks it is sure to fall from his virtue and practice of meditation. Confidence is the first of the seven treasures (*saddhādhana*) of the nobles (*ariyas*). It is the first mental power (*bala*); it is the first ethical faculty (*indriya*) of the mind. It has a great magnetic power which generates essential mental properties of energy, mindfulness, concentration, and right understanding. It also eliminates the mental hindrances of sensual desire (*kāmacchanda*), ill will (*vyāpāda*), obduracy

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¹ *Abhidharmasammuccaya*, p. 6.

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of mind and mental factors (*thīnamiddha*), restlessness and anxiety (*uddhacca-kukkucca*), and uncertainty (*vicikicchā*). It maintains a brightness and clearness of mind.

Confidence in the Dhamma begins with a temporary conviction of a morally wholesome object, but gradually it develops to a form of unshakeable trust in the Perfect One, his teaching, and his noble order. The Buddha has denounced blind faith and pointed out that it cannot help his follower in any way in his self-purification. He always emphasized that one should believe in his teaching only after having understood it. He often praised the one who is endowed with confidence based on knowledge. This confidence is called *saddhā* in Buddhist terminology. The understanding on which it is based may sometimes be weak and sometimes strong. The Buddha has compared *saddhā* to the confidence which a patient has in his doctor, or a student in his teacher. The more benefits the patient receives from his doctor's treatment and advice, the more *saddhā* he has in him. Similarly, the more easily the student learns his lessons and the more successfully he passes his examination, the more confidence he has in his teacher. If the doctor's prescription does his patient no good, the patient begins to lose his *saddhā*. In his own teaching the Buddha has said: "As a wise man tests gold on a touchstone, heating and cutting, so you monks should test my words by practice, and not accept them simply due to the reverence towards me."¹ The Buddhist's confidence in the Buddha is just the kind one has in a good physician or teacher. They have substantial ground for it. The teachings of the Buddha offer them what they can believe in first of all intellectually because it conforms to what they can see and prove empirically as to the nature of the world. They know that his method is effective in putting an end to unhappy conditions. Lastly, it invites them to "come and see" (*ehi-passiko*) for themselves. They are asked only to suspend their doubts until after they have clear proof by direct experience that the teaching is acceptable. This comes with the first (*jhāna*) attainment, after which normal doubts arise no more.

In the Buddha's teaching the supreme power is the natural law of cause and effect from which comes the moral order of *kamma* or volitional actions (*cetanā*) and results (*vipāka*). The ethical teaching of the Buddha is intrinsically a part of man's highest purpose, which is to gain his release from the painful condition of repeated births which is called *samsāra*. The Buddha has said that he only points out the way exactly as the doctor advises treatment for his patient: "It is for you to exert and practice; Tathāgatas only point out the way" (*Dhammapāda* 276).

¹ *Jāṇasāvāsasamuccaya* 31 : *tāpāc chaddā ca nikasāti/suvarṇam iva paṇḍitāni/paṭikāyaṃ bhikkhava gṛhīyaṃ madhaco na tu gauravāti.*

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The Buddha is regarded as a teacher (*sattā*). After realizing the Truth himself, he has taught it to the world. Buddhism is not a revelation but a path of deliverance discovered by the Buddha through his own efforts. Out of compassion he taught it to humanity. He asked them to test its validity in the light of their own reason, understanding, and experience. The Buddha most emphatically warned his disciples against putting blind faith in the authority of his Triple Canon (*Tripitaka*) or tradition. This is clear in a formal discourse called *Kālāma Sutta*, the Charter of Free Inquiry given by the Buddha. He said in it: "Come, O Kālāmas, do not go upon tradition; do not go upon hearsay; do not go upon correspondence with the scriptures; do not go upon supposition; do not go upon inference; do not go upon mere reasoning (logic); do not go upon your pre-conceived notions; do not go upon a person's seeming ability; do not go upon the thought that this ascetic is our teacher. But, Kālāmas, when you yourselves know (by observation, experience, and right judgement) 'such things are bad; such things when undertaken and followed lead to harm and ill'—then you should not accept and follow such things. Kālāmas, when you know for yourselves these things are moral; these things are blameless; these things are praised by the wise; these things when undertaken and performed, conduce to well-being and happiness, then do you live acting accordingly." The Buddha never attempted to persuade his followers to have blind and submissive faith in him or his teaching. He taught his disciples in the ways of intelligent enquiry. The enquiring Kālāmas he answered saying: "It is proper for you, Kālāmas, to doubt, to be uncertain; uncertainty has arisen in you about what is doubtful."³ He did not want us to accept anything that did not accord with truth and without reason. He asks us to apprehend things as they really are (*yathābhūta*).

On one occasion a millionaire named Upāli, a fervent follower of Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta (i.e., Mahāvīra, the founder of Jainism), approached the Buddha, and thoughtfully listened to his teaching; *saddhā* arose in him and forthwith he expressed his willingness to become a follower of Buddha. But the Buddha said: "Of a truth, Upāli, make thorough investigation." Then in his great delight Upāli said: "Had I manifested my readiness to become a follower of another creed they would have taken me round the city in procession and proclaimed that such and such a millionaire had embraced their faith. But, sir, your reverence counsels me to make further investigation. I feel the more delighted at this saying of yours." Upāli then sought refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.⁴

³ *Anguttaranikāya* I (Pali Text Society; London, 1961 reprint), p. 189.

⁴ *Majjhimanikāya* I (PTS; London, 1964 reprint), p. 371 f.

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According to the Buddha one should not follow the teacher blindly nor seek refuge in the hope that he will be saved by personal salvation, saintliness or mere glimpses of the serene personality of the master. He should not aspire to be purified by the master's own purification.

Vakkali, a brahmin who was proficient in the Vedas, became a monk. He never tired of glimpsing the Buddha and spent all his time following him about. The Buddha said to him: "O Vakkali, what is the use of seeing my foul body. One who sees the *dhamma* sees me."⁵

The early Buddhist scriptures are contained in the Pali Canon which the disciples of the Buddha compiled at Rājagaha in northern India under the patronage of King Ajātasattu after the passing away of the Buddha. It is quite possible that in the course of the twenty-five centuries which have elapsed since then some interpolation may have crept in here and there. Still, it can be said with full confidence that this collection of books is the nearest and most reliable source of the teachings of the Buddha. The Buddhists read these books in order to understand the teachings of the Buddha and to get inspiration to follow the path taught by him. They are regarded as the advice of the great teacher to his disciples. They are not to be accepted and believed, but to be understood and practiced.

The Buddha likened his teaching to a raft: "I teach you, O monks, the doctrine is like a raft to be used to cross over (the stream of existence), not as something to hold fast to. A man comes by a great stretch of water and sees no way of crossing to the opposite shore which is safe and secure. He fashions a raft out of sticks, branches, leaves, and grasses and lashings and uses it to cross over to the opposite bank. Suppose now, O monks, he were to say, 'This raft has been of such use to me that I will therefore put it on my head, and carry it with me as I proceed on my journey'—will he be doing the correct thing with this raft?"⁶ The monks agreed this action was not correct and the Buddha adds the obvious answer: "Even so, O monks, the doctrine taught by me is for crossing over and not for holding fast." Merely to hold fast means to adopt the "labels" of the belief without taking the trouble to practice what the belief advises, implies or involves. In one of the discourses the Buddha warned a brahmin not to rush to any hasty conclusions about him or the path he has shown or his disciples who have reached that path. In respect to everything there are degrees and grades, and one should not think of anything as belonging to the highest state in the absence of sufficient evidence. He went on to explain this fact with the help of the elephant simile: "An ordinary man on entering a forest sees a large, long

⁵ *Samyuttanikāya* III, p. 120; cf. *Itivuttaka*, p. 90 f.

⁶ *Majjhimanikāya* I, p. 194 f.

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footprint and comes to the conclusion, 'Indeed, it is the footprint of the great royal elephant.' But the skilled elephant tracker looking at the footprint would say, 'This is not necessarily the footprint of the royal elephant. There are stunted and elephants who also have such large footprints.' The skilled elephant tracker follows the footprints until he perceives the elephant's shoulder has knocked against the trees at a high level and has grazed off high things in the forest. Even then he does not come to the conclusion that one of them is the footprint of the royal elephant, as there are other elephants, too, who could cause the same conditions as the great royal elephant himself. The skilled elephant tracker only comes to the conclusion that it is the great royal elephant when he sees it with his own eyes. Just so, the individual should go through various stages in inner development and not count each as the most perfect stage, but persevere until he ultimately comes to the realization of the Truth."⁷

The Buddha says: "Confidence is an assistant to a person; actually understanding properly commands him."⁸

Taking refuge in the Buddha implies no personal guarantee that he himself will answer for his followers. The Buddha says: "Surely by oneself is evil done; by oneself one becomes pure. Purity and impurity depend on the individual; no one can purify another" (*Dhammapada* 165). He declared with reference to the goal: "[It can be attained after each one has] properly understood and experienced it for himself."⁹

According to the doctrine of *kamma*, future happiness is a direct result or continuance of the maintaining of a satisfactory standard of conduct in the present. One's action in the past must produce its effect in the present and in the future. One reaps the results of one's actions, good or bad, and there is no means of avoiding results on the strength of the moral excellence of another person. The best that can be done is to cut down the evil action and increase the good action. There is freedom of will and there must be cultivation of vision and discernment to detect what choice should be made. The Buddha stresses the cultivation of discernment since blind faith is not encouraged and the individual is warned against pursuing the wrong course. From the Dhamma text we get: "If by renouncing relatively small happiness one sees a greater happiness by comparison, the wise man abandons the lesser in favour of the greater happiness" (*Dhammapada* 290). It is therefore necessary that one should be willing to discern a possible comparison and be able to draw it. Such matters are, however, not evident in the devotion and pageantry associated with Buddhism in the Buddhist countries.

⁷ *Ibid.*, cf. *Cullahatthipadopama Sutta*, pp. 175-84.

⁸ *Samyuttanikaya* I, 38.

⁹ *Passim*.

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The mental attitudes of persons participating in these must be clear. The central, tangible object of ceremonial display consists in a *Buddharūpa*. Such images were unknown in Buddhist ceremonies until the first century before Christ. The original enactments were depicted by the Bodhi tree, wheel, lotus, and footprint, and represented the Buddha or certain ideas of Buddhism. It is generally understood that a non-Indian influence, notably perhaps the Greek, brought about the representation of the Buddha in the manner of a human figure. When the Buddhist goes before an image and offers incense and flowers, the offering is not to the image. It is an expression of gratitude and the follower meditates upon the fading flowers:

With diverse flowers to the Buddha I do homage,
And through this merit may there be release.
Even as these flowers fade,
So does my body approach dissolution.¹⁰

Though an image is useful to an ordinary person to help him concentrate his attention, an intellectual can dispense with it and concentrate his thoughts instead. The genuine reverence for the Buddha is to be measured only by the extent to which one follows his teachings. How does this attitude affect the moral outlook of the Buddhist?

In contrast to theistic religions where man is a subservient creature forever below the God or gods until he or they should feel inclined to raise his status, the Buddhist has it in his power to rise as high as he is willing to make the effort. Buddhist mentality is never enslaved. This power is the advantage of confidence born of understanding and not blind faith. The Buddhist pilgrim starts out with a good chance of success. He is never a miserable sinner but goes to his sacred places in order to get inspiration.

What do Buddhists do when they get to the temple? In the temple one finds the image of the Buddha which serves as a token of inspiration. He finds it helpful in concentrating on his teachings. He also makes an offering in the shrine. The offering of flowers and incense express his homage and gratitude and indicate no intrinsic value. His offerings are his recognition of the Buddha's sublime qualities. They are an outward indication that he takes the Buddha and Dharma as his guide. He accepts the way of life as laid down by the Buddha.

Almost all religions refer to confidence in terms of faith. The Buddha, however, urged his followers to see and to understand things for themselves.

¹⁰ For this and similar verses see H. Saddhātissa, *Handbook of Buddhism* (Mahābodhi Society of India; Benares, 1956).