



Sharing our trust really counts...

Letter 17

Trust on the spiritual path

Dear friends,

Now that we have reflected on the capacity of everyone to awaken, the qualities that give meaning to our life, and the necessity to develop gratitude for this precious life – what else is needed to enter the spiritual path? Trust! Yes of course, but trust in what? What is your answer? If you like, reflect a little...

Many people might answer: I need self-confidence; I need trust in my own ability to follow the path. I understand that answer; it is true, we need deep self-confidence, but not ordinary, proud self-confidence. The spiritual path does not truly unfold if we enter it with pride. It needs the confidence that our own mind has the capacity to awaken, as we reflected on earlier. A self-confidence which is a form of arrogant self-centredness will work against us on the path of Awakening. Awakening cannot be attained by willpower, by ‘me’ – the doer.

So let’s have a look at what the masters of old say on that question. Starting from the Buddha they all take trust, faith or confidence to be absolutely essential. According to them, without trust there is simply no path of Awakening. But to our great surprise they do not talk about self-confidence or about trusting the religion but they insist on trusting reality (!), trusting the way things are. Following Gampopa, I quote from the Abhidharma:

*“What is trust? True conviction, aspiration and inspiration
in relation to the results of actions, the four truths and the sources of refuge.”*

The first kind of trust in the results of actions, called “conviction”, is to be convinced that our actions with body, speech and mind actually have effects on our future experience. Based on our own observations, the conviction forms that this is a reliable fact of life: actions have consequences and we can indeed rely on actions to change our experience.

In more detail, we become convinced by our observations that wholesome actions – physical, verbal and mental actions with an open state of mind, free of emotional obscuration – lead to happiness and agreeable experiences. Due to this conviction it makes sense to act with consideration and not to act heedlessly, as unwholesome actions are seen to lead to disagreeable experiences.

The first of the four truths to trust in is “the truth of suffering”. No one likes this truth or fact and we tend to deny its reality. But we can see for ourselves that some degree of tension and suffering can be found in practically all states of experience. We also see that confusing emotions and the acts produced by them lead to tension and suffering. This is the understanding of “the truth of the cause of suffering”. Only when these understandings develop does it make sense to search for a path of liberation or awakening that will put an end to emotional entanglement and the omnipresent tension in ordinary life experience. Without this convinced trust we would simply want everything to stay as it is.

On deeper observation we see that tension arises whenever there is identification with this body, mind, and life experience as being “me” or “mine”, separate from the rest of the world. This notion of an unchanging, stable individual self which is so deeply ingrained in us is said to be responsible for suffering: wherever there is clinging to a self, there is tension or suffering. Reflect a little... Is it truly so?

If we are convinced of that statement as being a true description of life experience, we have the kind of convinced trust which is the starting point of the spiritual journey. Everyone can develop this form of trust – it simply needs an honest investigation into suffering and its causes. Thanks to this we will then develop the two other forms of trust traditionally described: the aspiration for Awakening and the inspiration to follow the path, both of which will be the subject of the next letter.

Exercise: *What can I really put my trust in? Let us reflect deeply and consider different forms of trust, one after the other: trust in ourselves, in our observations, in our convictions; trust in others, in their friendship and support; trust in our mind, our capacity to understand; trust in society, in nature, in our environment; trust in our philosophy, religion, ideas, thoughts; trust in the effects of our actions with body, speech and mind; trust in basic facts of life like the observation that tension is always present in a clinging mind, and so on... Which are the more reliable foundations for trust? What can we actually build on? And which are less reliable? Yes, I agree, this is quite a demanding, perhaps initially even overwhelming exercise. Take it slowly; we need to come back to it many times on our spiritual path.*

With best wishes for a deep examination of your life experience,

Tilman Lhundrup

PS. If you wish to read a traditional summary of trust, have a look at the end of chapter 2 of Gampopa’s “Jewel Ornament of Liberation”.