



Trust opens the heart like a flower...

Awakening to Sanity (letter 7)

Trust and belief

Dear friend,

The Buddha's teaching is actually for non-believers; it is for people who inquire in order to understand. But those who are not interested to investigate into reality themselves will simply believe what the Buddha and other similar masters said. There is no harm in that as long as the masters have done their investigation properly themselves and do not simply propagate what they have learned from their tradition and hear-say.

There are some indications however that often the inquiry is not being done properly, because the students in Buddhist places of learning usually turn out to cherish the same views as their instructors: Kagyu scholars will hold Kagyu views, Gelug scholars will hold Gelug views, and so on – it is the same for all Buddhist traditions. Without proper knowledge of each other they might criticize what they believe others believe. I have myself been witness to Theravadins criticizing the Mahayana for unjust reasons and Mahayanists doing the same with the Theravada. Conflicts and splits have arisen over that between Tibetan schools and other major Buddhist groups – and these conflicts are mostly based on belief. Many teachers of today encourage us to overcome such attitudes, but rarely do they encourage their students to challenge the beliefs cherished in their own tradition...

Strong belief based on trust is very powerful – it is the motor of most religions. It can “move mountains”. However, it does not have the strength of certainty based on direct, personal experience. To gain that certainty in the nature of mind and phenomena is the path which the Buddha taught. It is the more difficult approach, but it is the only sure one that will be able to free the mind. In that sense, the followers of the Buddha are not a community (Sangha) of believers but a “community of inquiry”. Within that community of inquiry there are some who have already come to direct personal insight, more or less complete, who can act as guides or helpers to others, but it will not help to simply believe what they say.

We can roughly distinguish two approaches:

- a. based on trust in the teachings one enters personal investigation and
- b. based on trust in the teachings one practices what one believes.

Both approaches are based on trust in what the masters say, but the first one in addition trusts in the possibility to investigate, see and understand for oneself, while the second one trusts in the power of devotion to what the masters say to dispel all confusion. The second one is obviously the path of most religions while the first one is more akin to a scientific approach.

In both cases there are dangers: In the investigative approach there is the danger not to investigate properly and to never reach that certainty that liberates. In the believer's approach there is the danger that our trust is misplaced and misguided and that it will never have the necessary strength to dispel confusion.

At first sight the two approaches seem incompatible with each other. But in fact – in the reality of practice – they are not only compatible but might inspire each other. Let's take an example from scientific studies: We all start with a certain trust and openness into what the professor of science teaches. Some may simply believe what they hear and trust in it (actually for most people so-called science is a system of beliefs) while others will make personal experiments to verify the key notions of their science and will thus gain certainty. Some experiments are simple and can be done in a classroom while others need extensive preparations and special conditions in laboratories.

It is the same with mind: To start out we need enough trust in our teachers to follow their advice on what to look for and how to conduct the experiments in daily life, prayer or meditation. Some experiments will be easy, but the verification of subtle points might need specific preparations (like first establishing deep mental calm) or very special conditions (like a period of undistracted retreat). It will help to have a deep confidence in the advice received to persevere with our research until we have verified the point in question.

The validity of our experiments cannot be disputed for as long as they have been conducted properly – they are direct experience. However, we have to watch out and be very careful concerning any speculative conclusions drawn from our scientific experiment or personal experience. This is where the error creeps in. Based on speculative deductions we might draw premature conclusions and what is a mere hypothesis becomes a belief. The beliefs of scientific or religious schools of thought might spoil the whole undertaking: instead of coming to true discoveries and insights one is out to prove one's own cherished point of view.

However, one can combine one's devotion to the teachings and masters with being truly devoted to insight – and this is what after all gives the best results: growing certainty.

All the best, Tilmann Lhundrup