

# THE POWER OF FAITH

Venerable Ajahn Nyanadhammo



# ***The Power of Faith***

***by Venerable Ajahn Nyanadhammo***

---

Edited from a Dhamma talk given by  
Ajahn Nyanadhammo at  
Wat Pah Nanachat (27 September 2002)  
in Ubon Rachathani Province, Thailand.

Copyright © 2003 The Saṅgha, Wat Pah Nanachat

**For free distribution**

“It is the spirit of *dāna*, freely offered generosity, which has kept the entire Buddhist tradition alive for more than 2,500 years.”

*Sabbadānam dhammadānam jīnāti*  
‘The gift of Dhamma excels all gifts’

This computer-edition of ‘The Power of Faith’ may be freely copied and redistributed electronically, provided that the file contents (including this agreement) are not altered in any way and that it is distributed at no cost to the recipient. You may make printed copies of this work for your personal use; further distribution of printed copies requires permission from the copyright holder, which may be obtained upon notification. Any reproduction (in whole or part, in any form) for sale, profit or material gain is prohibited.

The Abbot  
Wat Pah Nanachat  
Bahn Bung Wai  
Ampher Warin Chamrab  
Ubon Rachathani 34310  
Thailand

# The Power of Faith

In the Buddhist teachings, there is the path and there is the fruit that arise from fulfilling the factors of the path. In our practice of the spiritual path, we have to be going in the direction of the goal, the fruit of the path, but to do that, we have to create the conditions before any results can arise. Often if frustration or discouragement sets in, it's because we have disregarded or overlooked in some way the conditions necessary for the results to arise. So one of the important things is coming back to the basics of practice, to find out why – if the Buddha taught that these results arise as a natural consequence – why are they not arising for me? It is because the conditions have not yet been developed in the mind, or the conditions have not come together in a natural way sufficient for the results to arise. Just as fruit will not ripen if the conditions are not ready, if it is not the right season; so we need the right causes, and the right conditions. One important group of conditions necessary for spiritual development are the five spiritual faculties (*indriya*). When these spiritual faculties are developed, they become strengths (*bala*), they become powers for the mind, to move the mind towards the goal, in the direction of Dhamma.

So the five spiritual faculties – *saddhā*, *virīya*, *sati*, *samādhi*, *paññā* – when they are cultivated and developed, they become a power for the mind. If you find that the mind is lacking energy, lacking power, lacking inspiration, lacking focus, then one comes back to these causes, these spiritual factors. And the first one of those is *saddhā*, which is the quality that makes the mind "leap forward", it has the trust, the confidence, to make a leap of faith, that earnest inspiration to trust and say yes. Do you notice that the mind which lacks *saddhā* is always saying no? It says no or finds excuses why not to do something; why not to get up at three in the morning; why not to walk meditation after the meal; why not to sit meditation. It's always giving excuses. And we see that the defilements of the mind will always procrastinate, will always postpone, and will have the tendency towards not being inspired, towards putting things off and disregarding all that is good, noble and wholesome – all the teachings of the Buddhas and the *ariyas*.

So when we recognize the mind that procrastinates and disregards all that is good as unwholesome, then we also can see the opposite, those qualities of mind which say yes to Dhamma, which say yes to putting forth effort in walking and sitting meditation, which say yes to goodness, service and generosity – that is the mind which leaps forward, which has trust and confidence in the Buddha and the path of the noble ones. The quality of leaping forward with earnestness and encouragement, with trust and inner confidence, that is energy for the mind. If you compare it to a car, a car is just a vehicle and it can only go if there is petrol in the vehicle, which is the fuel which drives the engine and propels the car along. If the driver is careless and does not re-fuel the car, top up the petrol every now and then, the factors for the car to be projected and propelled along are removed, and eventually the car loses all power and comes to a

stop.

It's the same with *saddhā* or faith. Faith is the fuel, the energy which propels us on the spiritual path. For many Western people this quality is actually not very strong when we come to Buddhism, because we often come to Buddhism with the approach of having rejected religions of faith, religions which demand belief. We've come from a rational, intellectual and logical appreciation of Dhamma; and so we find it difficult to develop those faith practices like recollection of the Buddha, recollection of his teachings, or recollection of the *Ariya-Sangha*. And that can be one of our weaknesses – that our strong intellectual side is out of balance – so our practice can be very dry and formal. It lacks the zest, the zeal, the earnestness, the uplifting joy associated with sheer faith. So if this is the case, it may be one of the factors that one may need to focus on if one's meditation is getting stuck or not developing

One must look for ways to bring up faith. And how does one arouse faith? By turning towards the life of the Buddha, reading about his life, his own sacrifice. The arising of a Tathāgata in the world is like bringing light to the world. The world, without the realization of the four noble truths by a Sammā-Sambuddha, is in absolute darkness. With the arising of a Buddha in the world there is light, and there is the opportunity for beings to get beyond birth, old age, sickness and death. So try to give some time in one's meditation to contemplate the life of the Buddha, the qualities of a Buddha, as if the Buddha was standing right before you and you are bowing down to his feet, and he is spreading loving-kindness towards you. This can bring up a sense of joy and inspiration, wishing to emulate his qualities of body, speech and mind, wanting to fulfil the Buddha's teachings and instructions. This quality of faith also dispels unwholesome states (*akusalā dhammā*).

There is a beautiful passage in the Suttas where the Buddha says that if a person meditates or develops contemplation of the Tathāgata, recollection of the Buddha, at that time their mind will not be overcome by greed, hatred or delusion. So if you find that the hindrances are becoming very strong, that you are being overcome by sensual desire; by ill-will, negativity and frustration; by sloth and drowsiness; by restlessness and remorse; or by doubt; when the mind is not bright and alert, then bring up thoughts, contemplation, recollection of the Buddha as a way of bringing the hindrances to an end. This is a direct way of overcoming unwholesome states, not allowing the mind to sink down into sloth and torpor and dullness. The word Buddha means the awakened one, the serene one, the blissful one, so we emulate the qualities of the Buddha by becoming awake, becoming alert, becoming joyous, making the mind serene, tranquil and calm.

If you find that you are overcome by the hindrance of dullness, then open your eyes, don't sit with your eyes shut. It's a simple way of meditating that can bring up wakefulness. Nowhere in the Suttas does it actually say that, when meditating, a *bhikkhu* sits with his eyes shut. It says: a *bhikkhu* sits cross-legged, back straight, and establishes mindfulness before him. So if you find you are being overcome by drowsiness, open your eyes, be alert, and be mindful. When the mind becomes peaceful the eyes will close naturally.

This development of faith is one of the qualities which is often lacking. We can develop this faith around the Dhamma teachings, by reading the words of the Buddha or the words of the noble disciples, reading about their lives and how they too, both at the time of the Buddha and in recent history, put forth great effort in their practice, endured and overcome difficulties just like us. They began as unenlightened human

beings and, by fulfilling the path laid down by the Buddha, were able to transform themselves and abandon the view of self. So it is the development of the contemplation of the Dhamma which brings faith and inspiration. And by turning one's attention to the Suttas and looking for those words of advice and guidance, by memorizing those words and bringing them to mind frequently, it increases one's confidence that these teachings are "beautiful in the beginning, beautiful in the middle, beautiful in the end." They can be cultivated and developed by someone who has faith and goes forth.

Also the recollection of the Sangha, the *ariya-sangha*: we are very fortunate in our lives to have come across the teachings that are still vibrant and alive. It is wonderful and marvellous to have gone-forth in a tradition which is still practising well, practising rightly, still keeping this noble tradition of virtue, *samādhī* and wisdom; to have the opportunity to practise in the footsteps of the *ariyas*, to walk in the same direction, along the same path that the Buddha and all the *ariyas* of the past have walked. In that way we can arouse the faith and confidence that if we apply effort, if we strive, if we practise this path, then we are practising correctly. Often, when we reflect on the *ariya-sangha*, we can fall into a sense of comparing ourselves to people who we consider as having so many *paramī* (spiritual qualities), and we may feel that we lack these qualities. But that's not true: to have gone forth as *samaṇas* in the holy life, to have come to a place like this, at this time and in this age, to have the opportunity, when the teachings are still complete, to hear the Dhamma from *bhikkhus* who practise rightly, practise correctly, practise directly – that opportunity is still there, and we still have the facilities and conditions to put forth effort and practise.

So we do have great *paramī*, especially to have been born in non-Buddhist countries, but then to have come across these teachings and have the opportunity to practise under these conditions, in a tradition which is still vibrant and alive, which is still transforming people into *ariyas*. All that is needed is there, it's just a matter of applying the mind to creating the causes, putting forth the effort. And that effort must be constant and steady. This is not a 100-yard short sprint, this is a marathon. It takes extended and persistent effort, the attitude of "It does not matter how long it takes, I will continue striving." Apart from the foundation of faith in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, we must have the trust in the training (*sikkha*), for it is this training we are undertaking that leads to liberation. We have to trust in our ability to realise the Dhamma.

This comes from a sense of having kindness to oneself, not being too judgemental, because often – if the mind is falling into frustration and negativity – we become a very harsh judge of ourselves. We tend to think we are not worthy, that we can't live up to this training and we can't reach the goal, or that we don't have what it takes or don't have the abilities. But we do.... When we read the Suttas, many people who you wouldnt expect to be able to realise truth, were able to realise it. For example Angulimāla: he was able to realise this truth. We don't have those very strong hindrances that he had; we haven't created in this lifetime the kind of *kamma* that he had created, so the opportunities are there. This is an attitude of kindness to oneself, a sense of trust in one's own abilities and potential, because everything is possible. If we have the attitude of mind that "I can't do it, it's impossible" then it will become impossible. If we have the attitude that it is an achievable and desirable goal, then that aspiration, faith and confidence will bring up the energy to strive for that goal.

*Saddhā* (faith) is the origin of *virīya* (effort). So if there isn't enough energy in the practice, often the reason is that faith is lacking. *Saddhā* can be increased by having

contact with the teachings; by reading the Suttas; reading the life of the Buddha; having contact with good monks, having contact with the *ariya-sangha*; listening to Dhamma and reciting those teachings, bringing them to mind frequently. Also looking at one's own practice in a very caring and positive way, considering that we have the potential – despite the difficulties and problems – to reach victory over all the hindrances and defilements, that *dukkha* can be brought to an end. ***If we trust in the path and remove the idea of a self from it, then we see that it's just a process, not "our" dukkha, not "us" doing the practice, or "us" having a problem. It is just dukkha, the path to the ending of dukkha, and the realization of the end of dukkha, the fulfilment of the path.***

You will notice, when your faith and confidence is high, then it's very easy to put forth effort, energy comes up naturally. When our trust in the path is low then our energy goes down. Energy is the quality of overcoming unwholesome qualities, and not allowing unarisen unwholesome qualities to arise, bringing up wholesome qualities, sustaining wholesome qualities – this is right effort.

*Sati* (mindfulness) is the ability to recall what is happening in the here and now, to know whether the mind is overcome by hindrances and to know what to do about them. If you find that you're falling into the same hindrance over and over again, it's not just enough to know that this hindrance is arising; one also has to recall the teachings of what to do about this hindrance, what is the path to overcome this hindrance. How do I overcome drowsiness? How do I overcome doubt? How do I overcome restlessness? How do I overcome negativity and depression? How do I overcome sensual desire? What's lacking in the mind? This is also an aspect of mindfulness. Then we have to know whether the mind is expansive or contracted. If you are stressed, if you are putting forth too much effort, then the mind becomes contracted and is not expansive. If *sati* isn't there in the mind, then we get pulled along by the emotions and thoughts.

But *sati* should be cultivated along with *sampajañña*, the ability to understand things in context, to know in a circumspect way the right thing to do, and how to deal with the problems of meditation. For example, someone may be developing *samādhi*, the mind becomes peaceful and tranquil, and at that time visions (*nimitta*) may arise – lights, colours, sounds, visual impressions of beings or whatever. One has to have the awareness of what is going on and how to deal with them, what is the right way to approach such phenomena. Should one develop the attention on the object of meditation further, or should one develop wisdom by contemplating the impermanent nature of that phenomenon so that one doesn't get lost in it? These visions which arise are an indicator that the mind is not yet completely peaceful, it is not yet still, it is going towards diversification, and the mind will get distracted. So one keeps the mind on the object of meditation, and then the mind goes to *samādhi* (concentration).

One-pointedness means lack of diversity, not being scattered, having a single focus, a single object. When an object of meditation is being developed, it must be developed whole-heartedly and single-mindedly. One doesn't indulge in the thoughts stimulated by the hindrances: these things are to be abandoned and given up, not to be cultivated. If one develops this attitude of abandoning the unwholesome (*akusalā*), one is giving space for the wholesome (*kusala*) to arise. To bring the object of your meditation to mind is what we mean by *vitakka*, constantly keeping the mind on the meditation object, establishing one's attention on it, bringing it back: this is called *vicāra*. If you are suffering from drowsiness, it shows there is no *vitakka-vicāra*, you are not bringing

the object of meditation up in the mind, you are allowing the mind to blank out, to dull out. That shows the lack of this application of mind and establishing continuous attention.

Mindfulness is not "thinking about" the object, it is recalling the object, remembering it, bringing it to mind. *Vitakka* is the act of fixing your attention on it. Whether it's *buddho*, the breath, or *asubha* (unattractiveness) – you bring the object to mind. Then *vicāra* is the act of sustaining the mind on that object; once you've brought the object up into the mind, to sustain the attention on it continuously over a long period of time. To know whether you are breathing in or out is *vitakka*; *vicāra* is sustaining attention on the whole process of breathing, the whole length of one inhalation and exhalation. To keep the mind on an object like this, it has to be interested; if we are not interested, then we'll just be dull or distracted. So we arouse this interest: "What's happening here? Am I breathing in or am I breathing out? Is it a long breath or a short breath? What's the feeling, the quality of the breath? How does this breath feel throughout the body? Where does the breath begin and where does it end?" You will find that by sustaining the mind on an object like this, the hindrances will not arise. The hindrances are dependent on causes, and when we sit in the seclusion of mind (*citta-viveka*), relying on one object, then we will be secluded from the hindrances and they will get weaker.

But to do that we have to balance the mind, to develop *vitakka* and *vicāra*, and also *pīti-sukha*, the rapture and happiness of the mind. This is a quality of delight and gladness – to hear the Dhamma, or to bring up a meditation object. If we are struggling in meditation, often it's because we are not developing this quality of gladness in the mind. If, when sitting, there is the sense "Oh, here we go again," there is the sense of frustration with your object, or there is the sense "I already know it's not going to go anywhere", then there is not going to be this quality of gladness. If there is no gladness, there will be no rapture. If there is no rapture, there will not be any happiness. And if there is no happiness in a wholesome object, that will not lead to *samāधि*.

The last of the five faculties, *paññā* or wisdom, is the ability to bring things back to the three characteristics. The culmination of wisdom is when the mind sees things naturally in accordance with the three characteristics, as impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self. To create the causes for that, we have to develop the *saññā* (perception) of these characteristics; to bring to mind and into contemplation that "This condition, this experience, this happiness or suffering is impermanent; this, too, will change." To see the nature of impermanence, we purposely contemplate all experience, whether it's the most blissful experience we've had or the most terrifying, horrible, difficult experience we've had, that it is all impermanent. Reflecting that these conditions in the past have changed, in the present they change, and in the future, likewise, will change; one starts to see that this is something to be let go of, to be abandoned, not to be clung to.

For example, fear: we can apply wisdom to see fear as just an experience, an emotion, a feeling which has the nature to change. When we experience anything, rather than ask "What is this, who is this?" it is better to ask "What is its characteristic?" What something ultimately is cannot yet be seen, there is still a lack of clarity. What can be seen is the fleeting, changing nature of conditions. This natural characteristic is observable.

If its characteristic is change, then it's unsatisfactory, and if it's unsatisfactory, then it cannot be clung to as being "me, mine, myself". This is not something we just believe in; we can actually observe, know and experience the characteristic of something –

whether this experience changes or not, whether it's permanent or impermanent, satisfactory or unsatisfactory, and whether it is worthy to be called self or not-self.

*Uppādo paññāyati, vayo paññāyati, thitassa aññathattaṃ paññāyati.*  
(Arising is discerned, passing away is discerned, change in persistence is discerned.)