

From Faith by Sharon Salzberg

Sharon is one of the leading teachers of *vipassana* (insight) meditation. In 1976, she established, together with Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts, which now ranks as one of the most prominent and active meditation centers in the Western world.

One day a friend called to ask if we could meet for tea. Knowing that I was writing a book on faith from the Buddhist perspective she was confused and wanted to talk. “how can you possibly be writing a book on faith without focusing on God?” she demanded. “Isn’t that the whole point?” Her concern spoke to the common understanding we have of faith – that it is synonymous with religious adherence. But the tendency to equate faith with doctrine, and then argue about terminology and concepts, distracts us from what faith is actually about. In my understanding, whether faith is connected to a deity or not, its essence lies in trusting ourselves to discover the deepest truths on which we can rely.

For some this will be a very different approach to faith. Many link faith to narrow-minded belief systems, lack of intelligent examination, or pain at having one’s question silenced. Faith might evoke images of submission to an external authority. Historically the idea of faith as been used to slice cleanly between those who belong to a select group and those who do not. To fuel their own embittered agenda, fanatics harness what they call faith to hatred.

I want to invite us to a new use of the word faith, one that is not associated with a dogmatic religious interpretation or divisiveness. I want to encourage delight in the word, to help reclaim faith as fresh vibrant, intelligent and liberating. This is a faith that emphasizes a

foundation of love and respect for ourselves. It is a faith that uncovers our connection to others, rather than designating anyone as separate and apart.

Faith does not require a belief system and it not necessarily connected to a deity or God, though it doesn't deny one. This faith is not a commodity we either have or don't have, it is an inner quality that unfolds as we learn to trust our own deepest experience. The Buddha said, "Faith is the beginning of all good things." No matter what we encounter in life, it is faith that enables us to try again, to love again. Even in times of immense suffering, it is faith that enables us to relate to the present moment in such a way that we can go on, we can move forward, instead of becoming lost in resignation or despair. Faith link our present-day experience whether wonderful or terrible, to the underlying pulse of life itself.

In Pali, faith is a verb, an action, as it is also in Latin and Hebrew. Faith is not a singular state that we either have or don't have, but it is something that we do.

A capacity of this type of faith is inherent to every human being. We might not recognize it or know how to nurture it, but we can learn to do both.