

SHRADDHA

A SPECIAL KIND OF TRUST

An article by

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SHRADDHA: A SPECIAL KIND OF TRUST

“Shraddha” is a Sanskrit word which is often simply translated as “faith”; but *shraddha* means something deeper, more akin to our word “trust” – trust of a special kind that is essential on the journey to self-knowledge. Although a healthy scepticism can be helpful on our path, doubt can seriously hold us back. So we need to find a happy, middle way.

The use of words to describe *shraddha* is fraught with difficulty. For example, the word *faith* can imply reliance on a belief system, often with religious connotations. Understandably, many people are uncomfortable with something that they infer demands a need to suspend logic and common sense.

Yet every single day we employ trust and faith. We have to make assumptions because otherwise life would grind to a halt. For instance, we assume that if we switch an electric kettle on, the water inside it will heat up and boil; and we do not doubt that turning on the kitchen tap will result in a flow of water. We will probably also assume, unless we are suffering from a severe illness or phobia or are exposed to obvious danger, that we will still be alive when it’s time to go to bed and, indeed, that we will still be around tomorrow. Trust is essential for daily life and necessarily implicates an absence of fear. This type of trust might be described as taking things for granted – a state of mind or belief arrived at through habit that can, as we know, be shaken by major events and crises.

Shraddha, by contrast, is far greater than just taking things for granted. Our personal

evolution or spiritual progress involves a deepening of our self-knowledge and an expansion of awareness. It requires cultivation of the finer human qualities, such as love, kindness, compassion, patience and inner strength. It doesn’t necessarily mean becoming a saint, a guru or a Buddha, but it does mean evolving into a better human being. Fear and doubt can interfere with our personal growth because they cause our energy to shrink or withdraw, preventing us from moving forward and undermining our self-confidence and well-being.

Wise teachers have always encouraged us to overcome fear by having faith. Faith requires us to construct a mental image that goes beyond what is apparent to us – an image of a model of reality that cannot as yet be proved. Rather than regarding everything as false until we have proof, faith is a belief in something being true until the contrary is proved. That belief must be provisional, however, otherwise it would be no better than superstition; it is a working belief – a temporary measure that helps us move forward. An analogy is of a guide who advises us that to progress on a journey we must cross a very wobbly bridge over a deep ravine. If he stands behind us and says, “Go ahead, it’s safe,” we may have fear and even doubt him. But if we have known him for a while and everything he has said so far has turned out to be correct, or if he goes ahead of us and says, “Come on – it’s safe. I’ve just done it and many people cross here every day. No-one has ever fallen and it’s easier than it looks,” we are more likely to have sufficient faith in his advice and cross the abyss. Fear may still be present but we construct an image in our minds that everything is going to be all right so that we can go onwards.

Trusting what others tell us is not always easy or even appropriate, though. As children, we may have trusted what adults or friends told

us and subsequently found that it was a mistake to have done so. As a result, we grow into adults with a certain amount of caution or scepticism in us. That is probably healthy to an extent because it can keep us out of danger or trouble. But the downside is that the seeds of doubt are in us, too, and doubt holds up our evolutionary progress. It does so because we become fearful; strength leaks out of us, taking our confidence and sense of adventure with it. If we want to grow we have to lose that timidity by overcoming the conditioning that put it there. A good teacher will advise his students not to take everything he says as true until they are satisfied from their own experience and inquiry of what the truth is for themselves. An open mind is essential.

The inner strength that we need can only come if we have *self-trust*. That comes from knowing who we are, which can only arise when the mind is still and natural inner clarity is allowed to surface. To achieve complete stillness and total clarity, sometimes described because of its brilliance as “sheer lucency”, requires a supreme state of non-action with extraordinary mental clarity and alertness. The main difficulty in achieving that, particularly when we lead a normal busy life, is that the mind has been working overtime all our lives, acquiring information and ceaselessly regurgitating it. Our awareness has become overlaid with a smokescreen of thinking, with complex veneers of beliefs, emotions and habitual patterns of reaction.

What we have lost and need to rediscover is an innocent state of awareness. Once we have found it, self-trust naturally and ineffably arises by itself. Until then, we have to take some temporary measures to help us on our way, developing trust by degrees.

The first level of trust we need to have is a conviction that there actually is a journey of self-discovery to be made. We may get no further than this for a very long time – just having a sense that there is more to life and that there is an “inner self” that needs to be expressed and is seeking fulfilment. At some point, the urge to find this becomes so strong that we have to do something about it. The search then begins – and a little healthy scepticism at this stage will help us from making some wrong turns. (There are many people in the world who will guarantee to take us to nirvana, without having found it for themselves, and they should be avoided like the plague.)

The second level of trust comes when we know that we have found something that is going to take us at least some of the way on our journey. It is trust rather than knowledge because we cannot know for certain that our path will turn this way or that, any more than we can be absolutely certain that a ferry will reach the other side of a wide river. But, for now at least, we need to believe we are heading in the right direction.

For this extraordinary journey, we need signposts, maps and knowledge that are going to enable us to go further on our way. En route, we will come across teachings or information that will be useful – guidance from those who have travelled further on their own journey. Once we have found someone, or a body of teachings, that we are comfortable with, having tested them by our own inquiry, intuition and experience, we may grow to trust them. If they are right for us, and we have sufficient faith in ourselves, we will begin to feel more complete and find the mind becoming calmer and clearer. Gradually, we will realise that everything we need is to be found here, right now, in the present moment and that we don’t need to go off somewhere else looking for it.

The point will come, normally through the power of meditation, when we start to have occasional glimpses of pure awareness. The experiences may be very brief at first but sufficient for us to know that we are truly on the way home. The trust that we have had in various teachings that we have read or heard becomes validated by our own experience – we understand for ourselves, rather than relying on the words of others. Even though we may lose clarity from time to time, we know without any shadow of doubt that the mind is not who we are – nor are the emotions, nor the physical body. They are just vehicles that we use on the journey but are not the journey itself.

Shraddha is that deep trust in our own nature, that sense of knowing, and, by cultivating it, we gradually move forward, peeling back the veneers of the personality that we hide behind. Slowly but progressively we see more and more clearly until eventually total clarity becomes established. Finally, even *shraddha* is transcended. When that happens, the journey is over and we can turn round and smile; but until then, we must keep walking...

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