

Widening the Dialogue about Faith in Space

by Rev. Beata Chapman, PhD

It is probably the case that all kinds of people and all kinds of beliefs will find themselves inhabiting space together. Kepler University's Faith Space Program is developing to dialogue about and delineate what might be some kind of core elements of ethics and spirituality that nourish the kind of culture necessary to thrive in this brave new world.

As we continue this dialogue on what may truly be unanswerable questions, it seems important to proceed with care in the words we choose and how they may be received by the many diverse peoples who will inhabit space. For Christians, Muslims, and Jews, for example, "faith" is a word that includes belief in a Supreme Being who exists outside the human experience and in whom people put their belief in salvation or wisdom or just plain problem-solving here and now. The sacred is thought to be separate from and better than the mundane and the goal is to live a life that is in accord with the divine, which is the primary motivation for ethical or moral laws and behavior. Morality is thought to be defined by the Supreme Being and it is required of human beings to comply.

In order to achieve internalized adherence to moral standards or rules, a certain leap of faith is required as to the existence and omnipotence of the Supreme Being. In many Christian belief systems, humans are reliant on the Supreme Being for liberation from suffering, which comes primarily from their obedience with moral standards.

Buddhism and other Eastern religions do not require belief in a Supreme Being. Buddhism does not exclude the possible existence of God, but it is not concerned with experience other than that which is here, now. Therefore, as to the question of what happens after death, the Buddha's response is referred to as "the thunderous silence of the Tatagatha." Salvation is here and now, in this very moment. Damnation, too, is right here, now. The aim of the practice of Buddhism is to be awake here and now so that salvation and damnation are simultaneously included and one experiences the thusness of human experience. Just this is enough. Right here, beyond sacred and profane, good and bad, this and that, beyond divisions of thought and concept, or body and mind, there is just this, one's actual experience here and now.

The famous seventeenth century Zen Buddhist Master Hakuin Zenji defined faith:

What is this root of faith? It is nothing less than the belief that every man possesses his own intrinsic nature into which he can attain insight, and that there is a Fundamental Principle which can be completely penetrated. Just this.¹

¹ Isshu Miura Roshi, "Seeing Into One's Own Nature (2)," trans. Ruth F. Sasaki, in *Zen Dust: The History of the Koan and Koan Study in Rinzai (Lin-Chi) Zen*, ed. Isshu Miura and Ruth Fuller Sasaki (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), 41-45.

One can readily see how differently Buddhists view faith than do Christians and others for whom faith can be “blind” and involves vesting one’s belief in a being outside oneself. As Hakuin said, faith in Zen Buddhism is belief that anyone who practices sincerely and ardently can penetrate his/her own true nature and understand the true nature of reality. Faith and practice cannot be separated. Understanding that all things are empty of inherent self-solidity and co-arise with all other conditions is key to the ethical guidelines Buddhism calls Precepts. Precepts are not commandments or rules that come from someone or someplace more powerful than the individual, but arise from the practice realization of the individual. In other words, ethical behavior arises from practice; it is not imposed by dogma or moral judgment. In this way, practice is in itself an embodiment of faith.

The Buddha taught that there are four noble truths: First, there is dissatisfaction inherent in human form. Because all things born die, discontent or dissatisfaction is inherent. The second noble truth is that the cause of suffering is attachment – to one’s own opinions, preferences, and some solid idea of “self,” “me,” “my,” “mine.” The third noble truth is that there is freedom from suffering, the method for which is the fourth noble truth known as the Noble Eightfold path. Living according to the Noble Eightfold Path encourages and supports practitioners in releasing, grasping, and wishing that things were different than they are. Hence contentment with what is, things as they are, becomes the practitioner’s ground of living. Compassion and wisdom guide skillful use of body, speech, and mind. Practitioners become less attached to their own preferences and more able to follow the dictum of teacher Charlotte Selver, “What comes, comes. Make no fuss whatsoever about it and you will see what happens.”² Each moment includes each person, each activity, and the great earth and sky as we encounter them right now. This skillful means is another cornerstone of Buddhism’s ethical structure and, in conjunction with the Precepts, strongly support living an ethical and honest life as a means of ending one’s suffering here and now.

Hence, “great faith” is always accompanied by great doubt and great determination. The three together provide the raw materials through which one can penetrate one’s own mind – revealing the fundamental principle of emptiness. “Faith” is required because we are fooled by apparent separateness, craving, and grasping, the second noble of truth and the cause of suffering. We must believe that it is possible to see through this delusion into the fundamental nature of all things. This is not easy, so great doubt naturally arises. In order to make the effort required to break through our delusion of separateness, even with our doubt, and realize liberation, great determination must also be present. Great faith, great doubt, and great realization are important elements of Buddhist practice.

How do we talk about faith, then, in a way that includes and embraces our various beliefs without homogenizing them or ignoring their important differences? Interfaith dialogue today has moved beyond comparison between religions in an effort to find

² Richard Lowe and Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt, eds., *Reclaiming Vitality and Presence: The Teachings of Charlotte Selver and Charles V. W. Brooks* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2007), 137.

similarities and toward each system presenting itself as an intact whole and simply learning and continuing the dialogue about how we can work together for the common good, using the differences between us as strengths. Is there room for such a dialogue about how humans might inhabit space harmoniously and ethically without setting up moral rights and wrongs that include and exclude by their very nature? How does religion move people toward individual judgment and accountability and how might that contribute to a thriving, healthy, diverse culture in space? I believe faith and spiritual practice have a great deal to teach and learn about faith and practice in space communities which are likely to be diverse in beliefs, practices, and values.

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About the Author: Beata Chapman is an organizational consultant and Zen Buddhist priest. She has been involved in interfaith dialogue for many years and is keenly interested in how wisdom and compassion might be cultivated as the central themes of human societies wherever they may settle. Beata consults in group development to for-profit and non-profit organizations and is the teacher of the Suffering & Delight Sangha of meditation groups for people living with chronic pain (www.sufferinganddelight.net).



Editor's Notes: Kepler Space Institute welcomes Dr. Chapman to our ongoing study of Space Faith. Dr. (Pastor) Lawrence Downing has been the Chair for a group of theologians sharing their experience and knowledge on this important complex subject for the past five years. Dr. Chapman here brings her Buddhist expertise to this dialogue. Dr. Downing reviewed her submission to the Journal of Space Philosophy, had no recommended edits and identified it as a valuable contribution. *Bob Krone, PhD.*