The Three Stages of Faith
Category : English
Published by senthil on Sep. 01, 2009

Publisher's Desk

The Three Stages of Faith

We progress from blind faith to conviction bolstered by philosophy, and finally to certainty forged in the fires of personal experience

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October/November/December, 2009

Faith is central to all the world's religions. Webster's dictionary defines religious faith as unquestioning belief in God and religious tenets that does not require proof or evidence. The Hindu view of faith is somewhat different. This is because in Hinduism faith is not a static state; rather, it is constantly deepening through personal experience and growth. The spiritual truths of Sanatana Dharma, initially accepted without proof, are ultimately proved through personal experience. Swami Chinmayananda, founder of Chinmaya Mission, succinctly conveyed this concept: "Faith is to believe what you do not see. The reward of faith is to see what you believed."

My Gurudeva, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, presents this deeper aspect of faith by citing an old saying favored by pragmatic intellectuals, "Seeing is believing," and then states that a more profound adage is "Believing is seeing." He goes on to explain that today's scientists and educators see with their two eyes and pass judgments based on what they currently believe. The rishis of the past and the rishis of the now and those yet to come also are seers. Their seeing is not with the two eyes; it is with the third eye, the eye of the soul. Gurudeva observed, "The intellect in its capacity to contain truth is a very limited tool, while faith is a very broad, accommodating and embracing faculty. The mystery of life and beyond life, of Siva, is really better understood through faith than through intellectual reasoning."

The focus of many religions is on helping those with no faith in God to believe in God. For Western faiths, belief in God is the beginning and the end of the process. Once you have come to believe in God, there is nothing more to do. Your salvation is assured. However, in Hinduism belief is only the first step. Hindus want to move beyond just believing in God to experiencing the Divine for themselves.

Faith, called astikya in Sanskrit, is the fourth of ten spiritual practices called niyamas, literally meaning "to unleash." The niyamas are ethical and religious practices that release or cultivate one's refined, soul qualities. These observances comprise the second limb of the ashtanga ("eight-limbed") yoga system, which is codified in numerous scriptures.

Gurudeva summarizes faith as a Hindu practice: "Astikya is to cultivate an unshakable faith. Believe firmly in God, Gods, guru and your path to enlightenment. Trust in the words of the masters, the scriptures and traditions. Practice devotion and sadhana to inspire experiences that build advanced faith. Be loyal to your lineage, one with your satguru. Shun those who try to break your faith by argument and accusation. Avoid doubt and despair."

Like faith, the world's creation is addressed in all religions. A common Hindu view is that God creates and is His creation. This panentheistic vision contrasts with other religious views, such as "creation out of nothing" and "non-creation," the view that reality is beginningless and eternal. The Hindu view of God's creating the world from Himself is described in the Mundaka Upanishad: "As a spider spins and withdraws its web, as herbs grow on the earth, as hair grows on the head and body of a person, so also from the Imperishable arises this universe."

Examining these concepts of faith and creation together enables us to make an interesting comparison between the perspectives of a modern scientist and a Hindu sage. The scientist's natural question is, "How can you prove the existence of God?" The sage's natural rejoinder is, "How can you deny the existence of God?" This polarity arises from the fact that everything the scientist perceives is matter, and everything the sage sees is God.

The cultivation of faith can be compared to the growth of a tree. As a young sapling, it can easily be uprooted, just as faith based solely on belief can easily be shaken or destroyed. Faith boltstered with philosophical knowledge is like a medium-size tree, strong and not easily disturbed. Faith matured by personal experience of God and the Gods is like a full-grown tree which can withstand external forces. Let's look more closely at faith's three developmental stages.

Blind Faith:

Faith in its initial stage is simple belief without the support of either knowledge or experience. Keeping our faith strong in this phase depends heavily on the company we keep. We need to associate with spiritual companions and avoid worldly and nonreligious people. Attending a weekly satsang with like-minded devotees is sustaining. Having the darshan of visiting swamis and other Hindu religious leaders helps keep our faith strong, as we see them as living examples, souls who know from experience the principles we believe in.

Informed Conviction: Faith in its second stage is belief strengthened by a sound understanding of Hindu philosophy. Gurudeva called this the bedrock on which faith is sustained. It is established by studying in a systematic and consistent manner to increase your knowledge about Hindu philosophy and practices. Such a study can include comparing Hinduism with the world's other major religions to understand how they differ and how they are similar.

Personal Realization:

In the third stage of faith, personal experience transforms informed conviction into certainty. Gurudeva refers to this inner knowing as advanced faith, established by one's own spiritual, unsought-for, unbidden revelations, visions or flashes of intuition, which one remembers even stronger as the months go by, more vividly than something read from a book, seen on television or heard from a friend or a philosopher. Gurudeva stresses that spiritual experiences--when verified by what yogis, rishis and sadhus have seen and heard and whose explanations centuries have preserved--create a new, superconscious intellect. This type of faith, more a knowing than a conviction, is unshakable.

As we evolve spiritually, faith matures. I have seen so many devotees growing into a deeper relationship with God, a more profound acceptance of Divinity in their lives. Here are some examples.

First Example:

A girl attends the local temple weekly with her parents but never thinks much about Hindu beliefs and practices. As a teenager, she enjoys reading books about holy men and women, the stories of their lives and their wise sayings. The experience of these great souls noticeably deepens her conviction in the precepts she was taught at the temple as a child.

Second Example:

A young man attends an upadesha by a visiting swami whose presence is radiant with spiritual light. His talk increases the seeker's faith and inspires him to intensify his religious practices.

Third Example:

While worshiping at an ancient shrine to Lord Ganesha during a pilgrimage to Sri Lanka, a man has a life-altering vision. The Lord of Obstacles walks out of the shrine and stands before him, giving blessings, then walks back into the shrine. This dramatic experience convinces him, through and through, that the Gods are real.

Fourth Example:

A woman meditates every morning, but her thinking always distracts her and she never goes deeply within. One morning, for no apparent reason, distractions recede and she finds herself going in and in and in and staying in an expansive, peaceful state for a long time. Returning to normal awareness, she sees life differently, holding a new perspective that God is a consciousness permeating all, and she is that consciousness. The belief that the soul and God are one takes on new meaning to her.

Fifth Example:

A faith-building experience that many Hindus shared occurred in 1995. It all began when one man in New Delhi had a dream that Ganesha craved a little milk. In the early morning he went to a temple where a priest allowed him to offer a spoonful of milk to the small stone image. Both watched in astonishment as the milk disappeared. Within hours news had spread across India that Ganesha was accepting milk offerings. Tens of millions of people of all ages flocked to temples across the globe and had the same experience. A Reuters report quoted Anila

Premji: "I held the spoon out level, and it just disappeared. To me it was a miracle. It gave me a feeling that there is a God, a sense of Spirit on this Earth."

An important aspect of deepening our faith is building confidence in our innate divinity and our ability to experience it. We are fortunate in the modern Hindu world to have enlightened men and women in whom we can recognize high spiritual attainments. In them we have living examples of the illumined state we hope to one day achieve. We must remember that their attainment is our own potential; it is, in fact, the spiritual destiny of each soul in this or a future life. The path to such attainment involves regular practice of devotion and meditation, which leads eventually to personal experiences of the Divine.