Understanding Faith

Buddhism has a different understanding regarding the nature of faith. The Pali term for faith is *saddha* (sah-dah), and is also recognized as *confidence*, and is validated by direct experiential knowledge. Most religions understand faith as confidence in the power of a deity—God, Allah, Brahma, etc. to reward or punish people, supported by faith in an array of rites and rituals that are intended to attune consciousness to the power represented by the deity for avoiding damnation or producing salvation. This understanding, over the centuries since the time of the Buddha, has also become part of the Buddhist religion, with the Buddha and various Bodhisattvas as objects of worship. This is ironic, as the Buddha who started what we call Buddhism was a reformer, challenging the Brahminic faith in rites and rituals or the notion that there is an entity that is all-powerful, to be praised or appeased in order for salvation to occur.

The most well-known example of the Buddha’s teachings regarding saddha is found in the Kalama Sutta (kah-lah-mah soo-tah). The Kalamas were a community who would invite various teachers to make a presentation that they would subsequently critique. During a critical exchange, the Buddha had this to say:

Don’t go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, “This contemplative is our teacher.” When you know for yourselves that, “These mental qualities are skillful; these mental qualities are blameless; these mental qualities are praised by the wise; these mental qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to welfare and to happiness”—then you should enter and remain in them. ([AN 3:65](https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/AN/AN3_65.html))

Saddha plays a key role in Buddhism. The core commitments for a person following the principles and practices of Buddhism involve the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts. The Refuges are believing that 1) The state of being that the Buddha manifested is attainable, 2) That the Dharma, the principles and practices of Buddhism provide valid concepts and training protocols, and 3) That the Sangha, which typically is the community of those who are renouncing normal lives to “take the robes” of a monk or nun. In contemporary secular terms, the Sangha involves commitment to a form of secular community that seeks to study and practice the principles and practices together.

Having faith in the Buddha means operating as if the possibility of overcoming the distress and confusion of societal conditioning and the associated distress and confusion is realizable. Awakening is a process—the ultimate goal is direct experience of Nirvana, the Unconditioned nature of reality—but we can also aspire to the resolution of culturally embedded distortions that create a social identity and the development of a well-integrated personality as an important and worthwhile step towards realizing Nirvana. The Dharma involves the ways and means for Awakening, and the Sangha, that is, interpersonal encounters dedicated to the process of improving social harmony and using both the accomplishments and failures of these encounters as the field of practice for Awakening.

Saddha appears in the categories of Buddhist psychology as the first of the *sobhana cetasikas* (so-bah-nah cheh-tah-see-kahs), translated as *wholesome mind conditioning functions*. As suggested in the above comments, its function is to inspire confidence that the process described by the Buddha is effective. It is listed first among the wholesome mind conditioning functions because every moment of self-experience that is not burdened by craving and clinging increases the confidence suggested by the Kalama Sutta--empirical proof that the concepts and practices work.

Another function that is described in the commentaries regards saddha as one of the *Five Powers*: *Faith, Energy/Effort, Mindfulness, Stability of Attention, and Wisdom*. They operate in dynamic harmony, balancing their different functions. In the case of Faith, it is balanced by Wisdom, which includes Mindfulness, Investigation and Right Effort. If Faith is overactive, the mind becomes vulnerable to manipulation or to unreasonable conviction, but if there is too much Investigation, that can manifest as the hindrance of Skeptical Doubt. Mindfulness monitors the interplay between these functions, supporting Wisdom through Investigation and Right Effort.

The commentaries describe three levels of faith: *Conceptual, Through Examples* and *Through Direct Experience*:

*Conceptual faith* involves a convincing description of Buddhist principles and practices. For most people this is the initial rationale for study and practice. The weakness of this level is that the concepts might be distorted over the centuries of cultural influence, or, if accurate, erroneously understood or lacking in adequate practice.

*Faith through example* involves the influence of a person who seems to personify the potential for Awakening, either because the individual appears to manifest that personally, or because there seems to be a favorable group consensus regarding that personality. This is a less common entry into faith, and the prime example is the Buddha’s life. The weakness of this level is twofold: The role model may be more charismatic than authentic, but even if the person is authentic, this person’s level of awareness is not transferable—the disciple must still “work out your own salvation with diligence” (Reported to be the last words of the Buddha before his death).

*Faith through direct experiential knowledge* is the firmest validation of the benefits that are acquired through study and practice. This is a subjective realization of the Path and there are noticeable signifiers of this knowledge found in the suttas and commentaries. There is no weakness regarding this faith, but it is increasingly more difficult to validate, requiring increasing levels of mental stability and penetrating, dispassionate investigation of the selfing process. The ongoing support of a knowledgeable person can support this sort of investigation.