The Path of Faith and the Path of Reasoning

Dissecting Devotion

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We can examine any philosophical, religious, or spiritual tradition to see what role it gives to the path of faith and what role to the path of reasoning. In a tradition where the path of faith is foremost, a practitioner first believes in the authenticity of that tradition's exponent or teacher. As a result of that faith in the teacher, one believes the teacher's words. In those traditions, the teacher is most important.

In contrast, in a tradition that emphasizes the path of reasoning, the actual teachings that are given are more important than whoever the individual teacher may be. People who follow this path use their own intelligence to examine a teacher's explanations. In the course of one's examination, one asks: "Are these teachings really an antidote for my suffering? Do they help to relieve the disturbing emotions I experience? Do they help me to clear away my confusion?" If one intelligently examines the teachings and answers these questions in the affirmative, then one will believe in the teachings and hold their exponent in high regard. Thus, gaining confidence in the teachings (and, as a result of that, gaining faith in the teacher) is the path of reasoning.

The Buddha emphasized the importance of this path of reasoning, this intelligent examination of what is being taught. He told his students that their level of faith in his teachings and in him should be a product of their own critical analysis of his words. He said that if they analyzed and found his teachings beneficial, they should practice them, and if not, they should leave them aside. In this way, people who listened to his teachings should be like a merchant buying gold: Gold merchants do not merely accept the seller's praise of his goods; rather, they use a variety of methods to examine the quality of the merchandise before they make their purchase

decision. Similarly, the Buddha said, Do not accept my teachings out of faith in me, but rather out of your own confidence in my words—confidence that you have reached as a result of your own intelligent analysis.

The noble Nagarjuna is an excellent example of a Buddhist student who proceeded in this way. This is demonstrated by the opening verse of homage to the Buddha in Nagarjuna's text "The Sixty Stanzas of Reasoning":

To the one who has taught dependent arising, The method we can use to abandon birth and death, To the mighty sage, I prostrate.

Nagarjuna praises the Buddha here for his teachings. Nagarjuna says: Buddha, mighty sage, you are the one who has revealed to us the principles of dependent arising. And by having analyzed these principles, I have gained certainty in their accuracy and efficacy. I see that I can use them to cut through the net of mistaken views, abandon birth and death, and thus liberate myself from *samsara*'s suffering. Your teachings make you a great benefactor for me and all sentient beings, and so I bow to you in homage.

This emphasis on the path of reasoning does not deny the importance of faith. Faith is vital, but the way in which one arrives at one's faith is important. When faith arises as a result of analysis, it is much more stable, because that analysis will astutely detect and be able to resolve whatever doubts one might have. In contrast, when one simply believes in something from the outset, without having used one's intelligence to analyze the reasons for holding that belief, there is the danger that later on one will become cognizant of logical contradictions to one's belief and begin to doubt it. In that instance, resolving doubts is difficult, because one has deprived oneself of the tool of intelligent analysis.

That is why it is important to analyze from the outset, and to use analysis to clear up doubts. When one is analyzing and studying, it is good to ask questions and to have doubts. It is good to give one's intelligence free rein to investigate. Analysis produces a faith that is certain and that does not have to be shielded from logical inquiry or newly obtained information.

At this point, we may ask: What should we analyze, and how should we do

it?

Analyzing Our Own Experience

The Buddha's teachings direct us to analyze the mode of *appearance*, meaning how something appears to be, and *the mode of underlying reality*, meaning how something actually is—its true nature.

These two modes are different; the problem comes when we do not differentiate between them. Ordinarily, sentient beings are afflicted by this confusion, which is primarily a mistaken way of thinking. We think there is no underlying reality that is different from what we think is appearing to us; we do not question the validity of the information that our thoughts give us about our experiences. This confusion is what causes sentient beings to suffer, and this experience of confusion and suffering the Buddha called samsara.

So samsara is basically when we think about our experiences in a confused way. However, the Buddha also taught that if we relate to our experiences with wisdom rather than ignorance, we can be free of suffering and realize the true nature of our mind. This the Buddha called *nirvana*.

This presentation is quite contrary to our habitual way of thinking about things, so we should not take it at face value— we need to investigate it. And we can see that this investigation should focus on our very own experience. How does our experience appear to be? What is its true nature? That is what we must use our intelligence to investigate and analyze.

We should start by analyzing the state of existence that we find ourselves in right now. When we consider what constitutes our existence, we find that it is quite simply our six consciousnesses—the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mental consciousnesses; and the six kinds of objects that appear to those six consciousnesses—visual forms, sounds, odors, tastes, bodily sensations, and mental phenomena. This is what we experience when we are alive: sense perceptions and their objects, and thoughts and the objects of those thoughts.

Direct Cognition vs. Thoughts' Abstractions

We can begin our analysis with the basic and familiar experience of our eyes seeing forms. When that visual perception occurs, what is the true nature of the form that is the eye-sense consciousness's focal object? What is the true nature of the eye-sense faculty that supports the perception? And what is the nature of the consciousness supported by that sense faculty? In terms of the mode of appearance, how does the eye-sense consciousness perceive its object? And what is the perception's mode of underlying reality? We need to examine both the mode of appearance and the mode of underlying reality here. When we analyze our own sense faculties, sense consciousnesses, and their focal objects like this, we make our very own experience the subject of our analysis, and this makes the analysis both immediate and profound.

To apply this analysis right here and now, let us look together out the big window to my left at an orange growing on the tree outside. We see that orange with our eyes, but actually it appears differently to each of our six consciousnesses. This is true for any entity—it has six different modes of appearance. So for the eye-sense consciousness, the only focal objects that appear are the orange's shape and color—the orange's other qualities do not manifest. For the ear-sense consciousness, all that appears is the sound that the orange makes when it falls from the tree and hits the ground, or the sound it makes when you peel its skin. The orange's form does not and cannot appear to the ear-sense consciousness; the ear-sense consciousness does not have the ability to engage the orange's form. The nose-sense consciousness only perceives the quality of the orange's scent; the orange's other qualities do not appear to it. The tongue-sense consciousness only perceives the quality of the orange's taste, how sweet and how tangy it is. The body-sense consciousness only perceives the sensation of how the orange feels when it contacts the body; the orange's form, sound, smell, and taste do not appear to it. Thus, each of the five sense consciousnesses only perceives its own specific object.

What, then, appears to the sixth consciousness, the mental consciousness? In other words, what focal object appears to our thoughts? The conceptual mental consciousness cannot perceive the orange's form, sound, smell, taste, or bodily sensation. Instead, a thought can only impute an abstract image. This abstract image is neither form, sound, smell, taste, nor bodily sensation. A thought imputes that abstract, unclear, indirect

image, attaches the name “orange” to it, and thinks that it is actually perceiving the orange, when in fact it is not.

This is the important point to recognize: Thoughts do not perceive anything directly; they cannot perceive the actual, unique object. They can only impute generalities and unclear abstractions. In contrast, the five sense consciousnesses do directly perceive specific things, but they do not make conceptual judgments about them.

When we consider the mode of appearance in this way, we see that one orange appears in five different ways to each of the five sense consciousnesses, and that the conceptual mental consciousness (our thoughts) only perceives the abstract image of its own conceptual imputation. We mistakenly believe that when we think “orange,” the orange that is the object of our thoughts is one and the same as the orange we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. But the underlying reality is that the “orange” that is the object of our thoughts cannot be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched. It is just a facet of our imagination. Thus, analysis allows us to easily understand that the mode of appearance and the mode of underlying reality are different.

Then we can also examine other qualities of this orange. For example, it is created by causes and conditions—it is a composite result of many different causes and conditions coming together. Therefore, it is something that is constantly changing as the causes and conditions that act upon it change. It arises and ceases moment by moment, and so whatever is there in one moment, by the next moment has ceased: it has the quality of impermanence. Also, since it is only the product of causes and conditions, it has no nature of its own; no truly independent identity; it does not inherently exist. Thus, it is said to have the quality of emptiness. Impermanence and emptiness are qualities of the orange’s underlying reality, its true nature.

However, our ordinary thoughts simply think “orange,” and these thoughts impute permanence and substantial existence to that abstract image they have of the orange. Our thoughts cling to true existence and do not recognize the qualities of impermanence and emptiness. So again, we can

see how the mode of what appears to our thoughts and the mode of underlying reality are different.

This important distinction reveals the confusion that causes us suffering. For example, when our thoughts believe that an entity is permanent, that is a mistake, and that mistake causes us to suffer. Because when we believe an entity that makes us happy is permanent, we suffer when that entity ceases to exist. And when we believe an entity that makes us suffer is permanent, we deny ourselves the relief of knowing that it is impermanent and will therefore not cause us suffering forever, or even close to it!

So the more certainty we have that our thoughts' projections are mistaken, the less we will blindly believe they are true, and the better off we will be.

Direct Perception, Thoughts, and Time

Let us examine the difference between sense consciousnesses' perceptions and thoughts with regard to time. The five sense consciousnesses are nonconceptual, which means that they do not think one way or another about the objects they perceive. Therefore, the five sense consciousnesses directly perceive the unique forms, sounds, odors, tastes, and bodily sensations that exist only in the present moment. With the sense consciousnesses there are no past and future, because there is only the perception of what is right here, right now.

In contrast, thoughts do look at the past and future. However, the past has ceased, so it does not exist; and the future has not arisen, so it does not exist either. Thus, when thoughts look at the past and future, they are looking at nonexistence: at an absence of any particular thing. Therefore, only an abstract image of the past and future, which thoughts themselves have imputed, can appear to thoughts. We spend a lot of time thinking and worrying about the past and the future, but this analysis shows us that this past and future are merely our own thoughts' creation; past and future do not actually exist.

The five sense consciousnesses only look at the present. From the time we were young children until now, the objects perceived by the five sense consciousnesses have only been the unique objects of the present moment. The sense consciousnesses have never looked at the past or the

future.

Yesterday's sense consciousnesses perceived yesterday's unique forms, sounds, odors, tastes, and bodily sensations; they do not perceive today's unique objects. Today's sense consciousnesses only look at today's unique objects; they do not look at the unique objects that existed yesterday, nor do they perceive the unique objects of tomorrow. Tomorrow's sense consciousnesses will only perceive tomorrow's unique objects; they will not look at the unique objects of yesterday and today—how could they?

It is just like watching a movie. When you watch a movie for two hours, your eye-sense consciousness actually only ever sees each instant of the unique object of the movie that exists in the present; it never sees the past or the future. Even though it is like that, even though all that actually exists is the entity that exists in the present moment, thoughts lump past, present, and future entities together and falsely believe that they are one continuously existent thing.

Take the example of one of our hands in three different states: First we make a fist, second we move our hand about, and finally we let our fingers relax out of the clenched fist. The eye-sense consciousness that perceives the fist, the eye-sense consciousness that perceives the fist moving, and the eye-sense consciousness that perceives the hand in its relaxed state are different from each other. The same eye-sense consciousness does not perceive all these things together. The reason for this is that when the hand is first held steady in a fist, its movement does not appear; when it is moving, its stillness does not appear; and when it is relaxed, the fist held steady and the fist in motion do not appear. So how could the eye-sense consciousness in one moment that perceives one image but not the others be the same as the eyesense consciousnesses that do perceive the others?

We can also analyze and see that the five sense consciousnesses do not label or cling to the names of what they perceive. When the eye-sense consciousness perceives the hand, it does not grasp at the labels "fist," "moving," or "relaxed"; it does not even think "hand." It perceives the images of these three phases, but does not attach names to them. The reason for this is that the unique object has neither names nor labels, and

therefore the consciousness that directly perceives the unique object is nonconceptual.

In contrast, thoughts cling to the three images as being one thing. Thoughts give the same label “hand” to the three different objects appearing to the three different eye-sense consciousnesses— they think that the name “hand” and those three objects are the same thing. “What is moving there is my hand; the fist is also my hand; and when relaxed out of a clenched fist, that is also my hand.” Thoughts confusedly lump these three phases together and cling to them as being one thing, even though they are not one and the same thing at all.

Now, examine your own mode of appearance and mode of underlying reality: How do your sense consciousnesses and thoughts perceive you? From the time you were a young child until now, your five sense consciousnesses have never regarded you with any clinging. They have simply perceived their own unique objects without clinging to them in any way. Your thoughts are what cling to there being one unchanging self from your childhood to the present. You do think that from childhood until now, you have been just one person, right? You think, “When I was young, I was like this and that; now I am like this and that,” but you still think that the “me” of the past is the same as the “me” of the present. Thoughts look at these different moments and confusedly believe that they are one thing. Thoughts cling in that way, not the five sense consciousnesses.

Let us return to the orange and connect it with this examination: With this one orange, there is the orange of the past, the orange of the present, and the orange of the future. However, when thoughts conceive of the orange, they lump these together into one. So for example when thoughts think of the orange as smelling sweet, they do not think of the past orange, the present orange, and the future orange; rather, they lump them all together into one. And when we think not of this particular orange, but just of an orange in general, we take all the oranges in the world that ever have been and ever will be and confuse them together into one. We cling to all those oranges as just being one, but the image of the orange that arises in our minds is not clear. It is only an abstraction. That is all that thoughts can conceive of—unclear abstractions. Yet thoughts label those abstractions as “good” and “bad,” “pleasant” and “unpleasant,” and then thoughts

believe that the labels truly exist in the objects. Thoughts believe the objects really are good or bad, even though the sense consciousnesses do not perceive those labels of “good” and “bad” at all.

If we still have doubts, we may ask: “What proof is there that the five sense consciousnesses are nonconceptual?” We can know this from what happens when we meditate. When we abide in meditation and our minds remain free of thoughts, then our eyes may see forms and our ears may hear sounds, but thoughts do not arise. Clinging to names and labels does not arise. That is one sign that the five sense consciousnesses are nonconceptual. Another sign is that when you see a person for the first time, you do not know their name. That is because your eye-sense consciousness perceives the person’s form, but it does not conceive of anything about her. You should investigate and find other examples that demonstrate how the five sense consciousnesses are nonconceptual. Then see how your thoughts conceive of so many different labels and judgments about the objects that your sense consciousnesses perceive nonconceptually, and notice the different emotional reactions arising as a result.

Analysis and the Realization of Equality

The Buddha emphasized this way of analyzing the mode of appearance and the mode of underlying reality as a method for carrying oneself out of confusion and into enlightenment. That is why the divisions of the Buddha’s teachings are called yanas, meaning “vehicles”—the vehicles we use to carry us on this journey to realization. There are different presentations of how many yanas there are—sometimes three, sometimes nine; once the Buddha even taught that there is a different yana for each different concept we have, because each concept contains an element of confusion that we need to know how to transcend.

However, the Buddha also taught that although all of these different yanas and their philosophical presentations appear to exist, ultimately there is only one vehicle, because we ourselves only have one true nature, not many.

That ultimate vehicle is equality. Equality means that contradictions, opposites, differences, and distinctions appear but do not truly exist. In the true nature of reality, opposites, differences, and distinctions are undifferentiable; they are equality. I t is important for you to analyze appearances and see for yourself whether their true nature is equality or not. You can start by analyzing yourself. Ordinarily when you look at yourself, you think “self.” But when others look at you, they do not think of you as “self,” they think of you as “other.” So who are you? Are you “self ” or “other”? In genuine reality, self and other are equality. You are actually neither self nor other—you are the equality of self and other.

Generally, the identities of “self” and “other” depend on concepts. Without concepts, there would be neither self nor other. Earth and stones are not self and other, nor do they conceive of them. So when you are “myself ” or “me,” that depends upon concepts, and more specifically, upon your own individual concepts. When you are “other,” that is in dependence upon the concepts of all other sentient beings besides yourself. When you reflect in this way, you can see how you are also “other,” and how all others are also “me,” because all sentient beings think of themselves in the same way. Therefore, when we ask, “Who is really self, and who is really other?” the answer is that self and other are actually equality.

Next, we can ask ourselves, “Are we ‘friend,’ ‘enemy,’ or neither friend nor enemy?” The answer is that we are the equality of friend and enemy. Because from the perspective of our enemies’ thoughts, we are enemy; from the perspective of those whose thoughts cling to us as “friend,” we are friend; and for those who are neutral toward us, we are neither friend nor enemy. So what are we genuinely? It is impossible to define exactly what we are. And that demonstrates that our true nature is equality.

If because some sentient beings think of us as “enemy,” we would also think of ourselves as an enemy, that would be incorrect because many others think of us as “friend.” However, if because some people think of us as a friend, we also thought, “I am a friend,” that would be incorrect because there are those who think of us as an enemy. If, in dependence upon the thoughts in the minds of those who are neutral toward us, we thought of ourselves as neither friend nor enemy, that would be incorrect because in dependence upon the minds of our friends and enemies we do

in fact become one or the other. Therefore, our own true nature is equality.

We may also wonder, “Am I a good person or a bad person?” The answer that our thoughts will give us will not be stable. Sometimes, when our bodies are healthy and our minds are free from suffering and at ease, we think, “I am good. I am a fine person.” However, when things are difficult, we begin to think, “I am bad.” So we cannot rely on our thoughts to tell us if we are good or bad. In fact, our thoughts about whether we are good or bad can change quickly. So if we cannot rely on our own thoughts, can we rely on others for a judgment on this? If we do, we will find that some people think we are good, while others think we are bad. This shows that in the true nature of reality, good and bad are equality. We are neither truly a good person nor a bad one—whether we ourselves are a good person or a bad person is equality.

When we analyze our bodies, we notice that we consume a lot of food. So, can we objectively be called a “consumer”? No, our body is not a hundred percent consumer, because many insects and parasites consume it. In India and Nepal in the summertime, many tens of thousands of mosquitoes bite people from head to toe. There, one’s body becomes a giant piece of food. So from one perspective, our bodies are consumers of food, and from another perspective they are food that is consumed. Since we cannot say whether our bodies are definitively “consumer” or “consumed,” our bodies are equality.

We can also ask, are our bodies residents or residences? Superficially, you may think that you are a resident because you live in a residence—you are not a residence yourself. However, many tiny creatures live in our bodies, so actually you are a residence. Since you cannot say decisively that your body is a resident or a residence, your body is equality.

Why is it important to analyze these things? Because we suffer greatly from believing that “self,” “other,” “good,” “bad,” and all other conceptually imputed labels, differences, and contradictions truly exist. But when we understand that the true nature of reality is equality, it is easy to see the difference between that true nature and the merely relative, superficial appearances of differences and contradictions. And since, in the true nature, differences and contradictions do not exist, it is inherently free of conflict. The true nature is at peace, open, spacious, and relaxed.

So let us apply this analysis to our environment as well—first, to our planet. Wherever we are on this planet, we think that we are on the top of the planet, right side up. If anyone had the thought that they were on the bottom of the planet, upside down, they would feel as though they were going to fall off! For example, those of us here in America think we are right side up and that Australia is "down under," but Australians do not fall off the planet. They think that they are right side up too. So everyone thinks that they are on top of the planet, right side up. However, if there is no upside down at all, there cannot possibly be any right side up either. Therefore, right side up and upside down are equality; top and bottom are equality; and the appearances of right side up, upside down, top, and bottom, are merely conceptual. They do not truly exist. On our planet, direction is equality.

We should also consider space itself—the space that surrounds our planet and encompasses all the stars and planets there are. What we find is that space just goes on and on—it has no end. And since space has no end, it also has no center, no midpoint. Since space in reality has neither center nor end, center and end are equality. And in space without center or end, there is no way to actually go anywhere, because coming and going require the reference points of location, of center and end. Therefore, coming and going are also equality.

What about our experiences of happiness and suffering? Are they equality too? This is perhaps the most important question to consider. In fact, happiness and suffering are equality because when we analyze them, we find that they cannot exist from their own side; rather, they exist only in dependence upon each other.

Suffering depends upon its reference point of happiness—if happiness did not exist at all, neither would suffering. In the same way, happiness exists only in dependence upon suffering. If we never suffered, we would not know what happiness is. Even the word "happiness" would have no meaning. So if there were no experience of suffering, there would be no experience of happiness, and if there were no word "suffering," there would be no word "happiness."

Since happiness and suffering are dependently existent in this way, they are not truly existent. They are like happiness and suffering in a dream. We

may dream of attending a party in a beautiful garden filled with flowers on a calm, lovely day, and of feeling very happy to be there. However, if the weather turns bad, gusts of wind begin to blow the leaves off the trees and even the trees fall over, in dependence upon the earlier mere appearance of happiness, thoughts of its opposite, suffering, would arise. Since both happiness and suffering can only exist one in dependence upon the other, neither one can be truly existent. It is easy to understand how they do not exist in a dream, and that is why the dream example is given.

Then based on the dream example, one can think about how it is during the waking state. Attending parties and many other events can cause the appearance of happiness to arise in our minds. But the only reason we can know that we are happy is that we have had the experience of suffering. This is what is meant by dependent existence: All opposites depend for their existence upon each other in this same way, and therefore opposites do not truly exist; opposites are equality.

The benefit of our knowing that opposites are equality— particularly opposites like “happiness” and “suffering,” “friend” and “enemy,” and “good” and “bad”—is that we stop clinging to opposites as being truly existent. We stop hoping so much for one alternative and fearing its opposite; we stop worrying about which one will appear and which one will not. We begin to be able to regard opposites with spacious and relaxed equanimity.

he Role of Meditation

When you experience acute suffering, like a powerful physical illness or intense mental anguish, it may seem as though the logical analyses we have just discussed are not very strong, because they can seem to be a rather weak remedy in the face of the trauma you are experiencing.

However, it is not that these analyses lack power; it is that your clinging to the true existence of what is troubling you is so strong. Your view of how appearances are not truly existent is not strong enough yet. You need to strengthen your certainty in equality by contemplating it and analyzing it until you have removed all your doubts about it. When your view of the true nature is strong, it can overcome all suffering, no matter how great. It is like a dream: You can dream of being very sick, of taking medicine, even of

going to the hospital; but the moment you recognize you are dreaming, you recognize that your sickness is a mere appearance, and your suffering immediately decreases.

Meditation will also help to make your view stronger. Meditation does not necessarily mean that you have to be seated on a cushion. It means that you cultivate your certainty in equality by recalling it briefly, again and again throughout the day. Then you rest relaxed within that certainty. You can do that on a cushion or during daily activities.

When we meditate we have different experiences. Sometimes our meditation goes well, and we experience clarity, spaciousness, and bliss; other times, our minds have unpleasant experiences during meditation. At first, we may have a lot of hopes and fears with regard to positive and negative meditation experiences, but we need to make our hopes and fears smaller and smaller, until we have transcended hope and fear completely. At the same time, the way to transcend hope and fear is not to block it, cut it off, or to try to prevent it from arising. Rather, the way to transcend hope and fear is to meditate on hope and fear's true nature. For example, in the great thirteenth-century master Gotsangpa's song "The Seven Delights," he sings:

When thoughts that there is something, perceived and a perceiver,Lure my mind away and distract,I don't close my senses' gateways to meditate without themBut plunge straight into their essential point.They're like clouds in the sky, there's this shimmer where they fly;Thoughts that rise, for me sheer delight!

That is the Mahamudra meditation style: When thoughts fill the mind, one does not regard them as unpleasant, because one can look directly at their true nature and relax within that. As the Lord Gampopa has taught: "Consider thoughts to be necessary; consider thoughts to be very kind; consider thoughts to be pleasant; consider thoughts to be indispensable." Since thoughts' true nature is dharmata, the essential nature of reality, they are pleasant. If one did not have any thoughts, one could not meditate. Therefore, in Mahamudra meditation, one even intentionally produces thoughts so that one can meditate on their true nature.

Concerning the sense consciousnesses, Mahamudra meditation regards

sense perception as one would in a lucid dream: If one recognizes one is dreaming and one simply remains undistracted from that awareness, one does not have to shut off sense perceptions.

The first turning of the wheel of dharma's instructions are to shut off sense perceptions while meditating. The reason for this is that if one clings to outer appearances as being truly existent, when one perceives appearances, attachment and aversion arise.

However, the view of the Prajnaparamita of the middle turning of the wheel of dharma is that outer appearances are like dreams. When you know this, you do not have to prevent appearances from manifesting to your sense consciousnesses. When you are able to cultivate awareness of the illusory, dreamlike nature of appearances, that is called the "illusion-like samadhi." Meditating in this samadhi is important.

When we follow the path of reasoning, we use our intelligence to critically examine what our teachers explain to us. We resolve our doubts about their teachings by analyzing our own life experiences to see if the teachings are valid and give useful insights. If we can gain certainty in the teachings' accuracy and benefit, we meditate in order to turn that certainty into experience of the true nature of reality. This has positive effects—you should investigate for yourself and see. Then you will have a faith that comes from your own intelligence and diligence, rather than from an external command. It will not be faith in an outer person or doctrine; it will be faith in your own true nature—faith that is inseparable from the true nature of your mind.

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