

The Balance of Faculties

(One day Retreat March 3, 1998)

Today I'll talk about the balance of governing faculties in meditation. When we practice meditation, there are mental states or mental factors working together. These mental states have different functions. So long as they do their functions well, our meditation is said to be good. But if they do not function properly, if they do not function in harmony, or if a factor or a state works more than it should, then the practice of meditation is thrown out of balance.

It is important that these factors are working harmoniously. They should be doing their work neither too much nor too little. Although many mental factors or mental states are involved when you practice meditation, the most important of them are the five controlling factors. They are called controlling or governing factors because they are predominant in their own field. These five factors are faith or confidence, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and understanding. Whenever we have a good practice of meditation, these five controlling factors are working harmoniously.

Here faith means not the blind faith but it is faith or confidence associated with understanding. Faith or confidence here means confidence in the Buddha, the *Dhamma*, and the *Saṅgha*. Faith is a belief that Buddha was a historical Person, and lived and talked in India more than 2500 years ago and so on. Faith is a belief in the *Dhamma* or his Teachings. Faith is a belief in the *Saṅgha* or Noble Disciples of His who followed his Teachings and reached in the stage of enlightenment. And also confidence in the practice. I think it is more important to have confidence in the practice than confidence in other things. Because if you do not believe in what you are doing, if you do not have confidence in the practice you are doing, it is very unlikely that you will be successful with that practice. So confidence in the practice, confidence in the method of meditation, confidence in the instructions, or confidence in the teacher is also an important factor.

The second one is effort. In order to be mindful, you have to make an effort. The effort is not physical effort but mental effort. Without making effort, you cannot achieve any thing whether worldly or spiritual. You have to make an effort. Actually you have to make sustained and strong effort to be mindful. But the effort you make must be neither too much nor too little because too much effort causes agitation and too little effort causes laziness and sleepiness. So the effort must be just enough for us to be mindful or for our mind to be on the object.

The third factor is mindfulness. Mindfulness means thorough awareness of the object or full awareness of the object. It is not a superficial awareness floating on the surface. It must go deep into the object. This full awareness or thorough awareness is what we mean by mindfulness. When you try to be mindful of the object, your mind hits the object. That hitting the object is what we call mindfulness. When it hits the object, it hits with force.

The fourth factor is concentration. Concentration means the unification of mind on the object. For the mind to be on the object, concentration is a mental factor that keeps the components of mind on the object. Concentration does not let the mind to be distracted to the other

objects and it also keeps the components of mind unified and coordinated. Concentration can be achieved only through mindfulness and mindfulness can be achieved only through effort. These factors support each other. For instance, mindfulness supports concentration, and mindfulness and concentration support understanding. When mind becomes concentrated, it begins to see the true nature of things or the true nature of the object. Concentration of mind is something like stability of the lenses in the binoculars. When you look through the binoculars with a large magnifying power, you know that you have to hold it very steady. Otherwise you cannot see the objects clearly because the movement is also magnified. When you can keep the binoculars steady or still, then you can see things clearly.

In the same way before you get enough concentration, your mind is like unstable binoculars. The mind is shaking or going from one object to another and so you are unable to see the object clearly. But once the mind becomes steady, still and free from what are called mental defilements, then it begins to see the objects clearly and the true nature of the objects. That understanding or seeing the true nature of the objects is what is called understanding or knowledge or wisdom. The purpose of meditation is to see objects as they truly are. That means seeing that these objects are impermanent, these objects are suffering, and these objects are not soul that we practice *Vipassanā* or mindfulness meditation. Five faculties or mental factors are involved in the practice of meditation. And as I said before these five faculties should be working together and harmoniously.

What happens when the faculties work too much?

A person who has too much faith and less wisdom (or understanding) may take anything to be right. So he may not get the right information about practice and he may take up a wrong practice. And also when practicing meditation, excess of faith or confidence (or *Saddhā* in Pāli) can interfere with meditation. When a *yogi* begins to see the objects clearly, and begins to see mind and matter distinctly and separately, and when he begins to see the arising and disappearing of these objects, he becomes happy and he becomes elated. If he has too much faith, he will be very pleased with himself and he may be thanking the Buddha for this experience, or he may be thanking the teacher for this experience and so on. He has so much devotion for the Buddha that his mind is agitated. When his mind becomes agitated, he loses concentration. He cannot see the objects, I mean he cannot see things clearly in his mind. He cannot see the objects clearly and the meditation object fades away from him and he loses the object also. That is when a person who has too much faith. In such cases a *yogi* should understand that he has too much faith and then slow down his practice or make notes of that he has too much faith or just note 'faith' 'faith' 'faith' or 'confidence' 'confidence' confidence'. After a while his mind becomes stable again and he will get concentration.

Sometimes a *yogi* sees the object clearly and begins to see the arising and disappearing of mind and matter. If he is a type of understanding, a type of those who have too much understanding, then he may be thinking about the object whether it is mind or matter or he may want to try watching this object, that object and so on. Because he has so clear understanding of the objects. So his mind becomes agitated again. When mind becomes agitated, he is unable to see the objects clearly and he loses the objects and he loses concentration and he

loses the understanding. In such cases also, a yogi has to be mindful that he has too much understanding, too much activity in his mind and so he must slow down. Once he slows down, his mind becomes stabilized again and so he is able to be mindful of the object or he is able to see the objects clearly again.

It is said that the faith and understanding should be balanced. They should be balanced both outside meditation and inside meditation. Outside meditation also faith and understanding should be balanced. If you have too much faith and too little understanding, then you will believe in anything. If you have too much understanding and too little faith, you tend to become crafty or deceitful. But when you are practicing if you have too much faith or too much understanding, your mind becomes agitated and you lose concentration. So they should be balanced.

Sometimes your meditation is good and you can be mindful of the objects pretty well and then you want to make it better. So you make more effort to make it better. The moment you try to make it better, you lose concentration. You are not able to note the objects, you are not able to see the objects clearly. That is because you have made too much effort more than it is necessary. Too much effort makes your mind agitated again. When the mind is agitated, that means shaking, it cannot see clearly. The agitation of mind is called shaking above the object in our books. Shaking above the object means the mind is not properly on the object, the mind is not stuck to the object as it were. But it is a little away from the objects and shaking above it or moving above it. When it is shaking or moving, it cannot see the object clearly. So a person who has made too much effort becomes agitated, and loses objects, and loses concentration. When a person has too much effort, the level of concentration goes down, his concentration is weak at that time, not enough. In such cases a yogi should slow down his practice, be mindful that his effort is too much and regulate accordingly so that he sees the object clearly again.

Sometimes your concentration is so good that it becomes too easy for you to make notes or to be mindful of the objects. When it becomes too easy, your energy level or the level of effort goes down. You do not have to make much effort to be mindful and so you start to lose the effort. When effort goes down and concentration becomes too much, then you feel sleepy. Sometimes yogis feel sleepy not because they want to sleep but because they have too much concentration. When you have such an experience, then you have to step up energy level or you have to make more effort to be mindful, to pay closer attention to the object or you can add some more things to note during one round.

Suppose you are noting just two 'in' and 'out' or 'rising' and 'falling', then you have to add one or two more like sitting position or touching points so that your energy level rises up. The practice of meditation is a delicate business and you have to understand whether any one of these factors are in excess. If any one of them is too much, then you have to know how to regulate it, how to adjust it. When instructions are given, you are given instructions to be mindful of two things, say 'in' and 'out'. You should note one thing at a time; not at the same moment 'in' and 'out' or 'rising' and 'falling'.

Why not just one or three or more?

That is in order for you to have balance of effort and concentration. If you take just one thing and be mindful of it, it becomes easy and so you lose energy little by little. You have too much concentration and then you feel sleepy and you cannot meditate. If you have to make notes of three, four or five things, in the beginning (when your concentration and understanding are not yet strong) you become agitated because you have to do too much work. When you become agitated, you lose concentration. In order for you to have balance of effort and concentration, you are given to be mindful of two things 'in' 'out' 'in' 'out' or 'rising' 'falling' 'rising' 'falling'.

Also you are given to practice walking meditation and sitting meditation alternately. If you walk too much, you make more effort. So the effort becomes too much. That is why walking for one hour is a standard practice. And also giving you walking is for your body to have exercise. It is for your health also. It is important that these factors are well balanced when you practice meditation.

What about *Sati*, I mean mindfulness? I didn't talk about mindfulness, right?

It is said that mindfulness is required everywhere. That means mindfulness can never be too much. It may be too little, but it can never be too much. You may have noticed that mindfulness is required in keeping them in balance. Or you know that you have made too much effort and then you may be making notes of 'too much effort' 'too much effort' something like that or 'too much concentration' and so on. With mindfulness, you can regulate the balance of the factors. Mindfulness is said to be the regulating factor among the five mental faculties. It is compared to shaking salt on all dishes because it is required everywhere. It is compared to a prime minister who did all the works of the king. Mindfulness is always good and it can never be in excess. It is a regulating factor among the five mental faculties.

Actually there is another mental factor that regulates the balance of these factors and that is equanimity. Equanimity is one of the seven factors of enlightenment. When you reach the stage of equanimity, again these factors work in harmony. So long as these factors work in harmony, your meditation is good. And you will get concentration and penetration into the nature of things. When you practice meditation, be aware of the excess of faith or understanding or effort or concentration. If they are not balanced, you cannot meditate or your concentration is not good. You cannot get concentration or understanding of the nature of things. So these five factors, especially the four factors should be balanced when we practice. It is for this purpose that we note only two things at a time, not more or not less. We also alternate sitting and walking so that we do not have too much energy or too much concentration.

By regulating the balance of these factors, we will be able to get concentration. With the help of concentration we will be able to see the true nature of the objects we observe. The true nature means their impermanent nature, suffering nature and not soul nature. These three are called the common characteristics of all conditioned phenomena. Everything in the world is conditioned. So everything in the world has these three marks or characteristics. Everything is impermanent and everything is unsatisfactory and every thing is unsubstantial or we call it not soul.

The impermanent nature we try to see through *Vipassanā* meditation is a deeper understanding of the impermanence, not the superficial understanding. You drop a cup and it breaks and you say, "It is impermanent." That understanding of impermanence is very shallow. It cannot help us to get weary with the five aggregates and so it cannot lead us to ultimately enlightenment. What we need to see is the moment to moment of the impermanence. Now we go back to the cup again.

Do you think that the cup was permanent before it breaks?

Whether it breaks or whether it doesn't break, it is impermanent. Right? Every moment, actually the material particles in the cup are changing. Changing means one particle disappears and then another particle arises in its place. When we say 'change', we do not mean transmutation (or something similar in physics) where one thing changes to another thing. But actually it is not changed. It is the old particle disappearing and then new particle arising in its place. It may be the same kind of particle or may be identical. But one disappears and another takes its place. That is what we call impermanence. So we must see that kind of impermanence, if we are to get weary with the five aggregates and to get enlightenment. And that understanding we can get only through *Vipassanā* meditation, only through observing the objects at the present moment. That is what we do when we practice meditation.

If we have enough concentration, then we will see that moment to moment impermanence. When you see the moment to moment impermanence, you also see the unsatisfactory nature of things. That things are oppressed by rising and disappearing, rising and disappearing. So there is a sense of oppression there. When you see them, then you know that they are impermanent by their nature and you cannot change them to permanency. You cannot change them into satisfactory things. And there is a kind of understanding of *Anatta*. *Anatta* means having no control over them. We do not have control over mind and matter. They arise and disappear as they wish. These three characteristics we will be able to see through the practice of meditation but not just through reading books.