Your Sense of Balance

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The Buddha once told the story of two acrobats as they were about to get up on a bamboo pole. One acrobat said to the other, “Now you look out after me, and I’ll look out after you. That way we’ll perform our tricks, come down safely from the pole, and get our reward.” And his assistant, the Buddha, who was right there, said, “No, that won’t do. I’ll look out after myself. You look out after yourself. That way we’ll be able to perform our tricks, come down safely from the pole, and get our reward.” And as the Buddha noted, it was the assistant who was right there. If you’re concerned about other people’s balance and neglect your own balance, you’re bound to pull them down. This is why, when we meditate, it’s not a selfish activity. It’s a gift. We’re given the gift of stability. There are lots of ways we can help one another, but if the help doesn’t come from a stable mind, it can fall over very easily. And so this is what we’re looking for as we practice this stability of mind, strength of mind, the ability to keep the mind on an even keel. John Lee makes a comparison. He says the four bases for success in meditation are like the legs of a table. If your table has only one leg or two legs, it’s going to tip over. A four-legged table is a stable one. On the one hand, you want the desire to do the practice. It’s the desire to keep your mind in good shape. And it requires persistence. It’s something you have to do every day, every day. You don’t want to save it just for a business trip to the monastery, because the mind can very easily lose its balance at any time. If it doesn’t have a good foundation, then you have to work on the foundation every day. John Fuehn once had a student who commented that she’d been meditating for several years, and she was wondering when she was going to see more progress in her practice. He said, “Look, you’re working on a foundation here. If you try to build a building without a foundation, it’s going to tip over. When buildings tip over, they don’t just harm themselves, they harm the buildings around them. But once the foundation is solid, then you can build as many stories as you like.” So it’s important that you keep working at this foundation to make things solid, established, trying to get that sense of the observer that can watch what’s going on inside, what’s going on outside, and not get tipped over by things. The observer that notes when things are going well and when things are going poorly. It doesn’t get all worked up. But notice that when things are going well, you want to look after them, keep them going well. When they’re not going well, this is when those other two bases for success come in. One is giving things your full attention so you can get an idea of where things are in balance, where they’re not, what needs to stay the same, what needs to change. The fourth basis for success is usually translated as discrimination, a word that has a lot of bad connotations. But it has this good side as well, the ability to see distinctions, use your judgment, and use your ingenuity as well. If something’s not going well, what can you change? Where are the strengths that you can build on? Where are the areas that need to be adjusted? What kinds of adjustments could you use? You have to use your imagination. They say that imagination has four parts. One is just giving rise to an image in the mind. The second is to maintain it. The third is to make changes in the image. And then the fourth is to evaluate the changes. You can see how these four aspects to imagination correspond to the basis for success. You give rise to the desire, then you maintain the practice. You pay careful attention, make a few changes, see what happens, and then evaluate the changes. This way you maintain your balance. The image of the table may be a bad one, because tables are very solid and don’t move very much. A balance sometimes leans a little bit to the left, leans a little bit to the right, before it finally comes to a state of equilibrium. Sometimes your mind needs that shifting back to the left, shifting back to the right, but aiming towards a sense of just being very still and solid. Notice anything that pulls you out of balance is something you want to look at. Why would you want to identify with that? Something that would open you up to suffering, basically. This is one of the main lessons of the meditation. We tend to identify with thoughts, we tend to identify with the body, thoughts, feelings, and ways that open us up for suffering. You have to realize it’s a choice. That old question, “Who am I?” which lies at the basis of a lot of philosophies, is something the Buddha said is a misguided question. Because what you are is the result of choices, which means that you can choose to develop new skills and you will become a different kind of person. Things you identify with are things you choose to identify with. Of course, it’s easier to choose some things than others. You can identify with your body a lot more easily than you can with somebody else’s body. But even then, the choice of identifying with it is something that you can make or not. Sometimes you’re very aware of being in your body. Other times you’re a purely mental being, it would seem. When you’re sitting very still, you might be reading, thinking, and the physical side of things just seems to be irrelevant. Then all of a sudden you get hungry, or you get thirsty, or you have to go to the bathroom, and then the body becomes relevant. If you look at your sense of identification in the course of a day, it’d be like an amoeba stretching out a pseudopod over here and stretching out another one over there. Pull back from this, go into that. And since the mind is already doing that, you want to learn how to do it skillfully. There are times when it is useful to identify with your thoughts, and other times when it’s a good idea to just let them be. It’s something that you’re observing and not identifying with. This way you have more and more control over whether you’re going to suffer or not. Because if you let this process just go on through the force of old habit, what seems natural oftentimes is just going to take you straight into suffering. It’s like ruts in a road. You don’t get out of the ruts, and they happen to plow right into a car, into a hedge, into a wall. You just go where the ruts lead you and think, “Well, that’s just the way things naturally are.” Then you lose sight of the fact that you’re making choices all the time. And you can choose to get out of the ruts. Now, it’s not easy, but it’s possible. The question of how easy or how hard it is, that’s not the issue. The real question is what’s going to lead to suffering and what’s going to lead you away from suffering. If something’s going to lead you away from suffering, you want to do what you can to master it. This is where the desire comes in. And so it’s important that we develop this sense of the observer, watching what’s going on, able to evaluate and to pass judgment on what’s going well, what’s not going well, to actually see the movements of the mind. To see, “Oh, this thought, this perception is going to lead to suffering.” Say an issue comes up that would ordinarily lead to anger if you perceived it in the old way. You have to realize that your perceptions, the labels you apply to things, the way you understand things, is largely a force of habit. And if you see that a particular way of perceiving a situation is causing suffering, you can step back and say, “Well, what would be another way to perceive this so that I wouldn’t have to suffer and I can handle it more skillfully?” This is where the evaluation, the discrimination, comes in. So that stable state of mind gets more and more established, more and more in command of the situation, and more and more mindful. Mindful in the Buddhist sense of the term, the ability to keep things in mind, the lessons you’ve learned from the past—either things you’ve heard, things you’ve thought about, or things you’ve actually developed in the meditation. These are all lessons that are important to keep in mind because they are applicable. It’s not the case that every new moment is so new that the past gets in the way. If you’ve learned good lessons from the past, they’re actually helpful. Our problem is that many times we’ve learned the wrong lessons. But that doesn’t mean we can’t pick up knowledge and then use it in the future. If we’ve seen that a particular way of perceiving things is going to cause stress or has caused stress, we want to remember that. So next time around, you don’t go there. If you see that a particular technique is skillful, then we’re talking not only about meditation techniques, but techniques in how you deal with other people, how you look at the situation, how you direct it in a skillful way. When you’ve learned something useful, you want to remember that. These are some of the things you want to keep in mind. And this stable state of mind makes it a lot easier when things aren’t tipping and wavering all over the place. It’s as if you have access to more of the mind. It’s easier to remember things, easier to notice things, observe things, and easier to use your powers of imagination to figure out what would be a more skillful way of approaching a situation. The people around you benefit as well. You offer more stability. You’re not likely to knock them off balance because you’re keeping your balance well. So the time spent on meditation is not just time running away from responsibilities. It’s probably the most responsible thing you can do to get your mind in good shape. So that whatever comes up, you’ve got the tools, you’ve got the strengths that you need to be skillful in the most effective way. So remember the acrobats. We’re living in a world where everybody’s trying to maintain balance. It would be a good world if everyone would try. You can’t expect that everybody will maintain their balance, but the more carefully you maintain yours, you’re safer, the people around you are safer as well. So always make sure that you take time every day to work on your sense of balance, to work on the strengths you need in order to maintain your balance throughout the day, dealing with whoever or whatever the situation. That’s one of the best gifts you can give, both to yourself and to the world at large.

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