

Cultivating Faith and Mental Balance

by Prof. Peter Case
www.aukana.org.uk

The subject of tonight's talk is `faith'. When you first come across the Buddha's Teaching, you hear an awful lot about how the path to Enlightenment has to be trodden by each individual under his or her own steam. Whilst others can give you help and guidance, at the end of the day each individual has to make his or her own way along the rugged track up the mountain side toward the summit of *nibbana*. Indeed, the Buddha himself, said explicitly on many occasions that each person had to be a `lantern unto himself' and that the Teaching was based on the principle of *ehipassiko* - `come and see' - try the Teaching out for yourself. He emphasized (in a famous talk to the Kalamas) that his words were **not** to be believed simply because he, an extraordinarily gifted Teacher, had uttered them; nor because the logic and beauty of the system he taught were so compelling. On the contrary, each

person was urged to **apply** the Teaching - the various lists and guidelines - to his or her own experience. Only by doing this could someone be certain of making progress along the path.

All of this sounds particularly attractive to the Western ear. Many of us want to have our views of rugged individualism reinforced. We want to hear that it is only through our own efforts that we 'attain' the goal and that this has to be done regardless of what anyone else has to say about the matter. It's appealing for the Westerner to know that he or she doesn't have to get involved in the messy business of relating directly with a flesh and blood meditation teacher, with all the potential for embarrassment, praise and blame, mental pain and difficulty that it can entail. Why bother with devotion and surrendering, if the job can be done by oneself **for oneself**? Isn't this what the Buddha had in mind, after all, when he came up with the expression 'come and see'?

Tonight I'm going to point out that the latter set of

views is based on an **incorrect** interpretation of the Buddha's message; that, as with the entire Teaching, one must find the middle path between 'independence' from, and faith in a spiritual teacher or teaching. What is more, that 'middle path' for many Westerners will reside uncomfortably close to the surrendering, devotional end of the spectrum. This is directly opposite to the view of independence and self-will to which we habitually cling.

What, then, is 'faith'? In Buddha Dhamma, the Teachings of the Buddha, the English word 'faith' is a translation of the Pali term *saddha*. Sometimes the same expression is translated as 'confidence'. It may be the confidence you experience perhaps when first encountering the Four Noble Truths; meditators often describe how 'right' these Truths seem - that they make a great deal of sense of their lives to date and the world they live in. The meditator might recognize: "There is suffering in the world, it's undeniable, and, yes, one can see that craving for things to be different definitely causes yourself and others to suffer. What a

relief that there is the possibility of an end to all this distress and unsatisfactoriness, and thank goodness the Buddha has set out the way to that **Beyond**." It might be the confidence you experience when you first start meditating and begin, gradually, to see how some of the many facts you've heard about in theory actually **apply** to the practice. You find yourself sitting in meditation one day frantically worrying about a job interview coming up the following week. Suddenly you gain some mindful perspective on the activity and note that you're worrying. A light goes on the mind - "this is the hindrance of agitation and worry". You may also see that you're responsible for **doing** the action of worry and acknowledge that it is entirely fruitless; that the worry isn't helping matters one tiny bit. In the light of this recognition, you stop doing the worry. You feel confidence arise because you've finally seen how the Teaching applies in practice and how it can reduce suffering. Or perhaps you're washing up one day and suddenly you notice that you're able to remain quietly watching the sensations of temperature change as your hands enter the hot water, the pressure as they contact

the crockery, the texture of the sponge cloth and so forth. "Ah!", you find yourself thinking, "**this** is what's meant by correct mindfulness".

These are all useful examples of how confidence can come about as you apply yourself on a moment-to-moment basis to mindfulness meditation. A more **general** attitude of devotion and surrendering is also necessary in order to make the most of the practice. From now on, I'm going to translate the Pali, *saddha*, as 'faith' in order to emphasise its devotional aspect. But if faith is so important, why didn't the Buddha himself place greater emphasis on it?

The answer is **he did** think it expressly important, but to understand why **we** might not immediately see this we have to consider some crucial cultural differences between east and west. The Buddha did not make more of the importance of faith and devotion primarily because he knew that most of his followers already had this quality as a natural part of their make up. Many of you will have come across the notion of

Buddhist 'character types' - you may even have read Robert and Rose's book on the subject. If you have, you'll know that there are six character types, arranged in three pairs. I'm not going to describe these in detail here, but for the record they are: craving-faith, hatred-intelligence, confusion-speculation. Each pairing is made up of an **inefficient** root, 'hatred', for example, and an **efficient** root which stands in relation to it. 'Intelligence' is the efficient side of 'hatred', 'faith' the positive side of 'craving'. In very broad terms, whilst each individual possesses a complex mix of all these roots (both positive and negative), there is likely to be a predominance of one particular pairing for each person. Hence you may have heard the short hand expression, 'hate-type' or 'craver' in reference to a person's character. Now, just as an individual's behaviour derives from particular roots, so, in general terms, does that of an entire culture. There will always be exceptions, of course, but generally speaking the hotter countries of East Asia are populated by people's who have a preponderance of the craving-faith roots, whereas the cultures of colder northern European

climes are characterized by the presence of the hate-intelligence roots.

The Buddha, then, was almost always addressing groups of individuals of a craving-faith disposition. His frequent entreaties for his followers always to be 'striving', to be 'putting forth energy', to be analysing their experience with utmost effort, and so forth has to be interpreted in light of this fact. In the west, on the other hand, many of us need to hear less about putting forth effort than achieving the **correct energy balance**. Whilst the faculty of investigation (examining one's experience in terms of the Dhamma) is crucially important, it cannot be accomplished in the right way until it is counterbalanced by the correct amount of mindfulness, concentration and, last but not least, faith. It's here that, in the first instance, a lot of aspiring meditators switch off. They're very happy to learn about striving and finding out for themselves but less willing to acknowledge emotionally that uncritical and unquestioning devotion to teachers is a necessary or desirable attribute of the spiritual seeker. The

cultivation of faith, however, can smooth one's path considerably. If one's true desire is to open oneself fully to Reality with a capital `R', then taking the step of opening oneself fully to a spiritual friend can aid immeasurably in that process. As the Buddha once said, "He who sees me sees Dhamma, he who sees Dhamma sees me."

This point can be illustrated from the Pali Canon, the complete record of the Buddha's Teachings. Gotama had two Chief Disciples, Moggallana and Sariputta. It is said that Moggallana, who possessed a strong faith-root in his character, realized *nibbana* within a week of his first personal encounter with the Buddha. His friend, Sariputta, who possessed more intelligence than faith, is said to have taken two weeks to come to Enlightenment. These two individuals were both highly developed spiritually before they even encountered the Buddha, of course, but the wider implication of this example is that strong faith can be a great help in one's journey toward enlightenment.

If faith is relatively weak and undeveloped in a meditator's character, he or she is likely to strive at the practice in the wrong way. To illustrate this point, consider someone who habitually Wrong Concentrates. Such a meditator is too ambitious to achieve a result from his or her efforts. They are impatient to 'get ahead'. In seated meditation, they are inclined unthinkingly to apply excessive force in the search for the goal - which is all the more ironic given that they don't know what they're looking for in the first place! The effort will almost certainly be accompanied by ill-will. As the body tenses and gets painful from the energy being put in, it is taken as a sign that things aren't going to plan. The meditator gets troubled and distinctly irritated by the situation. Chances are, they'll resort (through sheer habit) to even more effort in an attempt to force the mind into the desired shape. In the throes of this vicious circle, things go from bad to worse, until, that is, the meditator gives up. Even the most obdurate meditator gives up from time to time, when the pain and passion get too much. The relief and calm that often follows an intense bout of Wrong

Concentration gives us a clue about the power and desirability of faith.

In the above example, the meditator indulging in Wrong Concentration was overly `self-concerned'. Invariably, under these circumstances, the meditator is doing the meditation in a self-seeking way. He or she wants to acquire something. They have temporarily, in the words of the Tibetan teacher Chogyam Trungpa, fallen into the trap of `spiritual materialism'. They are applying to the spiritual world the same rules that apply to acquisition on the material plane - the greater their energy and efforts, they incorrectly think, the greater the rewards. Of course, it doesn't work. Why doesn't it work? It doesn't work because the mind is unbalanced. Chances are that the amount of energy and investigation present is out of proportion with the degree of mindfulness, **correct** concentration and faith available at the time. Instead of just passively letting experience happen, the meditator's ego gets involved and tries to produce the result he or she wants. It is the **activity** that is at the root of the problem. Bringing the

mind into balance entails **not doing** what one habitually does. This 'not doing' doesn't sit comfortably with westerners who are used to working hard for what they get - who find it difficult to trust their life circumstances.

For such people, the requisite passivity, gentleness and openness of mind is unlikely to be come up naturally on a regular basis. It comes up, occasionally, as we saw above, when the meditator 'gives up' in desperation. Such 'accidental faith', however, is not enough. We need to cultivate an attitude of openness and acceptance, which will enable us more of the time to sit patiently, simply observing whatever is present in the moment. How, then, can faith be cultivated?

Practical Ways of Cultivating Faith

The first step to take is to find out whether or not you possess sufficient faith naturally. This, as with most meditative things, requires mindfulness. If we look at what we get up to in the practice and discover that faith

is not something we naturally have in great abundance, we need then to act on that knowledge. This where the quality of 'intelligence' (bearing in mind that intelligence in Dhamma terms is not at all the same thing as 'intellect'), can be used to good effect. We know we lack faith, so we do the intelligent thing and start taking steps to cultivate it.

An extremely practical thing one can do is to act reverentially towards one's teachers. In the beginning, this may involve paying attention to one's outward actions. Giving gifts to teachers, for example, is one area where one can work on developing faith and reverence. At first it may seem that you're just 'going through the motions' - you might even feel a little awkward about it - but in the longer run, the inner devotional attitude will gradually follow on from the outer behaviour. Taking care in choosing a gift, wrapping it with the teacher in mind and taking the appropriate opportunity to give the gift gently and with both hands to the teacher all help in cultivating a devotional attitude. In the act of giving, one is

acknowledging that the teacher possesses wisdom about the path to Enlightenment which the student is seeking and that he or she has developed spiritual qualities which the student needs to emulate. Gift giving opens up the communication channel between the teacher and the student.

As an aside, the educational institution for which I work has recently introduced a Students' Charter, so called. That Charter offers all kinds of new 'rights' to the student, enabling him or her to challenge the teacher's authority. It establishes an 'appeals procedure' for students who think they've been graded unfairly or otherwise discriminated against. In short, it significantly reduces the teacher's power base and is intended to put the student on an equal footing with his or her instructor. One could argue that such an apparently 'politically correct' move will have negative repercussions on the effectiveness of the learning relationship between student and teacher. Whilst it may be fashionable to think of the student as some kind of 'paying customer', such a set of rules only

serves to undermine the teacher's position **in the eyes of the student**. It says, in effect, the student knows best; that he or she is in a position to question the teacher's judgement if it contradicts his or her assessment of the situation. Imagine, if such values and expectations were transported into spiritual circles. The result would be a lot of messed-up meditators, I suspect. Views and policies which are touted as 'politically correct' can be decidedly incorrect and harmful spiritually.

This brings us conveniently to another aspect of cultivating faith. A student should make efforts consciously to acknowledge that the teacher has his or her best interests at heart. Consequently, any instruction is given for the student's benefit and should be followed unquestioningly. Alan's teacher, Kapilavaddho, once said that if his meditation guru had instructed him to climb a tall building and jump off, he would have had absolutely no hesitation in doing so. Similarly, in the accounts of Carlos Casteneda's spiritual training, one learns of Don Juan

once engineering a situation where Carlos and another apprentice thought they were physically jumping off a cliff. It turned out they were doing this in a form of mental body, but nonetheless, they displayed the unquestioning faith to carry out this instruction. They placed devotion ahead of self-concern.

In more immediate terms, are you always willing to carry out the instruction given to you on a residential meditation course? Or do you find yourself finding subtle excuses for not doing what you've been told? If so, the faith faculty is in need of further development. One meditator, some time ago, couldn't accept that he was not Alan's equal. Instead of endeavouring to put any instruction into practice to the best of his ability, this meditator wanted to contest and dispute every point of Alan's teaching. Needless to say, this person didn't last very long at the House of Inner Tranquillity. His lack of faith made him incapable of receiving instruction and therefore unteachable.

An ideal student is 'easy to instruct'. For instance, full

time trainees at the House of Inner Tranquillity are told never to answer back, argue or justify themselves when given instruction by a superior or blamed for some occurrence or other. It is extremely difficult to restrain the urge to explain the situation or off-load the blame in the heat of the moment. One gradually learns, however, that restraint of such passionate responses in the daily round are an integral part of reducing self-importance and cultivating greater faith and acceptance.

Faith can be cultivated directly in the seated practice as and when it is suitable. For instance, at the beginning of a meditation it is helpful to give away the merit from the practice to a spiritual teacher. This establishes a mental link with the teacher and the desirable qualities he or she possesses right from the outset. Sometimes the meditator might find it useful to take this a step further by systematically practising a recollection of the Buddha, Dhamma, or Sangha. I don't have time to go into the detail of the recollections here, but each involves consciously thinking through the positive and

desirable features of the meditation object. Such thoughts generally inspire faith and enthusiasm for the practice and are particularly useful for counteracting any hindrances which are present in the mind. Practised properly they can transform one's mental outlook, temporarily banishing even the most obstinate hindrance and making the mind joyful, buoyant and glad to be in the moment. Likewise, 'counting one's blessings' can have an inspiring effect. By systematically dwelling on how relatively fortunate you are, as opposed to selfishly poring over everything that's wrong with your lot, you can develop faith in life. You can see how, on reflection, everything has turned out for the best despite your best efforts to get in the way! If you reflect on it, you have had absolutely no control over the major events in your life, yet the universe has looked kindly upon you and provided the appropriate lessons. Were you solely responsible, for example, for coming into contact with the House of Inner Tranquillity and its Teacher? In truth, it was not completely down to you. Conditions led to an opportunity presenting itself which, wisely, you

decided to accept. The universe really does look after us, if we have the courage to open up and accept gratefully the lessons it brings us - whether painful or pleasant in the short run. On this note, it's worth remembering something which Jacqui once pointed out: "we seldom get what we want but we **always** get what we need." Developing faith helps one appreciate the depth of the wisdom contained in this observation.

If the formal recollections aren't working for you, and for some individuals reflection on a teacher from the historical past, such as the Buddha, may not always inspire, then one can reflect informally on the noble and desirable qualities of a living teacher at the House of Inner Tranquillity. One can reflect, for example, on Alan's great wisdom, his compassion in setting up such perfect conditions for meditation in the form of the Bradford-on-Avon Centre, the remarkable and extensive record of practical advice which he has so freely and generously given, his great skill at meditation, the fact that he had to endure the same kinds of difficulties as ourselves en route to

Enlightenment, and so on. All such constructive recollections, and you can be as free and creative with them as you like, help to soften and prepare the mind in the moment. They needn't be restricted exclusively to seated practice either. As with *metta* they can be practised whenever the inclination arises: on a bus ride to work, whilst out walking, or lying in bed just before going to sleep.

Let's say you're having a particularly difficult seated meditation practice. The mind's all over the place, you know there are hindrances present but you don't even have the presence of mind to identify them. In short, it seems like a complete and utter mess. This is a situation in which the cultivation of faith can have a transformative affect on the mind. If you can remember some key phrase that you've heard, like "life is perfect as it is" or, "there are no ordinary moments", or "nibbana is here and now" and you sincerely make a commitment to accept the truth of the phrase *as an article of faith*, then what seemed like a hopeless and thankless trudge through the mire of the mind can

almost instantaneously be revitalized. Genuine, unconditional acceptance of the circumstances you are in, however uncomfortable, will turn things totally around. It can go from being despondent and turgid to joyful and spacious in less than an eye-blink. The catch is, of course, that if you bargain with the moment or use this advice as an instrumental technique to get your own way, it won't work! There has to be a genuine desire to accept the situation and sincere trust that things will work out for the best if **you** just get out of the way.

Can there be too much `faith'? The short answer to this is that, yes, it is possible for someone to over-develop this quality to the point where they think that they have to do no work at all. They might suppose, wrongly, that just being associated with an organization such as the House of Inner Tranquillity is enough to take one all the way to Enlightenment. It can be helpful in this regard to see faith as one of several mental qualities, or `faculties', to use the term found in the books, each of which has to be developed

in the right balance. Faith is one of five faculties, or *indriya*, which are necessary for Right Meditation. The other four are: mindfulness, concentration, energy and investigation. As we pointed out earlier, mindfulness is crucial to any meditative endeavour. It may be likened to the salt used by a chef in the preparation of any savory dish and, as such, its importance cannot be stressed enough.

The other faculties can be grouped into two pairs, faith and concentration, on the one hand, and energy and investigation on the other. In terms of developing the correct mental balance, the faith/concentration pair generally has a calming and tranquillizing affect on the mind. Energy and investigation, by contrast, stir up the mind, making it eager and alert. Seen in this context, faith alone is not enough. But neither is any other faculty. An excess of any will unbalance the mind and make it unfit for meditation. As with everything in Buddha Dhamma, the need is cultivate a balanced middle path. In this case, an experiential understanding of the correct levels of tranquillizing

and energizing factors needs to be developed. The main point of this talk, however, is that for many western meditators they are not short of energy and investigation. They are eager to apply themselves and find out what's going on. More commonly what they lack is a combination of correct mindfulness, which tells them what state the mind is in, and the kind of softness, patience and openness which characterizes a mind filled with faith. The mind that is correctly balanced is able more of the time to concentrate properly and meditate on transience.

The mind balanced and purified in this way becomes unstoppable. A virtuous circle develops whereby one's faith and devotion leads, in turn, to correct practice and the arising of meditative insight. Gaining insight inspires confidence in the Teaching. One begins to *actualize the Truth*, that is, one begins to see directly how Dhamma applies to one's experience. This experiential understanding inspires ever more faith and devotion towards the Teaching and its teachers - and so the cycle continues. At a certain point in the

training, it becomes obvious to the meditator that the Noble Eightfold path really works; that, if followed, it will take one to the beyond of suffering. Knowing for a fact that the Teaching works, one is incapable ever again of entertaining a doubtful thought about it. At this point, the fetter of sceptical doubt is broken and a great deal of unhelpful mental baggage discarded. In its place stands an unassailable sense of faith that one is doing the right thing. Armed with such unshakable knowledge and faith, it is only a matter of time and application until the meditator realizes the final goal, *nibbana*.