Balanced Meditation

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There are two ways of calming the mind down. One is through giving it something tranquil to think about or to focus on. The other is through some new insights, something that’s been bothering you or something that’s eating away at your awareness because you don’t understand it, suddenly becomes clear. That brings calm to the mind as well. So both activities are important parts of the meditation. If they were just tranquilizing or just figuring things out, the meditation wouldn’t have the proper balance. As the Buddha said at one point, it’s both insight and tranquility that gets the mind into right concentration. Of the two qualities, it’s the insight that gives the deeper calm. It’s also the quality that’s harder to get. But different people find that their minds tend to go in different directions. For some people, all you need to do is give them something tranquil to focus on, and the mind just settles right down. They don’t have too many entanglements in the world. You can think of it as trees standing out in a meadow. Each tree is right far from the other trees. So if you want to cut it down, you don’t have to plan a lot of strategy, because you could cut it down in any direction and it’ll fall. Other people are more like trees in a forest. Their branches are entangled in the branches of other trees. Before you can cut them down, you have to figure out which branches you’re going to cut, which direction the tree will be able to fall. It takes some figuring out. Sometimes you find that your mind switches from being one type of tree to another type of tree. So you want to be prepared for both contingencies. In other words, at the times when the mind is ready to settle down, you don’t have to give it too much to figure out. Allow it to settle down. Give it plenty of time to be calm. Then, when it’s had its fill of calm, it’s ready for the more analytical work of figuring things out. The other times when the mind refuses to settle down, then you’ve got to give it something to think about, something to figure out. There are various ways of attacking it. There are meditation topics called the Recollections. There are ten in all. Recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. Recollection of relinquishment. Recollection of virtue. The qualities that make people endodavas. That’s a recollection. Recollection of death. Mindfulness immersed in the body. Mindfulness of the breathing. Recollection of the peace and nirvana. These are good topics to know for when you’ve got specific problems coming up. In other words, when you’re discouraged in the practice. It depends on what you’re discouraged on. If you’re thinking that you don’t have it, you’ll never make it. Think about the Sangha. All the different members of the noble Sangha who, before they became members of the noble Sangha, had lots of problems, sometimes worse than yours. Yet they were able to develop the resources within themselves to overcome those problems. They were people. You’re a people. You’re a person. They could do it. So can you. It’s also helpful to think about your own past generosity, your own virtue. These are topics that give you energy, because you realize that your birth as a human being hasn’t been a total waste. You’ve done good in your life. Of course, those two topics can get old if you don’t keep on doing good. This is why the practice of generosity is a necessary foundation for the meditation. And the practice of virtue is also a necessary foundation. In other words, it doesn’t help to think about some of the good you did five years ago if you’re not doing it now. If you observe the precepts and you’re generous as part of your nature, as a regular habit, then you can think about that at any time. It gives the mind encouragement. It nourishes the mind. It refreshes the mind. When you’re feeling lazy, there’s recollection of death. Death could happen at any time, as the events of the past few days have shown. The latest death count now is up above 60,000, and it’s still climbing. People woke up that morning and had no idea that their bodies would be up in trees within a couple hours, that a huge wall of water would come. It would engulf them. And yet it can happen. So we may not be right here on the coastline, but there are other things that could happen right here. Just the fact that you’ve got a body means that you’re leaving yourself open to death at any time. So you can’t waste your time. You’ve got the time to meditate now. Make the most of it. In other words, you don’t think of death in order to get discouraged and depressed. You think of it as an encouragement so that you’re not complacent. If you’ve got problems of lust, you can analyze the body, like that chant we have of the 32 parts of the body. Ask yourself precisely which of these parts are you lustful for? You take it apart like that, and there doesn’t seem to be anything to encourage your lust. Yet the mind has its ways of creating the appearance of attraction. Think about how artificial that is. When you see a body, it’s just colors and shapes. Why should one pattern of colors and shapes be more attractive than another? The mind reads a lot into what it sees, and that’s the troublemaker. It focuses on certain details and blocks out all kinds of other things. If it were fair and would let in all the information, lust wouldn’t have a toehold. But it’s because we like the lust that we give it a toehold. What do you want to like about lust? Well, look at that. Exactly where is a lustful mind an attractive thing? When you focus on it in this way, it loses a lot of its attraction. So there are different recollections for different mental states that are getting in the way of the meditation. As for other issues that come in from the course of the day, the Four Noble Truths are a good way of approaching issues that come in, that are standing in the way of your meditation. If the mind is fastening on something, ask yourself, “Okay, exactly where is the suffering here?” It’s usually a point of view that we don’t take. We figure we’ve got to straighten out this problem and get that issue dealt with, and then we’ll have time to meditate. Then the mind will be free to meditate. But that’s placing the problem outside. But the Buddha, and this is where his approach is really revolutionary, says, “Focus on the stress that’s right here, right now, and see what you’re doing that’s causing that stress.” You take your same problem-solving skills, but you apply them to this problem, the stress right here, right now, to see exactly what kind of craving, what kind of ignorance underlies that stress. And when you can catch these things in action, that particular burden gets lifted off the mind, and the mind is in much better shape, ready to settle down to greater levels of stillness. Once you start thinking in these terms, you find that this particular form of analysis can be applied to anything that’s standing in the way of the meditation. As Ajahn Suwat once said, “Just look at your mind and see the unquiet in the mind.” We’ll often focus on something outside. My mind is unquiet because of this or because of that outside. Well, what is your craving doing this, taking that outside incident and bringing it inside? Look at that. That’s the culprit. So the areas where the mind is still, look at that as part of the path. Where it’s unstill, look at that as an opportunity to develop the path. It’s either the first or the second Noble Truth. But you apply your problem-solving habits, looking for the cause of the problem and learning to solve the problem at its cause. That helps bring the mind down, gives it the insight, gives it the understanding that helps it let go of all those outside issues and focuses on where the real issue is right here. As it brings your focus inside, once that particular problem is dropped, where are you? You’re inside, ready to settle down. So learn to be skilled at both approaches to bring stillness to the mind. Because the mind has different needs from day to day, different tendencies. Sometimes if you simply lull the mind, lull the mind, it starts getting dull. Even though it does quiet down, it’s dull. That’s when you have to force yourself to ask, “Where is there still stress right in here? What issues am I avoiding?” Other times you start getting analytical, and that pulls you away from the present moment. Remember, the issue is stress. Where is stress felt? It’s always felt right here in the present moment. You don’t feel past stress, you don’t feel future stress. You can remember the past, you can anticipate the future, but where you’re actually feeling the suffering right now is right here. That’s what you want to focus on, because that’s the problem. And the insights you want to gain are the ones you’ll gain right here. So meditation, when it’s done properly, encompasses both. Coming to understandings about your suffering and also allowing the mind to grow still. Need each other. If you can’t be still enough to look at the suffering, there’s no way you’re going to understand it. All you’re going to be doing is dealing with concepts about suffering, generalizations, not the specific experience of suffering right here, right now. It’s that experience that makes us different from machines. We create artificial intelligence to do all kinds of things. You get sensors that will let robots act in various ways, but they don’t feel suffering. That’s us. When you look at it that way, it’s not much of something to be proud about, but it’s there. It’s why we need to work towards awakening, and it’s also the fuel that allows us to work. The idea that you can reach the deathless by focusing on your suffering, simply learning how to focus the right way for the purpose of comprehending. So you bring the mind to stillness to comprehend. You look at the issue of suffering from various angles so as to comprehend. When the two activities are working together like this, then the meditation progresses. If you’ve got one without the other, it’s out of balance. If you don’t have either, you’re really up the creek. But for the most part, we find ourselves emphasizing one or the other because we’re good at one or the other. One of Ajaan Foong’s strategies as a teacher was to focus you on your activity, focus your efforts on the side that you weren’t so skilled at yet. In other words, if you’re the type of person who likes to figure things out, he’d say, “Get your mind still, still, still.” If you’re the type of person who found it easy to keep the mind still, he’d say, “Think. Look at your suffering. Figure it out.” The purpose being to bring us back into balance. So we don’t focus simply on the activities we like to do, but we get good all around. This is one of the problems of our educational system these days. It tends to track students awfully quickly. If you’re good at music, they put you in the music stream. If you’re good at math, they put you in the math stream. There’s very little opportunity to become well-rounded. There’s very little opportunity to learn how to become good at something that you’re not automatically good at. For the meditation, the Buddha gives you the tools. This is how you get good at something. Try it. Notice the results. Consult other people. Try it again. Try to notice the connection between what you do and the results you get. And over time, you get good at it. So try to approach the meditation in a balanced way. Remember, you’ve got lots of tools. Both to calm the mind down by lulling it into calmness and making it calm through understanding. There are lots of tools for both activities. You should have one meditation topic that’s your home base, but you need the other tools as well for special circumstances. That’s what it means to be an all-around meditator. It’s like being a carpenter. If you only have a hammer in your toolbox, you won’t be able to get anything built. If you have lots of tools in the box but you don’t practice with them, you don’t learn how to master them, you still can’t get anything built either. So, acquaint yourself with your tools and put the time that’s needed into mastering them all. That’s how the meditation becomes an all-around skill.

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