A Point of Balance

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The world is insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving. We all know that craving is the cause of suffering. For most of us, we think of sensual craving. Craving for sight, sound, smell, taste. Tactile sensations. But that’s not the only kind of craving there is. There’s also a craving for becoming and a craving for no becoming. In both cases, it’s a push into the future. In fact, in all three cases, it’s a push into the future. We want something. We stand on the present moment and are looking to what we can do, how we can use the present moment as a jump-off place for the future that we want, one way or the other. In terms of sensual craving, it’s just that. We want sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, ideas that appeal to us. Craving for becoming is craving to be something. Craving for no becoming is craving for annihilation. The Buddha said that when people hear that he teaches the Dhamma for the end of becoming, they react in one of two ways. Either they, under the sway of the first two kinds of craving, don’t want to hear what he has to say, because it sounds like a block to what they’re just about to get, what they want to get, what they’re living for. Then there’s the third kind, the people who look forward to annihilation, saying, “The annihilation of what I am would be true happiness.” He said those people go past. The teaching is balanced right here in the present moment. He says the way to practice for the end of becoming is to look at what has already become, in other words, things that are just appearing right now in the present moment, and to develop dispassion for them. The dispassion is the means by which everything becomes untangled. So the Buddha is not asking us to look forward to annihilation, he’s not asking you to annihilate yourself, and he doesn’t encourage you to look forward to annihilation, because it never really works that way. In terms of craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, it’s like seeing this huge trap in front of you, but not seeing it as a trap, thinking that it’s a place where you’re going to find happiness. You walk into it and all of a sudden all these ropes tie you up. Craving for no becoming is finding yourself tied up by the ropes and just pulling, pulling, pulling, trying to get out of them, not realizing that the stronger you pull against them, the more tightly they confine you. The trick is to simply stand still and watch what’s already there. This is where the analogy breaks down. Think of it as you sit here meditating, and you see things just falling away, falling away, these ropes on the trap. Imagine them just falling away all the time, and you want to watch that happen. That’s how you come to the end of becoming. What this requires is good, strong concentration, the ability to stay with the present moment and not keep leaning into the future, leaning back to the past. To stay with the present moment requires a lot of stability. Stability requires a sense of well-being that you create in the present moment. It is something manufactured. After all, as the Buddha said, the path is something fabricated. So we fabricate a sense of well-being. It may not be absolute well-being, but it’s relatively better than anything else that we’ve experienced so far. So learn how to explore what you’ve got here and see how you can turn the breath, which is just simply coming in, going out, and not doing much more for the body aside from keeping it alive. Learn to use it as a tool to create a sense of well-being, a sense of fullness in the body. I know someone who was practicing the John Lee Method went over to Thailand, and they ran into a John who said, “Why are you working with a breath like that? It’s just a sankara.” In other words, just let it go. Well, you can’t just let it go. I told him my retort would have been, “Well, you’ve got a body. Why are you bathing it? It’s just a sankara. You’ve got to look after it, because it’s going to be useful. You have to care for it.” In the case of the breath, you have to really get on intimate terms with it if you’re going to be able to settle down in the present moment. If you can’t be on friendly terms with the breath, on good terms with the breath, you can’t stay here. You’ll always be slipping off to the past, slipping off to the future, craving one way or the other. To get a sense of balance here in the breath, you want to make your sense of the present moment as large as possible. If the present moment is just one little spot, you’re going to fall off. But if you can inhabit the whole body, it’s like having a really large piece of land on which you can stand, a good solid foundation. It’s a lot easier that way to stay in the present. So the body is an important tool. The breath is an important tool. Don’t be too quick to throw them away. Otherwise, you’ll never find the way out of that dilemma. In other words, don’t be too attached to the idea of becoming something or too attached to the idea of wanting everything to be annihilated. You want to stand right here at the present moment. You’ll see things arising and passing away, arising and passing away, and you want to watch them arise and pass away. In a way, that gives rise to disenchantment, dispassion. That’s how there’s release. But you can’t watch them arising and passing away without a good solid foundation. That’s the work in the meditation. This is the area of life where we need to devote as much energy as we can, as much attention as we can. Look for ways in your life where you’re expending a lot of unnecessary energy in your emotions, in your attitudes, in the issues you take on, because it really does pull away from this work that’s really important. Learning how to develop a sense of foundation right here, a sense of ease, a steadiness of gaze that will allow you to see things arising and passing away, things that have come into being, the word putta in Pali, as opposed to pava or vipava. Pava is a sense of becoming, wanting to move on, move on, move on to something better. Vipava is wanting to move on to annihilation. In both cases, you get past this tendency of the mind to lean toward the future. You get past this tendency by just watching what’s already there. As you get to know what’s already there, you may discover that some of it is stuff that you’re still creating here in the present moment. But you’re not going to see that until you just sit here and watch and give yourself a good place to sit and a good solid foundation so your gaze can be steady enough to see things as they’re actually arising and passing away. So right here is where effort should be focused. And developing that foundation. Without the foundation, no matter how much you read about insight or think about insight, it’s not going to be insight. It’s going to be, as Ajahn Lee once said, “outsights,” stuff you brought in from outside to impose on the present moment. It’s only when you can sit really still and watch what’s right here, what’s coming up, what’s going away, what’s coming up, what’s going away, what’s arising, what’s disbanding. That’s when you get insight into how it all happens and insight into how the mind can create all kinds of extra elaborations, extra fabrications, what they call proliferations or complications, pambanca. You see how the more things proliferate out of the idea, “I am the thinker.” How much suffering you create. You want to be in a position where you can simply be an observer, watching what’s arising and passing away, what’s already come into being, and then what happens to it as you watch it. So release lies in discovering a point of balance. The larger and more extensive your foundation in the present moment, the easier it will be to maintain your balance. So get in touch with your body. Get in touch with your breath. Don’t push them away, because they’re your only tools. Without those tools, you wouldn’t have anything to counteract the momentum of your breath. This is how the path works to undercut the cause of suffering. As we’ve said many times before, the heart of the path is right concentration. Only when the mind is balanced can it get away from these currents of craving that keep pushing, pushing, pushing. So as you focus the mind right here on the breath, you’re putting yourself in a position where you really can solve the problem of suffering at its cause. If you’re not right here, you’re wide of the mark.

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