Finding Balance

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One of the reasons we meditate is to give a sense of peace and ease for the mind. The mind that’s been carrying its burdens gets to let them down for a while. We try to bring the mind to stillness, but it has to be an alert stillness. We have to be mindful, we have to remember what we’re doing, alert to what we’re doing. And there’s a quality of ardency. So it’s not simply a matter of letting go, letting go, letting go, and dropping into the unconscious state of mind. You’ve got to be aware. You’ve got to know what you’re doing and the results of what you’re doing. We want the kind of stillness that allows insight to arise and understanding to arise. So it means we have to find the right balance. I talk about this a lot in the texts. The factors for awakening, for instance. Mindfulness is said to be always appropriate. Whether it’s focusing on the topic of your concentration, which are the same things as the process of developing mindfulness. Take, for instance, the body in and of itself. Focus on the breath in and of itself. Work with the breath in a way that makes it a good place to stay. If you’re feeling lazy, try to breathe in a way that gives you more energy. If you’re feeling tense and overworked, try to breathe in a way that’s more relaxing, more soothing. Right there, you’ve got to direct a thought and evaluation. Direct your thoughts to the breath and then see, is the breath appropriate for right now? And how about the way you’re relating to the breath? Is that appropriate? If you have trouble staying with the body in the present moment, in other words, the more you focus on it, the more agitated you get, then the Buddha recommends dropping the body for the time being and finding another topic that’s more inspiring. It might be goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity. Or you can recollect the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Anything that you find a congenial topic for right now. And again, you want a topic that’s a good antidote for whatever imbalance there may be in the mind. Again, when you’re feeling lazy, it’s good to reflect on death. Death could come at any time, zap you right in the middle of a nice sleepy meditation. Would you be prepared to go? Well, especially not if you’re sleepy. So try to put some more energy, try to find some way of stirring your energy up. So if you were suddenly called upon to die right now, you’d be prepared, you’d be ready, alert and mindful enough to handle it well. Or if you’re feeling discouraged, you might want to recollect on the Buddha, recollect on the Sangha. Thinking of them as an example to give yourself some encouragement in practice. But when you find that the mind does get a sense of being refreshed and inspired or energized by the contemplation, then you try to focus your attention back on the breath and see how is the breath going when you’re more refreshed, inspired, and energized. Try to maintain that way of breathing. This gets you back into your proper frame of reference. That brings you to the other factors for awakening. There are three that are energizing and three that are calming. Again, you might find that your mind needs more energy, so you focus on the energizing ones. These are analysis of the dhammas or qualities of the mind, persistence or energy, and then rapture or refreshment. The analogy here is of a fire that’s burning low, so you put more fuel in the fire. Analysis of qualities comes down to something very specific. It’s not an extended abstract analysis. It’s just simply observing in your mind what’s working and what’s not, what’s skillful and what’s not. For instance, if you’re feeling drowsy or beginning to wander off, what can you do to focus your attention more squarely on the breath? Sometimes it happens that as the mind begins to stay with the breath, it just lets go of everything and goes to a state that’s called delusion concentration, where it’s calm and peaceful, but you’re not very mindful. When you come out, you’d be hard put to say whether you’re awake or asleep. This means you need to give yourself something useful to do. This is where analysis comes in useful. Be very careful observing how the breath is going. In different parts of the body, you can imagine the thirty-two parts of the body. You can think about all the bones in your body. In other words, give the mind some work to do. When it lets go of its ordinarily daily concerns, don’t let it just drop off into a vacant state. Think about the bones. Start, say, with the bones in the tips of your fingers and go up through the hand, the wrist, the arms, up to the shoulders. Then start with the bones in the tips of your toes and work your way up. As you think of each bone, try to get a sense of where it is in your body right now. So it’s not just visualization. You’re also thinking about that particular part of the body. You’re focusing your attention on that part of the body. If there seems to be any tension around there, let it go. So you improve your posture, say, as you go up your spine. In other words, if you find you have a tendency to just drift away and get very lazy in the meditation, you’ve got to give yourself work to do to reestablish mindfulness. The kind of work that makes it feel really good to be right here in the body, that’s how rapture comes in as well. It’s an energizing sense of well-being when all the energy channels in your body are connected and they’re flowing well. It gives a sense of strength and resilience to the meditation that helps wake you up. Those are the energizing factors. The calming factors are serenity, concentration, and equanimity. You want to emphasize these when you find that the mind is a little bit too energetic or has trouble staying still. Breathe in a way that’s calming and soothing. It helps to release tension in different parts. Keep your focus on one thing exclusively. Just stay with the breath and focus on one spot. You may think of your awareness or the ease spreading out from that spot, but keep your focus on one point as possible as a way of calming things down. You’re not going to allow it to wander out anywhere at all. Try to develop an attitude of equanimity to all other things that you might possibly be focusing on. To find your mind obsessing about a particular topic, remind yourself that someday you’re going to die and this topic is going to mean nothing at all. You may not even have to wait until you die. A few days down the line, it’s not going to mean anything. You might die before the issue gets resolved. It certainly doesn’t help to get yourself worked up in the midst of a meditation session. This helps give you a sense of distance from your ordinary daily concerns, which is one of the important functions of meditation—to pull you out of your ordinary frame of reference of the world, i.e., the body in the world, your feelings as they relate to the world, your mind states as they relate to the world. You want to put aside all those things, as the texts say, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. So you can pull away for a while. Get yourself out of those worlds. Look at things in the larger perspective, where your ordinary daily concerns don’t loom so large. Make the mind larger than its concerns, able to maintain an even keel, no matter how things are going to turn out. That helps to soothe a lot of the anxiety that can fire a mind that is not willing to settle down. What this means is that concentration practice is not simply a matter of lulling the mind to sleep or lulling the mind into a still state, because you want a still state that’s alert, mindful, clear. That takes some analysis. It takes some work and consideration. It requires skill. So learn how to read your mind to get a sense, as you’re sitting down to meditate, which direction you think things might be going. If your imbalance is too little energy or too much energy, be prepared to try to strike a better balance right from the very beginning. Sometimes things start out and they seem okay, but then as you get into the meditation, you find the mind leaning in one direction or another. So read it not only before you sit down, but while you’re in the course of the meditation, if things aren’t right. When things do go well, then try to maintain that sense of balance. In this way, your meditation work yields more than just a sense of ease and well-being. It provides a foundation for really understanding what’s going on in the mind and learning how to foster skillful qualities and let go of unskillful ones, which is the beginning of discernment and wisdom. In this way, you develop the qualities of tranquility and insight together. This is how they function ideally. They function in tandem. So use the insight to improve your concentration, and use your concentration to improve your insight. It’s like your left hand washing your right, your right hand washing your left. That way they both get clean.

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