Finding Balance

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Watching Ajaan Fuang teach meditation, I noticed that he varied his teachings quite a bit from person to person, especially at the beginning. It seemed that he was bringing them in to one point. When they finally got to the point where they could sit with a sense of balance and ease in the body, and the mind was so still that the breath actually stopped, from that point on the instructions are all the same for everybody. It was as if he had to get you to that point first before he could give you any standard instructions. But up to that point, people were all over the map. So the people who were to the north had to be told, “Go south.” The people to the south had to be told, “Go north.” Like that famous comment that Ajaan Chah once made. He sees people going down the road and some of the people are wandering off to the right, so he tells them, “Go left, go left.” Or he sees them getting off to the left edge of the road and he has to tell them, “Go right, go right.” The whole purpose of this is to get into the middle, walk down the middle of the road, down the middle of the middle way, which requires a sense of balance. It’s almost like walking on a tightrope. In the beginning of the practice, very few of us have a really good sense of balance. But that’s one of the lessons we have to learn as we meditate. The job of the teacher is to remind you that there are various approaches so that if you find yourself going off to the right, you realize that there are techniques for going left. When you’re off to the left, there are techniques for going right. The Buddha mentions this in his teachings on the factors for awakening. There’s one factor he says that’s always appropriate, and that’s mindfulness, which includes alertness and right effort. That little cluster is always useful. But as you’re meditating, sometimes you find yourself getting drowsy. That’s when you need the activating factors, the things that wake you up, which are using your powers of analysis, putting effort into it, until you get a sense of rapture that energizes you. When the mind is too hyper, that’s when you need the calming factors—tranquility, concentration, equanimity. It’s the mindfulness that keeps watch over these things to see if they’re working. You want to keep in mind the fact that you want this balance, and then the alertness is what watches. How are things going? Because it is important that you get results in your meditation. You have to learn how to read your meditation. In the beginning, many times, people will tell you, “Well, there is no such thing as a good or bad meditation,” because they would encourage you to do it so you don’t all get tied up in premature judgments. But after a while, you’ve got to get to learn how to read the meditation so you can develop a sense of balance. You have to know when a one-pointed focus is needed and when it gets too much. When a full-body awareness is needed and when it gets too vague. Keep in mind that there are these alternatives. If you find yourself getting too exclusively focused on one point, where it begins to get too much pressure on the blood, too much pressure on the mind, you know how to let up without totally losing your concentration. In other words, you try to think of your focus as not having tight edges. First, you’re going to want to make sure the focus feels comfortable, and then allow that sense of comfort to spread. An image the Buddha uses is of a baby chick. If you hold it too tightly, it’s going to die. If you hold it too loosely, it’s going to fly away. So you’ve got to find just the right amount of pressure to place on it. Then when you’ve got the right amount of pressure, think whole body spreading out like melted butter, spreading all over your body. Then try to find the right balance to maintain that perception, maintain that feeling. Because, again, if you push it too hard, you’re going to ruin it. If you don’t encourage it, it just doesn’t happen. So you’ve got to find the right amount of pressure, the right amount of focus. This takes experience, which comes from trial and error. So you keep at it again and again and again. This is why the path is a path that takes time. It’s a gradual path, because your sensitivity, your sense of balance, is something that you acquire over time, through practice. It’s something that you can read about. You can read about it in a book. You can hear it from the teacher. But to actually get your own sense of balance requires that you just practice again and again and again, and just be very observant. Notice what feels right, and keep trying to pursue that sense of balance and what feels right. As you pursue it, you get more and more sensitive to where it lies. The same principle that applies to sitting meditation applies to walking meditation, as well. You want to keep your balance, your sense of the balance of your focus, just right. If it’s too heavy, it gets unpleasant. If it’s too light, you’re just sitting there, you’re just walking back and forth without any real concentration. So you can try focusing on different parts of the body. See which part of the body feels most comfortable, actually. As your focal point while you walk. For some people, it’s in the feet. For other people, it’s in the middle of the chest, or in the palate, or just about anywhere in the body. See how you can maintain a sense of ease, allowing the blood to flow naturally there, allowing the breath energy to flow naturally. Think of it spreading throughout the whole body, maintaining that sense of balance as you move. This is how you find that middle path to trial and error. It’s to be expected that you’re going to go off a little bit too far in one direction, then swing back and go too far in the other direction. It’s good to know that there are ways of dealing with these things when everything gets too tight. Try to think about the space around the body. Think of your breath permeating whatever that sense of tightness is. Remember that no matter how tight things are in the body, those sensations all come from atoms, and atoms have lots of space between them. So think about that space, the barrier of the tightness, the defining line where the tightness gets permeated. Your perception of it, the perception that maintains a tightness, gets loosened up a little bit. If the energy starts feeling oppressive, some people, when the mind settles down, have a very strong sense of energy flow in the body, which, after all, can get too much. Remember, there are passages for allowing the energy out. Send it out the palms of your hands, the soles of your feet. If the energy builds up in the head, think of it going down the front of the neck. Some people find that it’s convenient to think of it streaming out the eyes. Even as you breathe in, the energy is going out your eyes. For some people, that works. For other people, it makes it worse. So you’ve got to find what works for you. Remember, we’re not here to be perfect in every meditation session. We’re here to learn from our mistakes. That helps you to keep a cool head in the midst of all this. So that even though you know that you are working toward skill in the meditation, you don’t get all tied up around the fact that you’re not at your goal yet. You learn not to be too judgmental. You learn to use your powers of judgment, but not in a judgmental way. One thought that helps is to remind yourself that it’s not just you. Everybody who has problems or comes up with obstacles in meditation does. If you notice that some people around you seem to be having an easy time of getting settled down and meditating, that’s because they had to go through this stuff in the past, and they’ve gone through it now. So now their path is easier. Or it may be that they’ve got different difficulties that they haven’t realized yet. You can’t really compare yourself with other people. Just remind yourself that all of us have difficulties as we go along the path. This is one of the really great things about Buddhism. The Buddha didn’t start out perfect. He had to learn from his mistakes as well. So he knows what it’s like to be imperfect. He knows what it’s like to start out where you’re not really sure if things are going to work. You’re starting with the conviction that things should be able to work. They must be able to work. There’s got to be a way out. There’s a balanced way of working both on that faith and with whatever doubts you have, whatever uncertainties you have. There’s a way to deal with every problem and get past it. He knows because he was able to do that, and he was able to teach other people to do it as well. If you’re a person, you can do it too. If he could, he would have cleared all of the obstacles out of our paths. But each of us has our own areas where we’re unskillful, and we have to learn skill right there. We have to learn our own sense of balance right there. That’s how discernment develops. It’s not that somebody’s going to shine a light into your head and everything’s going to get clear. Bit by bit by bit, we keep finding that spot where the mind achieves balance. And the more sensitive you are to that spot, the more you know for sure that when things open up, that really is a genuine awakening. Sometimes if you just come charging at it, there will be a kind of a cathartic release, which lets go of a lot of the pressure the mind has been carrying around. It’s not necessarily an enlightenment or an awakening. If you come at this hoping for instant insights, you tend to fall for those experiences and think that that must be it. But you haven’t developed the sensitivity to really judge these things. This is why the gradual path is a necessary path, why it’s necessary that it is gradual, because that’s how sensitivity develops. When you’re really sensitive, you can tell the real thing from the false. Remember, this is a middle path we’re on, a gradual path. It will have its sudden moments. The analogy is of the continental shelf off of India. It has a gradual slope and then a sudden drop-off. But you don’t get to that sudden drop-off without going down the gradual slope. So we work on the gradual development of our sensitivity. And it’s in that process that the awakening will come.

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