Looking for Balance

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Take some time to take stock of your body. Take stock of your mind. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths and see how that feels. Then ask yourself, “What kind of breathing would feel good now? What does my body need?” Sometimes it feels sluggish, so you want to breathe in a way that gives it more energy. Or if it’s tense, you want to breathe in a way that’s more relaxing. Take a few minutes to fine-tune the breath. Then, as you fine-tune the breath, you can help it also start noticing how the mind is. So look at that, too. What kind of mood is it, and what kind of mood are you bringing to the meditation? Again, is it sluggish or overactive? One of the important things to keep in mind is that when you’re learning skills in meditation, it’s learning how to read the mind and then figure out what you can do to bring it into balance. This is what the Buddha taught in meditation. He didn’t teach just one technique or one step that covers all contingencies, all possibilities. Sometimes you’re bringing a lot of leftover baggage from the day. Then you’ve got to just learn how to let go, let go. At the same time, you have to look at the quality of your mindfulness, the quality of your concentration. Does that need strengthening? The Buddha talks about two activities that a good meditator should delight in. One of them is abandoning or letting go, the other is developing. He says you learn how to let go. How to take delight in that. In other words, learn how to enjoy it, to see this as something good. Both sides. You can’t favor one over the other because you have to have the skill to deal with whatever comes up. There are actually four kinds of right effort. The abandonment, the letting go, and the preventing. In other words, once you’ve let go of something that’s unskillful, you want to figure out how to keep it from coming back. Or when you’ve developed some concentration or mindfulness, the next step is to give rise to it. Then you want to develop it, bring it to more maturity, bring it to higher levels of competence. So there are lots of different things you could be doing right now. Your skill as a meditator lies in learning how to read the situation and figuring out what you need. This is going to involve a fair amount of trial and error. Sometimes you have to give yourself a good calming talk to say, “Look, you have to be patient here. If we could barge our way into Nirvana, we all would have barged our way in a long time ago.” Or, by simply relaxing, we could get into Nirvana, but again, we would have been there a long time ago. Practice requires finesse. It requires mastering a range of skills. It’s like learning a musical instrument. When you first pick up a guitar, you fiddle around, you pluck a few chords. Some of them sound good, some of them don’t sound good. And it’s a good thing you’re not being required to go out and stand on the stage and do this in front of everybody. You’re allowed time to fool around. Try this, try that, at your own pace. See what works. See what sounds good. And then after just strumming chords, you want to learn more complicated things. But it builds gradually. And if you approach this as you would developing any skill that you like, you’ll find that it gets easier and easier to take a delight in abandoning and a delight in developing the right things. So as you meditate, it’s good to reflect on skills that you’ve mastered in the past, particularly with the issue of desire. Because, as the Buddha says, it’s part of right effort is learning how to generate the desire to abandon the things that need to be abandoned, to develop the things that need to be developed. But as you also notice, the desire sometimes can run away with you, so it actually gets in the way. And at other times, it’s so weak that you just stew around and nothing gets accomplished. So it’s good to keep this framework in mind. You can’t gauge exactly how much effort is right. There’s no number scale. As I said earlier, if we could hook up little meters on our foreheads, we could look in the mirror and say, “Ah, it’s too much effort today.” You have to learn by trial and error, looking at your mind, to see how it responds to different approaches. But you can keep this issue in mind, that it is a matter of balance. We do have this tendency to try to draw a caricature of the practice. There’s the practice that it’s just all effort. You grit your teeth and just do what you’re told and hope that somehow you’re going to grind out enlightenment at the end. Or that you can let go and just do as you like, and somehow that will get you there too. There are times when you have to push harder and times when you have to let go. There are times when you have to pull back a bit. Neither side on its own is going to get you there. So hold that idea in mind. Remember that. So that you can learn how to read your meditation, read the response, read the results, and then make adjustments. Because this is a path of effort. But it’s a path not just of a certain amount of effort, it’s right effort. Right effort has to include some discernment, so that you read how much effort is appropriate right now, what kind of effort is appropriate. And you need some discernment in learning how to generate that desire to do it right. Learning to know yourself, what kind of motivating factors get you going, what kind of motivating factors tend to discourage you. The Buddha noted one time that there are meditators who are like horses. Some horses respond to encouraging treatment, some other horses respond to the whip. Other horses require both. Most of us fall into that third category. There are times when we need to encourage ourselves, other times when we need to come down hard on ourselves. And it’s knowing that it requires a range of skills that really helps you. It’s interesting to note that a lot of the meditation techniques that develop a one-type-of-effort approach to the meditation, that you do just one thing over and over and over and over again and that’ll get you there, tended to be developed at the same time. One person, all he has to do is put bolts in the front door, or the woman has to put fenders, that’s all she does. She puts the fenders on the car. That’s all you do all day long. Just the fenders, just the bolts, just the fenders, just the bolts. And it’s amazing, I think, that anybody thought that that would ever, one, get results in meditation, and two, would be a success. It’s not an enjoyable prospect. It’s like working on the assembly line. It’s just putting in the time. But the Buddha never taught a one-fold path. There are lots of aspects to the path, lots of types of right effort. There’s right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. All these things go together, and they all have their role. The breath is a good place to start because it gives you pretty immediate response. If you push too hard on it, it’s going to push back. Start getting headaches here or aches there. That’s a sign you’re pushing down too hard on the breath, forcing it too much. Or if it gets too weak, things begin to blur out. It’s a very good object for meditation because it responds quickly. It’s simply a matter of learning how to read those responses, getting a sense not only of the in-and-out breath, but also the breath energy flowing in the body. The sense of energy in the head, the energy in the shoulders, the energy in the neck, the energy down the arms, the energy in your torso, the energy in front, in back, down through the hips, down through the legs. The simple ability to find a spot in the body that feels good. It’s all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath, and then to allow that sense of comfort to spread through different parts of the body. Learning how to master that skill right there develops an awful lot of the skills you need to find that sense of balance, to find that sense of just right. If you find yourself getting into an awkward or restrictive rhythm of breathing, it’s time to back off. That’s something you want to let go. If you find that’s something that’s more comfortable, how do you nourish it? How do you maintain it without clamping down on it? These are questions you want to explore. So, working on the breath, if you approach it this way, it’s a question of how to find balance, how to find what’s just right. When it’s going well, how to allow it to continue to go well. Because there is that reaction sometimes when things are going well, you clamp onto it. And that, of course, destroys it. So again, you back off. Try again. And give yourself whatever pep talks you need in order to keep up the effort. Remind yourself that this is a process that may take time, but a lot of good things in life have required that you take time. And you were able to stick with them in the past. And at the very least, you’re not doing anything that’s degrading, anything that’s embarrassing, anything that’s harmful to anybody. You’re sitting here just breathing and learning to get on intimate terms with your own breath. That in and of itself is a good way to spend your time. Because you know that down the line, as you get more and more familiar with your breath energy, you can deal with the different issues that come up. Headaches, backaches, low energy, excess energy. And so, like learning how to make friends with a person, it takes time to get on friendly terms with the breath. And the more you get to know the breath in this way, the more you get to know the mind. Insight is not something you can force on the mind. It’s a sensitivity that you develop over time, as you get more and more sensitive to exactly what stress is. What stress is helpful, as in terms of the stress that’s needed to keep you on the path? What stress is excess that you can let go of? And what you’re doing to cause that excess stress, you don’t actually let go of. You let go of the cause. When the Buddha talked about the Four Noble Truths, he made this very important distinction. You let go of the cause by learning how to comprehend the stress. To do that, you have to develop good qualities in the mind that enable you to sit with the stress, not feel threatened by it, not feel overwhelmed by it. So that you can develop the patience to watch it and learn from it. Again, you can’t take other people’s insights and just clamp them on what’s happening, or slap them on what’s happening. Because this issue of putting an end to suffering and an end to stress is very personal, very intimate. And a lot of it requires developing your sensitivity, as you get used to more and more refined levels of pleasure that come with the breathing. As the mind begins to settle down, you get more sensitive to subtle levels of stress that you had never noticed before. It’s like trying to listen to a radio in a machine shop. You have to turn off this machine, turn off that machine, turn off that machine. After a while, you begin to hear the radio. Then, after a while, you begin to realize that the radio has turned to the wrong station, or it’s not properly tuned. You would not be able to tell at all when the machines were going because they were so loud and drowned out the radio. But as other things grow more and more quiet, you can sense that the radio is not turned on to the right station. So you start looking more and more into the mind to figure out what the right station would be. So this process of getting more and more intimate with the breath, more and more familiar with the breath, is not just a breathing exercise. It enables you to see what’s going on in the mind and understand where is the mind being excess stress, excess suffering, unnecessary stress or suffering. This comes down to that distinction we talked about this afternoon. The Buddha talks about stress in two contexts. One is the stress in terms of the three characteristics. Things that are conditioned are stressful simply because they are conditioned. They can’t stay together forever. At some point, though, whatever conditions and puts them together will start falling apart. That’s one kind of stress. That kind of stress doesn’t necessarily weigh on the mind. The stress that weighs on the mind is stress in the four Noble Truths, the stress that comes from clinging and craving. That’s what puts a huge burden on the mind. If you look at the four Noble Truths, three of them are actually conditioned. There’s stress and its cause, and the path to the end. The path is something you have to do. There has to be effort put into it. That simple fact right there is stressful. But remember that simile of the raft. You have to hold on to the raft in order to get across the river. When you get to the other side, then you can let it go. But you don’t want to let it go in the meantime. If you let go in the meantime, you get washed away in the river, and that’s the end of you. So you’re going to get more and more sensitive to what’s the distinction between the two types. What’s simply the stress of conditions, and what’s the stress that comes from craving and clinging? As you get more sensitive to what’s going on in the mind, what’s going on in the body, you begin to see the difference. You see the craving. First, you actually see the increased level of stress or the decreased level of stress in the mind. And if you watch it carefully, if you learn how to comprehend it, you begin to see that it’s connected with the coming and going of craving and clinging. The more quiet the mind is, the more you’ll be able to see these things moving. And the real insight comes when you realize you don’t have to do those things. You don’t have to cause the craving. You don’t have to cause the clinging. You’ve accepted that level of stress simply because you thought it was necessary. It came with the territory. But the more sensitive you get to what the mind is doing, the more you begin to see that it’s not necessary. You can stop it. You can function perfectly well without adding all that craving and clinging. And the level of stress goes down. So this is why it’s important to develop this sense of balance, because it’s in that balance state where the mind and the body fit together well, where they can be on intimate, familiar terms, in a way that develops your sensitivities. That’s how the insight comes. So it’s not just a johnny-one-note practice. It’s not an assembly line practice. It’s a skill. A skill with many components, but they’re all good things to learn. Simply learning how to be quiet and to breathe in a way that’s refreshing to the body, refreshing to the mind. That’s a good skill right there. It gives you respite. It gives you a place to be. A place where you can feel grounded. Then if you stick with it, you’ll find it can take you a lot deeper than that, to places that are a lot better than that. As the John Ferguson once said, “It’s all a matter of learning how to be observant.” When you run into problems, learn how to use your ingenuity, because this is a skill, it’s not a mechanical process. Figure out ways to breathe that are more refreshing, more gratifying. Figure out where to focus in the body in a way that gives the mind a place where it feels at home, at ease, and can develop the strength it needs to pry into the parts of itself that it doesn’t like to look at. The cravings and clings that it doesn’t like to admit to itself. But when the mind is refreshed and rested, you find that it’s much more willing, much more amenable to looking into the unnecessary ways that it causes stress and suffering, to the point where it sees that they’re unnecessary and can let them go. There does come a point at the end of the practice where everything gets let go. But to get there requires the developing and the abandoning and the preventing, and all the other aspects of right effort, all the other tasks that go with the Four Noble Truths. So always keep that point in mind. [SILENCE]

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