Looking for Balance

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Jhanli would sometimes start his meditation instructions by asking you to first check your body. Make sure it’s not leaning forward or back, to the left or the right. And then to check your mind to make sure it’s not leaning forward or back, left or right. Forward, of course, symbolized the future; back, symbolized the past. Left and right, right symbolize things you like and don’t like. And you can extend the metaphor, because when you’re getting the mind into right concentration, you’re really trying to get it into balance. When we look at our own minds, we have to realize, okay, we’re out of balance most of the day, most of the time. And sometimes it’s hard to get a sense of exactly how out of balance we are and what the direction is, because it’s what we’re used to. Some of us really like to control things. The least little thing that’s out of control gets us upset. Other people would like to get out of control. In other words, they want the mind to do something really bizarre, outrageous. Something they’ve never experienced before. Both of those are out of balance. So what you have to remember, what we’re doing here is getting the mind into balance. And we do that by exploring. And here again, different people have different tendencies. Some people tend to be overly confident. Other people tend to be under-confident. In other words, they try a little bit, and say, “Oh, it’s not good. I’ll try something else. That’s not good.” You have to give things time and you have to stick with things for a while and say, “I’m going to stick with this for a while and then pass judgment later.” Because if you’re constantly doing a little something and stepping back, doing a little something and stepping back, the mind doesn’t have any chance to settle down. It’s like that story of the Frenchman who went to see that. He had a life in an Eskimo village, and he went out to date with one of the Eskimos who was going to go fishing. The Eskimo had very carefully drilled a little hole in the ice, and there was a fish you could see under the ice, and he was going to try to catch the fish. The Frenchman, after fifteen minutes, got impatient and started walking around. Of course, that scared the fish away. Sometimes we need to have to sit with the breath and say, “I’m going to stay with one way of breathing and see what it’s like after ten, fifteen minutes.” That’s for being overly confident. That’s when you start getting insights and you run away with them. Vipassana Ksitigarbha had some good advice. She said, “If you gain an insight, watch the mind immediately after the insight to see what kind of reaction it has.” That’s when you really see how the mind deals with what it thinks is an insight. John Lee’s advice was, “If you understand something, ask yourself, ‘Exactly how far is that true, and how far is the opposite true?’” This gives you some control over your insights so you don’t go running away with them. John Fuehring’s advice was, “Don’t try to memorize your insights. If they’re really good, they’ll stick with you.” The first question is, “Is this an insight I can use right now?” If it is, use it. If not, just put it aside. It won’t go away. It’ll be there. As for the people who tend to control things too much, just tell yourself to loosen up a bit. There are a lot of teachings about having a greater sense of space in your meditation, and some teachers actually seem to think that that’s all there is. Just solve for yourself, soften up around your body, have a little sense of space around your body, a sense of space around your thoughts. I even read someone saying that the word dukkha means “apart from the natural spaciousness of your mind.” Well, it doesn’t mean that. Du means bad. There’s apparently a root in Pali that means kha, that means space, which means you’re in bad space, which doesn’t tell you much. Sukha is in a good space. Well, why? What kind of good space? What is it about it that makes it bad? What is it that makes it good? That’s something you want to delve into. Space is useful for concentration, getting the mind to settle down, loosening up around the stiffness of the body or the tightness of your control. But you don’t want to overestimate it. And again, it’s a matter of being in balance. Because we do want to be centered right here. Once you’ve loosened up around the body, get into the body and explore how the breath is. If things are tight, again, think of loosening up or being in a lot of space around the tight spots in your body. But if your sense of the body gets a little bit too loose, try to breathe more firmly. Think of the body as a mountain, sitting here suddenly. The body is solid, and you’re right here. The mind is solid as well. When we read about the Buddha’s awakening, we read about his passing away. He awakened in the fourth jhana, and he passed away from the fourth jhana. That’s a state of mind where everything is very, very still. The mind is very equanimous. Even the breath, the in-and-out breath, grows still. The breath energy in the body may still be flowing on its own, but there’s no in-and-out breath. In fact, it’s because the breath energy in the body is all connected that the in-and-out breath can get calmer. It’s very stable. In fact, it’s called imperturbable or unmoving, ananja. But again, it’s not unmoving because you’ve clamped down on it. It doesn’t feel any need to move. Everything feels very balanced, very solid, and it’s right here. That’s where you’re trying to head as you meditate. So if you know that you have a tendency to go off in one direction or another, think about compensating. If your sense of the body is too loose and you find it too easy to lose the body, leave the body, that’s when you’ve got to really think. Arms, legs, body. Think about the four elements as warmth, as earth. As far as you want to be on good terms with these. In other words, you don’t push them too much, you don’t exert too much control over them, but at the same time you want to stay with them. Remember, this is your foundation, this is your safe place, this is your stronghold. If you leave the body, the body gets left without anybody to look after it, and you’re left without a home. And even when we talk about going into sleep, the states of formless jhana, you’re still right here in the body. It’s just that your sense of the body gets less and less defined. But you’re not going anywhere else. The boundary line around your body begins to dissolve. You have some sense of little fog-like dots of sensation here. And then you start to think about the space between the dots and realize the space is infinite. You don’t go out running out to the limits or looking for the limits of the space. In fact, one of the reasons why it seems unlimited there is because you’re not focusing out, you’re focusing in. So try to get a strong sense of what it means to be balanced right here, comfortable, and approaching it in a balanced way, compensating for anything you know is an out-of-balance habit of the mind. Think of it as an exploration. If you come in with too many preconceived ideas about what it should be, you’re going to create those things. Then you’re going to give other things that are actually more useful in the practice a chance to show themselves. You’re thinking about the characteristics or perceptions of your body. In constancy, you’re thinking about stress, not self. It’s not that we’re trying to clone them or meditate for the sake of seeing those things. We use those things as tools to test whatever comes up. If something comes up in the meditation, is it constant? If it seems constant, stick with it. Can you make it constant, especially with the meditation? Can you make the concentration constant? Try to have as much skill as possible so you have some control. Not clamped-down control, but the kind of control that comes with really having mastered it. Here you’re pushing against those three perceptions, those three characteristics, and then after a while you begin to run up against them again on a deeper level. At that point, they become the test. When something arises, when something appears in the meditation, if there’s something really to hold onto, well, if you hold onto it, is it constant or not? Especially with an insight, is it constant? So any stress? If there is stress, let it go. It’s not what you want. You’re not after the insights. Insights are tools for something bigger. And it’s a something bigger that you want to test. So it’s like a treasure hunt. There’s something really valuable in here. The Buddha gives you some general instructions of where to look, and then those three perceptions are things you use to test whatever you find to see if it really is the treasure or if it’s imitation. So think of this as exploration. Be here to learn. And particularly to learn things we never expected we wanted to learn or needed to learn, but you find that they’re really useful. That’s when the insights get really good and really effective. So be open to a lot of things you didn’t expect, because that’s how the meditation exposes you to something new. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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