A Sense of Balance

April 7, 2017

When you meditate, there are several things you’ve got to bring into balance. On the one hand, you want to be focused enough so that you don’t leave the object, which is the breath. But you don’t want to be so focused or focused so strongly that the breath starts getting weird—in other words, putting too much pressure in one part of the body. Because then as soon as you leave meditation, the body’s going to react, and the mind’s going to react as well. So try to notice, as you’re focused on the breath, how the body feels as a whole. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has you be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out. Because when you’re aware of the whole body, it helps to alleviate some of the pressure that comes when you’re focused too exclusively on one point. So as soon as the breath starts getting comfortable, think of the whole body. Think of it spreading around. Notice the parts of the body that seem to be blocked. See if you can find some way of working the breath through them, working around it. Or you may notice that different parts of the body seem to be disconnected. I noticed one time I was beginning to meditate that I had a good sense of my torso and a good sense of my forearm, but the upper arm and shoulders seemed to have disappeared. So I had to very carefully trace what was the connection in my inner sense of the body. I found that my mental image of the shoulder was way out of whack. So we just gradually thought about everything getting connected again, and things got back into balance. Another way of bringing things in the body back into balance is to think of the different elements. We hear about the four elements, and it sounds like medieval chemistry. But actually, the Buddha is talking about properties, the property of warmth, the property of coolness, the property of solidity, and the property of energy or movement. These are the things that define our inner sense of the body, what’s called proprioception, how you feel the body from inside. So if things seem out of balance, you can ask yourself, “Is there too much earth or too little?” Because earth and breath balance each other off in one direction, and then warmth and coolness, or fire and water, balance in another direction. Ask yourself, “Are you feeling too heavy or too lightheaded?” If you’re feeling too lightheaded, you can just think of a lot of solidity in the body, and vice versa. If everything’s feeling solid, it’s getting very difficult for the breath to even come in at all. You feel like you’re fighting for every breath. You’ve got too much solidity in the body. And a lot of these elements or properties are the result of perceptions. Sometimes you’ve got to stay right here with the body and we try to solidify the sense of the body, but then that gets too solid and it gets hard to breathe. That’s when you think of it opening up. It’s all these little nodules of energy. Each little atom is not so much an object or a piece of matter, but it’s energy. Everything you feel in the body, think of it as energy, and that loosens things up quite a bit. Try to find the point of balance. And the same with the mind. There’s one passage where the Buddha talks about there being three activities in the meditation. There’s watching, and there’s concentrating, and then there’s effort. He says if you do any one of them to the exclusion of the others, your mind is not going to settle down properly. If it’s too much effort all the time, you get wired. It’s not comfortable being here. In other words, you’re putting too much stress into staying focused. But then if you get too concentrated just staying on one thing and not moving at all, that doesn’t develop. And if you just watch, that doesn’t develop either. You have to be able to concentrate the mind and watch and make an effort all at the same time. Now, there will be differences in emphasis sometimes if you’re struggling with a particular distraction. You have to think it through. Some distractions you don’t have to think. You just notice that the mind has slipped off and you get it back, and no big deal. Other times, something has a lot of hooks. Then you have to learn how to trim off the hooks, or at least trim off the barbs, so the mind is not snagged on that particular thought. That requires dropping the breath for a while and actually analyzing the thought for when it comes, why did it come, and is it there all the time, or does it just come and go? And when it goes, what happens? What’s the allure? Why do you keep bringing it back? Sometimes you have to be extra honest with yourself about the allure. You’ll be surprised sometimes about why you like things that part of you doesn’t like but another part does like. And the part that does like tends to get hidden underground, so you’ve got to bring it out. Because otherwise, if you don’t see the allure, you’ll just keep going back for it. So see why you like that particular kind of thought, and then think about the drawbacks. And then imagine yourself not falling for the allure. This is a big problem with addictions. A lot of people simply can’t imagine themselves not being addicted, and that gets in the way of their getting a cure. Well, your attachments are like addictions. So you’ve got to see what it is that you like about this thought, even though it’s bothering you. Then when you say, “Oh, I’m thinking because I think I can get this out of this,” or “I have to think this way,” then you can drop it and go back to the concentration. Once the mind gets settled, then you have to learn how to observe it. Don’t just let it sit there. You have to tend to it, look after it. Because if you’re not careful, the mind can slip off into delusion concentration, where it’s very still, but it doesn’t have much mindfulness. In which case, you’ve got to bring it back. Again, this is one of the reasons why the Buddha recommends full body awareness. Because it’s a lot harder to slip off into that delusion concentration when you really are fully aware of the body. If you’re just with one spot, the edges around that spot start getting blurry, and the spot itself starts getting blurry. But if you’re with the whole body, you know where your head is, you know where your hands, feet, legs, arms, torso, you know where everything is, you’re fully here and fully alert. So focus on this issue of balance. Balance in the body and also balance in the qualities of the mind. Those three roles that you play as you concentrate. In other words, there’s the part of the mind that’s getting concentrated, there’s the part of mind that’s watching it, and then the part of mind that has to put in an effort, either to keep the mind concentrated or to fend off any distractions. You’ve got the mind as the doer, the mind as the observer, and then the part that clamps down on things and says, “We’re going to stay right here.” Just make sure it doesn’t clamp too hard. Have a sense of “just right.” This is where the discernment comes into the practice. After all, the Buddha did teach a middle way. And finding exactly where the middle is requires a lot of discernment. And it’s very easy to get extreme in the practice, to get extremely concentrated. You block everything out and everything just kind of goes silent. You have no sense of your body and no sense of anything at all. Or extremely lackadaisical, saying, “Whatever comes in the mind, I’ll just let it come in and be with the flow.” Those are two extremes, and they’re easy. The hard part is finding the balance, because it requires that you observe things and develop your powers of judgment. We’re not here to teach you that. We’re here to be non-reactive, non-judging, non-whatever. We’re here to actually learn how to use our powers of judgment more skillfully. Learn how to ask the right questions. In this case, the question is, “Is the mind settled in? Does it feel balanced?” When you get out, what are the reactions? Sometimes you put too much pressure on your focus. You get out, the mind’s going to react all over the place, like it’s been penned up for a while. When it’s out, like college students on a spring break, you want to learn how to gain a sense of balance so that when you leave the meditation there’s still a sense of balance inside. Because all these skills are skills you want to be able to carry from the cushion out into your daily life. And we can maintain a sense of balance, a sense of poise with the breath, with the thoughts of your mind. Then you find it easier to have a sense of poise as you deal with people. This is going to be important for the next couple of days. Songkran is coming up. Tomorrow we’ll have people coming and setting things up. Even bigger crowds are going to come on Sunday. And it’s going to be a challenge to keep the mind as balanced as possible. Not to give in to its complaints about, “Why do we have to have all this activity?” It’s part of having a monastery. It’s part of having a community. Learn to have some empathetic joy for people who are having an opportunity to make merit. And be happy to help. And try to maintain your inner sense of balance while you’re doing this. This way you begin to realize the problem is not with a situation outside. The problem is inside. You don’t know how to balance your own mind and body. How are you going to deal with other people? But if you’re in balance inside, it’s a lot easier to maintain your balance outside. So this is how you develop sensitivity. Try to find, “What is the middle way right now for my concentration? What’s lacking? Where is it out of balance? Is it getting too narrowly focused? Okay, I’ve got to pull out a little bit. Am I just there without observing what’s going on? Okay, learn how to observe. If too much observation is destroying the concentration, drop the commentary and just try to be still for a while. As with any skill, it requires gaining a sense of what’s just right. You can’t be taught through words. You can’t pick up a book and say,”Okay, now I know everything.” The words give you directions, but that sense of just right has to come through. It has to come from your own powers of observation. So think of this as a skill, and you want to get things just right. So the results of the skill come just right. It’s in developing that sensitivity to just right that the discernment develops in this middle way that the Buddha taught. It’s a discernment that doesn’t come from going to extremes, but from trying to figure out what’s just right right now. So learn how to judge your sense of just right. That way you’ll be able to rely on yourself more and more as you meditate, as you practice, as you follow this path.

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