In Balance

November 8, 2023

Your mind often seems to have many minds, lots of different opinions, lots of different attitudes, and sometimes some pretty unskillful ones take over. The fact that we have many minds is often a problem. You make up your mind you’re going to be with your meditation object, and somebody else inside there says, “No, I’ve got other plans.” But you’ve got to learn to take the manyness of your mind and actually make it a help in the practice. In other words, realize that even though a mood may have taken over the mind, it doesn’t have one hundred percent of the mind. There can be part of you that steps aside and looks at things and can be determined to change the mood. Change whoever it is in charge of the committee meeting right now. Get somebody else, somebody better in charge. The Buddha doesn’t talk about this directly, but he does mention that of the various factors for awakening, mindfulness is always going to be helpful to the part of the mind that can remember why you’re here, what your purpose is. Always make sure that that’s there, and then it can look at the rest of the mind. In the Buddha’s discussion, he talks about the other factors for awakening as being sided with either too little energy or too much energy. When there’s too little energy, you want to bring in the more energetic factors, like analysis of qualities, rapture, persistence. When there’s too much energy, you want to bring in things that are more calming, like calm, concentration, equanimity. But you can expand on that list of the things that are available to you and the things you can do. The Buddha himself provides some lists. He says there are times when you’re focusing on the breath and there’s a fever in the body or a fever in the mind. In other words, you feel uncomfortable being here focused on the breath. The problem isn’t in the body, the problem is in the mind. So he says you try to find another theme, something you find inspiring. It can be recollecting the Buddha, recollecting the Dhamma, recollecting the Sangha, recollecting the fact that as you’re sitting here meditating, you’re not breaking any of the precepts. You’re not harming anybody at all. You’re looking for happiness in a way that doesn’t cause any divisions in the world. You can reflect on the fact that you’ve been generous. You can contemplate the four Brahma-viharas. You can ask yourself, “Is there anybody out there who I’d like to see suffer?” And you may be able to think of a few people. So you ask yourself, “Why?” What good would come from it? Part of the mind says, “Well, maybe if they suffer, they’ll see the error in their ways.” But that rarely happens. The more people suffer, the more they get entrenched in what they’re doing. The world doesn’t benefit from their suffering. You don’t benefit from their suffering. Of course, you’re not saying, “May they be happy simply as they are.” Goodwill may be a universal quality, but from the point of view of the Buddhist teachings, it has to be tempered by an understanding of how people do become happy. It’s through their actions. They have to behave in skillful ways. So when you’re wishing for people to be happy, you’re basically wishing for them to be skillful. You can think that thought of anybody, no matter how bad they’ve been in the past. It may be unlikely that they’re going to change their ways anytime soon. But the fact that your attitude is that they would be a lot happier if they could be skillful, and you’d be happy to see them make that change, that means that you become a more reliable person. If you wish ill on others, it’s very easy to start doing and saying and thinking things that would really be unskillful. But if you can have an attitude, “May everybody be happy. May everybody be skillful,” just spread that around. That can often be soothing to the mind, that you don’t have any issues with anybody. Or if there are issues, they’re issues surrounded by goodwill. That changes the character. It changes the character of the conflict. You can think of the parts of the body. This may seem strange to be an inspiring theme, but some people find it calming. Just go through the body right now. What parts do you have? And when you say that you feel antsy being in the body, which part is the antsy part? One by one by one, as we chanted just now. You realize that a lot of the big issues in life come from just these body parts. And what are they? There’s nothing much there. And it would create huge issues around them—the survival of the body, the health of the body. You start thinking about it. What you’ve got here is a big gaping hole with lots and lots of needs. But the reason it has needs is because you want it to be a certain way. The parts of the body themselves, they would be perfectly content to die. You’re the one who wants to keep them alive, keep them functioning. So contemplate ways that give you a sense of distance from your defilements, calm you down. Then you can be ready to settle down with the breath. You may reach the problem where you have trouble staying awake. The breath gets calm, gets soothing, and it’s very easy to associate that with the fact that you’re going to drift off to sleep, because that’s the way it happens. The breath gets calm. Things get kind of vague, and there you go. We’ve got to counteract the tendency to get vague. This is why you have to do activities that will be more energizing. So you can think of the breath, experiment with different ways of breathing. Think of the breath in different parts of the body. Next, accept what would feel good in the different parts of the body. Try to find the parts of the body that are especially sensitive to the flow of the energy. Next, what would you like? See if the body responds. If there’s a sense of well-being, then think of it spreading down the nerves, out the blood vessels, all over the body. You can think of the body as being like a big sponge. The breath energy can come in and out from any direction. Everything in the body is all connected to everything else. So the breath can flow smoothly throughout the body. Allow your awareness to expand. There may be one spot that’s more prominent than others. Try to choose a spot that, again, is sensitive to how the breath feels. Be aware of the whole body, and know that that range of your awareness will have a tendency to shrink sometimes. You have to fight it. This is where the effort comes in, and it’s that little bit of effort that keeps you awake. You’re trying to fine-tune things. The Buddha’s image is of a fire. When the fire is dying out, you want to put more fuel on it. When it’s blazing too hot, you want to pull some of the fuel away and put water on it, put dust on it. You want to learn how to adjust it so it’s just right. Jon Foon would make a lot of this. He said when we talk about sammā samādhi, right samādhi, the word sammā means just right, not too heavy, not too light, not too relaxed, not too energetic. Everything seems poised. Another way you can develop that sense of poise is to think of the body as having different properties. They use the words earth, water, wind, and fire in the Pali, but you can think of them as being properties of any physical thing. There’s the solid side, there’s the liquid side, which is cool, there’s the warmth, and there’s the energy. Everything’s going to be balanced. The fire and the water balance each other out. The breath and the earth balance each other out. In other words, not too much energy, not too light, not too heavy, not too warm, not too cold. You can play with these though, first, before you adjust them to be just right. It’s like getting a stereo and wanting to see what it’s like when you turn the bass all the way up, or the treble all the way up, or the bass all the way down. You can focus on the warmth in the body. Where does it feel warmer than other spots? This is especially useful in an evening like this when it’s cold. Focus on the warm spots. Just stay right there with them. Have the perception of fire or the perception of warmth, and then see if they can spread. Then you can try cooler sensations. See exactly how warm you want this to be. You can think about the solid parts of the body. The whole body is solid. Then, when you’ve emphasized, amplified the properties like this, then you can adjust them so that it feels just right. Everything is poised. You’re trying to find a point of balance right here. And it’s a subtle thing, like that image of the man carrying a bowl of oil on his head. You’ve got to keep the bowl balanced and see how long you can maintain that. If you ever watch somebody walk across a tide drop, you know that balance doesn’t mean that everything is perfectly still. There’ll be a little bit of leaning to the left, leaning to the right. Then you have to correct. But then it does get to a point where things do settle down and they don’t feel so much like you’re being on a tide rope, but you’re more on a really solid place. Awareness filling the body. Breath filling the body. Your range is large. It covers the whole body. And then you put the mind in a position where it can watch things as they arise and not get sucked into them. The getting sucked into them, that would be a state of becoming. And the Buddha said, “Once a state of becoming has arisen, if you want it to go away, that’s erring on the side of craving for non-becoming.” So instead, you look at the events that would lead up to the next state of becoming. And as you’re focused on that, then you’re not sustaining the first state of becoming. You’re allowing it to pass away on its own accord. You focus more on what are the building blocks here, what are the little things that would go into a state of becoming. Can you watch them? Can you develop a sense of disinterest in them? See their drawbacks. The state of mind in which you do this has to be balanced. That’s what we’re trying to maintain here. You can’t guarantee an insight. There is no insight technique. There are lots of mindfulness techniques, concentration techniques. These are things you can will. Insights you can’t will. Just stay very still. And you notice things. And sometimes the way you notice them, you begin to realize, “I don’t have to go with that.” You can’t anticipate these moments. But the fact that you’re here, fully present, fully balanced, puts you in a position where the insights can arise. The insights that free the mind from its burdens, free it from its attachments. And it’s hard to predict how they’ll happen, these insights, when they’ll happen. But you want to create the conditions that make it more and more conducive for them to come. Getting the mind still, and then asking the right questions. What’s going on here? Where is there any lack of stillness in the stillness? Any variations in the level of stress? When you’re really still, you can see them. If you’re running around, you rush right past them and everything is a blur. But if you’re very still, you can see things. You can see things more and more precisely. So try to aim for this state of balance. The body feels balanced, the elements in the body feel balanced, the mind feels balanced. And if you find it hard to get here, realize that you have lots of tools, lots of ways of thinking, so that the different committee members of the mind can find something around which they can gather. We talk mainly about breath here, but the Buddha has a whole doctor’s kit of all kinds of medical instruments for the mind. So gain a sense of what they are and how you can use them, and which ones have which effect on your mind, which ones have which effect on your body. That’s how you become your own doctor. The Buddha talks about himself as the doctor for people’s illnesses, i.e., the illness of suffering. And you can think of the Dhamma as basically a kind of medical training for the mind. This ability to get the mind in a state of balance, get the body in a state of balance, is going to be one of your most important skills.

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