

## *The Swinging Balance*

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When you focus on the present moment, you're trying to become friends with it. Tell yourself that you're going to focus on the breath and find a spot in the body where it's comfortable to stay, where it feels easeful. This can be anywhere in the body—deep in the body, on the surface of the body. Once you've found a spot, allow yourself to settle in. As you settle in, remember that you've got to develop a friendship here. That takes time, especially if you haven't been focusing much on the body or have been avoiding the body. Because it's all too easy, when you focus on the body, to barge in and just say, "This has to be that way, that has to be this way," and you start pushing the blood into different parts of the body, pushing the breath energy into different parts of the body where it doesn't feel comfortable. It's like trying to make friends with someone but not really listening to that person, not really seeing what that person needs or wants or likes.

What's required is a process of mutual adjustment. Find a way of staying focused where you're not putting too much pressure on things, but you're able to maintain the steadiness of your focus. The classic image is of a baby chick that you're holding in your hand. If you squeeze it too tight, it's going to die. If you hold it too loosely, it's going to fly away. So you have to find just the right amount of pressure to apply. Then notice how the breath responds. Notice how the mind responds. And as with any friendship, sometimes you ask straight-out questions, and other times you simply have to be observant over time.

As the Buddha once said, you don't really know a person until you've been with that person for a long time. And even then, you have to be observant. If you want to see that person's virtue, you have to live with the person for a long time and be observant. If you want to learn about a person's integrity, you have to have dealings with that person for a long time and be observant. If you want to know about the person's stamina and wisdom, you have to see how they deal with hardships and difficult topics and you have to be observant. In other words, it takes time and you have to use your powers of observation. These are the two things you really have to apply as you're practicing so that you get a sense of what works, how you can bring the body and the mind together in a way where both are comfortable.

The breath is often a good focal point for doing this, but it's not for everybody, at least in the beginning. For some people it takes a longer time than for others. But if it takes time, don't get frustrated. It's simply a matter of learning how to

listen, learning how to observe, and using your ingenuity. Those two qualities—being observant and being ingenious—are the two qualities that Ajaan Fuang would stress more than anything else when he taught meditation. He'd say, "Try this, and if that doesn't work then try that. And if you've exhausted all the teacher's ideas, try to think up some approaches of your own so you can feel at ease here in the present moment."

Because if the mind doesn't feel at ease here, it's going to wander around all over the place and never find any rest. You wander out into the world and all you see are the injustices of the world. Even when the people try to be nice to one another, it's just built into the world that there's a lot of feeding going on—emotional feeding, physical feeding. The simple fact that we're able to survive depends on our feeding, and somebody's going to get harmed, one way or another, when acting as food. So if you look for a place out there for the mind to settle down and feel at ease, you're never going to find it. If you look inside at the very beginning, you look at your mind, and your mind is a mess; you try to focus on the breath, and the breath and the body seem to be a mess. You don't know where to go. This is where you have to take it on the Buddha's word, and the word of all the people who have practiced his teachings and gotten results, that it's true: If you focus inside, eventually things will settle down.

Sometimes there's a resistance, but that simply means you have to be very patient, very gentle, and very observant. If you push yourself too hard, it's like pushing yourself on someone else. You want to be friends, but they're not so sure yet, and the more you push, the more they step back. So you have to be more gentle, more indirect, with the idea in the back of your mind that eventually you will settle down here, just that it may take time.

The reason we want to settle down here is that we want to observe the mind. The Buddha said that before he got started on his practice, he looked at the world and he said it was like fish in a stream that was drying up. The water was getting less and less and less, and the fish were struggling with one another to get that last little bit of water. And, of course, all of them were going to die. He said he looked at the world and just felt really dismayed. But then he turned around and looked, and saw that the real problem is here in the heart. The heart is always going out there looking for happiness, but no matter how much you gain out there, you're going to lose it. At one point he said that even if it rained gold coins, we wouldn't have enough to satisfy our sensual desires. It's this arrow of craving in the heart: That's what's making us suffer. This was his real insight: that no matter how bad things were on the outside, it is possible to develop skill inside so that you don't

have to suffer from those things. And if you're not making yourself suffer, you're placing less of a burden on others as well.

So whatever amount of time it takes to get the mind to settle down is time well spent. I noticed when Ajaan Fuang was teaching people, his students would be coming from all sorts of different directions, and his instructions for some people would sometimes seem to contradict the instructions he'd give for other people. It's as if someone was off to the west, he'd say you have to go east, east, east to get to the point where you want to settle down. Other people were off to the east, so they had to go west, west, west. Some people would go straight to the right point, and others would take a while to circle around. But, finally, they would all get to a point where they could settle down, and the mind would be really still. In fact, both the mind and the body would be so still that even the breath itself would stop. And once people had gotten to that point in their meditation, everything would seem balanced. The mind was balanced in the present moment, the body seemed balanced, and from that point on everybody's practice seemed to follow the same steps.

But leading up to it, some people would have really strange experiences in their body, really strange visions, positive, negative, or their sense of the body would get distorted. I remember one time sitting with a group, and at the end of the session this one woman said she felt like she was sitting there with a body but no head, while all for that hour I had been sitting with the sense that all I had was a head and no body. I told her we should get together. She, by the way, was the one that gave me that old blanket that I still wear.

Sometimes you feel like your body is filling the whole room. Sometimes it feels really small. Sometimes it seems to be nothing but pain, other times it seems to disappear. It can do all kinds of things. Just think of it as the various distortions things go through as you're learning how to settle down. And to emphasize that point of balance, when people would get to the point where the breath was still, Ajaan Fuang would have them focus on the sense of warmth in the body, the fire property. Then from there, on the coolness, the liquid property. Then the earth property, which was the solidity. And then he'd say, try to bring all these things into balance so it's not too hot, not too cold, not too heavy, not too light; try to find a sense of balance. Then, when you can maintain that, you've really mastered concentration.

But as with any balance: Think about those old-fashioned balances that swing back-and-forth. They go to the left, they go to the right, and it takes a while sometimes for them to reach balance. You just accept that that's part of the process of things settling down. You learn how to be patient with it because we

are developing a sense of home. In Pali this is called *vihara-dhamma*, a place where the mind can stay, where it feels at home, at ease. To compare it with a friendship, it's a friendship where, finally, both people are happy together, and the friendship feels easy.

This is where you can settle down. The mind doesn't have to wander around so much. And that reduces a lot of its suffering right there. The Pali term for wandering around is *samsara*. Sometimes we think of *samsara* as a place, but it's not really a place, it's a process the mind does. It's looking for happiness but hasn't found anything solid, so it keeps wandering. It tries to settle down here but it can't stay here. It has to move on to something else, can't stay there, either. It's constantly on the move. As we're meditating, we're trying to find a home, a place where the mind can settle down at least long enough so that it can look into itself to see, well, what is this arrow of craving, what is this arrow of clinging? What is the ignorance that keeps us suffering?

This is basically the good news of the Buddha's teachings, which is that the suffering comes from within, which means that we can cure it. If suffering were totally caused by outside circumstances, we'd be victims, and there'd be nothing we could do about it. But because the primary causes are inside, then once you get the mind to settle down and you're in the present moment, you can look inside and figure things out: In what ways are your intentions unskillful? In what way is how you look at things unskillful? How can you change those ways so that you're not constantly primed to suffer all the time? And as you dig down through those habits, you find—as you clear them away, straighten things out inside—that there really is a happiness that doesn't require any work at all. It's just there. That's where the wandering stops.

So as you're practicing, accept the fact that there will be some swings in the balance. But eventually that balance will come to a point of equilibrium and, at the point of equilibrium, things open up, and you actually go beyond the equilibrium. But this is the first step in the direction for happiness that really is satisfying, that really doesn't require any more work, any more wandering around at all. That's what the Buddha teaches, and he teaches it as a challenge. He said there is this possibility for true happiness. It's something human beings can attain. And so it's up to us to decide whether we're ready for that challenge, whether we're interested in the possibility of a happiness that's totally true, totally free.

As the Buddha once said, if you could make a deal that people would come and stab you with 300 spears a day—100 in the morning, 100 at noon, 100 in the evening—for 100 years, with the guarantee that at the end of the hundred years you to get awakening: If you could make that deal, it would be worth it. And

when you attained awakening, you wouldn't think that you had attained it with suffering. The awakening would be accompanied by joy. The happiness he promises is that amazing.

So keep that in mind as you face difficulties in the practice: that sitting through those difficulties is not 300 spears, and that the goal is more than worth the trouble of trying to develop the sense of balance, friendship, and home inside.