

## *Finding Your Own Balance*

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Try to find a balance with the breath, not too long, not too short, not too heavy, not too light. And how do you know when you find a balance? It feels good. And how you know if it really feels good, if it's good enough? That you have to observe. You have to learn how to trust your powers of observation, and the only way you can trust them is to keep exercising them. This is why we call this *practice*: You do it again and again and again, getting a better and better sense of what works, what doesn't work, what qualifies as working and not working. It's not like school where a teacher can come over and look at your work and say, "That's up to standard," or "That's not up to standard." Here there's no one looking over your shoulder to say, "That breath is good enough," "That breath is not good enough." *You've* got to do the observing.

This places all the responsibility on you. No one else can come in and save you from bad breathing. If they can't even save you from bad breathing, how can anyone else come and save you from samsara? It's something each person has to do for him or herself. You have to develop your powers of observation, because everything in the path involves a question of balance. Extremes are easy; balance is hard—because balance requires that you observe, that you be responsible for your observations, and that you have to learn how to refine them. With the extremes, you just keep running, running, running in the same direction. You don't have to observe anything at all, just keep running. But the question is, are you getting good results?

This is why you can't depend on just the technique to take you where you want to go. You can't blindly follow any technique. You've got to watch for the results. Are they not working? If they're not working, you've got to change. How do you know they're not working? Sometimes you have to watch for a long, long time. There's no expiry date written on the techniques, saying, "You do this, and within five days if you don't get results, you've got to change." Sometimes the problem is not with the technique, it's simply that you're not following it carefully. Other times the technique is not right for you. Again, you're the one to decide whether you've put enough effort or not.

Even when you find a technique that's congenial, there's still an element of balancing. Concentration does require some thought. It's not that you try to forbid the mind from thinking. You have to think about the object. You have to evaluate the object, evaluate how the object and the mind are getting along

together. If they're not getting along, what can you do to change? For the breath, not only is there the question of how long or short or heavy or light the breath is, but there's also the question of where you're focusing. There's the question of how you're conceiving the breath. These are things you have to adjust and get a sense of just right.

But then there are times when adjusting is getting in the way, and you just want to sit very, very still and watch. That, too, is a kind of doing. That, too, is a way of learning. What happens when you just get very, very still?

So there's a time and place for thinking, and a time and place for stillness. There's a time and place for desire, and a time and place for abandoning desire. Yet there are no clear hard and fast rules about what those times and places are. That's where your own powers of observation, your own sensitivities, have to come in.

One of the qualities of noble people, people who are on the noble path, is that they have a sense of time—in other words, when it's appropriate to be involved with other people, when it's appropriate to go off and be alone, just on the external level. We know that the Buddha praises solitude, but he also praises the ability for people to get along together, and to know what it means to get along together. Again, there are no hard and fast rules. You have to get a sense of this.

This is one of the problems of practicing here in a culture where Buddhism still brand new. In cultures where it's been around for a while, people over time have gained a sense of the right time and place, what's the proper balance. You live around those people and you begin to pick up their sense of balance as well.

This is something I had to learn over and over again with Ajaan Fuang: what was the right time and place to talk, what was the time and place not to talk, when was the time to search him out, when was the time to give him some space. That's on the external level.

Then there's the question of time and place inside, in your meditation: When is the time to adjust and evaluate? When is the time to sit and watch? When is the time to think? When is the time not to think? As Ajaan Fuang said, people tend to fall into two categories: those who think too much, and those who don't think enough. If you're the type of person who thinks too much, you've got to develop the skill of not thinking. In other words, if you see that your thought processes are spinning out of control, you have to be able to cut, cut, cut, cut, cut them, not so that you ultimately will stop thinking altogether, but you need the skill of learning how to stop when you need to—and then finding the point of balance: when to think, when not to think.

As for people who don't think enough, you've got to work at observing things, asking questions. Try to look all around an issue. One way to get started is: Is this really true? Do I know if it's really true? What if the opposite were true? To what extent could the opposite be true? This is one of Ajaan Lee's favorite questions. You take your insight and you turn it around. When you believe, "This has got to be true, this has to be the way it is," well, turn it around. Turn it inside out, suppose the opposite were true: What would that mean? Where is the opposite true: That way, you get both sides of the insight.

Part of the problem of being in a modern culture is that people are taught not to observe. They haven't learned manual skills, they don't know how to gain a sense of how to gauge what's enough, what's too much, what's too little. For all that we like to think that we weren't independent thinkers, we really are a herd. We depend on somebody else someplace to do our thinking for us, which is a bad foundation for the practice. We come to the Dhamma and, on the one hand, yes, we are asked to have faith in the Buddha's awakening, but we also have to realize that our understanding of what that means is pretty primitive. It comes out of ignorance. So we have to keep testing that understanding to see where the ignorance lies, where our faith may be misguided—misguided not because anybody else out there has misguided us, but because we're misguiding ourselves.

What this means is you have to learn how to commit yourself to doing something and then watching the results, to develop your powers of judgment so that you can begin to gauge when is the right time to act, when is the right time to be still, when is the right time to think, when is the right time to watch. It's in finding balance that your discernment develops. Without that sense of balance, without that sense of time and place, there's no real discernment. There's just a rote idea of what must be right, and you follow it blindly without looking around you. That doesn't gain you any genuine discernment at all. There's no way you're going to come to the end of suffering if you do things blindly.

So experiment. Watch and then test the way you read the experiment, to see if you really can trust it. Over time, your ability to read things will get better and better. Your sense of balance will get better and better. That's why it's called the middle way. The whole point of it is to find true balance. And as with any balance, the scale will sometimes swing in one direction, and other times in another direction. But having an overall sense of when to lean to the left, when to lean to the right, and how not to lose your balance even when you're leaning a little bit: That's how you walk skillfully along the path.