

A Point of Balance

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The world is insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving. We all know that craving is the cause of suffering, and most of us think primarily of sensual craving: craving for sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. But that's not the only kind of craving there is. There's also craving for becoming and craving for non-becoming. In both cases, it's a push into the future. In fact, in all three cases, it's a push into the future. We want something. We stand on the present moment and we're looking to what we can do, how can use the present moment as a jumping off place for the future we want, one way or another. In terms of sensual craving, we want sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas that appeal to us.

Craving for becoming is craving to be something. Craving for non-becoming is craving for annihilation. The Buddha said that when people hear that he teaches the Dhamma for the end of becoming, they can react in one of two ways. Either they're under the sway of the first two kinds of craving, so they don't want to hear what he has to say because it sounds like a block to what they're just about to get, what they want to get, what they're living for. Then there are the people who are fed up with everything, and who look forward to annihilation, saying, "The annihilation of what I am would be true happiness." Those people, he says, slip past.

The teaching is balanced right here in the present moment. As he says, the way to practice for the end of becoming is to look at what has already become—in other words, things that are simply appearing right now in the present moment—and to develop dispassion for them. Dispassion is the means by which everything becomes untangled.

So the Buddha's not asking you to annihilate yourself and he doesn't encourage you to look forward to annihilation, because it never really works that way. In terms of craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, it's like seeing a huge trap in front of you, but not perceiving it as a trap, thinking that it's a place where you're going to find happiness. You walk into it, and all of a sudden, ropes tie you up.

Craving for non-becoming is finding yourself tied up by the ropes, and just pulling, pulling, pulling, trying to get out of them, not realizing that the stronger you pull against them, the more tightly they confine you. The trick is to simply stand still, and watch what's already there. This is where the analogy breaks down. But think of it as your sitting here meditating and you see things falling away, falling away. These ropes on the trap, imagine them just falling away all the time, because that's what they're going to

have to do sooner or later. And you want to watch that happen, and not replace them with new ropes. That's how you come to the end of becoming.

This requires good strong concentration, the ability to stay with the present moment and not keep leaning into the future or leaning back to the past. To stay with the present moment requires a lot of stability, and the stability requires a sense of well-being that you can create in the present moment. It is something manufactured. After all, the Buddha said the path is something fabricated. So we fabricate a sense of well-being. It may not be absolute well-being, but it's relatively better than anything else we've experienced so far.

So learn how to explore what you've got here, and see how you can take the breath—which is simply coming in and going out, not doing much more for the body aside from keeping it alive—and turn it into a tool to gain a sense of well-being, a sense of fullness in the body. I know someone who'd been practicing the Ajaan Lee method, went over to Thailand, and ran into an ajaan who said, "Why you are working with the breath like that? It's a sankhara, so just let it go." Well, you can't just let it go. My retort would have been, "Then why are you bathing your body? It's just a sankhara." You've got to look after it because it's going to be useful. You have to care for it. In the case of the breath, you really have to get on intimate terms with it if you're going to be able to settle down in the present moment.

If you can't be on friendly terms with the breath, on good terms with the breath, you can't stay here. You'll always be slipping off to the past, slipping off to the future, craving one way or the other. To get a sense of balance here in the breath, you want to make your sense of the present moment as large as possible. If the present moment is just one little spot, you're going to fall off. But if you can inhabit the whole body, it's like having a really large piece of land on which you can stand, a good solid foundation. It's a lot easier that way to stay in the present.

So the body is an important tool. The breath is an important tool. Don't be too quick to throw them away, because otherwise you'll never find a way out of that dilemma of being too attached to the idea of becoming something, or too attached to the idea of wanting everything to be annihilated. You want to stand right here in the present moment and see things arising and passing away, arising and passing away. And you want to watch them arise and pass away in a way that gives rise to disenchantment, dispassion. That's how there's release. But you can't watch them arising and passing away without a good solid foundation.

That's the work in the meditation. This is the area of life where we need to devote as much energy as we can, as much attention as we can. Look for ways in your life where you're expending a lot of unnecessary energy in your emotions, in your attitudes, and in the issues you take on, because those things really do pull away from this work that's really important: learning how to develop a sense of foundation right here, a sense of

ease, a steadiness of gaze that will allow you to see things arising and passing away, things that have come into being—the word *bhuta* in Pali, as opposed to *bhava* or *vibhava*. *Bhava* as a sense of becoming, wanting to move on, move on move on to something better. *Vibhava* is a sense of wanting to move on to annihilation. In both cases, you get past this tendency of wanting to lean toward the future by just watching what’s already come to be. As you get to know what’s already there, you may discover that some of it is stuff that you’re still creating here in the present moment. But you’re not going to see that until you just sit here and watch, giving yourself a place to sit and a good solid foundation so that your gaze can be steady enough to see things as they are actually arising and passing away.

So right here is where effort should be focused on developing a foundation. Without that foundation, no matter how much you read about insight or think about insight, it’s not going to be insight. It’s going to be, as Ajaan Lee once said, “outsights”: stuff you bring in from outside to impose on the present moment. It’s only when you can sit really still and watch what’s right here, what’s coming up, what’s going away, what’s coming up, what’s going away, what’s rising, what’s disbanding: That’s when you gain insight into how it all happens, and insight into how the mind can create all kinds of extra elaborations, extra fabrications, what they call proliferations or complications, *papañca*. You see how the more things proliferate out of the idea, “I am the thinker,” how much more suffering you create. You want to be in a position where you can simply be an observer, watching what’s arising and passing away, what’s already coming into being, and what happens to it as you simply watch it.

So release lies in discovering a point of balance. The larger and more expensive your foundation in the present moment, the easier it’ll be to maintain your balance.

So get in touch with your body. Get in touch with your breath. Don’t push them away, because they’re your only tools. Without those tools, you won’t have anything to counteract the momentum of craving.

This is how the path works to undercut the causes of suffering. As I’ve said many times before, the heart of the path is right concentration. Only when the mind is balanced in right concentration can it get away from these currents of craving that keep pushing, pushing, pushing.

So as you focus the mind right here on the breath, you’re putting yourself in a position where you really can solve the problem of suffering and its cause. If you’re not right here, you’re wide of the mark.