

Finding Balance

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One of the reasons we meditate is to give a sense of peace and ease for the mind. The mind that's been carrying its burdens gets to let them down for a while. But meditation at the same time is work. Otherwise, we're falling asleep here. You're trying to bring the mind to stillness, but it has to be an alert stillness. We have to be mindful, we have to remember what we're doing, be alert to what we're doing. And there's the quality of ardency: trying to do your meditation duties well. So it's not simply a matter of letting go, letting go, and dropping into an unconscious state of mind. You've got to be aware, you've got to know what you're doing and the results of what you're doing. We want the kind of stillness that allows insight to arise.

That means we have to find the right balance. They talk about issues of balance in a lot in the texts. In the factors for awakening, for instance, mindfulness is said to be always appropriate: in other words, focusing on the topic of your concentration, which is the same thing as the process of developing mindfulness. Take, for instance, the body in and of itself. Focus on the breath in and of itself. Work with the breath in a way that makes it a good place to stay. If you're feeling lazy, try to breathe in a way that gives you more energy. If you're feeling tense, and overworked, try to breathe in a way that's more relaxing, more soothing. Right there you've got some directed thought and evaluation. You direct thoughts to the breath and then evaluate what you've done: Is the breath appropriate right now? And how about the way you're relating to the breath: Is that appropriate?

If you have trouble staying with the body in the present moment—in other words, the more you're focused on it, the more agitated you get—the Buddha recommends dropping the body for the time being and finding another theme that's more inspiring. It might be goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity. Or you can recollect the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha—anything that you find to be a congenial topic for right now. And again, you want a topic that's a good antidote for whatever imbalance there may be in the mind.

When you feel lazy, it's good to reflect on death. Death can come at any time, zapping you right in the middle of a nice sleepy meditation. Would you be prepared to go? No, especially not if you're sleepy. So try to put in some more energy, try to find some way of stirring your energy up, so that if you were suddenly called upon to die right now, you'd be prepared, you'd be ready, alert and mindful to handle it well.

If you're feeling discouraged, you might want to recollect the Buddha, recollect the Sangha, thinking of them as examples to give yourself some encouragement in the practice. Then, when you've found that the mind does get a sense of being refreshed, inspired, or energized by the contemplation, focus your attention back on the breath and see how the breath is going when you're more refreshed, inspired, and energized. Try to maintain that way of breathing. This gets you back into your proper frame of reference.

That brings you to the other factors for awakening. There are three that are energizing and three that are calming. If your mind needs more energy, focus on the energizing ones, which are analysis of the dhammas or qualities of the mind, persistence or energy, and then rapture or refreshment. The analogy here is of a fire that's burning low, so you put more fuel in the fire.

Analysis of qualities comes down to something very specific. It's not an extended abstract analysis. You're simply observing in your mind what's working and what's not, what's skillful and what's not. For instance, if you're feeling drowsy or beginning to wander off, what can you do to focus your attention more squarely on the breath? Sometimes it happens that as the mind begins to stay with the breath, it just lets go of everything and goes into state called delusion concentration, where it's calm and peaceful, but you're not very mindful. When you come out, you'd be hard put to say whether you were awake or asleep.

This means you need to give yourself something useful to do, and this is where analysis is useful. Try to be very careful in observing how the breath is going in different parts of the body. You can imagine the 32 parts of the body; you can think about all the bones in your body. In other words, give the mind some work to do. When it lets go of its ordinarily daily concerns, don't let it just drop off into a vacant state. Think about the bones, starting, say, with bones in the tips of your fingers, and go up through the hand, the wrist, the arms to the shoulders, and then start with the bones in the tips of your toes, and work your way up through the body from there. As you think of each bone, try to get a sense of where is it in your body right now, so that this is not just visualization. You're also focusing your attention on the actual experience of that part of the body. If there's any tension around there, let it go, so that you improve your posture as you go up your spine.

So if you find you have a tendency to just drift away and get very lazy in the meditation, you've got to give yourself work to do, to reestablish mindfulness, the kind of work that makes it feel really good to be right here in the body. That's how rapture comes in as well. It's an energizing sense of well-being. When all the energy channels in your body are connected and are flowing well, it gives a sense of

strength and resilience to the meditation. That helps wake you up. Those are the energizing factors.

The calming factors are, serenity, concentration, and equanimity. You want to emphasize these when you find that the mind is getting a bit too energetic. When it has trouble staying still, breathe in a way that's calming, soothing, that helps to release tension in different parts of the body. Keep your focus on one thing exclusively. Just stay with the breath and focus on one spot. You may think of your awareness of the ease spreading out from that spot, but keep your focus as centered as possible as a way of calming things down. You're not going to allow it to go wandering out anywhere at all.

And try to develop an attitude of equanimity to all of the other things that you might possibly be focusing on. If you find your mind obsessing about a particular topic, remind yourself that someday you're going to die, and this topic is going to mean nothing at all. You may not even have to wait till you die: A few days down the line, it's not going to mean anything. You might die before the issue gets resolved. And it certainly doesn't help to get yourself worked up in the midst of a meditation session.

This helps give you a sense of distance from your ordinary daily concerns, which is one of the important functions of meditation: to pull you out of your ordinary frame of reference of world, i.e. the body in the world, your feelings as they relate to the world, your mind states as they relate to the world. You want to put aside all those things. As the texts say, put aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

So pull away for a while. Get yourself out of those worlds. Look at things in the larger perspective, where your ordinary daily concerns don't loom so large. Make the mind larger than its concerns, able to maintain an even keel no matter how things are going to turn out. That helps to soothe a lot of the anxiety that can set you on fire when the mind is not willing to settle down.

What this means is that concentration practice is not simply a matter of allowing the mind to sleep or allowing the mind into a still state, because you want a still state that's alert, mindful, and clear. That takes some analysis. It takes some work, and consideration. It requires skill.

So as you're sitting down to meditate, learn how to read your mind to get a sense of which direction you think things might be going. If your imbalance is in the direction of too little energy or too much energy, try to strike a better balance right from the very beginning. Sometimes things start out and they seem okay, but then as you get into the meditation, you find the mind leaning in one direction or another. So read it, not only before you sit down, but also while you're in the

course of the meditation to see if things aren't right. When things do go well, try to maintain that sense of balance.

In this way, your meditation work yields more than just a sense of ease and well-being. It provides a foundation for really understanding what's going on in the mind, for learning how to foster skillful qualities and let go of unskillful ones, which is the beginning of discernment, wisdom. This way you develop the qualities of tranquility and insight together. This is how they function ideally. They function in tandem.

So you use the insight to improve your concentration, and use your concentration to improve your insight. It's like your left hand washing your right, and your right hand washing your left. That way, they both get clean.