

# *Watching Over Time*

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When you meditate, the question of balance is very important. It's especially true when you're meditating on your own, away from a teacher, where there's no chance to go running to the teacher with questions. You've got to learn how to develop a sense of *just right* in your meditation.

Now, we can talk about balance in abstract terms, but when you're dealing with the breath, the breath is a good way of actually monitoring the question of balance in the mind. There are a lot of teachings where the Buddha talks about balancing different qualities. He says that when the mind seems to have too much energy, you should try to use calming qualities, like calm, concentration, and equanimity. When the mind is too sluggish, you should try to develop qualities that are more enlivening, like actively analyzing what's going on in the present moment, putting in effort, being really persistent in what you're doing, and trying to develop a sense of rapture with the meditation—rapture is enlivening.

So it's good to get a sense of where your energy level is, and figure out what kind of quality you want to develop to bring it into balance. Mindfulness, the Buddha says, is good in all situations. And when he uses the word mindfulness alone, he means both mindfulness and alertness. In other words, keep in mind the question, "Okay, what's *just right* here?" Then look to see what is just right. Have a sense of where your mind is leaning, in one direction or another, and apply the appropriate quality to bring it back into alignment.

But sometimes this analysis seems all too abstract, so a good way of looking at the issue directly is right here—at the breath. How does the breath feel? How is your ability of the mind to stay with the breath? Can it not stay with the breath because the mind is too antsy, or because its energy level isn't up to staying with the breath? That's a good measure right there.

Then you figure out different ways of breathing, and also different ways of relating to the breath to overcome the problem of too much energy or too little energy.

A lot of this sense of *just right* comes from watching over time. This is why meditation is not something you do for just a short period of time and then be done with it so that you can go on with the rest of life. It's something you do time and time again: day in, day out, week in, week out, month in, month out. You get a better and you develop a better sense of just right. It comes from watching for long periods of time.

And with the question of balance, remember to think about an old-fashioned balance: the kind of scales they used to use to weigh things. The scales don't stay evenly balanced all the time. The nature of a balance is that if you put your finger down on one side, it swings wildly for a while until it finally corrects itself and brings itself back to balance. In other words, expect that there are going to be periods of imbalance in your meditation, and the only way you can

realize that is to watch it over time. When you see that have to bring things back into balance, sometimes it'll require some pretty extreme methods.

We hear about right effort, or the middle way, and we have the idea that it must mean a middling way where you put a little bit of effort into it, but not too much. But that's not what the middle way means at all. It means a way that's appropriate for the situation at hand. For example, when the mind is really sluggish, sometimes you have to try extreme methods of waking it up. Other times, when it's just bouncing all over the place, you have to use some pretty extreme methods to calm it down.

So the middleness of the middle way doesn't mean that you just keep things at a middling level of effort, or a middling level of attention. It means you gain a sense of what's just right for each particular imbalance—how to bring it back into balance—and once it gets balanced, how to keep it there.

Once it's in balance, it's a lot easier. Then it's a question of what's the just right amount of pressure to put on it. It's like learning how to sail a boat: When you first get out on the water, and you have a sense the boat is tipping over, your tendency is to overreact. You pull the rudder too far in the other direction, and it flips the boat over. Go too far in the other direction, and you flip it over the other way. But after a while of flipping it over and getting thrown into the ocean, you begin to get a better sense of how much pressure is needed on the rudder, so that eventually you just keep your hand on the rudder, and it's almost instinctive. Just a little bit of pressure here, a little bit of pressure there—a little bit to the right, a little bit to the left—and it stays on an even keel.

Or with driving a car: In the beginning it's hard to get a sense of what's over-steering and what's under-steering, but after a while you gain a sense that's almost instinctive. You hardly think about it at all. That's the kind of quality you want to develop in the meditation, and you develop it through a willingness to learn from your mistakes—that's going to make all the difference.

When you're putting too much pressure on the breath, or at other times when you're not putting enough pressure on the breath; when you're getting too obsessive about adjusting the breath, or when you're getting lazy about adjusting the breath: You have to watch for this, so that you can develop your own sense of just right. Once you have that sense of just right, you've got your internal teacher, and you can go anywhere.

Until you get that internal teacher, nobody can trust you. You can't trust yourself as a meditator. You tend to go off too far in one direction, too far in the other direction, you get fanatic about this, get fanatic about that. But if you watch and notice and look for cause and effect, you learn some subtlety. This is what you need, instead of a narrow attitude that say, "Well, I'm doing it this way, so this must be right. I'm going to hold on to this no matter what." Watch. Check for things. Look at the results that come, and learn how to back off when you're getting too heavy in one direction or the other.

So there has to be a willingness to make mistakes, but also a willingness to *recognize* mistakes—that's your governor. That's what keeps the meditation on an even keel, keeping it from going overboard in one direction or another.

It all comes down to a few simple principles. One—be as sensitive as possible to what you're doing, and two—be sensitive to the results. And when you see the results aren't what you like, then, three, make adjustments. Then watch again, watch again. Keep watching and doing, watching and doing—and this is how skill develops. Skill, basically means being sensitive to the raw materials that you're given in any given moment, and then being sensitive to what you're doing, and then being sensitive to what the results are. These three things, when you put them together, give the mind a chance to develop skill. It was this realization that made the Buddha realize further that the principle of karma really does work.

If it were impossible to develop skills, then we wouldn't really know, when we act, whether we're really acting through our own will, or if something is acting through us, or really, if there's action happening anyway at all, or if it's just all a delusion. All those questions would be really up in the air. But the fact that we can develop skill means, yes, action is *real* to begin with. And secondly, we are responsible for our actions, and we can change our actions—through noticing where the results are satisfactory and where they're not. That's why there's hope for human beings.

If you plunge into the meditation and say, "Well, my way of doing this is going to be, this, this, this, this," where does that attitude come from? It comes from ignorance. And unless you're willing to change that attitude, adjust it, you're going to remain in ignorance no matter how many hours you sit, no matter how many years you meditate. But this willingness to act and then to look at the results is why it's worthwhile to practice—why it was worthwhile for the Buddha to teach people to begin with.

So we have to develop this sensitivity to our intentions, this sensitivity to our actions and the results. This is why the Buddha's most basic teaching is one of *watching* intention. Remember his teaching to Rahula, his son: Rahula was about seven years old at the time, and the Buddha pared the teaching down to its simplest form. He said, before you act, to look at your intention. What kind of results do you expect from that kind of intention? If you expect harmful results, then stop, don't follow through with it. If you expect harmless results, you can go ahead and act. While you're acting, keep watch, because some of the results of your actions are going to come out immediately, and if you see anything harmful coming, stop. If there's nothing harmful, you can continue.

When you're done with the act, then start looking for long-term results of your actions. If you see that what you thought originally was going to be harmless actually ended up causing harm—and this can be from very gross levels to very subtle ones—then resolve that you're not going to make that mistake again. Talk it over with other people who are practicing, people you trust, to get their perspective on it, too.

This one basic teaching contains the seeds for a lot of other important things in the Buddha's teachings as well, such as the whole principle of causality: that you don't wait until after the action is done to see its results, because some of the results come right away. This is what makes the whole question of cause and effect complex, but at the same time, it's what makes skills possible.

As you're planing a piece of wood, you can notice immediately if the plane is digging too deep or not digging deep enough, and you can adjust right in the middle of each swipe across the board. You don't have to wait until after you've made your swipe at the board to look at it and see... whoops, something went wrong. You can sense while you're doing it, as you get more and more sensitive. You can sense what the results are going to be *as you do the action*, and you can make adjustments accordingly.

The Buddha's instructions to Rahula also teach that the results of our actions come out in two kinds: skillful and unskillful, or harmless and harmful. So you've got cause and effect, skillful and unskillful: That's the basic framework for the four noble truths.

I've always found it interesting, when reading through the Buddhist texts, to look at the way the Buddha talks to children, or at the teachings specifically directed at children, because they're very revealing. They cut things down to the most basic level, in ways that you miss if you're looking at the really abstract teachings like emptiness or not-self or whatever. Look at the kind of questions the Buddha had children ask as they were practicing, and it really grounds you in what the teaching is all about.

So as you practice, always keep this teaching to Rahula in mind: Watch your intentions, watch your actions, watch the results—both while you're acting, and after their done. This applies not only to the meditation, but also to everything you do in the course of the practice—when you make your life your practice. If you're not sure of the results, well, just keep watching. This experimental attitude toward life is a very important part of really developing, really growing as a person.

If you've developed really fixed attitudes very early on, it's hard to learn anything from that point forward. And you notice, when people start getting fixed in their attitudes, that there's a sense they've stopped growing—and that can happen at any age. It's not just the old people who get fixed in their attitudes. Sometimes young people are more fanatically close-minded than older people.

So you need this willingness to adjust, to learn, all the way to the point where you attain awakening—and even then you've got to watch and watch and watch again, to make sure that what you thought was awakening really is.

There's a really nice passage in Ajaan Maha Boowa's teachings: He talks about the time when Ajaan Mun passed away, and he had a very strong sense that he was like a wild beast left out in the forest, without anyone to care for him now that his teacher was gone. But then he stopped and asked himself, "Well, what were the things that Ajaan Mun kept stressing over

and over again in his teachings? Take those as your internal teacher.” And the one point that really struck him, stronger than anything else, was Ajaan Mun’s statement that “When something comes up in the mind, and you’re not really sure about whether it’s worth following through or not, just step back to that basic sense of knowing, and stay with that.”

For those of us at the beginning, this means staying with the basic *knower*, at the breath, and just watch what happens to that particular mind state, to that particular vision, that particular understanding, whatever it is that comes up in the mind. Sometimes our understandings come as sudden flashes in the mind: You’ve really got to stop and watch them to see, “Where is this going to lead?” Then Ajaan Mun said that, if you can stay with that sense of knowing, just being aware, without latching on to the object that you’re aware of, then no matter what, you’ll be able to get past that state safely whatever it was, good or bad.

So take these principles as your internal teacher. As you’re practicing, have a sense of balance, sensitive to what you’re doing, sensitive to what the results of your actions are, both while you’re doing them and after they’re done. Always be open to the fact that what you saw at one point maybe wasn’t the whole picture. Back up and watch again, watch again, watch again—there’s nothing lost by not being too quick to come to a fixed conclusion.

And keep experimenting: When you practice, it’s not the sort of place where you have to have an opinion, and there’s something wrong with you if you don’t have an opinion on everything that comes up. That was one of the most important things I learned when I went to Thailand and started staying with Ajaan Fuang. Being an Oberlin grad, you’re used to having an opinion, you’re *supposed* to have an opinion on all kinds of topics.

I remember one time, Ajaan Fuang happened to walk past when I was expounding to one of the other monks on something, he said, “Do you really *know* what you’re talking about?” I said, “Well, I think I do.” “Well, do you *really know*? If you don’t know, just say you don’t know, and leave it at that.” It simplified life an awful lot. It made life easier not only for me, but also for the people to whom I used to expound things.

You’ve got to have that attitude as you meditate. Even when you’re 100 percent certain, you’ve got to watch out for your certainty, too, because sometimes certainty is just a cover-up for ignorance. But if you don’t *really* know, just admit, “I don’t really know. I’m ready to watch, ready to experiment.” Sometimes they say in the meditation to *play* with the breath. That means to experiment, watch, and have a good time while you’re doing it. But always be ready to admit the fact that “Maybe there’s a lot that I don’t know yet. I’m just going to watch and learn.” That’s your salvation as a meditator.