

# *Achieving Balance*

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An important principle in meditating, in getting the mind to settle down properly, is to develop a sense of balance so that your desire isn't so strong that it runs away with you or so weak that you don't really care. Your effort isn't so strong that it wears you out, but not so weak that you don't accomplish anything. And so on down the line. You don't want to think too much because that destroys your concentration. But it's also possible not to think enough—as when you have a problem and don't try to think it through to discover the cause.

So we're looking for balance here. But remember that balance doesn't come automatically. Think of those old-fashioned scales. Before they reach balance, they have to tip first one way and then the other and then back and forth, back and forth, gradually tipping less and less until they finally achieve balance.

This means that if you find yourself tipping one direction and then the other in your meditation, that's going to be natural. The skill lies in learning how to balance things out, so that you're tipping less and less and less.

First off, you have to realize which direction you're tipping in. This is why it's good to take stock as you sit down and meditate: How is your mind right now? What does it need? Does it need encouragement? Does it need energizing? Or does it need to be calmed down? Is it too sluggish? If it is, you have to do a little thinking to stir it up a little bit. Remember the Buddha's reflection, that this evening's sunset may have been the last one you're going to see. That big earthquake they keep warning about could happen. The new fault that just opened just to the north of us could suddenly do something strange. So the question is, if that were to happen, would you be ready to go? And for most of us the answer is No. All this unfinished business, all these things we'd still like to do. Okay, what's the most important unfinished business? Getting your mind in shape, so that it's not your own enemy in the face of sudden events. Which means that you've got to work on your meditation.

Sometimes that thought will help stir you up. Then look at what you need to do to energize the mind even further to keep it awake. You might decide that you need to go through the parts of the body. Think about the different bones in your skeleton. What have you got? Imagine all the bones starting from the toes coming on up: Where are those bones? In other words, when you think about the bones in the toe, focus on the feeling in the toe. With the bones in your feet, focus on the feelings in your feet; and so on, up through the body. This way you give the mind work to do.

If your mind won't settle down with the bones, survey the breath energy in the different parts of your body. Start, say, at your navel, go up the front of the body, down the back, out the legs. Start again at the back of the neck, go down the shoulders and out the arms. Section by section. How does the body feel as you breathe in? How does it feel as you breathe out? If you notice any sense of tension or tightness anywhere, allow it to relax. This gives the mind work to do so that it doesn't start drifting off as it stays with the breath.

If you find, though, that your problem is in the other direction—that the mind

is too active—try to stay in one place and put all your energy in trying to protect that one place. If you find your thoughts wandering off, ask yourself, “Why do I need to think about that now? Isn’t it more important to get to work here?” If you’re worried about situations in the future, remind yourself that your best preparation for the future is to become mindful, alert, clear about where your mind is going. All the more reason to stay focused right here to develop those qualities. And then be very protective of the spot you’ve chosen.

As you focus on that spot, allow it to become comfortable. A sense of comfort is important, because it helps you stay. If there’s a sense of dis-ease and blockage in the body you’re going to try to get out and run away from it, because the mind doesn’t see any advantage in staying here. But if you see that as you stay here, things begin to dissolve away these patterns of tension, grow less and less solid, less and less rigid, just the fact of being in your body is going to feel a lot more attractive. You see immediate results—that the meditation is not simply aimed at results on and off into the future, but also gives results right here and now. And while working on blockage in one part of the body, if you’re focusing right on the spot of the blockage and it doesn’t seem to work, focus on other parts of the body because sometimes the blockage or pain or tightness may be caused by a blockage someplace else. It’s common, for instance, that a pain in your lower back is actually caused by blockage in your upper back; or pain in your legs is caused by a blockage in your lower back or the base of the spine. Or a pain in the right side of the body is caused by a corresponding tightness on the left, something in front may be caused by something in back.

So check around, and notice how you’re talking to yourself as you do this. If you have a tendency to get really harsh and negative with yourself, remind yourself we’re not here to be harsh and negative. Putting in proper effort doesn’t require that you hold a whip over yourself all the time. Again it’s part of balance learning how to know when to use the carrot and when to use the stick. If you find yourself harsh and negative, remind yourself, “Okay, the fact that you’re here meditating is good in and of itself; the ideal approach is simply to be a matter of fact.” The mind is wandering off, okay, just bring it back. If it’s wandering off again, bring it back again. However many times it wanders off, just keep bringing it back and try to keep a good humor about the whole thing. This, combined with mindfulness, is probably your best guarantee of getting the mind into balance, so that when things aren’t going the way you’d like them to, you don’t get upset, you don’t get flustered. You simply take it into account and see what you can do to balance it out.

So try to think in ways that are encouraging. When you catch yourself wandering off, at least you’ve caught yourself. Most people wander off and never catch themselves. Their whole days, their whole lives are spent just wandering around aimlessly with no control over the mind at all, or just enough to get by. But each time you catch yourself and bring yourself back, you’re strengthening your mindfulness, you’re strengthening your alertness. That in and of itself is a good thing. It’s an accomplishment.

Reserve the stick for the times when you’re really careless and lazy. And the stick, of course, is recollection of death, something we don’t like to think about, but it’s there in the background all the time. And it’s not going to go away by our not thinking about it. So remind yourself that meditation is your best preparation

for the time when you're going to die because at that point the mind will grasp at anything. It can't stay in the body anymore. You're afraid of what's going to happen if you let go of the body, but you've *got* to let go of the body so you grab at whatever comes up in the mind—and then there it goes, heading who knows where? So the question now is, Can you train the mind to be more composed even in that kind of circumstance, and not go flailing around?

The way to do that, of course, is to learn how to sit with the breath, and learn how to be patient with the breath, and to let go of everything else. Develop the quality of consistency. Develop your mindfulness. And keep in mind the fact that whatever comes up, you don't want to grab onto the things that are going to be harmful. If you're going to hold onto something, hold onto things that are skillful: the attitudes that will see you through whatever the difficulty. That won't get blown away. If you find yourself blown away now by a little bit of pain or a little bit of distraction, it's going to be really difficult when big pains and big distractions come. That thought is the stick to remind yourself that you've got work to do.

So achieving balance means that, when you find yourself leaning to the left, you've got to lean hard to the right. If you're leaning to the right, lean hard to the left. Finding balance doesn't mean using middling effort all the time. If you've gone too far in one direction, you've got to lean hard in the other direction until you reach the point of balance. Use the principle they call negative feedback, which doesn't mean being negative about yourself. It means that if you find yourself going too far in one direction, you learn to balance things out. All too often the mind gets into what's called positive feedback, which is not necessarily a positive thing. Positive feedback means that you're going in one direction, and you just keep tipping more and more and more in that direction. You find yourself angry, then you get angry at yourself for being angry, and then angry at yourself for being angry two times. That doesn't help. Or you find yourself getting kind of lazy and blurred out, and you say, "Well, this is kind of comfortable. I like this." Then you just go for the lazy, blurred out state of mind.

You've got to be able to step back from whatever the situation in the mind and say, "In what direction are we out of balance and how can we put it back into balance?" You'll find yourself tipping to left, tipping to the right, back and forth, but it's normal. It's natural. Over time you develop the skill so that the tipping gets less and less, gets more and more subtle, until finally you've achieved balance. There's a sense of just right. The mind fits into the body like a glove. It stays with its object, with a sense of ease and belonging. You feel like you're here at home, at last. And then all you do is simply maintain that balance.

In the course of developing that sense of "just right," you develop a lot of good qualities of mind. This is where a lot of the skill comes in the meditation. This is what the learning in the meditation amounts to: learning how to lean left and lean right when you need to, so that ultimately you get into balance. Then you learn how to stay in balance. You've probably noticed, when you watch an acrobat walking across a tightrope, that there are times when the acrobat is perfectly balanced, other times there will be a slight slipping off of balance. But the acrobat has learned how to correct for it. That's how acrobats don't fall. It's not that they never tip, but they know immediately how to tip in the other direction, back and forth, back and forth, until they are balanced again.

In the same way, even though there will be a lot of back and forth in the meditation, it aims toward balance. And it maintains your balance. So don't get upset by it. Learn how to use it to bring the mind to that state where it feels really at home: settled, secure. Or as we say in that chant, so that it "looks after itself with ease." It gains a sense of maturity, a sense of good humor and confidence that comes from experience: that you can deal with whatever comes up.