

# A Question of Balance

*Understanding the Middle Way*



by  
Bhikkhu Pesala



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Association for Insight Meditation

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# Contents

A Question of Balance.....	1
Understanding the Middle Path.....	1
The Three Characteristics.....	1
Respect.....	2
Continuity.....	3
Cultivating Suitability.....	4
Remembering Previous Successes.....	5
Developing the Factors of Enlightenment.....	5
Enduring Patience is the Greatest Austerity.....	6
Courageous Determination.....	6

# A Question of Balance

## Understanding the Middle Path

On the full-moon night of Vesākha, the Bodhisatta became the Buddha after meditating the entire night at the culmination of a six year struggle to find the right path. Thereafter, he spent forty-five years propagating his “Middle Path” guiding others along the unique way that he had discovered.

In fact, he had been searching much longer than six years to find this middle path. Since the time of his vow at the feet of the Buddha Dīpaṅkara, ninety-one aeons ago, as the ascetic Sumedha, he had dedicated 100% of his efforts throughout many lives to this quest for enlightenment. Even before meeting the Buddha Dīpaṅkara, the Bodhisatta had practised meditation earnestly throughout many lives to accumulate perfections, and at the time of meeting the Buddha Dīpaṅkara he was an accomplished ascetic with mystic powers.

After his enlightenment he taught this “Middle Path” for more than forty-five years until his death at the age of over eighty. He called it the “Middle Path” because it avoided the two extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification, not because it requires only a moderate amount of effort to follow it. The facts clearly show that to follow the “Middle Path” requires a great deal of effort and dedication, though it does, of course, also require that effort to be well-balanced, equanimous, and rightly directed. It is not a path for fanatics or zealots, but one for pious devotees, serious students, and ardent meditators.

When we talk of a well-balanced approach to practice, one should not conjure up visions of balancing in a hammock on a sunny afternoon, nor of sitting on a fence not knowing which way to jump, but the balance of a long-distance athlete who runs as fast as possible with the least possible waste of energy, or the balance of a worker who climbs a ladder with a heavy load of bricks on his shoulder.

## The Three Characteristics

First we should learn something about why we need to meditate, and what we are aiming to achieve by meditation. If our aim is wrong, our practice will be wrong, or even if it is right, we may give up easily if we don't get the results that we expect.

The aim of the Buddha's Middle Path of mindfulness meditation or insight meditation is to understand things as they really are, and

thus remove craving, which is the cause of suffering. In short, we meditate in order to realise the three characteristics of impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and not-self (*anatta*). The purpose is not mental tranquillity, to enjoy a stress-free life, or to make merit.

One should have this basic understanding that the First Noble Truth — the truth of suffering — needs to be understood; the Second Noble Truth — the truth of the cause (craving) needs to be abandoned; the Third Noble Truth — the truth of cessation (*nibbāna*) — needs to be realised; and the Fourth Noble Truth — the truth of the Path — needs to be developed. If one has this basic understanding before one begins, one will not be surprised, disappointed, or alarmed if one discovers one or other of these three characteristics. On the contrary, one will be encouraged at the thought that one is making gradual progress on the Path to the end of suffering.

## Respect

Not all Bodhisattas have to endure six hard years of self-mortifying practice. It depends on their past kamma. The reason that Siddhattha Gotama had to struggle in this way is told in the [Ghaṭikāra Sutta](#) of the Majjhimanikāya. In that discourse, the Buddha relates to the Venerable Ānanda how, in a previous life, he himself was reborn as a Brahmin youth named Jotipāla, whose companion since childhood was a potter (that is the meaning of Ghaṭikāra — a maker of pots). This potter was a devout follower of the Buddha Kassapa, and a Non-returner, who supported his blind and aged parents by his simple craft. One day, Ghaṭikāra repeatedly urged his friend, Jotipāla, to go and visit the Buddha Kassapa, who was staying near by. Jotipāla, however, being proud due to his high caste family, was reluctant to visit a teacher of another religion. He remarked, “What is the use of going to see this bald-headed recluse?” Eventually, however, he gave in to the repeated urging of his friend, went to see the Buddha, gained faith in the Dhamma, and became a bhikkhu in his dispensation. It was due to those disrespectful words regarding the most noble of beings, that Siddhattha Gotama had to struggle for six years before finding the Middle Path.

I hope you can see, therefore, the important role that respect pays in the practice of the Dhamma. If we listen respectfully to the teacher’s instructions, we will learn much more quickly, and avoid unskilful

paths that only lead to more suffering. Even if the teacher explains something wrongly, if one listens respectfully, one will not be misled, but will realise that the teacher hasn't explained it very clearly, or that one may have misunderstood what he meant. One will seek a second opinion or refer to the relevant books to clarify the teacher's instruction, or proceed carefully, trusting one's own experience.

## Continuity

Nothing worthwhile can be achieved in a short time unless one has done a lot of preparation. Consider how long the Bodhisatta had to strive to achieve his goal. To gain enlightenment took him only about twelve hours of continuous meditation once he had gained the right method, but to get to that advanced stage of preparedness he had to struggle hard for much longer.

Someone on a Buddhist forum, referring to the Venerable Ānanda's striving for Arahantship, wrote that after practising walking meditation for the whole night without achieving his goal, he gave up and went to rest. I don't see it the same way. Venerable Ānanda didn't give up at all. After practising walking meditation for the whole night he reflected, "The Buddha said that my perfections are mature enough to gain Arahantship, yet though I have tried my hardest for the whole night, I haven't yet reached the goal. I must have been exerting too hard, making the mind distracted and restless. I need to regain mental balance by adopting a posture more conducive to tranquillity." So he went and sat on the edge of his bed, and lay down to rest the body for a while. He did not give up mindfulness for one moment, but continued to note mindfully all actions and movements of the body as he adjusted his posture. After sitting on his bed, he gained Once-returning, Non-returning and, finally, Arahantship, before his head touched the pillow. This very rapid attainment by the Venerable Ānanda was the result of continuity of practice throughout the whole night without a break. It was not the result of "giving up."

Be careful when you listen to this story. Enlightenment is not to be gained by lying down on the bed — unless you have excellent knowledge and wisdom like Venerable Ānanda, and have been striving hard all night practising intensive walking meditation.

When we practise meditation seriously, we should be prepared for an endurance race, not a sprint. Ten days is nothing if we

compare it to six years. To gain enlightenment and escape from rebirth could not be such a simple task. If we speak of striving for at least eighteen hours a day, continuously for many days, people say that we are fanatics, that we are not teaching the Middle Path. What do you think? Are we fanatics, or are those people just lazy and far away from understanding the right method?

### **Cultivating Suitability**

The meditator's attitude should be very different to the average person. The average person quickly becomes bored with meditation if asked to practice for the entire day and late into the night. It is not easy even for experienced meditators to sustain effort for a long time. One needs to cultivate the right conditions to stir up effort and deepen concentration. A meditator should avoid worldly thoughts and activities. This is doubly difficult to achieve at home. It is also hard to achieve in many monasteries that I have stayed at. The Buddha's advice is to go to a forest, to the root of a tree, or to an empty place.

One should join a meditation course, where like-minded people are also striving to develop concentration and insight. If one has the moral support of other meditators, it will help one's own practice. Staying alone is beneficial, but only if one is strongly inclined to meditation. Otherwise, it is better to derive some support from others. It was with this in mind that I started the "Association for Insight Meditation." By associating with others who also want to gain insight, one will practise harder than if one associates with those who want to enjoy sensual pleasures.

A meditator should avoid all talking. Talking for five minutes can spoil one's practice for the entire day. Even talk about meditation should be limited to what is necessary for instruction. One should eat plain food that suits one's own metabolism. Two light meals — breakfast and lunch are enough for a meditator. In the afternoon one can drink fruit juice or take honey if one becomes famished.

The climate may be a problem for westerners who visit Burma Asia. In the hot season, go to a meditation centre at higher altitude. [Taunggyi](#) in Shan State is much more comfortable than Rangoon.

One should seek out a teacher who can give inspiring discourses, and/or inspire by example. "Talking is easy, doing is difficult," as the saying goes.

## Remembering Previous Successes

There are many factors that contribute to good results. Every meditator is unique, and only a teacher with the higher knowledge of a Buddha can know exactly what instructions to give at any moment. Other teachers give advice that is good, but may not be what the meditator needs to hear at that moment.

My mother took me for weekly swimming lessons for many weeks, but I did not like the instructor and made little progress. Then one day, while playing in the sea, a wave picked me up and I realised that I could keep my head above water and my feet off of the ground. It was not very long before I could swim quite well.

Learning to meditate is an acquired skill like learning to swim or riding a bicycle. Even the best teacher can only point out the way, and offer tips and encouragement, the student must practise the meditation exercises for himself or herself, and discover the right method that keeps the mental faculties in perfect balance.

When you achieve some results, such as being able to sit or walk for long periods without interruption, or if the mind becomes unusually calm and still, make a mental note of the conditions at that time. Recollect that experience and the conditions that led to it when trying to regain concentration at a later date. Did you eat your meal with special mindfulness that day, or walk slower than usual?

## Developing the Factors of Enlightenment

These seven factors of enlightenment are weak in the average person who first takes up meditation: mindfulness (*sati*), investigation (*dhammavicaya*), effort (*viriya*), joy (*pīti*), tranquillity (*passaddhi*), concentration (*samādhi*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). They need to be developed through sustained and continuous practice. Mindfulness is indispensable. It is the factor that keeps the others in balance. Investigation, effort, and joy all excite the mind and stir it up to strive harder. Tranquillity, concentration, and equanimity cool the excited mind to make it focus deeper. When the energy is low we must use investigation, effort, and joy to brighten the mind and stir it up. When the mind becomes too fired-up, we must use tranquillity, concentration, and equanimity to cool it down before it overheats. Mindfulness keeps checking the current state of the mind to know which factor is in excess and which is deficient.

## **Enduring Patience is the Greatest Austerity**

Renunciation of pleasure is hard for human beings, but tolerance of pain and discomfort is much harder. No one likes pain and discomfort, fatigue, hunger and thirst, excessive heat or cold. A meditator must endure these hardships with patience. If the mind shrinks from facing up to them, as it always does when it is weak, the meditator must keep stirring up effort, courage, and determination. If severe pain comes, try to sit with it for a little longer. You should regard it as your best friend because it is the means by which you can gain freedom from suffering. Remember, the truth of suffering must be understood. So when suffering comes, you have a precious chance to gain insight. If you shy away from it, the pain will be unbearable, and crush your will to go on. If you take it as a challenge to test the maturity of your practice, it will lead to rapid progress.

## **Courageous Determination**

Each time you participate in a retreat, whether for a few hours, a few days, or a few weeks, you are developing your perfections. The Bodhisatta practised meditation throughout many lives to attain the perfections that he needed to achieve his goal. Perhaps you already have sufficient perfections to achieve your goal, as the Venerable Ānanda had, but you must not give up. You may need to go to work and earn money to support your family, but each time you get a chance to meditate seriously, you must take it and practise again and again. Keep doing the practice until you break through and gain some insight knowledge. Without applying heat, nothing ever gets cooked.

When suffering arises, do not shrink from it, but increase your efforts and spend more time for formal meditation practice. If pain arises, don't change your position at once, but change your attitude. The pain is not your enemy, but a reminder of the universal truth of suffering. If insight can be gained, suffering can be transcended. As it says in the introduction to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta: "This, monks, is the only way for the purification of living-beings, for the transcendence of grief and lamentation, for the extinguishing of pain and sorrow, for attaining the right method, for the realisation of nibbāna, namely: the four foundations of mindfulness." Do not seek for any other method; avoidance just delays success further into the future.