

Life in the Balance

Charles Hogg explores the trick of maintaining a balance in life

Some incidents in childhood leave deep impressions. I have a deep memory of a television programme showing a tightrope walker crossing Niagara Falls. I was fascinated as he carefully placed one foot after another in a state of total concentration. Sometimes he stopped to re-balance and reassess his position. Only one slip or slight imbalance and he could have fallen hundreds of metres into the turbulent white waters below. It was breathtaking.

Some of us feel life is similar. Finding our inner balance while living amongst many extremes, like the tightrope walker, can be precarious. It can create extraordinary tension. We live in a world of duality, and at every second we have to make decisions about where we sit between so many extremes. Should I tolerate the situation in silence or should I face it and express how I really feel? Am I coming from a point of self-respect or am I just being arrogant? Am I being selfish or am I just being sensible and looking after my own needs? When should I let things be and when should I push for what I want?

Taoist philosophy expresses these dilemmas in the ancient Ying Yang symbol. At almost every second we are faced with the duality of opposites. Unfortunately, there is no formula for finding the right balance. Each situation requires a different mix of seemingly diametrically opposed forces. Some situations require us to be totally assertive and express how we feel. Other situations require us to let go in favour of others' needs and desires, and at other times a mixture between the two. Every situation depends on our ability to objectively view a situation and discern the middle path. In my experience, the middle path means to find a point of silence from which I observe all the tides of influences and opinion. From that point I clearly see the path I need to take.

Most of us find life a constant juggle in which we try to fulfil many different responsibilities. Firstly, to our family and friends—most of us do feel relationships to be the highest priority. Secondly, our responsibilities in our chosen career. Thirdly, to our other interests, whether they be community service, sport or just our own recreation. Neglecting one can create stress.

The greatest stress does not come from overwork, but from the worry that we are neglecting an area of our life. It's common knowledge that workaholics who may be brilliant in their field often use work to escape areas of their life they find difficult. Perhaps there's conflict at home, or even a lack of self-worth. Going to an extreme is usually a sign of covering up a lack in another area. We seem to pursue the things we are good at, but very cleverly create our life to avoid those things that challenge us or we find difficult. A renowned public speaker once told me he had so much confidence in front of a crowd, but when it came to one-to-one communication he often felt totally inadequate, so he avoided it. The result, imbalance!

I took up the practice of meditation when I was just twenty-one years old. One of the wonderful benefits of meditation I discovered was the art of objectively viewing

myself, like a member of an audience watching my own performance on stage. As I watched myself I could see how hard I was trying to please others, constantly compromising what I really wanted or needed. It was more important to seek respect from others than from myself. The result ... more imbalance.

So, do I have a responsibility to myself, and what is it? How many of us reach a point where the anxiety of juggling our various responsibilities reaches an extreme. It's often at this point I reassess my priorities. An Australian social researcher, Hugh Mackay, described the 1980's as the "anxious 80's". He observed that many people were opting for the "inner journey"; a total change of attitude where one begins to look internally to resolve anxiety and extremism. Blaming others and situations is the path of self-deception, but taking responsibility for how I feel is my true path. I neither resist the challenges that life brings me nor am I overwhelmed by them.

But how do we find our point of balance in each situation?

We need to extract ourselves totally from the influence, opinions and even past perceptions and take the 'helicopter view'. From there we can view the whole picture with clarity. Detachment has always been the mark of great thinkers because it is only when we see the situation as a detached observer can we perceive the real truth. Otherwise our emotions, desires or attachments cloud our clarity. Detachment is so necessary to find true balance, but to many of us it can tend to feel clinical, or lacking in heart. That is why the first and foremost balance is love and detachment.

Love is the greatest need. Those who always express their love with a pure motive will always feel full of love. But to be truly loving we need detachment. When we are detached from others we are not irritated or affected by their actions, so we can maintain our love. Our love isn't conditional to others' responses. We are not trading in the business of love which says, "If you do this, only then will you receive my love ..."'

Sometimes we have to show total love and support but other times we have to stand back and allow others to stand on their own feet. Here, our detachment can be a form of respect, where they can do without us. Being loving and detached is like a protection from different influences and atmospheres, where others' moods, inaccuracies and perceptions cannot disturb our clarity.

The practice of meditation takes you into the 'helicopter view' naturally. From there you can see the complete picture and become a more balanced person. Some of the areas in which you will find balance are:

Analysis and Acceptance

Some situations require clear analysis, but analysis does not end the matter. The mind repeats events again and again and we try to maintain our objectivity. But acceptance can clear subjective feelings and allow us to get on with life. Acceptance does not mean denial or suppression but a deeper wisdom that realises nothing more can be done. All we can do is take the lesson from whatever has happened and progress into the future.

Humility and Authority

When we have self-respect, our words and actions express humility. Some say they admire humility, yet feel that humble people can become doormats. But true humility is a point of gentle strength and authority. This is self-authority, not an authority that imposes control over others. The one with humility will speak with truth but their authority will not hurt the hearts of others. Others will admire the dignity and self-assurance of such a person. The balance of humility and self-authority is the foundation of a great leader.

Satisfaction and Ambition

Some people are never satisfied. No matter how much they have, they want more. It is a cancerous type of inner peacelessness that never allows them to be quiet and enjoy the present. Others seem to have no motivation to improve on any level. One of the gifts of meditation practice is discovering a deep awareness of our spiritual self and our relationship with God.

This cools down the ambition for recognition, and creates a feeling of fullness and contentment. However, even with this inner satisfaction, there can still be the ambition to improve our own lives and to help others. But this is not an ambition that seeks the approbation of others, but comes from a point of genuine benevolence.

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