

CHAPTER 15



BUDDHISM BRACES *and* BALANCE

An excerpt from *Wabi-Sabi Wisdom:
Inspiration for an Authentic Life*
by Andrea Jacques

Chapter 15

平衡

Balance
(Heiko)

*Something to stop longing for, as it is
what's keeping you from having the life
you want.*



Welcome!

In today's fast-paced world, even the wealthiest people say they would love more of one thing: balance. The challenge? Balance, by definition, is about maintaining a state of equilibrium that is stable and unchanging. People who want more balance in their lives and work don't want things to stay the same. They want them to change. More balance to most means having more time and/or money to spend on health, family, hobbies, relaxation, or moving a dream forward. Unfortunately, their lives are already "balanced" in a state of equilibrium that doesn't allow for these pursuits.

The problem, then, with the quest for balance is that you already have it. What you really want is more energy, joy, vitality, success and fulfillment. You don't want balance, you want to thrive! In order to thrive, you need to stop striving for more balance and learn to actively shift the existing balance in your life towards your new desired set point.

Strangely, I happened across the perfect explanation of how to shift out of balance and into thriving during a visit to my orthodontist. Due to a freak accident where I got hit in the face while meditating (yes, meditating!) I had to get braces to reposition my teeth in preparation for a dental implant. After taking pictures and molds of my teeth, the orthodontist explained the process I would be going through over the next year like this:

“Except for the recent injury” he said, “your teeth are currently in perfect equilibrium. Even though your bite is not optimal and your teeth are not perfectly straight they have achieved their own balance and stability. Once we begin moving things around, this balance will be upset and the changes will need to be monitored closely to ensure that movement is occurring in the desired direction. We won’t know exactly how the other teeth will shift in response to shifting the ones we need to at the front. Sometimes it will seem that we are undoing something that we just did, but don’t worry. As long as we have a clear picture of where we started and a clear vision of the end result we want to create, we will keep fine-tuning until eventually we reach the goal. For this reason, the time estimate I am giving you for the complete process may not be 100% accurate, but based on my experience and barring any unforeseen difficulties, it will not be too far off. You will experience some pain and discomfort during the process as your teeth move but the worst of this will be at the early stages when the movement is greatest. Once you are finished you will need to wear a retainer of some kind for several years and possibly for life to prevent your teeth from moving back to their original position.”

Listening to his words I was hit with a flash of insight. Braces provide the perfect illustration of how to build your capacity to thrive in all areas of your life and work!

Unbeknownst to my orthodontist, his comments illustrated eight core principles of shifting balance and learning to thrive:

Every Element of Your Life and Work Is Already in Balance, Even Though You May Not Like What That Balance Is

A balanced state is not desirable in and of itself. The most obvious example of this is body weight. Many people have maintained a stable weight for many years that is 10, 20 or even 30 pounds over their ideal weight. While they may not like the way they look or feel at this weight, it is perfectly balanced with the type and amount of food they eat, the amount of exercise they get and their metabolism.

Another example of a stable or balanced state people find themselves in is an unhealthy relationship. We all know of people who have been in a long-term relationship with an established status quo that is dysfunctional. While neither party may be all that happy, they have a stable pattern in the relationship. Despite not being particularly healthy, you cannot deny that their relationship has achieved a balanced state.

Changing Anything Causes Everything to Shift (Whether You Want It to or Not)

David Klein's now-classic study of the reindeer on St. Matthew Island illustrates the principles of balance in operation. In 1944 a population of just 29 animals was moved to an island where the species did not previously exist. The absence of predators such as wolves and human hunters caused the population to swell to 6000 in 19 years. Then, within a space of 3 years, the population crashed to 41 females and one male, all in miserable condition. Klein originally estimated that the carrying capacity of the island was about 5 deer per square kilometer. At the population peak there were 18 per square kilometer, but after the crash there were only 0.126 per kilometer. Klein projected that the original carrying capacity would take decades to return even without any deer because a key source of food production (lichens) had been eliminated.

By now our awareness of environmental issues has made it common knowledge that introducing even the smallest change or a seemingly harmless element (such as reindeer) into a complex system can upset the balance.

The same applies to all areas of your own life and work. This explains why your attempts at balancing your life to make it better can sometimes prove so frustrating. Unless you have a top-level understanding of every possible link and interconnection within a complex system, it is impossible to know what the repercussions of any single choice will be. The old adage that things often “get worse before they get better” also comes into play. The reactions and consequences created by the system trying to either return to its previous state of equilibrium or a new state of equilibrium are not always positive or comfortable in the present.

One of the key sources of stress in people’s lives and work is their resistance to this constantly shifting balance. External forces are constantly acting upon individuals and organizations causing change, so, no matter how much balance you have created in your own life, the external balance will constantly be shifting, causing your balance to be upset. Learning to handle and enjoy the process of constantly shifting the balance is critical for learning to thrive.

To Succeed, You Need to Have a Clear Picture of Where You Are and Where You Want to Go

Most people have a very vague picture of what success looks like, who they are and where they really want to go. Young people starting out in their first career have hopes that it will be a vehicle to provide health, wealth, happiness and the fulfillment of their dreams. Unfortunately, most people lose sight of these hopes early on. Instead they get sucked into the prevailing mindset of pushing, struggling and striving to do more, have more and earn more at an ever increasing pace. They get caught up in keeping up, but lose sight of who they are and what truly makes them happy. Without the latter, achieving the former becomes impossible.

It is all too common to set goals based on what you are told you should want and what you need to do to get there by parents, friends and society. Only in the rarest of cases does this match with the your own intrinsic vision of who you want to be. If you are heading towards a goal that has been dictated by someone else, you will lack the energy and motivation needed to carry you through the hard times on the road to success. Even if you do manage to force yourself to completion, you will find that the goal does not provide the rewards you had hoped it would. Shifting your balance to where you want it to be requires taking the time to craft a clear vision of where you want to go that is based on your authentic needs, personality and passions.

You Need to Exert Constant Pressure, Using the Appropriate Skills, Knowledge and Tools, to Shift From Point A to Point B

Our society today is ridden with stress because we have become almost too good at exerting constant pressure on ourselves to do more, be more and have more. Unfortunately most people lack the proper skills, knowledge and tools to exert this pressure correctly and consistently enough to achieve results. They also don't understand how to do so without causing harm to themselves (or others) along the way.

My orthodontist had a variety of tools to achieve the result he was aiming for. He knew exactly which tool to use at which stage of the process in order to shift my teeth from where they were to where he wanted them to be. Your attempts to shift the balance in your life are doomed to fail if you are using tools for one thing that were meant for another. You can use the back of a screwdriver instead of a hammer to pound a nail once, but try to use it to build a whole house and you're going to have problems.

In the same vein, pushing yourself to work harder is not always the answer. Persistence, determination, and long hours are good tools to have in your toolbox, but they aren't always effective.

Frequently, they are a crutch of martyrdom. Sometimes you need to call upon other tools such as patience, inspiration, creativity and even fun to get where you want to go. Shifting the balance requires constantly expanding your tool set and learning to use the right tools to adjust your strategies along the way. This allows you to achieve more with less effort (and more fun!).

Making the Shift Will Be Uncomfortable, Especially at First

Change becomes less un-comfortable over time as you get used to it. When I had braces, the first few days after each adjustment would be painful as my teeth shifted. As the process wore on, each adjustment was less painful and the discomfort lasted for shorter periods of time.

The discomfort associated with shifting the balance in your life will also decrease over time. Once movement is underway, you are not as attached to (or stuck in) your old ways of doing and being. Newton's first law of motion states that "an object at rest tends to stay at rest and an object in motion tends to stay in motion." Once you are in motion, it is more comfortable and easier to stay in motion. Plus, as you see progress towards your goal, you establish a positive feedback loop that reinforces and builds yet more progress.

One of my Buddhism teachers in Japan was fond of a saying: “pain is inevitable, suffering is optional.” It wasn’t until I went on my first ten-day silent meditation retreat that I began to understand what he was talking about. As I deepened my meditation practice, I discovered a strange kind of pleasure in being able to be with my pain, notice it, and not attach to it in a way that created suffering.

You can see a similar principle in elite athletes. Athletes who are in training know that a certain amount of pain is a sign of progress. They expect and even enjoy it because they know that those sore muscles today will become even stronger by tomorrow. As you develop a thrive mindset, you become like an elite athlete – you welcome the good type of pain that comes from developing yourself in ways that help you reach your goals of superior performance.

This pain factor is one of the key reasons that it is important to seek support in shifting the balance. My orthodontist told me that sometimes a patient would come back after a few weeks and ask to have their braces removed because it was just too painful. He was always able to talk them out of it, and true to his promise, the pain eventually lessened and the patient was glad they had persevered. Having a support network that will keep you from removing your own braces is essential to make it through those times when you want to throw in the towel.



You Can't Predict How Long It Will Take to Make the Shift or How It Will Look in Between

This is another good reason to have a support network in place, ideally made up of someone who has the expertise and experience to help you through it. I trusted my orthodontist to make the changes necessary along the way so that I could get from where I was to where I wanted to be. Despite his knowledge, however, he could not predict exactly how long it would take. His estimate turned out to be quite accurate because he has had experience with cases similar to mine, but he warned me that every patient was unique in terms of where they started and where they were going, so guarantees were not possible. The best support person for you is the person who has the skills, knowledge and experience related to the change you are trying to make.

You Need to Have Confidence in the Person in Charge of Orchestrating the Shift

With my braces, I was 100% confident that the orthodontist knew what he was doing. He had worked with thousands of patients and had a proven track record of getting great results. This was extremely important since, in other areas of my life, I am not the most patient person.

This impatience is most pronounced and painful in areas where I am trying something new. Despite spending time researching and developing new skills, until I have achieved success in a new area at least once, I find it difficult to trust that I will achieve success at all. This self-doubt increases my impatience because I need external validation that I am doing things right. In the case of my braces, it was easy to be patient because I trusted that my orthodontist knew what we was doing and would get me where I wanted to go.

In your life, you may have had more experience with not getting the results you desire because you don't understand the above principles. Once you understand that balance is working against you, that you need to exert effort to overcome this balance, that it is going to be chaotic along the way and that you can't predict how long it will take to reach your goal, it becomes easier to persist. This understanding allows you to reframe the pain and the mess as signs of progress rather than signs of failure.



You Will Need Systems, Tools and Habits to Maintain the New State of Equilibrium

Just as I still need to wear my retainer at night to keep my teeth from shifting, it is not enough to shift the balance. You must put the proper habits, tools and systems in place to ensure you are able to sustain your new state of balance over time. With time and practice, your new equilibrium will become the norm. You will form new thought habits and, just like driving a car, you will eventually be able to drive while also being able to enjoy the scenery around you.

With this new perspective on balance as a process to master, rather than a goal to achieve, you will be in a much better position to achieve your goals in life with less stress, greater ease, and more fun than ever before!

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