

THE ART OF
BALANCE



STAYING SANE IN AN INSANE WORLD

DAVID J. BOOKBINDER

ILLUSTRATIONS BY STEPHANIE BOND

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TRANSFORMATIONS PRESS

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Illustrations by Stephanie Bond

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The greatest victory is that which requires no battle.
- **Sun Tzu**, *The Art of War*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

“Balance” is a word with many meanings, in many contexts. But in May, 1971, when I was a college sophomore, it meant “to become more complete.”

That’s when I started on a four-month hitch-hiking journey across the United States, following a meandering loop west from Buffalo to Berkeley, south past L.A., up the coasts of California, Oregon, and Washington, and back east through Canada.

I started that trip wanting to see the country, but I quickly understood I was really on a mission to balance out who I was.

My travels included many adventures I still vividly recall, but more importantly, they gave me an expanded outlook I have carried with me all my life.

I began that trip with \$400 and a sense of adventure. I returned with 25 cents in my pocket and a new vision of who I could become. It’s the best \$399.75 investment I’ve ever made.

Within days of my return, I made a list of new activities to undertake. On it were writing, photography, learning a trade, practicing a sport, pursuing a spiritual activity, and, to carry on the traveler’s sense of adventure, motorcycling. This list became the curriculum for a program to rebalance myself that, in a more nuanced way, I’m still following today.

That semester, I started to carry out my curriculum, setting aside physics and calculus courses and exchanging them for the humanities, and seeking out new-to-me activities that would, I hoped, enhance my undeveloped physical, emotional, spiritual, and creative sides.

I took all the literature, philosophy, psychology, and creative writing courses I could fit into my schedule. I volunteered at a mental hospital and at a faculty-run free school. I started to make knives as a hobby. I played tennis, rode a motorcycle, practiced Transcendental Meditation. I apprenticed in carpentry and used that skill to put myself through school and, for several years after graduation, to support my new writing and photography habits.

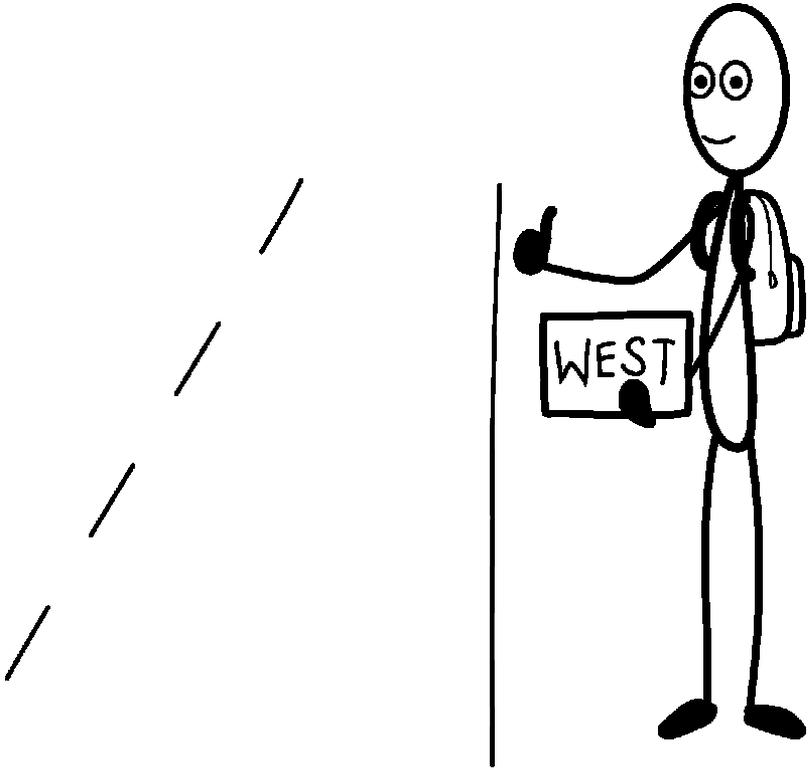
Books have long been the first step into activities that have extended me. They were part of my curriculum then, and they are still part of it now.

Before I looked for a job as a carpenter's apprentice, I read books on woodworking. Before I volunteered at a state mental hospital, I read from the founders of Western psychology. Before I made my first knife, I read a book on metallurgy. Before I taught my first class, I studied up on pedagogy. After a near-death experience altered the way I think and feel, books were where I went to help understand what had happened to me, and it was a book by Carl Rogers that convinced me to become a therapist.

I have almost no sense of direction, but I'm very good at reading maps, and books are, for me, the most elaborate and detailed maps to just about everything. In my travels through time since my trip across the United States, they have guided me to places I would never have ventured without their gentle prodding.

In *The Art of Balance: Staying Sane in an Insane World*, I've distilled the best of what I've learned from my own experiences as a person and a therapist, and from the best teachers I know. I hope this book—and the cast of characters it contains—will help to guide you on the hills and valleys of your own unique journey.

- David J. Bookbinder



INTRODUCTION

He who only sees the obvious, wins his battles with difficulty. He who looks below the surface of things, wins with ease.

- **Sun Tzu**, *The Art of War*

Sometimes the stresses of life wear us down. Sometimes, they knock us off our feet. Either way, we can lose our balance, and if we fall hard enough, it can take a long time to get back up.

The Battle of Balance is a life and death struggle: Stay balanced, and we enjoy life to the fullest. Lose balance, and things get hard.

In this book, I'm going to show you how to stay on top of the forces that unbalance us, how to recover if you do get knocked down, and how to build resilience so you're better prepared the next time the forces of imbalance—let's call them *unbalancers*—throw you a curve ball.

I help people rebalance their lives every day.

As a life coach and therapist, I've had more than 15 years of real-world experience helping people successfully overcome a wider range of unbalancers than most people encounter in a lifetime.

Together, we deal with problems large and small, immediate and chronic. Using the methods in this book, my clients not only recover from whatever brought them down, they also grow more insightful, more resilient to stress, and better able to make choices that bring them happiness and well-being.

The Art of Balance: Staying Sane in an Insane World is different from self-help articles and books you may have seen before. And, if I can blow my own horn for a moment, it's better.

Unlike most articles on the Internet and a lot of self-help books, *The Art of Balance* provides much more than a laundry list of the “Top 10 (or 25, or 100) Tools and Techniques.”

It’s not a greatest hits. It’s a system.

It’s a system that will help you recognize the forces that knock us out of balance, outline a strategy for overcoming them, and adopt a methodology for achieving lasting balance. The self-help tools and techniques are in there, sure, but they are integrated into a system that also teaches you how to create your own tools, develop your own techniques, and refine your own strategies—and thereby become the master of your destiny.

The Art of Balance doesn’t “give a man a fish,” so he can eat that day. It teaches you how to fish. It’s a system you can adapt not only to the issues you face today, but also to the unknown unknowns you may face as you move through your life.

These time-tested strategies have helped hundreds of my clients—and they’ve also helped me. To paraphrase the old “hair club for men” ads on late-night television, “I’m not only the therapist, I’m also a client.”

Many of the lessons in *The Art of Balance* I learned through my own struggles with unbalancers. I’ve been knocked flat by relationships and health crises, worn down by burnout and wrong career choices, and deeply shaken by accidents, crime, losing people close to me, and my own close brush with death. Not to mention more than my fair share of mistakes, large and small.

All of these experiences have been teachers, and the lessons learned from them have given me insights, heightened my intuition, and taught me skills that have benefited my clients—and will soon help you.

I often tell my clients, “I can save you 10 or 20 years of trial and error.” *The Art of Balance* can save you 10 or 20 years, too.

They say that “what does not kill you makes you stronger,” but this saying is only true if you know how to turn adversity into opportunity, and you learn from your difficult experiences.

The balance strategies and tools you’re about to discover will teach you how to do that. No book can provide all the answers, but the methods you learn here will give you the confidence to handle, adroitly, whatever situations come your way.

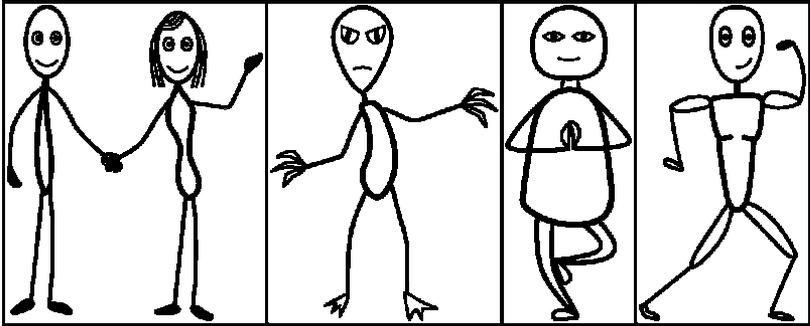
The word “overwhelmed” will no longer be in your vocabulary.

Instead, when you follow the steps revealed in *The Art of Balance*, you’re sure to move forward with a spring in your step that won’t get unsprung.

THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

Know thy self, know thy enemy.

- Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*



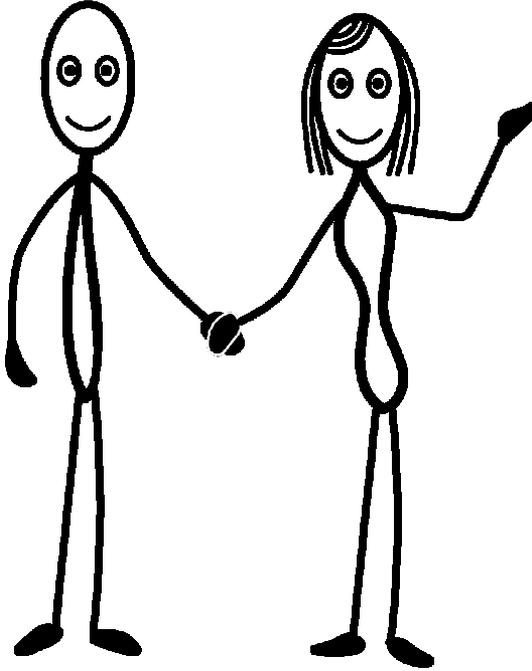
This is a book about balance: what disrupts it, what restores it, and how to keep it going.

It is also a story.

And like any story, it has its cast of characters. Some are friends and fellow travelers. Some are enemies. In the pages of this book, you will come to know them well.

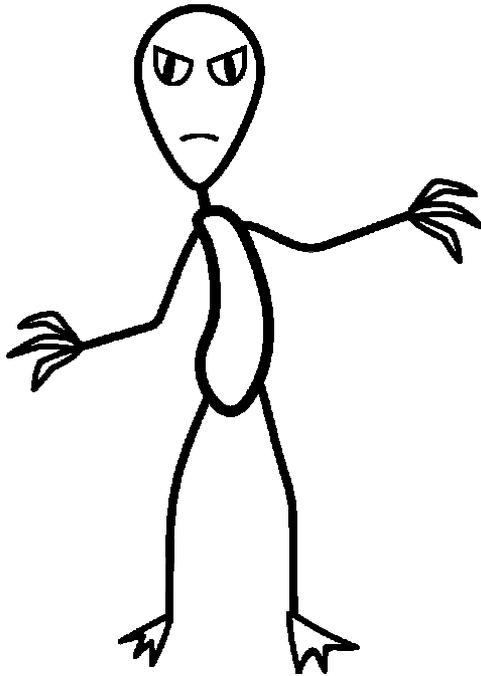
But first, some introductions.

AL AND ALICE



We are the heroes of this saga, an epic battle not only for balance but literally for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

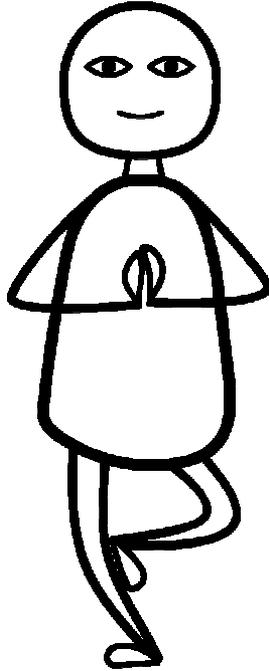
UNBALANCER



The villain in our story is the nefarious **UnBalancer**.

UnBalancer is a fearsome and sometimes deadly force. It strives single-mindedly to unseat us, and sometimes it wins the battle—but not, as we'll see, the war.

BALANCER

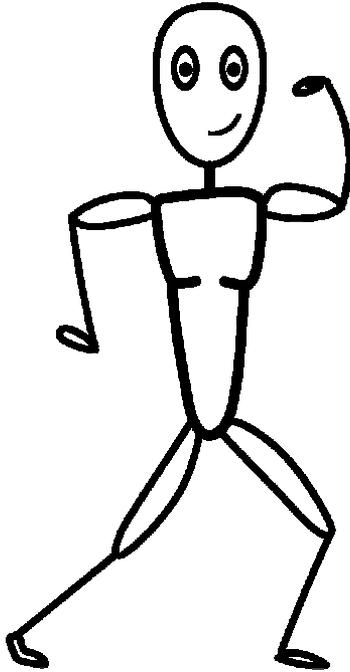


Our chief ally in combating UnBalancer is **Balancer**.

Balancer is the internal stabilizer that handles day-to-day stresses. It keeps us sane and balanced most of the time and, for the most part, holds UnBalancer at bay.

Emphasis on “for the most part.” When Balancer falls, things can get wonky fast.

REBALANCER



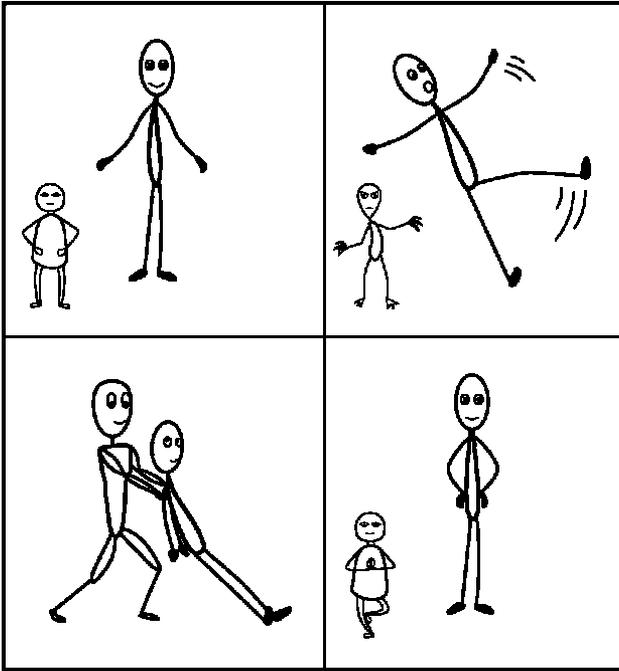
Fortunately, Balancer is not our only ally.

Balancer's trusty sidekick, **ReBalancer**, leaps into action when UnBalancer gets the upper hand.

ReBalancer is a good friend to have in a crisis.

BALANCED, UNBALANCED, REBALANCED

Here's how these folks work to keep us sane.



1. Balancer operates in the background to maintain our equilibrium.
2. UnBalancer trips us up!
3. ReBalancer comes to the rescue.
4. A stronger, wiser Balancer keeps us stable again.

PART I.

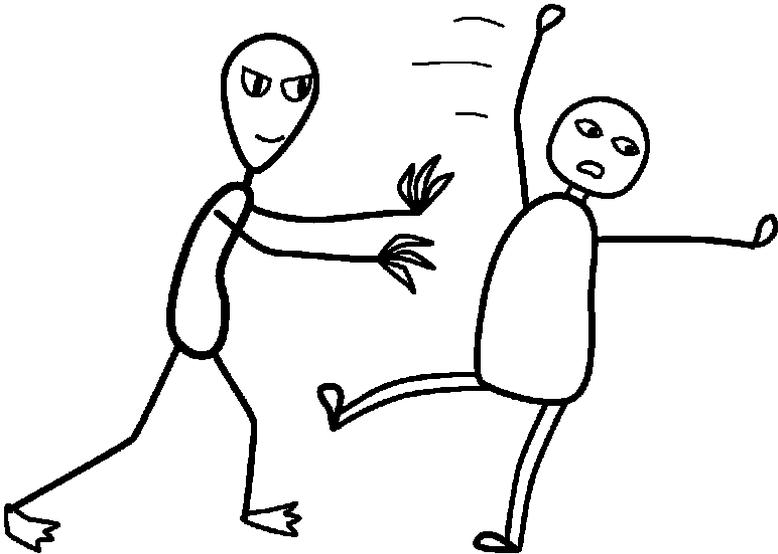
BALANCE LOST

If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.

If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat.

If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.

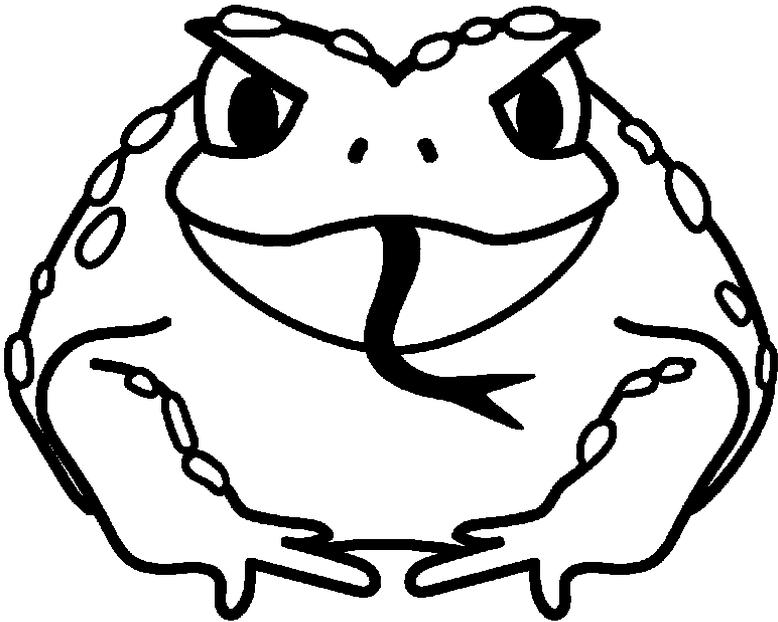
- **Sun Tzu**, *The Art of War*



1. THINGS FALL APART

Disorder came from order, fear came from courage, weakness came from strength.

- Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*



“The Under Toad,” Walt said. “I’m trying to see it. How big is it?”

And Garp and Helen and Duncan held their breath; they realized that all these years Walt had been dreading a giant toad, lurking offshore, waiting to suck him under and drag him out to sea. The terrible Under Toad.

Garp tried to imagine it with him. Would it ever surface? Did it ever float? Or was it always down under, slimy and bloated and

ever-watchful for ankles its coated tongue could snare? The vile Under Toad.

In John Irving's novel *The World According to Garp*, the Under Toad is a monster young Walt Garp imagined when he misunderstood a warning to beware of the undertow. For Walt's parents, T. S. and Helen Garp, it becomes a code word for anxiety. "*When the traffic was heavy, when the road was icy—when depression had moved in overnight—they said to each other, 'The Under Toad is strong today.'*"

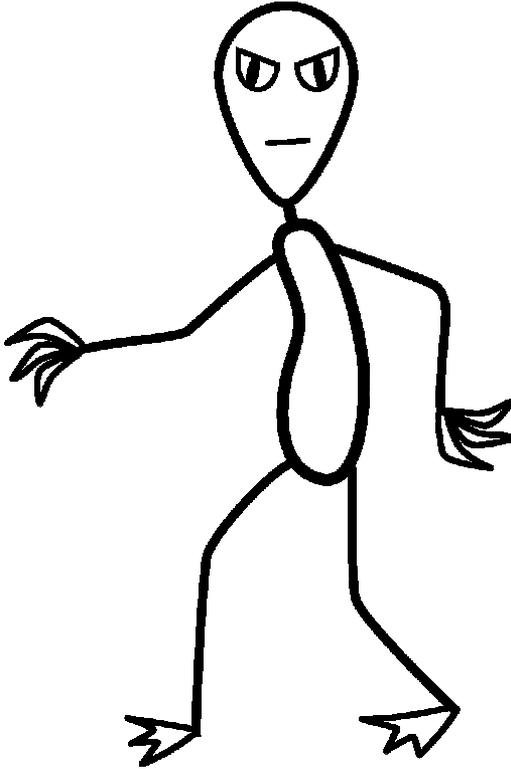
Enter: UnBalancer

In the physical world, things go out of balance when there's a design flaw, when something breaks, when unequal forces press on an object. Imbalance typically worsens over time, gradually compromising the whole structure.

An unbalanced tire rattles the car. A leak in a roof leads to a ceiling falling in. When winds vibrated the Tacoma Narrows bridge to its resonant frequency in 1940, the whole structure danced briefly and then catastrophically collapsed. When an O-ring failed in the Space Shuttle Challenger, the spacecraft exploded.

The same thing happens to us, individually and collectively, when the forces that throw us out of balance are at play. We begin to wear and to ripple, sometimes to the point of collapse, sometimes to explosion.

These myriad forces have a common root in **UnBalancer**.



UnBalancer is *not only* Chaos, though Chaos can be its confederate, nor is it *only* Accident, Misfortune, Entropy, Chance, Obliviousness, Fear, Greed, Distrust, Anger, Hatred, Passion, Illness, or any of the other internal and external forces that sometimes knock us out of alignment.

It's all of these things, and it's also more.

Sometimes UnBalancer is blunt and direct. When life takes a turn for the worse—we lose a job, a relationship, or suddenly face

a difficult health problem—UnBalancer rubs its hands in glee. When sudden tragedy strikes, UnBalancer does handstands and turns cartwheels, jumping for joy.

But more often, the forces of UnBalancer are subtle. Even when nothing is obviously going wrong, UnBalancer is a magician who draws our attention to whatever's in the foreground so it can work its mischief unseen.

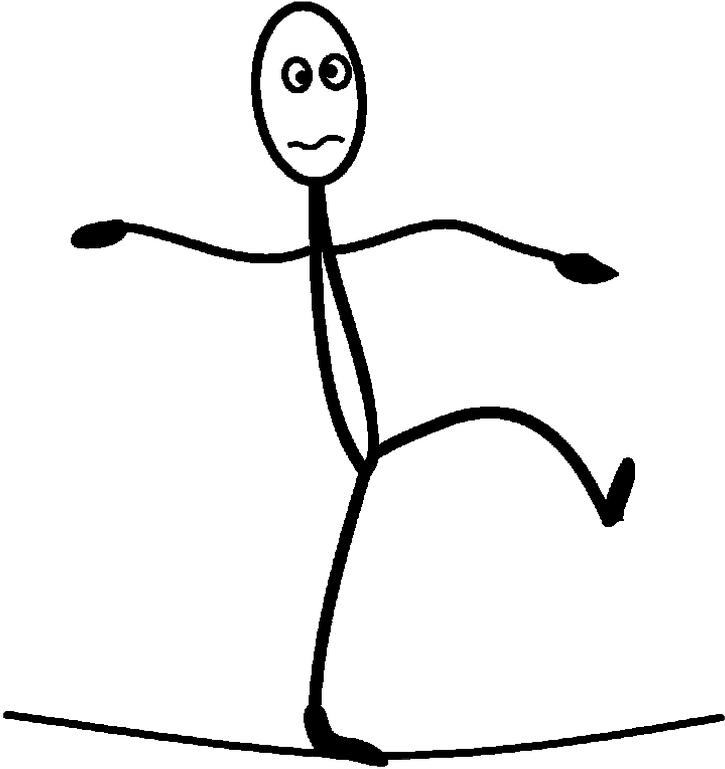
UnBalancer is patient.

Like the frog (or toad) contentedly sitting in a pot of gradually heating water, unaware it's about to get cooked, the path to imbalance is often almost imperceptible at first. When the books are out of balance, for example, the road to ruin may already be paved, but nobody notices. The sh*t hits the fan when there's nothing left to borrow. Witness the financial collapse of 1929. Or 2008.

On a global scale, the inventions of agriculture and manufacturing have, over thousands of years, altered the environment, unbalancing the Earth itself.

In our individual lives, when the teeter-totter of work and leisure gets too heavily weighted toward one or the other, things go awry. When our diet gets out of sync with the nutrients our bodies need to function, our health starts to break down. The same goes for imbalance in waking and sleeping, thinking and doing, yin and yang.

UnBalancer revels in our unawareness.



UnBalancer is strong today.

So how do we reckon with it?

Stay tuned!