

In Alignment

December 24, 2014

Ajaan Lee used to say that when you sit up straight in meditation—not leaning to the left or the right, forward or backward—you want to make that a symbol for your mind. The mind is sitting up straight, too. It's not leaning forward toward the future, back toward the past, to the left to the things you like, to the right things you don't like. So try to get your mind in alignment here with your body. Your body's sitting right here; you want your mind to sit right here too. Don't go running off. And try keep everything balanced; keep the breath balanced, experiment a bit to see what feels just right.

Just like a balance trying to find its point of an even keel, it'll lean a little bit to the left, a little bit to the right, but just enough so that you eventually know what's straight up and down. Then try to keep it there.

This is our point of normalcy: the mind at ease in the present moment, just being aware. For most of us, that's not normalcy. Our normalcy is something else, thinking about all kinds of things all the time, but that's the normalcy of someone who's bent over or whose body is out of alignment, so try to bring things back into alignment. After all, this is the middle path and this is the middle: right concentration with its requisites of all the factors of the path.

This evening I was looking at a little video clip on Buddhism in Thailand, and the narrator was a guy from England who at the very end of the show says, "Obviously, Buddhism in Thailand is facing a crisis point; on the one hand, there is rampant materialism, and on the other hand, there's moral purity." He had been to a forest monastery and that was moral purity. He said, "Of course, as good Buddhists, we should all find the spot in between."

What does that mean, though?—"the spot in between." There is the phrase, "Just the right amount of wrong," but that's the advertising slogan for a casino hotel. And as Ajaan Maha Boowa says, the defilements have their sense of what's just right, too: right in the middle of the pillow, right in the middle of all kinds of activities that actually are pulling you off, out of alignment.

What you want is the Buddha's middle, and it may be a little bit hard to get used to if we've broken precepts in the past, or if our life is involved a lot in greed, aversion, and delusion. It's like any process where, say, you try to get your body into alignment. You go for a treatment, and the first couple of times it's hard to keep things in alignment after the treatment; you find yourself going back to your old ways of walking, sitting, etc. But if you keep at it long enough,

you begin to realize that this new middle here, the new alignment, actually is a lot better, and you're more inclined to try to maintain it.

So even though it may feel unusual at first, you begin to gain a sense that this is the point of just right. As for what happened in the past, what you did in the past: Remember the Buddha's statement that someone who used to be heedless and then becomes heedful illumines the world in the same way that a moon at night, when it's released from the clouds, illumines the world below. In other words, don't let the clouds get in the way of your new brightness. They may come back a little bit, but you realize, okay, this is where you'd much rather be, and over time it does become your point of normalcy.

So think of yourself sitting here with the body perfectly balanced, your mind perfectly balanced; everything is in alignment, and try to get used to this new alignment. If there are any fears that you won't be able to keep it up, remember that it's natural for there to be some slips, but the more time you spend at it, the easier it becomes to recover from the slips. And again, as Ajaan Maha Boowa has said, "The practice is not a chopping block waiting to execute those who give their lives to it." It actually gives you a deeper sense of well-being, a higher sense of well-being, a more secure sense of well-being. Regardless of what you thought were normal ways of practicing, normal ways of living, you come to see this state as true normalcy. This is balance.

Or again, with Ajaan Lee: He said, "Look at the Buddha image in front of you. He's not disturbed by anything. People bring flowers, he's not disturbed; people create a mess here in the hall, he wouldn't be disturbed." Try to have that same sense as you're sitting here, both with regard to things outside and to things happening inside the mind. You want to find the point of awareness that's aware and that's it: knowing these things as they come as they go, not getting thrown off balance. It's when you're not thrown off balance that you have a much better sense of what's up and down, what's right and left, what's something that should be done, what's something that shouldn't be done. These things become a lot clearer when the mind itself is clear and at normalcy.

There was a famous Southern writer who was asked by a Northerner why Southern writers like to write about freaks so much, and she said, "Because we recognize one when we see one." In the same way, you want to have the ability to notice the freaks in your own mind and to recognize them for what they are. But to do that you've got to side with the point of balance and normalcy. So keep working on making this your default position, the position to which the mind always returns. That's how you're able to set things straight inside.