

Xtreme Drama

October 16, 2008

One of the forest ajaans, talking about the early years of his practice, talked about how his mind would progress, progress, progress, then the whole thing would come crashing down, with nothing left. Then it would start progressing again, and it would crash again. He began to notice there was a cyclical pattern to the ups and downs. He learned to anticipate them—and in particular, the crashes. And the way he got around this was to decide not to pay any attention to this idea—he didn't care whether it was progressing or regressing, he was just going to stick with his practice. In his case it was repeating the word *buddho*.

In other words, he decided he wasn't going to buy in to the drama that had begun to infuse his practice. He had developed quite a narrative of how things would go up and then down. And because he had bought into the drama, that just reinforced the pattern. The way out was not to buy into it, to have a more sensible attitude toward the whole thing. Whatever ups or downs there may be, you don't have to take them all that seriously. You just stick with your practice. You have to find the middle way between the extremes that the dramatic side of our personality likes to read into things.

The Buddha had a similar problem. In his case, he started out with the extreme of sensual indulgence. Then in order to get away from what he saw as the problem of sensual indulgence, he went totally into self torture. He was an extremist. If it wasn't one extreme, it was going to be the other. Thinking that deals in large abstractions tends to push us to extremism. And the type of thinking that likes to deal in drama goes in the same way as well.

So there's an ordinariness to the practice that sometimes we resist. It's like the poets and artists of the 19th century who despised the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie were prudent and sensible, and the poets hated them. There was nothing dramatic in their lives. But living a dramatic life could be pretty miserable. It may make for great art, but it's a miserable life. I read a novel one time in which a guy had been put in prison for murder. He was reading letters from his wife who was going through psychiatric counseling, in which her grief counselor had taught her to go step by step through the stages of her grief. And you could tell from tone of the narrative that the novelist despised grief counseling. It didn't have the

drama, didn't have the excitement or grandeur of someone who gets excited enough to go out and kill somebody and then has to suffer the consequences.

Again, that's the kind of mindset that deals in extremes. Would you like to be somebody who is constantly going through one extreme or the other? Part of the mind enjoys it. It makes life more interesting. But it doesn't really help in terms of finding a solid happiness. There's nothing dramatic about solid happiness. There's nothing dramatic about a sensible attitude that learns how to deal pragmatically with issues as they arise, that refuses to be blinded by extremes. That's when you learn to get past the romanticism and the drama of the extremes. That's when you really get on the path, and your practice really matures.

If you have a tendency to extremes—we usually don't have just one extreme in our practice, we go from one extreme to the opposite extreme, back-and-forth—you've got to find ways of modulating that. This means modulating both your physical experience of extremes, and your mental attitude toward them.

I once had a student who was manic-depressive. She found that a large part of the problem was anticipating her ups and downs. The anticipation in and of itself would exacerbate the extremes. But she also found that in her extreme moods, the experience of the body was very different. This is where the breath became helpful. When she was feeling down, she could breathe in a way that would add more breath energy, make the body lighter, lighter, lighter, so she didn't feel so weighed down all the time. And without the physical experience of being weighed down, her depressive mind states didn't have so much to latch onto. This began to cut through the pattern. Similarly, when she found she was getting more manic, she could breathe in a way that made the body heavier. She would think a lot about the earth element, find whatever sensations in the body were solid, still, heavy, and substantial, and just focus on those sensations. That would balance things out. It would balance out the energy both in body and mind. So gradually the wild mood swings became a thing of the past. And her life wasn't as dramatic as it was before, but it was a more reasonable life, a more manageable life.

That's the physical side. There is also extremism in our thoughts. If it's not total sensual indulgence, it's total abstinence. When the mind looks at abstinence as wrong, so it goes running to the indulgence without really realizing that there is a middle way. There are sensual pleasures that are innocent, that are harmless. Mahakassapa, who was one of the strictest of the Buddha's monks, has verses talking about the beauties of nature, how much he enjoys getting out into the wilds. Apparently this is the first wilderness poetry in the world. And so even the strictest

arahants have room in their practice for pleasures that are innocent. As he said, being in the forest refreshed him. And the mind does need refreshing. You've got to find ways of dealing with its moods without giving in to them, and realize that you don't have to think in extremes. There are ways of enjoying some of the pleasures of the senses, because they gladden the mind.

That's one of the duties we have in the meditation. Look at the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation. When you find that the mind is getting down, its energy is low, you figure out ways of gladdening it. Part of that can mean learning how to think about the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha in ways that you find inspiring—anything that gives enjoyment to the practice, that doesn't get you all tied up. It's not that sensual pleasures are bad. The beautiful things, the nice things in the world are not the problem. The problem comes from these obsessive plans we build around them: "This is going to be really great, this is going to be really good, this is going to be worth whatever effort goes into it. Whatever harm it may cause on the side, who cares? This is what I want." That's the problem, a very unrealistic attitude toward what sensual pleasure will do for us. That, you've got to watch out for.

But the pleasure that comes from a harmless activity—any activity in which you're actually doing good for yourself and other people—is perfectly okay. It's not that the breath is the only way of finding pleasure in the practice. There's a pleasure in generosity. There's a pleasure in being virtuous. There's pleasure in finding time alone with nature. All these are perfectly legitimate ways of looking for happiness, legitimate ways of gladdening the mind.

The same with steadying the mind. If you find that your thinking is running away with you, you've got to figure out ways of just settling down and being really, really still, so that the extremes of your thinking don't pull you away from your center. It can happen that your thinking begins to follow from an innocent conclusion to the next conclusion, and to the next conclusion, and then runs away with you. This is a problem with being logical without being reasonable: It can totally pull you away from the practice.

In Thailand, they have a term, "Thinking a lot," and it's not a good thing. It means your thinking is taking over. The logic is there but without the reason. Reason is when you think about things with a sense of balance, a sense of proportion.

So if you find your thinking running way, what ways do you have of getting your awareness to be still, settled down, solid, solid, solid? Think of the Buddha's

meditation on the elements: making the mind like earth; making it like water, undisturbed by whatever it washes; wind, undisturbed by whatever it blows away; fire, undisturbed by whatever it burns. And you've got those qualities in your body. So whichever quality seems the best to make you feel solid and grounded—it's most often earth, but not necessarily—work on that quality.

This takes a lot of the drama out of life, but it's a much more sensible, reasonable, happier way of living. The Buddha was nothing if not sensible. He had explored all the extremes and he realized that there was nothing there. And his life story makes for great drama, the first part at least. After he became the Buddha there wasn't as much drama, at least there was no emotional drama for him, but it was a much happier life.

There was once a cartoon in the New Yorker with man sitting in his living room, meditating. His wife was off in another room, looking in the door at him together with a friend, and complaining to her friend: She said, "George used to be such an interesting neurotic before he learned meditation." It's one thing to be interesting, another thing to be happy and wise. So watch out for the extremes and the type of thinking that indulges in extremes, for it will drive you off the path.

This is why the Buddha has that phrase: having respect for concentration. The concentrated mind is solid, still, stable, extremely undramatic, but with a very strong sense of well-being. That's why it was the first factor of the path the Buddha latched onto after he had explored all the various extremes. Here is a form of pleasure that's harmless, and you can then use that as your test case. Any pleasure that doesn't pull you away from this, that doesn't make it difficult for the mind to settle down, can be something to energize you on the path. Any form of thinking that doesn't pull you away from this, helps you to settle down, can be part of the path. And you find that that kind of thinking makes a lot more subtle distinctions, doesn't go running off after extremes.

There are some teachers who criticize idealism, but it's not the idealism that's bad. It's the extremism, the absolutism: that's the problem. There are a lot of ideals that are really, really worth exploring, really worth following. Ajaan Mun in his last sermon mentioned the determination not to come back ever again to be the laughingstock of the defilements. Hold on to that determination, he said. Never let it go. And the determination requires, one, that you believe it is humanly possible. Convince yourself that it's possible to follow this path to get results. Hold onto that. That's an ideal you never want to abandon. And two, convince yourself that it's not only humanly possible, it's possible for you and you are going to do it. You stick

with that ideal. If you find any extreme forms of thinking getting in the way of that, those are the things you've got to drop. Focus on what helps to get you to understand better and better exactly what are these defilements that are laughing at you. They pull you off into the extremes, and they laugh at you for being so gullible. You run back to the other extreme, and they laugh at you again.

It's when you're on the path that they can't see you. As the Buddha said, this is the path where Mara can't detect you, Mara can't see you. You're invisible. This requires a lot of skill, but it's an interesting skill to develop. It may not be dramatic, but there comes a strong sense of well-being and accomplishment when you've mastered it. That's what you're looking for.