

## Between Either & Or

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Ajaan Fuang said that when he first went to stay with Ajaan Mun, he was very afraid of Ajaan Mun because Ajaan Mun was very hard to predict. One of the monks might get sick and ask Ajaan Mun for some medicine, and Ajaan Mun would give him a stern lecture about taking refuge in medicine. “Why aren’t you taking refuge in your practice?” he would say. Another monk would get sick and he wouldn’t ask for medicine, and Ajaan Mun would criticize him, “Hey, we’ve got the medicine. Why aren’t you using it?” As Ajaan Fuang said, it sounded like you were going to get criticized no matter what you did.

But after staying with Ajaan Mun for a while, he began to realize that there was a pattern. If the medicine was there, you would use it. If it wasn’t there, you made do with what you did have. In other words, you’d make do with your practice.

That’s the kind of thing you learn by watching your teacher, and living with the teacher over time. As the Buddha said, there are a lot of things you’re going to learn only by spending a lot of time with a teacher and being very observant, and in particular, getting a sense of “just right” in the practice.

The Buddha talks about the middle path, or the middle way, from the very beginning of his teachings. What’s interesting, though, is that even though he presents this as one of the most important principles of his teachings, he doesn’t explain it very much. In his first sermon, he says that the middle way is the way that avoids the extremes of sensual indulgence and self-torture. But there are very few passages in the Canon where he talks about what makes the middle way middle. There are other passages where he talks about how the teaching on dependent co-arising avoids certain extremes, but these are very subtle extremes: the extremes of existence or non-existence—in other words, the labels that we place in the mind, saying that things exist or don’t exist. Or the labels that would say that the person acting is one thing, the person receiving the results is somebody else, or is the same person: That’s another set of extremes avoided by dependent co-arising. Those are pretty subtle.

Even more subtle is the passage where the deva comes to ask the Buddha, “So, how did you cross over the stream?” And the Buddha said, “I crossed without moving forward, and without staying in place,” and of course, that totally befuddles the deva. It’s a very subtle avoidance of the extremes of either doing something new or sticking with what you’re doing, moving to a new place or staying where you are. It’s an important principle, but, again, it’s one that’s not explained. It’s one you have to learn through the practice.

Because all too often we’re like—well, like the Buddha himself. He started out with a life of extreme sensual indulgence. When he realized that that wasn’t going to lead to true happiness, what did he do? He went to the opposite extreme, self-torture. You see this a lot among former addicts who come to the Dhamma. They indulged in alcohol, they indulged in drugs, and now they’re going to indulge in starving themselves, trying to deny all kinds of sensual pleasure. Well, neither extreme, as the Buddha pointed out, is going to work.

It’s easiest to think in extremes because extremes can be expressed in short sound bites. The middle way requires being very observant, experimenting, and developing a sense of what’s the just-right point in the practice. There’s some confusion about this coming from the Thai language. The word for “just right” in Thai is *phor di*, which literally means “enough good.” And many people will interpret that as “good enough,” which means, “okay.” You don’t have to try to be really good, just good enough. But that’s not what the ajaans are really saying when they say you should do things *phor di*. *Phor di* means you have to find the point that’s just right—and sometimes “just right” requires a lot more than “good enough.” Sometimes it lies outside of the box entirely.

Like the Buddha’s approach to pleasure and pain: It’s not that you try to find a middling point where each pleasure and pain gets neutralized. You pursue certain pleasures—the pleasures of *jhana*, the pleasures that come from mastering virtue and concentration, generosity—so that you can use them. Use the pleasure of concentration to put the mind in

the proper mood and the proper frame of mind, making it stable enough so it can really see things in a balanced way. And often this requires a lot of concentration-pleasure to get the mind tamed, not just little middling doses.

At the same time, the Buddha has you use pain. Pain is a noble truth—when you use it as a noble truth. In other words, you use it to understand: What’s the mind doing around the pain? Sometimes you’ll gain this understanding with subtle pains, and sometimes it requires more extreme ones, when the mind is cornered and can’t find any other way out aside from sharpening its discernment into what your perceptions are doing to build a bridge from the pain into the mind.

So instead of having you pursue pleasure and pain as goals in and of themselves, the Buddha has you use them as tools. That’s an entirely different kind of approach. We’re not looking for a middling path that’s halfway between pleasure and pain. We’re looking for a new way to approach both pleasures and pains.

You have to keep this in mind all the time as you’re practicing: Where is the “just right” point in what you’re doing? Sometimes it’s outside the box. If you’re the sort of person who’s been angry, you might say, “Well, I need to be really loving and compassionate,” and you try being a Pollyanna for a while, and you realize that doesn’t work. So you go thrashing back and forth, feeling that you’re either too passive or too aggressive. It’s not the passivity or the being aggressive that’s the issue: It’s what your intention is when you’re dealing with people.

Look at the Buddha. In some cases he would totally avoid getting into arguments, and in other cases he’d pursue an argument and be really aggressive. So you have to realize: There was something else going on. The passivity or the aggressiveness was not the issue. It was his intention. His intention was kind. At the same time, he’d have a sense that some people would be just a waste of time. They were in the argument simply to win, to make points. They weren’t trying to learn anything. Those were the people he’d avoid.

Like the brahman who came to see him one time and asked, “What kind of teaching do you teach?” The Buddha sensed that the brahman was looking for a fight, and so he responded, “I teach the sort of doctrine where people don’t get into useless arguments.” That was the end of that. But then there was the case of Saccaka, who came to make the Buddha sweat and shake, as he said. And he ended up being the one sweating and shaking because of the Buddha’s aggressive response to his arguments. Saccaka was trying to say that everybody knows that form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness are your self. And the Buddha picked his argument apart, to the point where Saccaka really lost face, in front of all the people that he, Saccaka, had brought along to watch his victory.

So the issue is the intention. But then again, you can’t take that as a sound-bite teaching either, because there are certain actions the Buddha said are inherently unskillful and you have avoid those. If intention were everything, you could say, “Well, I have compassionate intention in”—whatever: killing, stealing, having illicit sex, all the way down the line. But skillfulness doesn’t work that way. In some areas there’s a very clear right and wrong. Just like those “Bear Awareness” signs in Alaska. There’re some areas with very clear dos-and-don’ts. For example, as the Buddha pointed out, killing is never skillful. Stealing is never skillful. Illicit sex is never skillful. Lying is never skillful.

Divisive speech, coarse speech, idle chatter: There are a few cases in those three where you can engage in them, but you have to know a sense of moderation. This doesn’t mean that you do them a little bit. You engage in them only when you’re confident that your intention is skillful, when you have to speak harshly with somebody to get that person’s attention, when you have to warn people about someone who could take advantage of them, or when you have to engage in friendly chatter to keep the group going smoothly. But those are areas where you have to be very, very careful.

In terms of the mind, the Buddha said, inordinate greed, ill will, wrong views are never right. So these are areas where there’s a clear right and wrong. But then there are a lot of areas where “right” is at that point of “just right” in the middle. That’s where you have to watch for your intention; you have to watch for the results that you’re expecting and that you actually get.

Here is where it's good to have good examples, which is one of the reasons why we have the monastic Sangha. The Buddha didn't write meditation manuals and hand them out. He set up a monastic Sangha so that there would be people living together and learning the kinds of lessons that you learn from living with people who are further along in the path, seeing how they handle different situations: the lessons you pick up by osmosis, by using your powers of observation.

So there are no easy sound bites for finding the middle way. It's a body of knowledge that you pick up as you practice, as you live with other people who are practicing and are further along on the path. This way, you learn how to look at incidents and choices from a wide variety of perspectives. In the beginning, it's awkward because you find yourself choosing the wrong issues to focus on in particular situations at particular times. But over time, if you're really observant and willing to learn and willing to listen, you get a better and better sense of this point of "just right."

It's like people going to live in the wilds of Alaska. The people who survive are the ones who are not doctrinaire. They're the ones who figure out what works and what doesn't work. Sometimes some modern gear is very useful, and other times you want to stick with the old ways of doing things. And how do you know which is which? Through experimentation and also through learning from people who have been there before. Some areas have clear do's-and-don't's. Other areas are like that very last item on the "Bear Awareness" sign: where the bear has attacked you and is chewing on you. You have to decide, "Is this bear chewing on me out of curiosity or out of hunger?" If he's chewing out of curiosity, just lie there playing dead, and the bear will lose interest and go away. But if the bear is chewing out of hunger, you've got to fight for all you're worth. Now, how are you going to know the bear's intention? You have to be very sensitive, very alert, very mindful, right at a point where most people are losing their minds entirely.

This is one of the reasons why we practice: to put the mind in a position where it can learn these subtle lessons of where "just right" is even in difficult situations. Be willing to drop some of your doctrinaire ideas that everything has to be either this or that. The Buddha himself gave good lessons in this area when he was answering questions. People would ask him to come down on one side or the other of a question, and in some cases he would. In others he'd say, "No, this is not a question that deserves a categorical answer." It might deserve an analytical answer. It might deserve to be put aside—if the question was framed in totally the wrong way.

So not everything is either/or. As it turns out, many of the most important issues are the ones where the answer is in between the either or the or, and you have to find exactly right where that is. As you practice, it gets more and more subtle, as I said, this distinction between the way the mind slaps the label of existence or non-existence on things, or the choices that it forces on itself to move or stay. Are you going to keep framing your choices in the same way, or are you going to think outside the frame? Sometimes the right answer is one of two alternatives, sometimes it's right between the two alternatives, sometimes it's off the continuum entirely.

So to develop that kind of sensitivity, you need to look for the point of "just right" in everything you do. It's only in this way that your sense of "just right" gets more and more on-target in taking you nearer to the goal.