

The Middle Way

January 9, 2006

The path we're following here is the middle way. The Buddha's first explanation of how it's middle is that it avoids two extremes: the extreme of self-torture and the extreme of sensual indulgence. A problem with us as meditators is that we tend to veer off to the left, veer off to the right, and very rarely stay on the middle of the path. Either we spend our days in self-indulgence and complacency, or we use the path to punish ourselves. So a basic skill in following this path is to learn how to recognize whether you're going to the right or to the left, and learn how to bring yourself back on the middle way.

There's an element of pleasure and enjoyment in the path that doesn't count as self-indulgence. So get the mind to settle down. Be with the body in the present moment. Learn how to breathe in such way that it feels good. Learn how to breathe in such way that gives rise to a sense of fullness and refreshment. This is an important part of the path.

Just this morning I was reading a piece on feelings, saying that you should simply allow feelings to come and go on their own. You shouldn't try to produce them. Now, the author said that this was following the practice of contemplation of feelings in the establishing of mindfulness. But the Buddha himself didn't teach it that way. In his instructions on breath meditation, which are supposed to be a practical application of the four establishings of mindfulness, right there in the section on feelings, you train yourself to breathe in and breathe out so that you're sensitive to pleasure, sensitive to rapture and refreshment.

This is an important skill in the path for several the reasons. One, having that sense of pleasure and refreshment gives you energy, makes it an enjoyable path, makes sure that you're not punishing yourself with the practice. It gives you an alternative to the typical sensual pleasures that most people are looking for.

As the Buddha once said, the reason we're so hooked on sensual pleasures is that we don't see any other escape from pain. So we go for the pretty sights and the nice sounds and nice smells and nice tastes and nice tactile sensations. Even though they've never really given any total satisfaction, at least they seem to be better than pain, and that's the best we see. Our range of awareness, our range of experiences doesn't expand to include anything better, so that's why we're obsessed with these things.

So one of the purposes of developing a sense of ease, refreshment, rapture in the practice is to give you a better alternative. Otherwise, when you come down hard on your attachment to sensual pleasures but you don't have anything better to offer yourself, then either it's a grudging abandoning of the pleasure, which means you don't abandon it for long, or it's just an act of self-punishment, which is not only not lasting, but also not especially healthy.

So it's important to learn how to develop a sense of ease and well-being, pleasure, rapture, fullness, and refreshment that's not sensual. Look for it here, simply in the way you breathe in, the way you breathe out. What feels good right now? Don't worry about what Ajaan Lee said, what anybody else says, look at what feels good in your body right now. Breathe that way. Often what you think Ajaan Lee said or what the other masters say is filtered through your ignorance. So there comes a point in the meditation where you simply have to put the instructions aside and just focus on what feels really good right now as you breathe in, what feels really good as you breathe out. Expand your imagination as to different ways you can experience the breath in the body. Explore that right here right now. That kind of pleasure doesn't count as self-indulgent. It's part of the path that you're on: the middle way.

Another reason why it's important to develop this sense of pleasure is because there are times when you do have to come down hard on yourself, not in the sense of self-tormenting, but simply because your defilements are getting unruly. After all, the Buddha didn't call his teaching just Dhamma. It's "this Dhamma and Vinaya." The verb that goes along with Vinaya, *vinati*, means to subdue. You've got to come down hard sometimes on your complacency, on your pride, on your greed, your delusion, your anger.

This is why discipline is such an important part of the path. It's a part we don't like to talk about. Look at how many books on American Buddhism deal with discipline: almost zero. Yet it's an essential part of the path. The Buddha kept referring to his teaching as Dhamma and Discipline. If you can't come down hard on your own defilements, sometimes the teacher has to come down hard on your own defilements for you. And don't think that he enjoys that. It takes effort.

So learn how to do it for yourself. Look for your pride. Look for your greed. Look for your lust. Realize that if you don't take care of them, nobody else is going to take care of them. And if you simply let them grow and have their own way, they're going to take over your life. They're going to push that middle way out of kilter, out of alignment, and you find yourself running off into self-indulgence, which is not the path.

So be clear on this point: that without discipline, the path doesn't go anywhere. This is one of the reasons why the Vinaya is so important, even all those little rules, because so many of your defilements take little forms to begin with. They say, "I'm nothing really serious. Why are you coming down on me?" Well, it's like a vine. The vine is tender, has nice downy leaves, a nice downy stem, nice downy tendrils, and it winds itself around the tree. At first it looks so harmless and small, but then it winds itself around and around and around and gets stronger and stronger, thicker and thicker, and ultimately can bring down whole trees. As Ajaan Mun once said to Ajaan Fuang, people are rarely blinded by whole logs of wood, but they can be blinded by fine sawdust. It's the little things that you have to watch out for. If you don't catch them, they'll take root and grow. They get into your eyes. When fine sawdust gets in your eyes, it blinds you.

So take a good look at your practice. Make sure it's on the middle path, that it's not self-indulgence and not self-torture. That's what you're looking for. The Buddha provides you with the ease of concentration. He often compares it to food. You want to feed the mind so that it's willing to listen to what your discernment has to tell you: Yes, you've been remiss. Yes, you've been sloppy. You've been complacent. You've been self-indulgent—messages we don't like to hear. You're more likely to listen when the mind feels well fed, when it feels nourished.

But if you're really serious about the practice, you want to hear the lessons whenever they come, whether you're feeling hungry or nourished or whatever. That's when you can begin to trust yourself. After all, following the path is a skill. When you work on a skill, you want to be able to look objectively at your handiwork and say, "This looks really good." That's because you've put a lot of effort into it, you've put a lot of time and attention, and the effort and the results come out well.

Even if they don't come out yet, at least you want to be able to look at yourself and say, "Yes, I did put time in it. I did put effort in it. Maybe I'm not as skillful as I'd like to be, but at least I can't blame it on laziness." That's how the skill develops. It may take time, but it's all time well spent. As the Buddha once said, there is something miraculous about his teaching: The effort put into it really does give the results he promised. There are a very few things in the world that can do that. And the results he promised are of high caliber. So give it high-caliber attention; give it high-caliber care. That way, you get the results you're looking for.