

In the Details

February 11, 2010

The path of practice we're following here is often called the middle way. Many of us tend to interpret that as right in the middle of our comfort zone: not too extreme, not too demanding. But the result of that kind of middle way is not very effective.

The Buddha says there are two ways of gauging what kind of effort is just right. One is in terms of your own strength. When you're sick and feeling physically weak, there's only so much you can do. At times like that, you have to adjust your effort to what you can manage. But when you're feeling stronger, you should look at the second gauge: what's really called for at any one particular time in your practice. As the Buddha says, when you live at your ease and you find that the defilements are falling away, then fine, live at your ease. There's no need to go out and prove something by forcing yourself. But if you find that by living at your ease, the defilements are just piling on, you've got to practice with the pain. Force yourself more than you want to, however much is needed to deal with that particular defilement, that particular situation, that particular state of mind.

But it's not the case that you always have to push yourself to the limit.

The Buddha gives the analogy of a fletcher making an arrow. The fletcher has to put the arrow over the fire, to bend it one way, to bend it another way. The heat will cause the wood to expand so that he can get the arrow perfectly straight. But once it's straight, he doesn't have to put it over the fire anymore. In the same way, you exert yourself when you have to, but when the mind is in good shape, you don't have to make the same sort of effort. This, however, requires an awful lot of honesty on your part, because the mind does tend to side with itself and say, "Well, not too much."

Ajaan Maha Boowa has a great line. He says that when we're practicing, everything is just moderation, moderation, moderation, moderation, but when our defilements come in and we're following them, the word "moderation" or the word "middle way" just disappears. We go with them all the way. Whatever they require, you're often up for it. So why is it, then, that when we're doing the path, we're not up for what's required by the path? This is something you have to look into. And it's something each person has to look into for his or her self. This is where you have to develop a lot of honesty. Are you getting results? What does it mean to get results? What happens when you push yourself harder? How long can you push yourself harder? What kind of stamina do you have?

I've told you that story about the time Ajaan Fuang, out of nowhere, after a very hard-working day, said, "Tonight we're going to sit up and meditate all night long." Being brand new there, I complained immediately: "Oh, I can't sit up all night tonight. I've been working all day." Ajaan Fuang said, "Is it going to kill you?" "Well, no." "Then you can do it." And I was able to do it.

So you want to take that as your guide, when you're sitting up late at night, and part of the mind says, "Okay, that's enough for now." Ask yourself, "Will sitting a little bit longer kill you?" If you find that you're really falling asleep and there's no way you're going to wake up, you might as well go to sleep. But if you find that you can give yourself some more time, then give yourself some more time. You don't have to worry about tomorrow. If there's energy, if you're up for it, stick with it. See how far you can go. And see what results you get.

If you don't experiment like this, you have no standards with which to compare things. It's only after you've pushed yourself too hard that you know what too hard is. And it's not going to kill you. If you find that you've gone too far, you can back up a little bit. But all too often, when we're not willing to make that extra push, then the mind has lots and lots of excuses, starting with the term "middle way." "Don't push yourself too hard. After all, that turns into self-torment and that's the wrong way." Well, how far is self-torment? What the Buddha called self-torment was starving himself, forcing himself not to breathe, getting so thin, so malnourished that just the act of defecating or urinating would cause him to pass out. Now, have you gotten that far in your practice yet? No.

We're not advocating that you go anywhere near there, but still, it is important that you push yourself more than you might want to so that you can learn what the range is. It's like getting a new stereo. You turn up all the dials to see what it's capable of before you decide what's just right. The important point here being your sense of honesty: What is getting results?

A defilement comes up in the mind—greed comes up in the mind, lust comes up in the mind, aversion comes up in the mind—and if you can look at it and it just drops away, you know you're making progress. But if you find that it comes up and just latches on, and you have trouble shaking it, then there's more work to be done.

This requires strategy, knowing how much you're capable of, and realizing that you're in this for the long term. The results may not be absolute, but at the very least you want to be able to see how the mind can drop a defilement as quickly as possible. Lust comes up, well start taking the skin off. You've all see the Body Shows; you know what's under the skin. And those are prettified versions. With an actual human being, there's blood and all kinds of other stuff coming out. If

lust is taking hold of the mind, can you hold on to that perception? Which part of the mind says to drop it, drop it, drop that perception? You don't have to listen to it. Just hold on to whatever perception of the body gives you a sense that it really is unattractive, and it's not worth the lust. And that you're a fool for getting involved with that.

The problem with lust is not just the imperfect objects that it focuses on, but also all the things that we do under the power of lust. Remind yourself of those, too: all the stupid things you've done in the past because of lust. Bring those to mind. And keep at it. The lust may still be there, lurking around, but you can just keep at it, keep at it. Just because it's still lurking there doesn't mean that it's not being weakened. At the very least, you're not giving in to it totally. And that's important. The same goes with anger. How much longer do you want to hold on to that anger? That sense of self-righteousness is the meager and pretty sad food that you get from that anger.

Can you hold on to the perception of that person being a suffering person, someone worthy of compassion? Here again, the root causes of anger may not go away, but it doesn't hurt to cut the grass off at ground level. When you see it sprout up a little bit, cut it off again. What's really important is that you learn to detect these defilements when they're still little shoots just beginning to poke up out of the ground. The more quickly you can catch that happening, the more easily you'll understand what's going on. Because all the various conversations and decisions that would get a defilement into place happen around those beginning moments.

This is one of the reasons why we have the rules here at the monastery: the Vinaya for the monks, which is not just for the monks, as Ajaan Suwat once pointed out. When lay people live around monks who are observing the Vinaya, they get more sensitive, too. The whole purpose of the rules is to detect where there's some slight greed, some slight anger, some slight lust. As you keep careful watch over your behavior, you begin to notice the slight ways in which these defilements display themselves in seemingly innocuous behavior. But if you really hold to the standards of the rules, you can't help but notice these things: a little sloppiness here, a little sloppiness there.

I remember when I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang. He would tell me what it was like to live with Ajaan Mun, how very precise and very careful and very neat Ajaan Mun was about everything. At first, it struck me as a little bit obsessive. But then you have to realize that as you're looking after your mind, you need to see the little details. The slight movements of the mind: Those are the ones

you've got to watch out for. And you see them very clearly when you've got the rules as your measuring stick.

There's that line of Ajaan Mun's that very few people get their eyes blinded by having logs come into the eye. But sawdust can get into your eye very easily and it can blind you. The little things, the little defilements in the mind, the little actions that go against the rules: Those are the ones that can blind you. Go where the real work needs to be done. Ordinarily, you can sit and look around and not see any of the defilements. Nothing seems to be wrong. But that's because your vision hasn't been sharpened. Your powers of observation aren't clear enough yet.

The practice is in the details, the little things that we tend to overlook. So it doesn't hurt to be scrupulous. If you see part of the mind resisting, look at it, ask it, question it: What's the problem? Learn how to detect the tone of voice in the mind that indicates that "It's a defilement talking. It's not me talking. I could identify with it if I wanted to, but I don't have to." Learn how to test yourself. This is an important part of the practice.

I've been looking at the different ways that the Buddha teaches questioning, because he does encourage questioning as part of the path. First there are the questions where you try to come by right view, to get the right framework for the practice. Then there are the questions by which you observe yourself. You try to figure out how you're going to apply those views to your practice and then gauge how well you're doing it. What are the standards by which practice is measured, by which progress is measured, and how do you measure up? Those questions are important, too. In fact, they make up a lot of the practice. The Buddha himself, as he was following his quest for awakening, kept questioning himself, questioning his actions: "Why do I do this if it's giving bad results? How about if I did that?" He tried that. Then, looking at the results he got, he learned how to measure what's satisfactory, and what's not.

These are some of the ways in which we question ourselves: Are we putting enough effort in? Is the effort effective? How do you measure "effective"? What qualifies as satisfactory progress? When can you really be sure about yourself in the practice?

It's by learning how to look into the details like this: That's where progress is found.