

Discerning the Middle Way

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We should always keep in mind that the Buddha's first description of the path that he taught was the middle way between two extremes. Because it's a middle way, it requires discernment. In fact, finding where exactly the middle lies is what exercises our discernment. If the path were simply a matter of pushing and pushing and pushing all the time or of being passively accepting all the time, it wouldn't require much discernment at all. We would just do one thing repeatedly: doing and doing and doing or being accepting, accepting, accepting. It'd be a one-note path.

But here we have eight factors and each of them is supposed to be *right*. And as Ajaan Fuang pointed out often the "right" in everything from right view all the way through right concentration means just right view, just right concentration. And finding that point of just right requires that you use your powers of observation, along with your ingenuity. Sometimes the point of just right doesn't lie halfway between two extremes; it lies outside the continuum. And sometimes just right might lean toward one extreme or another at any particular time. You have to read the situation. That's why you have to be observant, discerning, to see what's needed.

Right now you're trying to focus on the breath. Several questions come in: One, what kind of breath is just right for you just now? This means "just right" for the body in the sense that it feels good breathing in, feels good breathing out. And "just right" for the mind: It's not too light to detect, it's not too heavy so that it gets burdensome. So you've got to adjust things and then observe and then adjust again and observe. When you find something that's good, you stick with it for a while. You stop the adjusting then and see how long you can stay with that kind of breathing, that kind of focus—because the strength of your focus is also an issue.

The Buddha's analogy is of a baby chick you're trying to hold in your hand. If you squeeze it too tightly, it's going to die. If you hold it too loosely, it's going to fly away. So you have to hold just the right amount of pressure on the chick, just the right amount of pressure on the spot where you're focused. And then try to maintain that. Like a person crossing a tight rope or a surfer riding a wave, you'll need to make some adjustments here and there.

This is a matter of learning how to read the situation and then doing what's required. This is why, as I've said, the two words that Ajaan Fuang used most in his instructions were "be observant," and "use your ingenuity." This is why Ajaan Lee puts so much value on evaluation. Evaluating the breath and then, when the breath gets good, evaluating what you're going to do with the pleasure you get from the breath. In other words, you don't want to just wallow in the pleasure. You want to use it as a tool to create a place in the body where it's easy to settle down, pleasant to settle down, where you feel enveloped in good energy, enveloped in a sense of rapture and pleasure.

“Rapture,” here, sometimes is not all that strong. It might be just refreshment but it feels good. You want it to be all-around so that you can sit down and settle into the body and not feel like you’re pushed off to one side and ready to totter and fall off. You’re here in the midst of a good energy.

Now as you’re evaluating, you’ll find there are some things you can adjust and others that you can’t. There’ll be some spots in the body that respond to good breath energy and others that don’t. And dealing with these is like dealing with issues outside. In other words, when you’re dealing with other people, you have to figure out which battles are worth fighting and which ones are not. Where do you have to stand your ground and where do you have to give? Again, this requires your discernment.

There are some times when you work with a particular pain or a particular blockage in the body and you really do get results. The problem is that sometimes those results may come slowly, so it takes a while for you to realize whether what you’re doing really is having an impact or not. But if you see that after a while nothing is happening, tell yourself to work around it. Breathe around the blockage as you spread your awareness to fill the body. Let that part be outside the range of your awareness for the time being.

In other words, you make the most of what you’ve got. But you’ve got to test things for a while so that you can gain your own sensitivity as to when it’s right to push and when it’s right to just accept—and when the effort that’s required is strong effort and whether it is just gentle effort.

As the Buddha said, with some causes of suffering all you have to do is look at them and they go away. Those are the kinds that survive in the mind simply because you’re not looking, not paying much attention to them. But as you notice them and watch them, you realize, “This is ridiculous,” and you can drop them.

But there are other causes of suffering that just stare right back at you. They’re going to stay right there. Those are the ones that are going to require a lot of work—what the Buddha calls “exerting a fabrication.” In other words, you apply all three kinds of fabrication: You work with the breath, work with the way you’re talking to yourself about the issue, look at the perceptions you hold around the issue to see maybe if the perceptions are part of the problem, and whether you can change those perceptions.

For instance, if you find yourself running up against anger, you have to ask yourself: What’s the perception you’re holding that’s giving the anger a foothold in your mind? What is it about the anger you find appealing? Why do you like getting angry, why do you like getting negative? What is the allure? You look around and ask a few questions, and after a while you uncover that there is something about this that you really enjoy. But then you begin to realize that it’s really miserable enjoyment. When you can see the drawbacks and compare them with the allure—and can do this with a sense of fairness—it’s a lot easier to let go of that particular cause.

So the middle way doesn’t mean just middling everything: middling effort, middling concentration, middling breath. You want an extremely good breath if you can. You want your concentration to be really, really still. But to get there requires a sense of balance,

seeing which times you have to be on the offense and which times you have to be on the defense; which times you have to be active and which times you have to be accepting and passive; which times you have to meddle with things, which times you just have to let them go. You learn this with practice. This is why we have to practice again, again, and again, because we have to develop our own sensitivity to things.

So develop a feeling for “just right.” Settle down and you’ll begin to know more and more instinctively what’s just right for you right now, what the body needs now, what the mind needs right now. It’s in this way that your concentration becomes just right and the other factors of the path become just right as well. But it requires a lot of discernment.

This is why in every description of the path discernment is necessary. And why all the teachers talk about how discernment is what makes all the difference. This is not just the discernment that comes at the end of the path. You have to exercise it all along the way as you figure out what’s just right, right now: where to be more assertive, where to be more quiet. You’ve got to read the situation. And as you do you develop sensitivity, that sensitivity is what becomes your discernment. It’s not just a matter of reading things in books.

This is one of the reasons why Ajaan Lee uses the mastery of a skill as his main image for the practice. It’s through doing things and then reading the results of what you’ve done and then making adjustments, that the path progresses. This is why his explanation of jhana places so much emphasis on the evaluation of the breath. Because that’s what you’re doing: You’re making adjustments. It’s also why, when he talks about mindfulness practice, that he places so much emphasis on the fact that your ardency—your attempts to do things right—is what gives rise to the discernment. You put your whole heart in trying to do it right. That means you also have to read the results you get to make sure they really are right.

So you put your whole heart in. You don’t put it in only in a middling way. You have to become very, very sensitive to what you’re doing and the results you get. And adjust things accordingly.