The Middle Way

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The path we follow here is a middle way. In the Buddha’s first explanation of how it was middle, he avoided two extremes, extremes of self-torture and the extreme of self-indulgence. Our problem as meditators is we tend to veer off to the left, veer off to the right, and very rarely actually stay on the middle way. 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 going to the left, and learn how to bring yourself back onto the middle way. There is an element of pleasure and enjoyment in the path, but it doesn’t count as self-indulgence. Get the mind to settle down. Be with the body in the present moment. Learn how to breathe in such a way that it feels good. Learn how to breathe in such a way that it has a sense of fullness and refreshment. This is an important part of the path. Just this morning, I was reading a piece on feelings. They say you should simply allow feelings to come and go on their own. You shouldn’t try to produce them. That, they said, was following the practice of contemplation of feelings in the establishing of mindfulness. The Buddha himself didn’t seem to support that. He gave instructions from breath meditation, which was supposed to be a practical application of the four foundations of mindfulness. Right there in the section on feelings, you have to breathe in and breathe out, 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 on the path. For several reasons. One, having that sense of pleasure and refreshment gives you energy. It makes it an enjoyable path. It makes sure that you’re not punishing yourself with the practice. And it gives you an alternative to the typical sensual pleasure. As the Buddha once said, the reason we’re so hooked on sensual pleasures is because we don’t see any other escape from pain. So go for the pretty sights and the nice sounds and the nice smells and the nice tastes and the 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 awareness, our range of experience, doesn’t expand to include anything any better. That’s why we’re obsessed with them. So one of the purposes of developing this sense of ease, refreshment, rapture, and the practice is to give you an alternative. Realize you’ve got something better. Because otherwise, when you try to come down hard on your attachment to sensual pleasures, you don’t have anything better to offer yourself. Either it’s a grudging abandoning of the pleasure, which means you don’t abandon it for long. Or it’s an act of self-punishment, which is not only not lasting, but it’s also not especially healthy. So it’s important that you learn how to develop a sense of ease, well-being, pleasure, rapture, fullness, refreshment. But look for it here, simply in the way you breathe in, the way you breathe out, what feels good, what feels good. Right now, don’t worry about what Ajahn Lee said or what anybody else says. Look at what feels good in your body right now. Breathe that way. Because many times what you think Ajahn 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 say, “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 could experience the breath in the body. Explore that right here, right now. And that kind of pleasure does not count as self-indulgence. It’s part of the path. 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 a sense of self-tormenting, but simply because your defilements are getting unruly. After all, the Buddha didn’t call his teaching just dhamma. There’s dhamma and vinaya, and the verb that goes along with vinaya. Vinaya means to subdue. You’ve got to come down hard sometimes on your complacency. On your pride. On your greed. On your delusion. On your anger. This is why discipline is such an important part of the path. It’s the part we don’t like to talk about. Look at how many books there are in American Buddhism that deal with discipline. Almost zero. And yet it’s an essential part of the path. The Buddha kept referring to his teaching as this dhamma and discipline. If you can’t come down hard on your own defilements, well, sometimes a teacher has to come down hard on your own defilements. 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 if you don’t take care of them, there’s nobody else who’s going to be able 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 and 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. To be clear on this point, 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 so hard on me?” Well, it’s like a vine. The vine is tender, has nice downy leaves, nice downy stem, and it winds itself around the tree. At first it looks so small, but then it winds itself around and around and around. It gets stronger and stronger. Thicker and thicker, and it can bring down trees. As Ajahn Mun once said to Ajahn Phue, “People are rarely blinded by whole logs of wood. They’re blinded more by fine sawdust.” It’s the little things that you have to watch out for. And if you don’t catch them, they’ll grow. Take root. They get into your eyes. Fine sawdust gets into your eyes and applies you. So take a good look at your practice. Make sure that it’s on the middle path. It’s not self-indulgence and it’s 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, 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 and you want to hear the lessons wherever they come, whether you’re feeling hungry or nourished or whatever, that’s when you can begin to trust yourself. Because following the path is a skill. When you work on a skill, you want to be able to look at your handiwork and say, “This looks really good,” because you put a lot of effort into it, you put a lot of time and attention into it, and the results come out well. Even if they don’t come out well yet, you want to be able to at least look at yourself and say, “Yes, I did put time into it. I did put effort into it. Maybe I’m not as skillful as I’d like to be, but at least I can’t blame it on laziness.” It’s in that way that the skill develops. It may take time, but it’s all time well-spent. As the Buddha once said, there’s something miraculous about his teaching. The effort put into it really does give the results. There are very few things in the world that can do that. And the results that are promised are of high caliber. So give it high-caliber attention. Give it high-caliber care. That way you get the results that you’re looking for. you

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