

The Middleness of the Path

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This path we're following: There's a way in which you could call it sensitivity training — getting more and more sensitive to the way the mind creates suffering for itself. As you deal with a layer of blatant suffering, you peel it away and find another, more subtle one. This is a lot of what the training in discernment is about: working from the blatant layers to the more subtle ones by trying to stay on the path. The Buddha called it a middle way, and getting that sense of middleness, or balance, is a lot of our training in discernment.

If you've ever looked at a balance, you see that the two sides don't stay balanced all the time. They swing back and forth before they can come to a point of equilibrium. And we have to learn to anticipate that in the practice. Sometimes you lean too far to the left and then too far to the right, back and forth like this before you come to any kind of balance. A lot of the wisdom and discernment that come in the path lie in learning how to negotiate all the back and forth, when you follow a particular tack in your practice and then find that it goes too far. You've got to turn around and go back the other way, and often you'll find you've gone too far the other way, too, so you have to turn around and come back, back and forth like this. The wisdom lies in learning how to deal with the back and forth and not get frustrated with it, realizing that when you make mistakes you're learning lessons. When you learn from your mistakes, you'll ultimately be able to reach balance and learn how to regain it quickly whenever it gets knocked to either side.

The other aspect of the middleness of the path is that it's appropriate for whatever comes up. In other words, it doesn't just call for middling effort all the time. Sometimes your effort has to be strong, sometimes it has to be very, very subtle. And again, mastering this point requires sensitivity.

The Buddha once talked about two kinds of Right Effort. Some kinds of suffering, he said, require a really concerted effort to deal with them; others simply require that you watch. This is a lesson we can learn with the breath. Sometimes there are levels of discomfort in the breath you can actually deal with, patterns of tension in the body you can work through, by experimenting, by trying this, trying that, making the breath longer, shorter, deeper, more shallow, changing your conception of the breath. But sometimes you run up against a brick wall. Nothing you do seems to help. The more you meddle with the breath, the more muddled it gets. Either you're too heavy-handed or too picky about what kind of breathing is good enough for you. So you've got to back off and just watch for a while to see whether the problem is in the breath or in the mind.

And don't be too quick to come to conclusions. When you see an opening that seems to make sense – maybe this could be changed a little bit, maybe that could be changed a little bit – then you can get back to meddling with the breath again. Try things out. If they don't work, go back to just watching. The practice goes back and forth like this.

A lot of the discernment in the path comes with learning where the extremes are, how far you can push things, and when you have to stop and just watch for a while, trying to do as little as possible. If the breath seems too entangled – the more you work with it, the worst it gets – just tell yourself, "I'm not going to breathe. If the body wants to breathe then it can do it on its own, but I'm not going to participate." See what happens. Of course the body will have to breathe. Give it a chance to be unmeddled with for a while. Then you watch what an unmeddled breath is like, until you get a sense for it.

Sometimes the issue centers on how far you can get the mind to settle down. Given the level of concentration, given the level of mindfulness you have, maybe you can only settle it down a little bit for the time being, and yet you want more. It's not good enough, especially if you've had better meditations in the past. The current meditation isn't measuring up, so you try to push, push, push it back to where it was. Sometimes you can, sometimes you can't, because the pushing may be part of the problem. Or if you've been away from the practice for a while, the level of sensitivity in the mind is not what it was, particularly your sensitivity to what you're doing. When this happens, get the mind to settle down at least a little bit and then just stay there for a while – it may not be perfect, but it's good enough. Then watch. If you can see yourself causing any form of stress or suffering, you can drop it. That will move you to another level of sensitivity, and so you stay at that level for a while, and then just watch again.

So the middleness of the middle way actually means the appropriateness of what you're doing vis-à-vis the circumstances you've got. There are no hard and fast rules that you're not allowed to meddle with the breath at all, or that you have to be meddling all the time, or that you always have to push for greater and greater and greater levels of concentration. Sometimes you have to learn to be satisfied with what you've got.

You know the story about the foolish, inexperienced cow. She's got a nice meadow with nice water, but she looks over to the other mountain, and says to herself, "Gee, the grass over there looks pretty good, too. I wonder what the water tastes like over there." But to get there, she has to go down into a ravine. So the foolish, inexperienced cow heads down into the ravine, but because she's foolish and inexperienced she gets stuck in the ravine. She can't even get back to her original meadow, much less to the other side.

What this means is that when you find a level of concentration, a level of comfort in the breath that seems okay, stick with it for a while. See if you can maintain it. Watch it. Don't push too hard to make it any better, until you see clearly that there's a level of stress, a level of discomfort, a level of disturbance

that really doesn't have to be there. That's when you can let that disturbance go, because the stillness allows you to see. One of the things it allows you to see is precisely what needs adjusting.

So the two go together – the doing and the watching – and there has to be a balance between the two. It's like walking. The easy way to walk is first with one foot and then with the other. That's a lot easier than trying to hop along just on your right foot or just on your left. This is what keeps the path on the middle: finding the balance between the two – balance not so much in the sense of a little bit of effort and a little bit of watching, but knowing when which one is appropriate, because you've got to have both. Sometimes you need more of one than the other, like the balance that swings back and forth before it comes to a perfect balance.

As Ajaan Chaa once said, we're groping our way in the practice. We like to think that we have the whole thing mapped out ahead of us, but if we knew the map entirely, and if our map were entirely perfect, we'd already be at the end of the path. The map we have is just a sketch, and we have to feel our way. Your willingness to feel your way, to learn from your mistakes, is what develops your wisdom, develops your discernment.

Sometimes it's a little chastening to see how little wisdom and discernment you have, but what are you going to do? You make use of what you've got. There's no way you can get more without using what you've got. It's like going down to the gym. You want to go to the gym to get exercise, but you feel embarrassed because your body is so weak and everybody else is so fit and strong. But if you're embarrassed, you never get down there to work out. So you take the body you've got and you exercise that. Only then will it turn into the body you want.

In the same way, if you only have a little bit of discernment and a little bit of concentration, make use of what you've got. Only when you make use of these things will they grow. Be content with what you've got – content not in the sense that you're going to stay here forever, but content with the fact that these are your raw materials, these are the tools you have. You want big muscles but you've only got little muscles. You can't wait until your muscles are big and then exercise. You exercise the little muscles you've got. That's where big muscles come from. You've got to start where you are. And being very clear about what you've got is a lot of what you learn as you practice.

There are times when the practice is intended to throw you up against situations where you come to the end of your rope, where you have to use your ingenuity to figure out what you should do next. As Ajaan Fuang said, if everything were handed to you on a platter you'd never develop discernment at all. It's by testing it and admitting mistakes, learning from your mistakes, getting clearer and clearer about exactly you've got here: That's how the path opens up.

The Buddha described nirvana as being immediately present, *sanditthiko* – right here in the here and now – but remember that time right after he gained

Awakening where he reflected on whether he could teach or not. He was discouraged because nirvana was so subtle. He wondered how he could ever teach anybody, how anyone could learn what he had to teach. But he realized that people could be led to it, step by step. This is why our path is a gradual one, a step-by-step path, as we become more and more sensitive to what we're doing, more sensitive to the results, so that gradually we become more and more sensitive to what's actually right here. And it's in working with this issue – the middleness of the path, what's appropriate right now in terms of our concentration, in terms of staying with something, in terms of pushing a little bit more: That's how we get more and more sensitive to what's going on right here. In pursuing the middleness of the path we develop our discernment. And remember, a lot of discernment is seeing how foolish you've been, because that's the only way you're going to get wise.

So the image of the path is of the continental shelf off the coast of India: a long, gradual slope, followed by a sudden drop-off. We all like the idea of the sudden drop-off – the momentary insight that reveals everything in a flash – but you can't get to the drop-off without following the gradual slope of getting more and more subtle in your sensitivity. And a lot of the subtlety lies in seeing just where the middleness of the middle path lies.