

Two Kinds of Middle

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This path we're following is called the Middle Way, and it's important that you understand that there are two kinds of "middle": One is the midpoint on a continuum; the other is a point off the continuum entirely. And the Buddha teaches both.

For example, in terms of the effort you put into the practice: You know the story of the monk with very tender feet. He was doing walking meditation so much that his feet started to bleed and he began to have thoughts of disrobing. The Buddha, reading his mind, levitated and appeared right in front of him. Don't you wish you had the Buddha coming to appear right in front of you while you're meditating? It would make things a lot easier. In this particular case the Buddha asked him, "Back when you were a lay person, were you skilled at playing the lute?"

The monk answers, "Yes."

"What happened when the string was too tight? Did it sound good?"

"No."

"When it was too loose, did it sound right?"

"No. You have to tune the string so it's just right."

"In the same way," the Buddha said, "you tune your effort, the level of energy you put into the practice, to what you can handle. Then you tune all the other faculties of your practice to that." It's like tuning a lute, you tune one string first and then you tune the other strings to that first one. You tune your conviction, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment to the level of effort you can manage. In that way your practice stays in tune.

In this case, the middle is a midpoint on a continuum. You can slide up or down the continuum and it's not all that difficult. The question of how much you push, how much you pull back: There are just two directions to choose from.

But with the other kind of continuum, there are more directions, more dimensions. Take the noble eightfold path. The Buddha teaches it as middle that avoids sensual indulgence and self torture. This doesn't mean that you lead a middling life halfway between torture and indulgence, torturing yourself a little bit and allowing yourself a little pleasure. The path actually involves a very intense level of pleasure in right concentration. But it's a different kind of pleasure, and you relate to it in a different way from how you normally relate to pleasure. That takes it off the continuum.

To begin with, it's a pleasure based not on the pleasures of the senses, but on the ability of the mind to settle down and be still. This is off the continuum of sensual pleasure and sensual pain. It's a pleasure that comes simply from inhabiting the form of your body, being with the breath, the breath energy all around the body, all through the body, experiencing it from the inside. That's form. It's also a pleasure that can come as you learn how to direct the energies in the body—finding out where they're flowing well, where they're not flowing well, what ways you think about the energies that help them to flow better, where you focus your attention to loosen up the tension. That's a pleasure that

doesn't depend on sensory input or sensual desire. It's a different kind of pleasure and, as a result, a much clearer pleasure. The mind is less intoxicated by it because you're not harming anyone. The pleasures where we have to intoxicate ourselves are the ones where the mind intentionally puts blinders on itself.

You've probably had the experience of lusting after somebody. If you step back and looked at the lust, you'd realize you're focusing only on a few things in a narrow narrative that includes a few details of the other person's body—and your body—but the narrative excludes an awful lot. After all, there's an awful lot of oppression that goes on even in a consensual sexual relationship, but we don't like to think about it, so we just block it out. There's also the whole question of what that person contains right under the skin, what *you* contain right under *your* skin. Is that really worth lusting for? Again we block that out. So many of our sensory pleasures are just that: a blocked out, narrow, confined range of view. That's why they're intoxicating.

But the pleasure of concentration isn't intoxicating in that way. You can get attached to it, but it's putting you in a position where you can see the attachment clearly and learn to let go. But notice that it's off the continuum. It's not halfway between sensual pleasure and sensual pain. It's something of a different order entirely. And the way you relate to it is different as well. This is important. We tend to simply receive our pleasure: *rab*, is the word in Thai. We're on the receiving end of the pleasure; we're on the receiving end of the pain. We're the ones who are being afflicted by the pain. We're the ones who are allowed to enjoy the pleasure. That puts us on the passive side. When it's pain, we're the victim. When it's pleasure, we're the person enjoying the pleasure. We identify ourselves as the taster, the enjoyer, the experiencer.

But with the path, that's not the relationship you want. You want to learn how to use the pleasure of concentration as a tool. This means you're able to create a sense of pleasure with the breath. You're not just going to wallow in the pleasure, because that takes you back to your old ways of getting intoxicated with pleasure. You've got to think of it as: "This is something I've got to work with. What can I do with this pleasure?" First, you can work on areas of tension or tightness in the body. Get yourself into the body. Inhabit it fully. Then start asking yourself: "Where am I in the body? What fabrications have I built up around that sense of where I am in the body?" You can begin to take these things apart. In other words, the pleasure becomes a basis for understanding a lot of the mind's strange perceptions, replacing them with new perceptions, trying out new perceptions to see how they fit.

This is how you get off your normal continuum. Ask a different question. Look at things from a different way. Get outside the box. Pleasure is something you can actually use as a tool rather than something you simply experience or don't experience, something you run after as much as you can and then, when you've got it, you just hold onto it. Here we're learning how to be with it, but not just simply to grasp at it. We learn to use it. So when pleasure comes up in the meditation, don't let yourself lose focus. Don't abandon your focus on the breath to wallow in the pleasure. Think of the pleasure as something you're going to use as a tool. And then start using it as a tool. This way you develop the mindfulness that keeps you from getting waylaid by the pleasure, carried off by the pleasure.

And it becomes part of the path.

There's another version of the Middle Way where the Buddha points out that saying *all exists* is one extreme; *all doesn't exist* is another extreme. He teaches the Middle Way: dependent co-arising. This is another case where the Middle Way is off the continuum because, as he said, most people think in terms of a polarity. Things either exist or they don't exist. The word "all" here covers all the senses and their objects. Basically the question leading to this polarity is: is there something really existing there or are we just experiencing just phantasms? Is there something really there behind the sight, the sound, the smell, the taste? Is there nothing behind the sight, the sound, the smell, the taste? And the Buddha says, try to drop both.

Where does that put you? It puts you in a position where you can actually experience what's arising and passing away. He says look at it as just that: arising and passing away. As you see things arise, the idea that they don't exist doesn't occur to you. As you see them passing away, the idea that they do exist doesn't occur to you. You put yourself in a position where existing and not existing are not the issue. The issue then turns into what? It turns into the fact that there's stress arising and passing away. Whatever arises, it's a form of stress. Whatever passes away, it's just a form of stress.

Once you look at your experience in those terms, then the imperatives of the four noble truths kick in. Where there's stress, you've got to comprehend it. In other words, you look at your experiences, not with the question of "Is there something behind there? Is there nothing behind there?" "Behind there" is not the issue. The issue is what you're directly experiencing. Try to comprehend that. Then you can see the craving that causes the stress to rise and pass away. Learn how to abandon that. Develop the path, so that you can realize the ending, the cessation of stress. This is another case where the Middle is off the continuum. It requires that you think in new ways.

So when you find yourself with problems in the meditation, sometimes it's simply a matter of sliding back or forth on the continuum: heavier effort, lighter effort; more analysis, less analysis; more quiet, less quiet. But there are other times you have to get off the continuum. That requires that you use your ingenuity, to think outside the box, think off the continuum. This is why some teachers like to use paradox in their teachings, the unexpected answers. Like the rhetorical question Ajaan Chah asked, "What is the mind?" His answer: "The mind isn't 'is' anything." The answer's not grammatical, but the fact that it's not grammatical means you have to stop and think. What does it mean? "The mind isn't 'is' anything." Or another way of translating it: "The mind isn't a what." Teachers answer in this way to alert you to the fact that sometimes we ask the wrong questions. That's why they've got to frame the answer in a new way.

So when you find yourself sliding back and forth on a continuum—the extremes don't work, the middle part of the continuum doesn't work—maybe you've got to get off the continuum. Look at what questions you're asking. Maybe it's time to reframe the question, so you can get that other kind of middle: the middle that avoids both extremes and avoids even the middle point between the extremes, because it's off the continuum entirely.