

A Dhamma Talk by

Ajahn Chah

Following the Middle Path

as edited by

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It's the shortest and most direct path. You can come and argue with me on points of Dhamma, but I won't join in. Rather than argue back, I'd just offer some reflections for you to consider.

Please understand what the Buddha taught: let go of everything. Let go with knowing and awareness. Without knowing and awareness, the letting go is no different than that of cows and water buffaloes.

Without putting your heart into it, the letting go isn't correct. You let go because you understand conventional reality. This is non-attachment. The Buddha taught that in the beginning stages of Dhamma practice you should work very hard, develop things thoroughly and attach a lot. Attach to the Buddha. Attach to the Dhamma. Attach to the Sangha. Attach firmly and deeply. That's what the Buddha taught. Attach with sincerity and persistence and hold on tight.

In my own search I tried nearly every possible means of contemplation. I sacrificed my life for the Dhamma, because I had faith in the reality of enlightenment and the path to get there. These things actually do exist, just like the Buddha said they did. But to realize them takes practice, right practice. It takes pushing yourself to the limit. It takes the courage to train, to reflect, and to

fundamentally change. It takes the courage to actually do what it takes. And how do you do it?

Train the heart. The thoughts in our heads tell us to go in one direction, but the Buddha tells us to go in another. Why is it necessary to train? Because the heart is totally encrusted with and plastered over with defilements.

That's what a heart is like that has not yet been transformed through the training. It's unreliable, so don't believe it. It's not yet virtuous. How can we trust a heart that lacks purity and clarity?

Therefore the Buddha warned us not to put our trust in a defiled heart. Initially the heart is only the hired hand of defilement, but if they associate together for an extended period of time, the heart perverts to become defilement itself. That's why the Buddha taught us not to trust our hearts.

If we take a good look at our monastic training discipline, we'll see that the whole thing is about training the heart. And whenever we train the heart we feel hot and bothered. As soon as we're hot and bothered, we start to complain, "Boy, this practice is incredibly difficult! It's impossible."

But the Buddha didn't think like that. He considered that when the training was causing us heat and friction, that meant we were on the right track. But we don't think that way. We think it's a sign that something is wrong. This misunderstanding is what makes the practice seem so arduous.

In the beginning we feel hot and bothered, so we think we're off track. Everyone wants to feel good, but they're less concerned about

whether it's right or not.

When we go against the grain of the defilements and challenge our cravings, of course we feel suffering. We get hot, upset, and bothered and then quit. We think we're on the wrong path. The Buddha, however, would say we're getting it right. We're confronting our defilements, and they are what is getting hot and bothered. But we think it's us who are hot and bothered. The Buddha taught that it's the defilements that get stirred up and upset. It's the same for everyone.

That's why Dhamma practice is so demanding. People don't examine things clearly. Generally, they lose the path on either the side of self-indulgence or self-torment. They get stuck in these two extremes. On one hand they like to indulge their heart's desires. Whatever they feel like doing they just do it. They like to sit in comfort. They love to lie down and stretch out in comfort. Whatever they do, they seek to do it in comfort. This is what I mean by self-indulgence: clinging to feeling good. With such indulgence how could Dhamma practice possibly progress?

If we can no longer indulge in comfort, sensuality and feeling good, we become irritated. We get upset and angry and suffer because of it. This is falling off the Path on the side of self-torment. This is not the path of a peaceful sage, not the way of someone who's still. The Buddha warned not to stray down these two sidetracks of self-indulgence and self-torment.

When experiencing pleasure, just know that with awareness. When experiencing anger, ill-will, and irritation, understand that you are not following in the footsteps of the Buddha. Those aren't the paths of people seeking peace, but the roads of common villagers. A monk

at peace doesn't walk down those roads. He strides straight down the middle with self-indulgence on the left and self-torment on the right. This is correct Dhamma practice.

If you're going to take up this monastic training, you have to walk this Middle Way, not getting worked up about either happiness or unhappiness. Set them down. But it feels like they're kicking us around. First they kick us from one side, "Ow!" then they kick us from the other, "Ow!" We feel like the clapper in our wooden bell, knocked back and forth from side to side.

The Middle Way is all about letting go of happiness and unhappiness, and the right practice is the practice in the middle. When the craving for happiness hits and we don't satisfy it, we feel the pain.

Walking down the Middle Path of the Buddha is arduous and challenging. There are just these two extremes of good and bad. If we believe what they tell us, we have to follow their orders. If we become enraged at someone, we immediately go searching for a stick to attack them. No patient endurance. If we love someone, we want to caress him or her from head to toe. Am I right?

These two sidetracks completely miss the middle. This is not what the Buddha recommended. His teaching was to gradually put these things down. His practice was a path leading out of existence, away from rebirth—a path free of becoming, birth, happiness, unhappiness, good, and evil.

Those people who crave existence are blind to what's in the middle. They fall off the path on the side of happiness and then completely pass over the middle on their way to the other side of dissatisfaction and irritation. They continually skip over the centre. This sacred

place is invisible to them as they rush back and forth.

They don't stay in that place where there is no existence and no birth. They don't like it, so they don't stay. Either they go down out of their home and get bitten by a dog or fly up to get pecked by a vulture. This is existence. Humanity is blind to that which is free from existence with no rebirth. The human heart is blind to it, so it repeatedly passes it by and skips it over.

The Middle Way walked by the Buddha, the path of correct Dhamma practice, transcends existence and rebirth. The mind that is beyond both the wholesome and the unwholesome is released. This is the path of a peaceful sage. If we don't walk it we'll never be a sage at peace. That peace will never have a chance to bloom.

Why? Because of existence and rebirth. Because there's birth and death. The path of the Buddha is without birth or death. There's no low and no high. There's no happiness and no suffering. There's no good and no evil. This is the straight path. This is the path of peace and stillness.

It's peacefully free of pleasure and pain, happiness and sorrow. This is how to practise Dhamma. Experiencing this, the mind can stop. It can stop asking questions. There's no longer any need to search for answers. There! That's why the Buddha said that the Dhamma is something that the wise know directly for themselves. No need to ask anybody. We understand clearly for ourselves without a shred of doubt that things are exactly as the Buddha said they were.

Reference

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