# *THE MIDDLE PRACTICE*

by Sayagyi U Chit Tin

"Kamesu brahmacariyava Metteya" ti Bhagava
"vitatanho sada sato
Sankhaya nibbuto bhikkhu tassa no santi injita.
So ubh' antam abbhinnaya majjhe manta na lippati
Tam brumi mahapariso ti so idha sibbanim accaga" ti.

"The bhikkhu who lives the holy life amidst sensual pleasures, Mettaya," said the Blessed One, "with craving gone, always mindful, quenched after consideration -- for him, there are no commotions.

"That thinker, knowing both ends, does not cling to the middle. Him I call a great man. He has gone beyond the seamstress here."

Sutta-nipata vv 1041-1042[1]

The Buddha began his first discourse[2] by saying that the way to Nibbana, the end of all suffering, was the middle practice (majjhima patipada). This discourse was very appropriate for the five ascetics to whom he was speaking. They had known him as the prince who gave up all the comforts of life as a layman in order to search for the ultimate truth. They had helped him when he tried extreme ascetic practices. In his description of these practices,[3] the Buddha said that he had tried all sorts of extremes of heat and cold, he ate so little he fell down in a faint, and he even stopped his breath.

The Buddha's control over his own mind, even before his Awakening, was so complete that these extremes did not disturb his thoughts. He realized, however, that with the body so disturbed, it would be impossible to reach his goal. He decided to follow a moderate approach, eating enough to keep his body going comfortably. The five ascetics did not understand. They thought he had given up and returned to a life of luxury. They decided to leave him, and so, the Buddha was alone when he reached his goal.

He taught these same five ascetics first because they had been so helpful to him. As always, his discourse is perfectly suited to his audience. He begins by telling them that a person who has gone forth from lay life should avoid two extremes. One extreme is connected with sensual desire and means one is attached to the sensual pleasures of a life of luxury which is inferior, vulgar, associated with the ordinary man, ignoble, and associated with what is unprofitable. The other extreme is being attached to exhausting oneself, which is misery, ignoble, and associated with what is unprofitable.

The middle practice, he said, produces vision, produces knowledge, leads to tranquillity, personal knowledge, to perfect Awakening, to Nibbana. It is the Noble Eightfold Path, which we can sum up in the three aspects of morality, concentration, and wisdom.

The Buddha specifically mentions this moderate approach as

appropriate for those who have renounced lay life. But what about laypeople? Can they also follow the middle practice? The answer is to be found in a discourse which the Buddha gave to a village chieftain named Rasiya.[4]

Rasiya asked the Buddha if it was true that the Buddha categorically disapproved of and condemned all ascetics who led severe lives, that he censured all asceticism. The Buddha says that he has been misrepresented and in his discourse he makes clear that there is a difference between saying that extreme ascetic practices are to be censured and saying that everything done by the person who follows them is to be censured.

Of particular interest to us, however, is what the Buddha has to say concerning those who have not given up sensual pleasures. He included this, no doubt, because a discussion of the ascetic practices without any mention of the other extreme would have been incomplete, and this other extreme was more pertinent to Rasiya as a layman.

The Buddha begins with the same instructions he gave in the first part of his discourse, which we have already mentioned, but here, instead of continuing with the Four Noble Truths, he shows what is to be censured and what is to be praised concerning those who either practise extreme asceticism or lead lives surrounded by sensual pleasures.

The Buddha says the following actions are to be censured in those who enjoy sensual pleasures:

(1) seeking possessions through violent means which are immoral (adhamma),

(2) not making oneself happy and satisfied,

(3) not doing meritorious deeds,

(4) enjoying the use of one's possessions, even if they are acquired without using immoral, violent means, while being addicted to, infatuated with, and bound to them, not seeing the danger (in this), and not knowing how to escape.

The opposite of these wrong actions is praiseworthy. That is to say, in this context, the Buddha gives the following actions as the proper measure of lay life:

(1) Possessions -- or we might say "earning one's living" -- should be sought through moral, non-violent means. This, of course, is given in more detail by the Buddha in many other discourses. If a layperson practises the precepts of not killing, not stealing, and not lying, then right livelihood will be attained.

(2) We should work for our own happiness and satisfaction. One of the most important motivations for all people is the pursuit of happiness. It is often assumed that trying to be happy is selfish and entails neglecting others, but if we have a fuller understanding of human nature we come to realize that not only must we find happiness ourselves before we can help others, but that harming others will make us unhappy.

(3) We should do meritorious deeds. This aspect can be summed up by generosity. As will be seen in the last point, it is important to work for true happiness which goes beyond material possessions. In order to do this, we should be generous with the goal of attaining Nibbana.

(4) We should enjoy the use of our possessions without being addicted to, infatuated with, or bound to them. We should see the danger in this and know how to escape. As laypeople, we do not have to be blinded by greed. We can live moral lives, remembering that the highest happiness is in ending the suffering that inevitably accompanies conditioned existence. We can be aware of the danger of being slaves of our possessions. The happiness associated with them is short-lived. If we crave for them, we will be unhappy when we do not get what we want. We will be unhappy when we obtain what we do not want. In this way, we can be aware of the danger in being attached to possessions.

Knowing the way to escape from this danger means understanding the Buddha's Teachings. This is only possible through putting them into practice. It is possible for those who live surrounded by the pleasures of the senses to do more than lead moral lives, share their possessions, and do meritorious actions. If we do not go further, we will only be making sure that in future lives we will have good fortune, but there is only one way to escape the possibility that some wrong action of ours will bring us great suffering, and that is to develop our concentration and then use this concentration to develop insight into the true nature of conditioned existence. This insight will lead to experiencing the true happiness of the ultimate goal, Nibbana.

If we could always do good, it would be possible to have eternal happiness in life after life, but for most of us, our actions are a combination of good and bad actions. This is clearly shown in this discourse by the Buddha, for he tells Rasiya that there are three types of people who enjoy pleasures:

(1) those who seek possessions through violent means which are immoral,

(2) those who seek possessions through both violent and non-violent means which are either moral or immoral, and

(3) those who seek possessions only through non-violent, moral means.

Most of us come under the second, mixed category. In fact, it is only those who have passed beyond the stage of the ordinary individual and who are firmly established in at least the first of the four stages of Awakening who are assured of not doing actions that may lead to the lower worlds of great suffering. Even those who have reached the highest stage of Arahatship may experience the physically painful results of past bad actions.

The better our control is over our mind, the better we will be able to understand not only the difference between good and wrong actions, but even more important, the truth concerning our existence, our world. This is why Sayagyi U Ba Khin dedicated so much of his time and energy to practising and teaching Buddhist meditation to others. He chose one of the many methods taught by the Buddha that enables us to concentrate our minds, to control our minds and make them stay on a given object. Sayagyi taught the development of the mind through mindfulness of the breath (Anapana). Once a good level of concentration is reached, the students then develop their understanding by gaining insight (Vipassana) into the reality of suffering and its origin by observing the physical sensations within the body and appreciating their ever-changing, unsatisfactory nature. At the same time, an appreciation of the ever-changing nature of the accompanying mental states is also gained.

Laypeople may not be able to renounce the pleasures of family life and of owning many possessions, but it is possible to set aside periods each day to work on their concentration and insight. Ten-day retreats can be made from time to time in order to lessen the day-to-day distractions of lay life and make more progress on the path to true happiness. In this way, students of Buddhist meditation are able to practise the Noble Eightfold Path which leads to Awakening, to the end of all ignorance. This Path, as we have seen, is the middle practice, the moderate path that avoids the two extremes of being submerged in deceptive, temporary sensual pleasures or being tormented by exaggerated ascetic practices.

In his discourse to Rasiya, the Buddha goes on to explain that those who leave lay life in order to follow exhausting practices can attain praiseworthy states and states which are to be censured. Their motivation in torturing themselves comes from their belief that by doing so they will be assured of attaining a profitable mental state (kusala-dhamma) and will see for themselves a truly distinctive, noble knowledge and vision (ariya-nana-dassana-visesa) through transcending the human mental state (uttara-manussa-dhamma). The method they use is to be censured. If they attain either of these goals, that is praiseworthy.

In other discourses, the Buddha says that some ascetics who practise severe austerities can be reborn in heavenly worlds.[5] This is possible if they are able to make skilful mental states increase and unskilful mental states decrease,[6] but such practices cannot lead to the complete destruction of suffering.[7] Exaggerated effort, unbalanced effort, will not lead to the ultimate goal. The Buddha discovered that uninterrupted thought and uninterrupted investigating for too long a time makes the body weary, and if the body is weary, the mind will be agitated. When the mind is agitated, it is not concentrated. Progress towards Nibbana can only be made when the mind is steady, calm, one-pointed, and concentrated.[8]

In the West today, we do not see people renouncing lay life and undergoing severe ascetic practices, but many people do have the mistaken idea that if they subject themselves to physical and mental suffering, this will in some way purify them. Special diets or fasting, going without sleep, or adopting painful physical postures are some of the exaggerations attempted with regard to the body. Indulging thoughts of self-reproach and guilt, or entertaining thoughts of doubt about the method of work or about one's own ability, are examples of mental torture.

Sayagyi U Ba Khin instructed his students to avoid all self torture. He used the term "zestful ease" to describe the right approach. This means that the student should work directly on developing concentration and insight as long as the mind is able to remain steady, calm, and one-pointed. When the student finds that the work is physically tiring, then he or she should give the body rest. In this way, it will be possible to continue the effort to maintain a calm mind at all times.

It is very important that we correctly understand what is meant by the middle way, the moderate practice. The English expression "the golden mean"[9] expresses the idea very well. It is defined as meaning, "the way of wisdom and safety between extremes; sufficiency without excess; moderation."[10] It is all too easy, however, to incorrectly identify the extremes and in this way to come up with a medium path that is still a wrong path. We could take any of the basic five moral precepts and say that we will not go to extremes but only break them with moderation. This, of course, would be entirely wrong.

In the first sermon and in the discourse to Rasiya, the Buddha identifies the middle practice as being the Noble Eightfold Path. In other discourses, we find explanations which expand on this and make it plain that this path includes all efforts which lead to the goal of the

cessation of suffering. In the first sermon, it is clear that the Noble Eightfold Path is for understanding the Four Noble Truths.

In the discourse to Rasiya, the Buddha explains that three things are instantaneous, not subject to decay, immediate, invite one to come and see, lead onwards, and are to be experienced by the wise for themselves. [11] These three things are the elimination of the three roots which are present when unwholesome deeds are done: desire (raga),[12] hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha).[13]

Venerable Sariputta identifies the middle practice in similar terms. The middle practice is the Noble Eightfold Path and it gets rid of greed (lobha) and hatred (dosa). Its qualities of producing vision and knowledge, and leading to tranquillity, personal knowledge, perfect Awakening, and Nibbana, are the antithesis of ignorance. Venerable Sariputta goes on to identify other pairs in place of greed and hatred. In leading to Nibbana, the path eliminates anger (kodha) and enmity (upanaho), hypocrisy (makkho) and malice (paasa), envy (issa) and selfishness (macchera), deceit (maya) and treachery (satheyya), stubbornness (thambha) and impetuosity (sarambha), arrogance (mana) and pride (atimano), conceit (mada) and indolence (pamada).

In several other discourses, the middle practice is identified with the understanding of dependent origination (paticca-samuppada).[14] In answer to questions put by bhikkhus and laymen, the Buddha explains that to adopt wrong beliefs is to go to extremes which will make progress impossible. These wrong beliefs include those based on existence or non-existence, those based on an enduring self or a self that need not be responsible for its actions, or those based on the dogma that the body and life principle are the same or that they are different. The middle practice is to observe the conditioned nature of existence in order to understand the arising of suffering and its cessation.

One Sutta is particularly appropriate in connection with the middle practice and dependent origination. The verses with which we began were given by the Buddha in answer to questions posed by Tissa Metteyya: "Who is contented here in the world? For whom are there no agitations? What thinker, knowing both extremes, does not cling to the middle? Whom do you call a great man? Who has gone beyond the seamstress here?"[15]

A group of elders discussed these questions and offered a number of explanations for the two extremes and the middle way.[16] The first bhikkhu to give an explanation said that the two extremes are contact (phassa) and the arising of contact (phassa-samudaya). The middle is the cessation of contact (phassa-nirodha). Other bhikkhus said that the following were to be included: the past (atita) and future (anagata) as extremes, the present (paccuppanna) as the middle; pleasure (sukha) and pain (dukkha) as extremes, neither pleasure nor pain (adukkha-m-asukha) as the middle; mind (nama) and body (rupa) as extremes, consciousness (vinnana) as the middle; the six internal senses (cha ajjhattikani ayatanani) and six external objects of the senses (cha bahirani ayatanani) as extremes, consciousness as the middle; the individuality made up of the five aggregates (sakkaya) and the arising of that individuality (sakkaya-samudaya) as extremes, the cessation of that individuality (sakkaya-nirodha) as the middle.

All the bhikkhus identified the seamstress as desire (tanha), because it truly sews one to rebirth in various lives. In so far as a person knows the knowable and comprehends the comprehensible, knowing the knowable and comprehending the comprehensible, to that extent a person is one who puts an end to suffering in the present existence.

When the bhikkhus asked the Buddha which answer was the best, he

replied that all the answers were correct, but he himself would give the answer of the first bhikkhu.

These answers are of special interest to students of Vipassana meditation. The goal is clearly stated: it is the end of suffering. This must be done through understanding in order to escape from the binding power of desire. In the twelve links of dependent origination, the Buddha explained the arising and cessation of suffering. The terms given by the Buddha and bhikkhus can be related to these links whose arising leads to suffering and whose cessation leads to liberation.

The two extremes in the explanation preferred by the Buddha are contact and the arising of contact. Contact arises dependent on the six senses. Contact ceases when sensations (vedana) cease, and sensations are the basis for the arising of craving, which is identified here as the very thing that binds us to continued suffering.

The other explanations are very close to this one. Dependent origination takes place in the past, present, and future, but it is only in the present that we can do something about cutting through the bonds that tie us to continued suffering. Reacting to pleasant and painful sensations gives rise to desire and hatred. Sensations which are neither pleasant nor painful are associated with ignorance.[17] All three types of these sensations are impermanent, so we should not cling to any of them.[18] They arise through contact, and when contact ceases, they cease as well.[19] The entity of mind and body (nama-rupa) arises because of consciousness. Once this is correctly understood, there will be no more attachment to these. The combination of the various aggregates which is wrongly considered to be a lasting self (sakkaya) must also be correctly understood as arising and vanishing.

Sayagyi U Ba Khin selected the method which is most appropriate for laypeople in developing insight. Contact between the senses and stimuli result in sensations. If these sensations are observed to be continually arising and ceasing, as being impermanent (anicca), it is possible to stop desire from arising. Experiencing the arising and ceasing that is taking place within our own minds and bodies will lead to true knowledge. The physical sensations in the body are the only ones arising that are immediately experienced as pleasant, painful, or neutral. Therefore, they enable us to develop equanimity by letting go attachment to the pleasant sensations, aversion to the painful sensations, and we can overcome our lack of understanding by seeing the impermanence of the neutral sensations.

As the student of Buddhist meditation makes progress in the control of the mind and understanding of impermanence, the moderate approach will have to be fine-tuned. At first, it may be necessary to struggle just to follow the moral precepts and practise meditation regularly. The temptation at times to make an exhausting forced effort will have to be resisted. With time, the student will develop good habits and become established in the practice.

Once established, times will come when boredom sets in, or complacency. Then it will be necessary to summon up more effort. Finer and finer distinctions will need to be made in keeping the attention properly balanced as it carries on with the essential task of observing what is happening in the body and mind.

It is important to always remember that the goal is the end of all suffering. This is what is meant when the Buddha says in his answer to Tissa Metteyya that the liberated person does not cling to the middle. Practising meditation is the way to make progress on the path leading to Nibbana. Once the goal is reached, the path is no longer clung to. This

does not mean that we should underestimate the importance of the path, but we should be careful not to be attached to past experiences. When the breathing becomes more subtle or when sensations become very subtle, we must not be disappointed. We should rather continue our observation in order to come to the cessation of all these results of past volitional actions.

Sayagyi U Chit Tin

FOOTNOTES:

[1] The translation is based on K.R. Norman's GD II vv. 1041-1042.

[2] BD IV 15-19, KS V 356-360.

[3] MLS I 103-108.

[4] KS IV 234-244.

[5] DB I 224.

[6] GS V 132.

[7] MLS I 108.

[8] MLS I 150.

[9] Adapted from a Latin poem by Horace (Odes II x 5): //aurea mediocrites//.

[10] //Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language// (1922).

[11] These qualities are those of the Dhamma. One quality, "not subject to decay" (nijjara) is not included in other passages (see, for example, MLS I 47), and another, "it is well taught by the Blessed One," is not mentioned here.

[12] A synonym of //lobha//.

[13] Desire is eliminated by the person who is filled with passion (ratta), hatred by the evil person (duttha), and delusion by the bewildered person (muha).

[14] KS II 12f., 17-19, 44, 52f., 53; III 113f.

[15] Sn v. 1040; this translation is based on K.R. Norman's in GD.

[16] GS III 284-286.

[17] MLS I 366.

[18] MLS II 179

[19] KS II 67.

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