

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu:
The Middle Way Life in a World of Polarity
by Santikaro

We human beings have long acquired the habit of creating dichotomies and opposition, and our understandings of scriptural texts and traditions have not avoided this tendency. We frequently find polarity imposed as a device of convenience: tradition versus reform, meditator versus scholar, etc. Some Buddhist teachers may fall into such dichotomies. Ajahn Buddhadasa is one who does not. For him, the middle way is about finding the right course between extremes.

Ajahn Buddhadasa grew up during a time of great change in Thai society, as aggressive western “civilization” and imperialism made deep inroads. This change brought about many benefits such as roads, schools, and advances in health care, but much destruction resulted as well. The forests of Thailand diminished from over 90% to just 10%, prostitution became rampant, and traditional modes of life have disappeared. Many in Thailand responded to the pressure to westernize by embracing and profiting from it. Others took the opposite approach, resisting and refusing what the West had to offer. Ajahn Buddhadasa sought the middle way between these opposing alternatives.

The organizing element in Ajahn Buddhadasa’s response to Western imperialism and modernization was the Dhamma. This may seem self-evident, but it wasn’t true of the political-economic elite or even the majority of Thai monks, especially the senior monks who were often much more interested in maintaining tradition and privilege than in living from Dhammic principles. One of Ajahn Buddhadasa’s most notable qualities was his ability to hold the Dhamma at the center – not a bookish, memorized Dhamma, but a living, creative expression of it. He and others, such as Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hahn, represent some of the healthiest Asian responses to the tremendous economic, political, and military pressure emanating from the violent capitalist-driven ideology of the West.

Faced with the dichotomy of slavishly following or stubbornly refusing the progress of Westernization, Ajahn Buddhadasa felt that there were many things to learn from the West. Like the Dalai Lama, he was fascinated by science. When he was a young monk, he cherished the typewriter given to him by an early benefactor. He experimented with radios and early recording equipment, and was an excellent photographer. He read Freud and other psychologists, and philosophers like Hegel and Marx. He believed there was a way to use some Western developments constructively. Instead of blindly refusing them, he thought that one should learn how to adapt them - understanding them while being mindful of their potential dangers.

He thought that Asian peoples could learn from what those in the West were thinking and doing, without surrendering their own wisdom. Many Thai students in Europe and in Western-style educational systems were being told by their European teachers that they came from an “inferior civilization.” There were some who believed what they were told. Fortunately, others did not. Ajahn Buddhadasa emerged as the main Thai voice pointing out that Europe had created nothing comparable to Buddhism, while acknowledging the economic and military advancement of the West. He presented the view that Asian Buddhism had an attitude much more fitting with science than Christianity, and a kind of wisdom largely missing in the West.

Ajahn Buddhadasa taught that in order to wisely absorb what is coming from the West, and to filter what is unhealthy, we need to stay grounded in an understanding of Buddha-

Dhamma. This had a great influence on Thai society, especially among the progressive elite. Though the meaning is a bit different for those of us born in the West, the dilemma remains: we live in a culture that is very powerful and has some healthy, creative aspects, but also a tremendous amount of violence and destruction. How are we going to sort through this? In which principles can we ground ourselves?

Another dichotomy occurs between conservative and radical. The Thai activist and scholar Sulak Sivaraksa coined the term “radical conservatism” to describe Ajahn Buddhadasa. In some ways Ajahn Buddhadasa was conservative. He thought that Southern Thai culture was healthy, balanced, and wise, and he wanted to help conserve it. He was also conservative, in certain respects, regarding Buddhism, believing that Buddhism needed to stay grounded in its past without being stuck there.

At the same time he was radical. Ajahn Buddhadasa honored the Buddhist tradition that had developed over 2500 years, but he also recognized that the many changes it had been through were not in keeping with its core. In trying to understand and preserve the tradition, he endeavored to find the original and essential aspects of Buddhism through carefully reading and studying the Pali suttas. He insisted on reviving core threads of Buddha-Dhamma – teachings such as suññata (emptiness) and tathata (thusness) – that were in danger of being obliterated by certain elements of traditional Theravada Buddhism. Although this could be considered a conservative activity, it seemed very radical to the monastic hierarchy. Rather than end up on one side or the other of this conservative-progressive dichotomy, he was able to be progressively conservative and conservatively progressive, avoiding a common ideological lock-down.

Another key dichotomy he addressed is that of lay versus monastic. Senior monks discouraged him from teaching anatta (not-self) and pativasamuppada (dependent co-origination) to lay people on grounds that it would “confuse them.” But in good conscience Ajahn Buddhadasa could not stop. He argued that these dhammas are core to Buddhism, and all people who want to end suffering have a right to learn them. For him, ending suffering is not a monastic issue, or even a Buddhist issue, but a human issue. He took on the work of making the Dhamma available to anyone who might be interested, whether they were lay or ordained, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, or Sikh (and he had students from all of these traditions).

Ajahn Buddhadasa also challenged the meditation versus daily-life practice dichotomy. The term ‘Dhamma practice’ is often used as a euphemism for meditation both in the West and in Asia. When people say ‘practice’ they are referring to the practice of sitting on a cushion or doing walking meditation, and sometimes specifically on retreat or in a formal setting. This has raised questions and created confusion about how to practice in daily-life, and how to respond to the demands, complexities, and needs of the world we live in.

Central to Ajahn Buddhadasa’s approach is the idea that “Dhamma is duty; duty is Dhamma.” Dhamma practice comes down to doing our duty, which inspires a further investigation into the nature of that duty. For some of us our duty is something dictated to us by our family. The government tells us about our patriotic duty. Capitalism tells us about our duty to consume to keep the economy strong. Ajahn Buddhadasa believed that duty must be discovered by and for ourselves. We should be mindful of messages from our family, government, culture, and economic system, but in the end it is our own responsibility to identify. Sometimes it’s about taking care of the body, sometimes it’s about one’s profession, and sometimes it’s about social action. Ultimately the core duty is to let go of self and to be free of suffering.

Finally, there is the spiritual versus worldly dichotomy. There are teachers of Theravada who believe in a clear duality between samsara and Nibbana, the worldly and transcendent. And there is much in the West that dichotomizes these as well, including leftist political traditions that want to abolish religion and be simply materialistic. There are others with the opposite bias: "Forget politics and forget social issues, all you have to do is practice, practice, practice and escape to Nibbana."

While Ajahn Buddhadasa didn't believe that samsara (worldly) and Nibbana (transcendent) are one and the same, he did insist that Nibbana is found only in the midst of the world. For him the way to end suffering could only be found through suffering. He described Nibbana as "the coolest point in the furnace."

The Dhamma perspective that made all this bridging possible is an understanding, both intellectual and experiential, of idappaccayata – the universal natural law that all things happen because of causes and conditions. Nothing is static, absolute, or fixed. Seeing this, we avoid becoming trapped in ideology, positions, and dichotomies. Ajahn Buddhadasa believed that an approach which may have worked for a while may also finally reach its limit. The more we understand that everything depends on causes and conditions, that nothing is fixed, the easier it will be to navigate the intellectual and ideological dichotomies of our world, and to follow the middle way of non-suffering in this lifetime.