



Balancing Vision and Routine, by Bhikkhu Bodhi

All human activity can be viewed as an interplay between two contrary but equally essential factors -- vision and repetitive routine. Vision is the creative element in activity, whose presence ensures that over and above the settled conditions pressing down upon us from the past we still enjoy a margin of openness to the future, a freedom to discern more meaningful ends and to discover more efficient ways to achieve them. Repetitive routine, in contrast, provides the conservative element in activity. It is the principle that accounts for the persistence of the past in the present, and it enables the successful achievements of the present to be preserved intact and faithfully transmitted to the future. [...]

When one factor prevails at the expense of the other, the consequences are often undesirable. If we are bound to a repetitive cycle of work that deprives us of our freedom to inquire and understand things for ourselves, we soon stagnate, crippled by the chains of routine. If we are spurred to action by elevating ideals but lack the discipline to implement them, we may eventually find ourselves wallowing in idle dreams or exhausting our energies on frivolous pursuits. It is only when accustomed routines are infused by vision that they become springboards to discovery rather than deadening ruts. And it is only when inspired vision gives birth to a course of repeatable actions that we can bring our ideals down from the ethereal sphere of imagination to the somber realm of fact. It took a flash of genius for Michelangelo to behold the figure of David invisible in a shapeless block of stone; but it required years of prior training, and countless blows with hammer and chisel, to work the miracle that would leave us a masterpiece of art. [...]

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Though the emphasis may alternate from phase to phase, ultimate success in the development of the path always hinges upon balancing vision with routine in such a way that each can make its maximal contribution. However, because our minds are keyed to fix upon the new and distinctive, in our practice we are prone to place a one-sided emphasis on vision at the expense of repetitive routine. Thus we are elated by expectations concerning the stages of the path far beyond our reach, while at the same time we tend to neglect the lower stages -- dull and drab, but far more urgent and immediate -- lying just beneath our feet.

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--Bhikkhu Bodhi

