Middle Way, The

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The Buddha’s first sermon started with the topic of suffering. That was the big issue he was going to address all through the forty-five years that he taught, suffering or stress and the end of suffering. But when he introduced the topic of suffering as his main topic, he prefaced it by talking about how people act. In other words, the issue of suffering is something that we create. And once it’s there, then we react to it in ways that continue our suffering. He said there are two extremes, either sensual indulgence or self-mortification. Then he said there’s another course of action, though. That’s the middle way. And it’s not the middle way because it’s half indulgence and half mortification. It actually lies off the spectrum entirely. It’s something else. And that’s basically the path to comprehend suffering. There’s no way you’re going to get around it, he said, unless you comprehend it. And you have to develop certain qualities. The qualities of what you do, what you say, how you think. Or to look at it another way, virtue, concentration, and discernment. And what we’re working on right now is the concentration. How are you going to make your concentration part of the middle way? For one thing, you have to look at the other ways that your mind is tempted to deal with suffering. You either try to bury yourself in pleasure, or you decide to deny yourself any pleasure at all. And that’s not just conscious denial. Sometimes you let yourself wallow in thoughts that simply make you suffer more. That’s a kind of self-mortification, too. And you find that both these kinds of thoughts keep jumping up as you’re sitting here. And the middle way lies in not following either of them. So you focus on the breath. That’s a pleasant object that’s okay. It’s not sensual indulgence. It’s a different kind of pleasure. And the important thing about it is that it’s based on something inside. Sensual indulgence requires depending on things outside being the way you want them—sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations—arranged a certain way. And you look at your life, though, and how many times are they arranged the way you want them? After all, this is the human realm, which is a really mixed bag. One of Ajahn Fueng’s students complained to him one time that she was a victim of a lot of gossip where she worked. She herself was not a gossip. She didn’t feel that it was fair. He said, “Look, who asked you to be born? Who asked you to be a human being? It was you who decided you wanted to be a human being. So how are you going to blame the human realm for being the way it is?” This is where you wanted to come. You’ve got to learn to think in that way. It makes it a lot easier to deal with the way things happen. You came, joined the human race, you learned human language, got a sense of what’s right and wrong in the human realm, and then you notice a lot of people don’t do things in terms of right and wrong. They have their own other ways of doing things. That’s the way it is in this world. So what are you going to do about it? There are a few things you can arrange the way you’d like them to be, but there’s so much that lies beyond your powers. That’s why the Buddha has you focus inside, on a happiness that doesn’t have to depend on those things outside. It doesn’t force this happiness on anyone, but he says, “Here it is. This is an alternative. So it’s up to you.” The reason the Buddha started his discussion of suffering, not with suffering itself, but with paths of practice, was because he wanted to make the point that what we do is all-important. So focus right now on what you’re doing right now. There are all kinds of things you can focus on. But to be on the path, you want to focus on the present moment. And as for anything else that would come up and change your frame of reference, you can say, “No, thanks.” Not right now. That’s opening the possibility that there may be a time when it’s wise to think about these things. But for the time being, just let all those things go. Try to establish your frame of reference right here, and do what you can to make it solid and unshakable. If the mind is easily shaken, then with the slightest disturbance it’s going to go back to its old ways, either running away from the disturbance to finding some sort of pleasure, or whipping itself over the back. Neither approach takes us where we want to go. But for so long we’ve thought these are the only two alternatives. And the Buddha says, “No, there’s another one. Just stay right here.” There’s part of the mind that’s not shaken by anything. See if you can get in touch with that. And before you can get there, you have to learn how to control the impulse to go jumping after things. That requires a lot of mindfulness and alertness. So those are the two qualities you want to focus on right now. The Buddha once said that these are the two most helpful qualities in the mind. Mindfulness is keeping something in mind. You’re going to keep the breath in mind. In alertness, you watch what you’re doing. In other words, you watch how the breathing is going. Notice when it’s coming in, when it’s going out, when it’s comfortable, when it’s not. And notice how the mind is reacting. Keep watch over it so that you notice when it’s beginning to slip off. Say, “Nope, nope, come on back.” And then it’s going to wait while you’re watching, and then it’s going to slip off again. It’s like students in a classroom. As long as the teacher’s in the classroom, the students are obedient. As soon as the teacher turns her back, walks out of the room, and then they go running around all over the place. Which means you’ve got to keep your eye on the mind. At first it takes a lot of effort, and you find yourself slipping off all the time. But you can come back, come back, come back. But the important part of the effort is that it’s not going to feel this effort all the time. After a while, it becomes more and more natural that this is the place where you want to look. An important way of establishing this is to try to make the breath as comfortable as possible. Once it’s comfortable, you can start thinking of that sense of ease spreading throughout the body. Down the front, down the back, all around. As it gets more and more pleasurable in the body, you find that you can relax your hands, you can relax your feet. You don’t have to be so tense about watching the breath. And it does become more and more pleasurable to stay right here. The important thing is that you don’t let everything relax. Otherwise, the mind starts blurring out. You’ve got to find the proper balance. How much tension do you have to bring to your attention so that it’s not too tense, but it’s not so loose that it’s going to let everything go? The old image is of holding a baby chick in your hand. You don’t want to hold it too tight, because it’s going to die. If you hold it too loosely, it’s going to fly away. So you want to hold it just right. Then something in the mind says, “Okay, now what? What’s next?” Well, there’s just stay right here. This is the important point. Learning how to stay. This is right concentration. Learning how to keep the mind established. It’s going to want to think about this and move around about that and do all its other old things. And you say, “Nope, not right now. Just stay right here.” And every time a thought comes up that you’d like to go someplace else, just think of that thought disbanding. The tension around the thought allows it to relax. And as you can do this, the sense of the center, wherever it is in the body, the center of the mind, will tend to grow stronger, because your energy isn’t running out all the time. It’s allowed to settle back in and gather together in one spot. Then just watch over it. Try to keep everything balanced. Whatever’s going to develop will develop on its own. And it’s going to take its time. You can’t schedule it and say, “It’s going to happen within the next five minutes or within the next hour.” But you know that the only way it’s going to happen is by your staying right here. If you try to do anything to speed it up, you may be messing it up. So stay right here. See what happens. What will develop on its own? It’s like sharpening a knife on a stone. You have to maintain just the right amount of pressure. Just keep at it, the same rhythm, the same rhythm, the same rhythm. If you try to speed things up, put too much pressure, you’re going to ruin the blade. Or not enough pressure and the blade doesn’t get sharp. And you can’t ask how much longer this is going to take. The only way the blade is going to get sharp is if you keep maintaining the right amount of pressure. So it’s all you do. And the process will take care of itself. So there is a fair amount of doing in the meditation, but a lot of it is also learning how not to do the other things you normally do. How to stay centered right here. How to stay perched right here without flying off the way the mind normally does. This way you begin to realize that no matter how bad things are out there, you don’t have to go flying out to them. And you also realize that a large part of why they seem so bad is the way you fly out to them. Again, you don’t have to, whether or not you accept the teachings on rebirth, that you made a choice to come here. You can see that you are making a choice all the time in the present moment. There’s this issue the mind wants to fly to. There’s that issue the mind wants to fly to. Well, who asked it to fly there? And when you fly there and you suffer, who’s to blame? This is not to say that there aren’t times when it is wise to deal with the situation outside, but right now is not the time. The mind needs to learn some basic skills to see how much of the present moment, or its experience of the present moment, comes from its choices right now. And you can’t see that unless you teach it to stay right here. Because right here is where the choices are made. So you can think of this as the “I” in the middle of the storm. The “I” of the storm is calm. The storm may be whirling around it, but as long as you’re staying in the “I,” you’re okay. The “I” here, of course, is the observing “I,” the “I” of the mind. If you want to understand how the mind creates suffering, this is the place to watch.

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