The No-Karma Zone

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The main elements of the training—virtue, concentration, discernment—are things that we already have to some extent. We’re virtuous in some areas, maintain our concentration in some areas, and have some discernment in some areas of our lives. The problem is that they’re not all around. The teaching of Ajahn Mun that struck him most was the idea that your practice should have the shape of a circle—in other words, all around every area of your life. It’s like a fence. If you have a fence or a building on your property, but you’ve only fenced off part of the property, the fence doesn’t really protect you from anything. If you have huge gaping holes full of all kinds of animals and thieves and who knows what else, we’re all going to come into the property through the holes. So you have to make sure your fence is all around—in the image of the cannon, without even a hole big enough for a cat to slip through. This is a huge area where we tend to fall short in our practice. There are areas where you practice, there are times when you practice, and you’re thinking about the Buddhist teachings, thinking about the Dhamma, thinking about your actions, thinking about the consequences. And there are other times which you might call your no-karma zones—the areas where you don’t want to think about the consequences of your actions. You just want to do what you want to do. And you don’t want to hear about karma. You don’t want to hear about consequences. Virtue, concentration, and discernment have no business being there. That’s what the mind tells itself. Those are like the areas where the fence was never even built to begin with. Or if it was built, it has huge gaping holes and the possibility for all kinds of animals of suffering to come in through those holes. So you have to learn how to bring your concentration to bear. You have to bring your virtue, concentration, and discernment—all elements of the path—to bear on those areas, despite the resistance. This is particularly true of our addictions. The things we like to think about that we know are unskillful. The things we do that we know are unskillful. The mind likes to put itself into a kind of a zone where it says, “Okay, now that I’m in this zone, there’s no turning back. I’m not going to listen to anybody’s voices.” And so the voices of shame and the voices of a sense of compunction get pushed off to the side. Shame, you’re not in the sense of being ashamed of yourself. You’re going to have plenty of that after it’s done with. But just realizing that you’re better than that kind of action, it’s beneath you to act in that way, to think in that way. Or compunction, having a genuine concern about the results of what you’re doing. Down the line, you’re going to suffer. Do you really want to suffer? No. Nobody wants to suffer. But at that moment you say, “I don’t care.” And the mind has all kinds of defenses. You have to learn how to argue with them. This is why, as we were saying today, if you could give somebody a drug to stop a particular addiction, all it would do would be a temporary stopgap measure. Then you wouldn’t develop the discernment that comes from learning how to argue with your defilements. Like the defilement that says, “We’re going to give, anyhow, another five minutes, so why don’t you give in now?” The mind says, “Well, I don’t know about five minutes from now, but right now I do have the opportunity to make a choice, and I want to make a good choice. I may not stick with it, but for the time being I want to stick with the right choice, or at least assert the right choice.” And the mind says, “It’s hopeless.” And you say, “Well, at least I’ve got to hope for this one second.” Especially with thoughts of lust. The Buddha once said that even though he never really recommends a lot of sleep for people, he says, because you tend to waste your time in sleep, still, sleep is better than getting yourself all embroiled in thoughts of lust. So if you find the temptation coming on, remind yourself, “I’ve probably got a sleep debt.” Pay off your sleep debt first, and then see where you stand. Because a lot of times we give in to these impulses when we’re tired, when we feel stressed and the mind feels the need for an immediate pleasure hit. Like those mice in the cages where they’ve planted electrodes in their brains that go straight to the pleasure center. They found that the mice would starve to death because they kept hitting the pleasure center again and again and again on the little bars in the cage, getting their hit to the point where they didn’t care about anything else. That’s what it is. When these addictions are hit, at that moment you don’t care. So the ultimate way of putting up the fence to protect yourself from these things is to learn how to care and to bring that concern into every aspect. On days when you’re able to resist a particular addiction or a particular temptation, the next morning when you wake up, remind yourself, “Notice how good it feels that you didn’t give in yesterday.” So the next time you feel tempted, remind yourself. You can tell yourself, “Hey, tomorrow morning I’m going to feel really good that I didn’t give in now.” That way you’re beginning to bring the different ends of your fence together so they surround your property. There’s another teaching that the Buddha has that’s called the Governing Principles. There are three of them, things that are useful to keep in mind when you feel tempted to enter that no-karma zone. The first is thinking about yourself, realizing that you’re here because you want true happiness. This is why you came to the Dhamma. This is why you’re practicing meditation. If you’re ordained, this is why you’re ordained—to find true happiness. And if you don’t stick with a path, you’re being a traitor to your own best interests. You’re being a traitor to your own love for yourself, your concern for yourself, the high standards that you want to set for your happiness. We all want a happiness that’s unadulterated, and yet here you go adulterating it. So ask yourself, “Is this really a sign of self-love, my desire to just take a quick hit and pretend that it’s not going to have any consequences?” The second thing to remember is the Dhamma. Here you are, with a chance to practice a Dhamma that leads out of suffering. You don’t know how many lifetimes you’ve had where you haven’t been able to find this teaching. And you look around you, and you look at all the people in the world who are totally closed to any idea of wanting to practice in this way. A famous person says that he’s a Buddhist and immediately there’s a firestorm. People say, “Oh, who wants Buddhism? It’s world-negating.” What did the Buddha know? He didn’t live in a world with iPods and James Cameron movies. He was being facetious, of course, but deep down inside there is that resistance. People say, “I don’t want to hear about this teaching.” At least you’re not in that mode all the time. There are times when you do have the desire to practice to remind yourself of how fortunate you are. And you don’t know how much longer you’ll have the opportunity to practice in this way, so you want to make the most of what time you’ve got. So it really behooves you to think about the Dhamma and what implications it has. It tells you what your actions have. There are ways to find pleasure which are not harmful. There may require some effort, but the payoff is huge. And we’re lucky that we have this Dhamma, who knows how much longer it’s going to last. Jon Swat once commented, “When you get to the end of the path and you’ve been spending all your time practicing, trying to clear away the weeds, clearing away the obstacles in the path, once you’ve reached the end, as far as you’re concerned, the weeds can grow back. But you turn around and you look at other people, so you do what you can to keep the path free of weeds.” And he was struck by how many people are planting weeds in the path for everybody else. So we do have this opportunity to practice now that Dhamma is still alive. And if you want happiness, this is where you’re going to find it. Because as you talk to your various unskillful desires, one way of talking to them is—remember, as in any negotiation, you have to make the point that we have some points in common. Skillful desires and unskillful desires all have one thing in common, which is the desire for happiness. And once you’ve established that common ground, then you can start talking. The third governing principle to keep in mind is one you may not have thought of. It’s called “The World is a Governing Principle.” The meaning is that there are people in the world who can read minds. You tell yourself, “Somebody might be reading my mind right now. Do I want them to see what’s going through my mind?” That’s a chastening thought, because often in that no-karma zone, it’s not only no-karma, but there are no arahants, there are no people with psychic powers, there’s nobody. It’s just you and your defilements. You think, “Okay, now there’s just us here. Nobody else has to know.” But there are people who can know. Somebody may be looking in right now. What do you want them to see? At the very least, even if you can’t totally overcome a particular desire, a particular addiction, you’d like them to see you fighting it. So it’s important to remember that the law of karma is not a traffic law, i.e., just on Tuesdays and Thursdays and just on this side of the street or that side of the street. There are no karma-free zones. There are no no-karma zones. Everywhere you look, every time of the day or night, your actions are going to have consequences. And if you can remind all the various committees of desires in your mind that, “Hey, we’re all here for happiness. We’re all here to be happy.” But some of us have some pretty strange ideas about how that’s going to be accomplished. Let’s sit down and talk it over, because that’s one of the things they’re going to resist. They don’t want to talk things over. They just want to hold on to their opinions, regardless of how rational or irrational they are. But if you’re patient, and if you strengthen the skillful members of the committee, and you work on your powers of concentration, so that you can develop a sense of ease and well-being, so that you don’t have to be so stressed out all the time—because that’s a huge reason for a lot of addictions, is that you don’t see any other way of getting instant pleasure, any immediate visceral pleasure. Or you can’t imagine yourself doing anything else. So, one, expand your imagination a little bit. There are other ways of doing this. And two, learn to develop the skills of dealing with the breath, dealing with the energy in the body. One, so that you don’t load up on stress throughout the day, that you have your ways of releasing it through the way you breathe, taking meditation breaks whenever you can, even if you can’t sit down and close your eyes, so that you can be with your breath as you’re listening to other people talk, as you’re going through the day. So you’re not building up the kind of tension and stress that seem to call for a quick release. A quick hit of pleasure. I had a student in Singapore one time who told me that as he went through the day, he felt like a garbage can. Everybody was throwing their garbage in it. At the end of the day, he had to sit down and dump it out. Of course, the trick there is to cut a huge hole in the bottom of the can, so that whatever people throw in, it just goes right through. You don’t have to carry it with you. You don’t have to gather it up. In other words, you learn how not to burden yourself down, so that you can maintain the practice in an all-around way, so that you can have a fence all around your property and it doesn’t wear you out. Your practice can have the shape of a circle that encompasses everything. Your virtue becomes all-around, your concentration all-around, your wisdom all-around. It’s when all the different ends meet like this, in a circle, that the path really yields its full results.

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