

The Middle Way

April 21, 2005

The Buddha's first sermon started with the topic of suffering. That was the big issue he was going to address all through the 45 years 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 tend to act in trying to get away from suffering. The issue of suffering is something we create, and once it's there, we react to it in ways that continue more suffering.

As he said, there are two extremes: either sensual indulgence or self-mortification. But then there's another course of action, the middle way. Now, it's not middle because it's half indulgence and half mortification. It actually lies off the spectrum as entirely something else. It's basically the path to comprehend suffering. There's no way you're going to get around suffering, he said, unless you comprehend it. To do that, you have to develop certain qualities: qualities of what you do, what you say, how you think—or to look at it in another way, virtue, concentration, and discernment. 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, either trying to bury yourself in pleasure, or denying yourself any pleasure at all. This doesn't refer just to conscious denial. Sometimes you let yourself wallow in thoughts that simply make you suffer more. That's a kind of self-mortification, too. You find that both these kinds of thoughts keep jumping up as you're sitting here.

The middle way lies in not following either of them. Focus on the breath. That's a pleasant object, but it's okay: It's not sensual indulgence. It's a different kind of pleasure. The important thing about it is that the pleasure is based on something inside. Sensual indulgence requires depending on things outside being the way you want them: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, arranged in a certain way. But look at your life: How often are things arranged the way you want them? After all, this is the human realm, which is really a mixed bag.

One of Ajaan Fuang's students complained to him one time that she was a victim of a lot of gossip where she worked. She said that she herself was not a gossip. She didn't feel that it was fair. But he told her, "Look, who asked you to be born? Who asked you to be a human being? You were the one who decided you

wanted to be a human being. So 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 and joined the human race. You learned human language. You gained a sense of what’s right and wrong in the human realm, but then you notice that 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 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 things outside. He doesn’t force this 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 the path 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 actions in the present moment. As for anything else that would come up and change your frame of reference, you can say, “No, thanks, not right now.” That leaves open the possibility that there may be a time when it’ll be wise to think about those things, but for the time being, just let them all 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 find some sort of pleasure, or whipping itself over the back. Neither approach takes us where we want to go.

For so long we’ve thought, “Well, these are the only two alternatives,” but the Buddha says, “No, there is another one.” Stay right here. There’s a part of the mind that’s not shaken by anything. See if you can get in touch with that. Before you get can there, though, 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. As the Buddha once said, these are the two most helpful qualities in the mind. Mindfulness is keeping something in mind. Like right now: You’re going to keep the breath in mind. As for alertness, you watch what you’re doing. In other words, you watch how the breathing is going—noticing when it’s coming in, when it’s going out, when it’s comfortable, when it’s not—and, at the same time, you notice how the mind is reacting. Keep watch over it so that you can detect when it’s beginning to slip off. You can say, “Oh, no, come on back.” It’s going to behave while you’re

watching, then it's going to slip off again. It's like students in a classroom. As long as the teacher is in the classroom, the students are obedient. As soon as the teacher turns her back or walks out of the room, 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. The important part of the effort is realizing that it's not going to feel this effortful all the time. After a while, it becomes more and more natural that this is the place where you want to stay and keep looking.

An important way of establishing this frame of reference is trying 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 in how much tension you have to bring to your attention so that it's not too tense but also not so loose that it's going to let everything go. The classic image is of holding a baby chick in your hand. You don't want to hold it too tight, or 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.

Something in the mind might ask, "Now what? What's next?" The answer is, "Just stay right here." And this is the important point: learning how to stay. This is right concentration, after all, learning how to *keep* the mind established. It's going to want to think about this, and move around about that, and do all those other old things it's been doing all along, but you say, "No, not right now, just stay right here." Every time a thought comes up that you'd like to go someplace else, just think of that thought disbanding. The tension around that thought: Allow it to relax. As you can do this, the sense of the center, wherever it is in the body, will tend to grow stronger because your energy isn't running out all the time. It'll have to settle back and gather together in one spot.

Then you just watch over it, trying to keep everything balanced. Whatever's going to develop will develop on its own. 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 do know that the only way it's going to happen is through your staying right here. If you try to do anything to speed it up, you may be

messing it up. So stay right here and 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 and just keep at the same rhythm, the same rhythm, the same rhythm. If you try to speed things up and put too much pressure on the knife, you're going to ruin the blade. If there's not enough pressure, the blade doesn't get sharp. And you can't ask how much longer it's going to take. You know that the only way the blade is going to get sharp is if you keep maintaining the right amount of pressure. So that'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 other things you might normally do. You learn how to stay centered right here, how to stay perched right here, without flying off the way the mind normally does. In this way, you begin to realize that no matter how bad things are out there, you don't have to go flowing out to them. And you also realize a large part of why they seem so bad is the way you fly out. And again, you don't have to. Whether or not you accept the teachings on rebirth, that you made the choice to come here, you can see that you're making choices all the time in the present moment. There's this issue your mind wants to fly to, that issue the mind wants to fly to. Well, who asks it to fly there? And when you fly there and you suffer, who's to blame?

This is not to say that there won't be times when it's 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 its experience of the present moment comes from its choices right now. And that you can't see unless you teach it to stay right here, because right here is where those choices are made.

So you can think of this as the eye in the middle of a storm. The eye of the storm is calm. The storm may be whirling around it, but as long as you're staying in the eye, you're okay. The eye, of course, is the observing eye, the eye in the mind. If you want to understand how the mind creates suffering, this is a place to watch.