

The Middles of the Middle Way

In his very first sermon, the Buddha introduced his path of practice as a middle way that avoids two extremes: a commitment to sensual pleasures related to sensual desires, and a commitment to self-affliction. On the surface, this statement makes the path sound like a middling way, at a bland halfway point on the continuum between pleasure and pain. But if you read further in the Canon on the middle way, you realize that its middleness is much more complex than that.

To begin with, there are times when the Buddha recommends pursuing pleasant practice; and other times where he recommends painful practice. There are also times where he talks of the middleness of his middle way in different terms entirely. When discussing one of the more advanced stages of the first factor of the path, right view, he describes it as a perspective that avoids questions requiring an either/or response, where both the *either* and the *or* entangle you in issues that distract you from the task of putting an end to suffering and stress. This aspect of the path is middle in the sense that it cuts right through the middle of such questions and throws both alternatives off to the side.

This means that the Buddha chose his words carefully. The path doesn't necessarily *lie between* two extremes. It *avoids* two extremes. But exactly which directions it goes in avoiding them is up to the discernment of each practitioner to find out. Sometimes you avoid extremes by finding a point of moderation on a continuum running between them: a point that doesn't always stay right in the middle, and that can move unexpectedly. Sometimes you avoid extremes by leaving the continuum entirely. The Buddha's middle way has middles of both sorts.

In tracking down and sorting out the various middles of the middle way, you have to use your discernment in the same way you do when practicing to master a physical skill. To begin with, you have to discern where, on a continuum running from too little to too much, what amount of practice is just right. Too little practice doesn't make a difference in your performance; too much practice can simply wear you out without improving your skills. That kind of middle lies on a continuum measured in time. Just as important—and often even more so—you have to discern which issues to focus on while you practice and which ones to ignore. This involves finding a middle that lies off any continuum entirely. For instance, if you're trying to become a faster swimmer, you have to focus on maintaining good form throughout your time in the water and to ignore the question of whether a red or yellow swimsuit will shave seconds off your time. In realizing that neither red nor yellow are relevant to your speed, you cut right through the middle of that issue and are done with it.

The Buddha himself saw the parallels between the path of practice leading to the end of suffering and the practice involved in mastering physical skills. In explaining the path, he often drew similes from the ways in which cooks, carpenters, and archers had to practice to hone their abilities. The main difference, of course, is that while physical skills require a great deal of

concentration and discernment, the path requires even more. Once the Buddha's attendant, Ananda, stopped while on his almsround to watch a group of young princes practicing archery. On returning to the Buddha, he expressed amazement at the accuracy of their aim. The Buddha responded,

“What do you think, Ananda: Which is harder to do, harder to master—to shoot arrows through a tiny keyhole without missing, one right after the other, or to take a horsehair split into seven strands and pierce a tip with a tip?”

“This, lord, is harder to do, harder to master—to take a horsehair split into seven strands and pierce tip with a tip.”

“And they, Ananda, pierce what is even harder to pierce: those who pierce, as it actually has come to be, that ‘This is stress’; who pierce, as it actually has come to be, that ‘This is the origination of stress’ ... ‘This is the cessation of stress’ ... ‘This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress.’” — *SN 46:45*

In other words, the path to the end of suffering is a skill that, like archery, requires accurate aim, but the level of discernment needed to develop that accuracy is of a much higher order.

So when trying to understand the various middles of the middle way—both those that are on a continuum and those that are off—it's useful to keep in mind the middles discerned in mastering a physical skill.

TWO TYPES OF MIDDLE

The middles of the middle way that lie on a continuum are those related to the practice of moderation. Those that lie off any continuum are related to the practice of appropriate attention. Although these two practices focus on different aspects of the path, they have one important feature in common. They both avoid the extremes of commitment to pain and to sensual pleasure, not by avoiding pain and pleasure, but by using pain and pleasure as tools, whenever appropriate, to help the mind abandon its unskillful qualities.

In other words, neither practice treats pleasure or pain as an evil in and of itself. Instead, they both treat pleasure and pain as means to a higher end. They simply differ in the way they use pleasure and pain as tools. Moderation uses pain, when necessary, as a goad to heedfulness, and pleasure as a support for life and for physical and mental health. Appropriate attention encourages you to develop the pleasure of strong concentration to help wean you away from attachment to sensual pleasures. Then it encourages you to use the mental firmness provided by concentration to look carefully at the experience of pain until you develop dispassion for it. This, in turn, allows you to free the mind from all suffering and stress.

So to develop the discernment that can lead to that freedom, you have to exercise it with both sorts of middles: those involving moderation, and those involving appropriate attention.

THE MIDDLES OF MODERATION

The practice of moderation, in which you try to find an ideal point of balance on a continuum between two extremes, relates primarily to the factors of the path related to virtue and concentration, although discernment necessarily plays a role in governing how this is done.

For instance, with virtue: If we compare the precepts recommended by the Buddha—no intentional killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, or taking of intoxicants—with the precepts taught by the other contemplative schools of his time, we find that the Buddha’s precepts lie between two extremes. On the strict side, the Jains taught that all activity, intentional or not, is harmful, and that the only harmless course of action was to undergo austerities and ultimately to lie down still and fast to death. On the other extreme, the Ajivakas and Lokayatas taught that actions have no effect on what happens in the world, so there’s no way that you can do anyone any help or harm. From this they argued that the whole idea of morality is a sham, a mere social convention, and that there’s no need to place any restrictions on your behavior at all. The Buddha’s insistence that actions have consequences, that harm is real, and that you have to focus on not *intentionally* causing harm is a midpoint between these two extremes.

However, it’s important to note that the moderation of the precepts taught by the Buddha doesn’t mean that they should be observed in a middling way, sometimes following them and sometimes not. The Buddha stressed that the practice of the precepts gives its best results when you observe them in your dealings with all living beings in all situations at all times. He also expressed admiration for those monks who kept to their precepts even if it cost them their lives (Ud 5:5). Only when you show that level of commitment to the precepts can they expose any unskillful agendas in the mind that would otherwise lie hidden behind your excuses for not observing them in one situation or another.

So even though the precepts are moderate in their strictness, the commitment they call for is extreme. This is one of the ways in which the middle way is not a middling way. It’s both moderate and radical at the same time.

MODERATION & CONCENTRATION

A similar principle applies to the moderation of concentration: You have to be radically committed to developing a balanced state of mind. Here, however, the point of moderation is no longer on a single continuum. Instead, you have to find a point of balance on several different continua at once.

The continuum stretching from commitment to sensual indulgence to commitment to self-affliction relates to the practice of concentration most directly in the need to exercise moderation in the amount food you eat. The path factors related to concentration—right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration—are aimed at developing a stable, full-body awareness that requires a healthy body that’s neither weakened from eating too little nor oppressed from eating too much. Afflicting yourself by eating too little will deprive you of the energy you need to maintain full-body focus; indulging in eating too much will make the body heavy and unsettled. Like an athlete or a soldier, you have to avoid both hating food and loving food for its flavors and the sense of fullness it provides. Instead, you have to regard it primarily as fuel to keep the body both light and strong at the same time.

As for the state of mind in concentration, it lies on the midpoint on a continuum between two other extremes: states of mind that are scattered and hyperactive, and those that are torpid and unalert. To find this midpoint—which will vary over time—you have to develop the factors of awakening in a way that moves you away from either extreme. When the mind is torpid, you rouse it by developing three qualities. The first is your ability to analyze what's skillful and unskillful in your present state of mind: This is called *analysis of qualities*. Then you make the effort to develop what's skillful and to abandon what's not—this is called *persistence*—until the body and mind are nourished with a sense of refreshment called *rapture*. On the other hand, when the mind is overly aroused, you focus not on those factors but on a different set of three: calm, concentration, and equanimity. The only factor for awakening that's always appropriate is mindfulness, for it remembers to watch over the mind and to evaluate which of the other factors are needed at any one time.

Another continuum requiring moderation relates to the issue of how much pressure to apply in your focus on the object of your concentration. In the Buddha's simile, it's like holding a quail in your hands. If you hold it too tightly, it'll die. If too loosely, it'll fly away (MN 128).

As concentration develops to the level of jhana—the absorption that constitutes right concentration—you'll find that the factors of rapture and calm can lead to extremely intense feelings of pleasure. These feelings don't count as sensual pleasures, in that they don't depend on the external senses. Instead, they're classed as pleasures of form: the sense of wellbeing that comes from fully inhabiting your inner sense of the form of the body. For this reason, these feelings are not to be avoided. In fact, the ability to access them at will is an important part of mastering concentration, for it nourishes your ability to stay on the path. However, here too you have to exercise moderation. If you get stuck on the more blatant levels of pleasure in the beginning stages of jhana, you prevent yourself from reaching the more balanced stability of the higher stages, in which intense pleasure and rapture fade away, leaving the evenness of pure equanimity.

The concentration that results from following these instructions is balanced and moderate, both stable and fully aware. But the commitment it requires is extreme. The Buddha recommended developing it at all times and in all situations. Here again the moderation of the path has its radical side.

DISCERNMENT & MODERATION

Although issues of moderation focus primarily on the parts of the path dealing with virtue and concentration, they require that you use discernment. After all, discernment plays a necessary role in seeing the value of moderation in the first place. Appreciating moderation—to say nothing of mastering it—requires a higher level of intelligence than the intelligence used in chasing after extremes. Discernment is also needed to provide you with effective reasons to withstand the emotions that would push you off-course. Without this sort of discernment, it's all too easy to push too hard when you feel enthusiasm or to slack off when your enthusiasm wanes, leading you to waste time swinging back and forth between two fruitless extremes.

Discernment also plays a role in gaining a sense of how the energies of the mind and the demands of the practice keep changing—especially in the practice of concentration—so that you can figure out, at any given moment, where on the continuum the middle point of most effective moderation actually lies. For instance, you can notice how today’s needs differ from yesterday’s and—like a swimmer who can read the state of his body as he swims his laps—figure out whether your concentration today needs more energy or less.

Discernment also helps you to notice when you can practice in line with your pleasure, and when you have to practice with pain. If you see that living in accord with pleasure fosters unskillful qualities in the mind, you have to push the middle point of moderation in the direction of pain: sitting longer hours, going with less food and sleep, practicing walking meditation for longer stretches of time. When working with pain has done its work, the middle point of moderation can slide back in the direction of harmless pleasure (MN 101).

An example of harmless pleasure is the pleasure that comes from the beauties of wilderness, where you can find the seclusion that fosters concentration. At present we tend to take for granted the idea that wilderness is beautiful, and forget that only recently has human culture come to view wilderness in a positive light. For millennia, ever since the beginnings of agriculture, wilderness was something endured under duress and that had to be tamed. Only with the industrial revolution have people in general come to regard wilderness as a place to be enjoyed. But the Pali Canon was far ahead of its time in this regard. It contains the earliest extant poetry extolling the beauties of wild nature, treating those beauties both as inherently pleasant and as the ideal setting for finding the even higher pleasures of a well-concentrated mind. The ability to appreciate these pleasures, and to realize that this appreciation was a healthy aid on the path, required sharp discernment.

What makes these pleasures healthy is the purpose which they are used—a point that applies equally to the more everyday pleasures of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. Monks are enjoined everyday to reflect on why they need these supports on the path, and to remind themselves to use them strictly for that purpose, to keep from getting carried away by the pleasures these things can provide. The reflection on food, for instance, gives guidance on how to find the point of moderation in eating by keeping the purpose of eating always in mind:

“And how does a monk know moderation in eating? There is the case where a monk, considering it appropriately, takes his food not playfully, nor for intoxication, nor for putting on bulk, nor for beautification, but simply for the survival & continuance of this body, for ending its afflictions, for the support of the holy life, thinking, ‘I will destroy old feelings [of hunger] & not create new feelings [from overeating]. Thus I will maintain myself, be blameless, & live in comfort.’” — AN 4:37

So the role of discernment in directing the moderation of virtue and concentration shows that the path, in avoiding the extremes of commitment to sensual pleasure and commitment to self-inflicted pain, doesn’t require you to avoid pleasure and pain. It teaches you to avoid *commitment* to either of the two. In other words, it doesn’t view either pleasure or pain as an evil—or a good—in and of itself. Instead, it uses both of them as tools, whenever appropriate, for a

higher good: cleansing the mind of its unskillful qualities. This requires that you use your discernment to see when these tools are best used and best put aside, by determining—at each stage of the path—where on the point of effective moderation lies.

THE MIDDLES OF APPROPRIATE ATTENTION

When discernment turns to the larger questions of understanding the framework of the practice—in other words, when it focuses on the processes of discernment itself—its middleness is no longer a shifting point on a continuum. It becomes a range of points off the continuum entirely. In cases like this, the middleness of the path is less a matter of moderation and more one of *appropriate attention*: knowing which questions to focus attention on at any particular time, and which to cut through the middle and put aside.

The questions to focus attention on are those dealing with the duties appropriate for the four noble truths: how to comprehend suffering, how to abandon its cause, how to realize the cessation of suffering, and how to develop the path to that cessation. The focus on suffering shows again that avoiding commitment to pain and sensual pleasure doesn't mean avoiding pain and pleasure entirely. You learn to sit with the pain of suffering so that you can really comprehend it; you develop the factors of the path—which include the non-sensual pleasures of strong concentration—that allow you to sit with pain without feeling the need to run away from it in the direction of sensual pleasure. This is what allows you to fulfill the duties appropriate to all the noble truths, and so to reach the end of suffering.

To stay focused on the questions related to the noble truths, however, you have to learn to how put aside any questions that cling to issues that would get in the way of performing the duties appropriate to those truths. This is where the middleness of appropriate attention shows its radical side, for it cuts through the middle many of the questions that people normally ask themselves about themselves and the world around them.

These inappropriate questions increase in subtlety as you progress along the path, but they all come down to two sorts of clinging that can develop directly around the practice of the path: clinging to the practices of the path as if they were the goal of the path, and clinging to a sense of identity fashioned around those practices. The need to avoid these two types of clinging—and the need, at the same time, to develop a path of practice that risks giving rise to them—is related to a concept central to the Buddha's analysis of the stress and suffering that the path is designed to end. That concept is *becoming*.

QUESTIONS OF BECOMING

Becoming is a sense of identity in a particular world of experience. Becomings of this sort can last for whole lifetimes or, within the mind, for fleeting moments of time. In every case of becoming, both the identity and the sense of the world coalesce around a particular desire. The identity relates to the desire in two ways: both as the self that wants to experience the object of the desire, and as the self that wants to develop (or already has) the powers that will bring that object about. Other aspects of yourself are irrelevant to that particular becoming.

The sense of the world related to the desire is also composed of two things: those aspects of the world that will help fulfill the desire and those that threaten to stand in the way of its fulfillment. Anything irrelevant to the desire won't count in that particular sense of the world.

For instance, suppose you want a drink of water. The self in the becoming that coalesces around that desire is composed of the mental acts that hope to quench a thirst and the parts of your body and mind that will be involved in finding the water you want. Other aspects of yourself—such as your looks or your musical abilities—will be irrelevant to that particular becoming. The world of this becoming will be composed of the parts of the world that will either provide you with water or stand in the way of your obtaining it. If you're in a desert far from water, the desert will play a huge role in that particular becoming. If you're near a stream in the mountains, the desert—even though it still exists in this human world—won't count in the world of that becoming at all.

Processes of becoming can operate simultaneously on many levels, both short-term and long. The fact of your being a human being in this human world is a becoming that resulted from a desire that appeared in the mind as you were leaving your last lifetime. Within this larger becoming there are many shorter-term becomings that coalesce around particular desires related to possibilities in the physical world. There are also many more fleeting becomings that are purely mental, as when you conceive a desire to think and take on the role of the thinker thinking the thought, or of an actor in the world of your thought. These levels of becoming are interrelated in that physical levels of becoming can inspire mental ones, and purely mental becomings can form the seed for becomings on the level of the physical world for short periods of time or for entire lifetimes.

The process of becoming is related to the issue of suffering and stress because any desire leading to becoming is also a cause of stress. To gain freedom from stress requires putting an end to all desires leading to becoming. The Buddha identified these desires as falling into three categories. The first two are intuitive: sensual desire and desire for becoming itself. The third—the desire to put an end to any existing becoming—is counterintuitive but it can be explained in that any action to destroy a becoming requires taking on an identity built around the desire to see it destroyed. This in turn forms the seed for a new becoming.

But even though this third type of desire can be explained as a cause of becoming, it presents a strategic problem for any path of practice aimed at the ending of stress and suffering: how to allow becoming to end without getting involved in the desire to destroy becoming. In Iti 49, the Buddha presents his solution to this problem as a middle way between the desire for becoming and the desire to end any existing becoming. That middle way is to see what has come to be simply as what has come to be.

Iti 49 gives no further explanation of what this means, but other passages in the Canon concerning the path show that this approach requires a two-stage strategy. The first stage is to use virtue, concentration, and discernment to provide a stable state of concentration, a poised state of becoming that allows you to observe the processes in the mind as they are happening—or, in the words of Iti 49, as they have come to be. The second stage is to use discernment based on this stable becoming to watch those processes without reference to a “self” or a “world” (or “no self” or “no world”) as a context for those processes. In other words, you watch the processes simply as processes without reference to

the question of whether there is or isn't a self watching the processes, or to the question of whether there is or isn't a self or a world standing behind them.

At first, this sort of discernment is applied to all processes outside of those involved in maintaining virtue, concentration, and discernment. Ultimately, it's applied to those processes as well. This leads eventually to a dispassion for all processes, at which point the desires related to becoming simply end on their own. That's the end of all suffering and stress.

TWO STAGES OF DISCERNMENT

In the context of this two-stage strategy, the role of appropriate attention—the middleness of discernment that lies outside any continuum—is to turn attention away from any unnecessary or unskillful sense of self or the world that would interfere with this strategy. For instance, **in the first stage**, the practice of virtue and concentration requires high levels of self-esteem and heedfulness, both of which require a healthy sense of self. So appropriate attention at this stage doesn't call that sense of self into question. However, any desire to compare your level of virtue or concentration with that of others is detrimental to the practice, and so appropriate attention focuses on turning attention away from questions that would involve comparing yourself with others. You're here to cure your own unskillful mental qualities, so the question of whether you're better than others is really none of your business.

For this reason, the middleness of discernment at this stage warns you, for instance, not to exalt yourself or to disparage others over how content you are with meager material gains or how much delight you take in the practice (AN 4:28). And it warns you not to exalt yourself over other people whose level of concentration is lower than yours (MN 111)

So at this stage the middleness of discernment deals only with becomings that thwart your path, while it encourages those that are necessary to keep the path going.

On the second stage of the Buddha's strategy, discernment undercuts every type of becoming, but here again it treads a middle path. The middle here lies in turning attention away from any questions concerning the nature or existence of a self or world surrounding the processes of the mind.

The middle path that cuts through these questions is an understanding of the processes leading to suffering and stress, viewed simply as processes. The formal name for the pattern of these processes is dependent co-arising (*paticca samuppada*).

Although dependent co-arising is a teaching that even the Buddha described as complex, its middleness as a form of discernment is easy to explain: It makes no reference to the existence or non-existence of a self or world as a context for the processes leading to suffering and stress. In fact, it shows how any sense of "self" or "world" is a byproduct of those processes. In this way, instead of placing these processes within the context of a self or a world, dependent co-arising provides the context for understanding how ideas of self and world come about as a result of the processes leading to stress and suffering.

In doing so, it shows how to view the processes of the mind in such a way that leads ultimately to a sense of dispassion for any sense of self or world, and

in so doing leads to total release from becoming, total release from all suffering and stress.

Several discourses list questions that are cut through the middle when you adopt the perspective of dependent co-arising. Some of these questions cover issues about the nature of the self. For instance:

“Is the body the same as the soul, or is the body one thing and the soul something else?” — *SN 12:35*

“Is stress self-made, or is the one who creates it different from the one who experiences it?” — *SN 12:17*

“Are pleasure and pain self-made, or is feeling one thing and the one who experiences it something else?” — *SN 12:18*

Other questions cut through the middle by dependent co-arising cover issues concerning the nature and existence of the world:

“Does everything exist? Does it not exist?” — *SN 12:15*

“Is everything a oneness? Is it a plurality?” — *SN 12:44*

When discernment is able to put aside these questions—and other similar ones, such as whether the self does or doesn’t exist (*SN 44:10; MN 2*)—it can reach a point of equipoise, called non-fashioning (*atammayata*), where all the issues of becoming fall away. It’s in this way that the Buddha’s middle way cuts through the middle of the challenge posed by the desire for becoming and the desire for non-becoming, allowing the experience of all becomings—including the becoming of the path—to fall away, leaving total release.

RELEASED FROM LOCATION

One of the features of this release is that it’s totally devoid of location, both physical and mental. After all, location is an issue of selves in worlds, which in turn are issues of becoming. When the mind is free of becoming, location is no longer an issue, for there’s no sense of a world in which to be located, and no sense of a self that has to be located somewhere. This is how the various middles of the middle way—the middles of moderation and the middles of appropriate attention—prepare the mind to cut through one of the final middles faced on the path: the issue of moving or staying in place. As long as location is an issue, there’s no way through the middle of this question. The mind is always faced with choosing one side or the other: to stay where it is, or to go somewhere else. This means that it’s always having to choose a course of action. It’s still not totally free. But when location is no longer an issue, the question of where to go or stay is cut through the middle, and total release is found.

This is why the consciousness of those who are totally awakened is said to be nowhere established (*SN 22:87*) but everywhere released (*Dhp 348*). Because this release is so total, they’re no longer concerned with who’s experiencing the release, or where. The fact of release, on its own, is completely enough.

PIERCING A MOVING TARGET

It's worth noting that the number of discourses dealing explicitly with the middleness of dependent co-arising—eight—is more than twice as large as the three dealing explicitly with the middleness of the path as a whole. This fact is apparently related to the fact that the issues of appropriate and inappropriate attention are more complex and present a larger number of pitfalls than the issues of moderation.

However, what's even more noteworthy is that the total number of both sorts of discourses is so small when compared with the vast number of discourses the Pali Canon contains. The Canon rarely discusses the issue of the middleness of the middle way at all. This may be because many of those other discourses, even though they don't explicitly mention the middleness of the Buddha's path, treat it implicitly. The issue of moderation, for instance, lies in the background of every discussion of the path, whether dealing with issues of virtue or with issues of concentration and discernment. Appropriate attention lies in the background of every discussion covering any of the four noble truths.

But, more importantly, the small number of discourses devoted explicitly to the middle way may also be related to the fact that only so much can be said about middleness in words. Most of the issues surrounding the middleness of the path can be settled not by thinking about it in the abstract, but by dealing with the detailed ups and downs you encounter in your own mind, both as it creates suffering and stress, and as it develops the path to bring suffering and stress to an end. The challenge of finding the many middles of the middle way—which often involves trying to pierce the center of an erratically moving target—exercises and sharpens your discernment so that it can find the end of suffering where it matters most: not in the abstract, but in the middle of your own heart and mind.

— *Thanissaro Bhikkhu*