

Bodhi Leaf Publication No. 99

The Middle Way

and other essays

M. O'C. Walshe



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by

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The Middle Way (1)

It is always a good idea to seek the middle way, or the golden mean, between extremes whether in politics, in one's personal view and behaviour, or in fact in any walk of life. The difficulty arises when we attempt to discover what, in practice, is the middle way. It is not, as some appear to suppose, the mid-point between truth and falsehood, or between right and wrong! In fact the middle way itself is true, and is right: the difficulty lies merely in finding it. Here are some examples: it is the mean between (as the Buddha said) self-indulgence and self-mortification, or (the same thing as applied to other persons and animals) between pampering and cruelty.

These two cases, of course, raise the whole question of discipline, of oneself and others—a particularly knotty problem today. It is also the mean between excessive scepticism and credulity, which involves our religious for quasi-religious views and beliefs: also not easy today. But it is also, and positively, that calm and wakeful state of mind that lies between the extremes of slothful indulgence and restless agitation and tension, a state which, when truly achieved, will help us greatly to solve all our problems by seeing their

nature dispassionately; and this in turn means having a vastly greater degree of insight than most people have into our own emotions—which again leads to greater insight into those of others.

The middle way, even at a fairly modest, mundane level, is not very popular in the world today. Probably it never was. But in these restless times it is perhaps especially needed, and at the same time especially hard to achieve. It is fatally easy to indulge in nostalgia, to conjure up a false and idealised picture of earlier times which in fact, whatever period of history we may envisage, all had their grave disadvantages of one kind or another. All the same, until recent times it may be said that, in general, life usually had a kind of placidity that has now been lost, and which is hard to recapture, except in the atmosphere of some temple, church, meditation centre or the like. This, however, may simply mean that in earlier times the tendency towards sloth and indolence was, on the whole, greater than that towards worry and flurry.

We can't go back and live in the past. But at least we can try to see the faults of the present age, and thereby equip ourselves to face it and do what we can to counter its disadvantages. One thing that is extremely obvious is that we are, as never before, sitting targets for propaganda of all kinds. First the newspapers, then the radio and now television, which penetrate into the

intimacy of our homes, have exposed us as never before to the full flood of all the wickedness and folly of the entire world.

Violence is one thing, and there are probably few today (except interested parties) who would seriously maintain that constant exposure to a diet of violence has no harmful effects on the impressionable. It must be remembered, too, that the impressionable are not confined to the ranks of the very young. Sex, in a rich variety of forms, is another. But the effects of plain, ordinary commercial advertising are less widely recognised; this, being a shade less obviously harmful, is thereby all the more insidious.

Apart, then, from violence of all kinds, and from sex in its direct, now very direct manifestations, advertising is in fact one of the major harmful factors in our present situation. This may sound like an extreme statement, and of course as long as we have any sort of a commercial civilisation at all, it must be admitted that advertising has some legitimate place. But in a better organised state, I submit, this would be a much more modest one than it is at present.

The naked appeal to human greed is an ugly thing, and a dangerous thing. It conditions us to equate the good life with material gadgets and comforts, many of which incidentally, such as alcohol and tobacco, are

thoroughly bad for us. By urging us to a continually rising 'standard of living', it leads us more and more into a state of mind where we consider mere luxuries as 'necessities'; and it is a potent factor in stimulating, or at least aggravating, the constant demands for increased wages which beset us. Much more could be said on this score.

For instance, the proliferation of cars, which most people don't really need, clutters up our roads intolerably, causes a monstrous number of accidents, ruins the landscape, creates pollution and is on the verge of wrecking our once excellent public transport system. The indefinite expansion of hire-purchase undermines the old-fashioned virtue of thrift and tempts people to take on more and more burdensome commitments. And, not least, preoccupation with our own 'higher' standards of living tends to make us callously indifferent to the state of other people still battling with desperate poverty.

Thus, be it noted, the evils of violence are at least generally recognised, even if it sometimes seems there is little we can do to curb it; the dangers of excessive 'permissiveness' in sexual matters are at least constantly before us, even if there is rather less consensus on how to cope with this problem; but the evils of sheer instigated acquisitiveness are far less clearly seen, though they too make their potent and

dangerous contribution to the general scene.

Until recently it was widely held, at least in 'progressive' circles, that poverty was the principal cause of crime. This may in fact be so, but only if we understand something rather different by the word 'poverty', i.e. poverty of mind and spirit and not mere material deprivation. By this poverty of mind and spirit I do not, of course, mean that true 'spiritual poverty' (in Christian terminology) which is blessed, but its very opposite, which is born of blindness and emotional inadequacy. True 'spiritual poverty' means, among other things, being satisfied with little; its opposite is being dissatisfied with whatever one has, much or little; and this is as much manifested in the big property tycoon with his multi-million takeover bids as it is in the genuinely hard up back-street burglar. And it is also manifested, in a slightly different form, by a lot of clever propagandists for trendy causes with their incessant demands, usually for things of, at best, doubtful worth.

So, in seeking the middle way, let us beware, for one thing, of the demanders. What they seek may, at least in part, be justified, but their methods are wrong and their motives are at the very least mixed, when they are not in fact almost wholly bad. By the same token, we should of course, and especially as Buddhists, be always alert to the demanding voices within

ourselves, and at least make some effort to distinguish clearly between our needs and our greeds. On inspection, our true needs may turn out to be surprisingly modest.

In fact the middle way is hard to find, and those who have found at least an approximation to it are liable to be shot at from both sides. If we stand up for people's genuine rights we are 'subversive', but if we suggest that besides rights people may also have duties, we are reactionaries or even 'fascists'. Let us learn to ignore all such foolish abuse, from whatever quarter, and follow our chosen path.

SANGHA, November-December 1972

The Middle Way (2)

Recently in my reading I came across a truly inspired misprint: Hahayana. There is a lot that is laughable in Western (and occasionally even some Eastern) forms of Buddhism. "My cat's got Zen," a lady once said to me. "Really," I replied, "has he got rid of greed, hatred and delusion?"

More excusable, perhaps, was the mistake of a very distinguished Anglican divine who takes a deep and sincere interest in Buddhism. I heard him say that Buddhist mindfulness consisted of concentrating the mind on one point, till subject and object become one. Perhaps he didn't mean mindfulness but *samādhi* which at any rate is what he described.

Concentration is a very fine thing, and Buddhists should certainly practise it. It brings great calm and peace of mind, but unless mindfulness is present as well, it will never bring one to Enlightenment. The lady's cat is perhaps a case in point. Cats are very graceful animals, with a magnificent economy of movement. They often seem to be in a very happy state of mind, purring away with obvious contentment. This may not be unconnected with their considerable power of concentration, which may be readily observed, for instance, when they are watching birds. It would be difficult to suppose, however, that they were watching these with detachment. If a cat could watch itself with the same degree of intensity, it might well be on the way to Enlightenment. Probably we can learn something from cats, or other animals, but we should not overestimate them.

It is time Western Buddhists got to know a bit more about the various possible states of consciousness which are 'available' to us. Much can be learnt from

the valuable book *Altered States of Consciousness* edited by Charles T. Tart. Such knowledge would save many people from making mistakes and, in particular, from supposing that through some possibly quite interesting and even valuable 'experience' they have had, they have attained or nearly attained Enlightenment. There is, in fact, in Vipassanā practice, a kind of zone in which peculiar things can happen (though they don't always), which one has to learn to pass through.

This zone marks, not the end of the road, but merely the culmination of a certain preliminary stage. In it, feelings of great joy, great faith, visions of light, and so on, can occur. One can feel that one has no body, or no head, The thing is, in such cases, simply to press on regardless—being clearly aware but as far as possible not involved. It is probably mainly at this stage that Zen masters get tough with their pupils—for their own good. The great thing is not to dwell in such states, and above all not to get conceited about one's 'progress'. In point of fact, serious progress only begins when one is safely over this particular 'hump'.

There is much serious interest in meditation nowadays. This an excellent thing—and a most important development. And for this very reason, it is important that as many people as possible should be aware of what can happen in the fairly early stages,

and what it means—and what it doesn't mean! Meditation can bring, as one proceeds, both joyful and painful feelings. We must learn to pass through both—mindfully and clearly aware.

'Meditation' today is a kind of collective label for a wide range of activities indulged in by all sorts of people. There are of course various kinds of traditional Christian meditation, especially in the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches. Various systems of genuine and alleged Hindu and yogic practices have been introduced, often by people with few, if any, qualifications—though of course serious teachers and practitioners also exist. Even so, what they teach may differ considerably from what is taught by any genuine school of Buddhism. Nowadays there are hippy-cults and the like, involving the use of hallucinogenic (so-called 'psychedelic') drugs. Some of the experiences produced by any of these methods may equate with the phenomena mentioned above. Thus, in fact, it is not even necessary to risk the grave dangers of an LSD 'trip' or the like in order to have such experiences. Drugs apart, it is easy for some to fall victim to the hypnotic sway of some charlatan or 'Earl's Court guru', or to the group-hypnosis of some possibly half-baked 'community'. The critical faculty is one of the first victims, especially in an atmosphere where anti-intellectualism is positively encouraged.

It is true the intellect can be overrated, and that in a very real sense it has to be 'transcended'. But a little critical common-sense is no bad safeguard all the same. And above all, right motive is very important. The purpose of serious meditation is not ego-boosting but the very opposite. It may be nice to feel one is 'enlightened' but it is not healthy. And if the motive is to gain power over others, it is even worse . . . The true aim is to overcome dukkha, which is rather misleadingly rendered 'suffering'. By concentration alone we can certainly gain very happy states—sometimes. But they won't last, and so they are no real cure for 'suffering', though they may help. Their true function is as a basis for penetrating deeper.

Some people would say the true motive should be compassion. This is fair enough, if properly understood. According to Mahāyāna doctrine, which such people usually invoke, compassion is inseverable from wisdom. Only the wise can practise true compassion, through their understanding. This understanding, however, is only gained by self-knowledge—i.e. by developing increased awareness of this mysterious thing called 'self'.

As a matter of fact, we can cure neither our own suffering nor that of others without wisdom. This is common ground to all schools of Buddhism. When we have seen into the nature of our own troubles—and

only then— we shall have the necessary skill to practise true compassion towards others. We won't, in fact even have to bother very much about trying to do this, it will just happen of its own accord. So don't bother overmuch about 'Theravāda' or 'Mahāyāna' but just press on with the good work in your own mind.

If you do feel over-concerned with developing 'universal compassion' rather than solving your own problems, beware! It is a symptom of an unhealthy state in you. It is always easier to 'solve' (at least in theory) others' problems than one's own, because they don't hurt so much. Think of the definition of a minor operation: 'one performed on somebody else.'

If, in the course of Vipassanā meditation or otherwise, you have attained to the 'happy zone', just carry on, regarding it with detachment and not getting too excited about it. This may prove difficult, but by even trying you will at once become more and more aware of the strength of your attachment to happiness.

Continuing, you will shortly afterwards come to see a bit more clearly than before the true nature of all things including your 'self': impermanence. Frustration and impersonality will present themselves to you, not yet with the final clarity of Enlightenment, but quite sharply. You will still not have got rid of

'self', but you will have at least a distinct inkling of what anattā or 'non-self' really means. If you care to call it *sunyata* or 'voidness' it doesn't matter. There is no real difference. But you will also begin to find that this seemingly negative thing is in reality, somehow, positive after all.

There are many subtle traps along the Path. That is why most people need a teacher, not only to start them off but to give them continuing guidance, at least until a certain point is reached. But above all things else—awareness is always required. There should be no let-up in this. Whatever state you may have attained or think you have attained, it must be seen with awareness. And we should always be aware in advance that conceit can only too easily be aroused—and what is still more difficult, we should be able to recognise it when it has arisen. It is one of the most vital functions of a teacher to point this out at times—and the information is not always very well received . . . But if we can catch this on the wing the rest will probably follow in due course. Then the Middle Way will reveal itself instead of the Muddle Way too many people are following.

The Obstacle Race

Life may be thought of as an obstacle race. Many people have to cope with appalling obstacles, even in the heart of 'Western civilization': poverty, ill-health, lack of housing, lack of privacy (or too much of it, in the form of desperate loneliness), noise, squalor, ill-treatment—the list is almost endless. And in places like London, or New York, or Tokyo, the obstacle race is a real rat-race in which great masses of people quite literally struggle and fight to get in and out of town, to get and keep a job, to keep up with the neighbours, to preserve their 'self-respect' (which may be something foolish but it means a lot to them). Add to this the continual threat of disaster impending: nuclear war, even a nice little 'conventional' war; race-riots and general hooliganism, chemical poisoning of food and atmosphere; regimentation, computerisation and general depersonalization; personal conflicts with wives or husbands, children or parents, bosses or employees; emotional appeals for doubtful causes; advertising with its incessant appeal to greed and pandering to our lower natures. All this in a relatively 'fortunate' community—the depths of suffering, degradation and despair to be found in places like the Sahel or Vietnam, or in many police-states and

impoverished countries, go far beyond this. Nor does this take into account the manifold sufferings endured by animals at man's hands, which those who are at all sensitive cannot fail to see.

Some of us may be spared a good deal of the personal suffering implied by this by no means exhaustive list, but we are aware of it if we stop to think, and even in our own lives we are harried and badgered from pillar to post by the sheer pace and pressure of modern life. This is indeed a rat race and an obstacle race!

What can we do about it? Let us face the situation squarely to begin with. For one thing, it confirms the Buddha's description of the nature of life as dukkha or suffering. As a matter of fact, we don't hear quite so many objections raised to this statement nowadays as used to be the case. Dukkha has become a bit too obvious to most people by now.

It is sometimes claimed that Buddhism is selfish. Both Christians and Humanists are heard to say that they do more to relieve suffering in the world than the Buddhists do. There may even, in some ways, be some truth in this. Certainly we should do everything in our power to relieve starvation, to stop or prevent wars (if we can!), and so on. But we might as well recognise two things: we can never clear away all the dukkha in

the world, however hard we try; and secondly, our efforts will anyway be largely in vain unless there is a good measure of understanding.

By science and technology man has gained an increased control over many aspects of nature. But even highly-skilled scientists, with the best of intentions, have made and are making terrible mistakes, the results of which may well prove disastrous. Let us take just one example: DDT. This at first seemed to be a practically unmixed blessing. We may note that even so it must have caused suffering: how many animals had to suffer during the experiments necessary for its development? And do we even stop to think of the possible sufferings of insects killed by it? We don't even know whether it causes them an agonising death or not, and perhaps few people care. But now we have good reason to believe that the widespread use of DDT is a threat to man himself. Perhaps the world would after all have been better off—or no worse off—without it ...

Also, efforts to help others—wisely do not exclude the necessity to help ourselves. In fact, we cannot do the one without the other.

So far we have considered only those problems which man has to face without. What about the problems within? We all have in our make-up, as the

Buddha declared, the three unhealthy roots of greed, hatred and delusion. This is one of those truths proclaimed by the Buddha, which surely no sane person of any religion or none could deny. How many of our problems including so-called 'external' ones—can be traced back to these? Why are we so vulnerable to advertisements for whiskey, to pornographic films, to gambling, and all the rest? Because of the root of greed within us. Why do we fall for incitements to violence, whether directed against those of another nation or 'race', or whatever? Obviously because of the root of hatred within us. Why do we constantly commit acts of plain stupidity? Because of ignorance—within us!

We can generally see these things operating, clearly enough, in other people, especially when their actions are directed, against us or our supposed 'interests'. But somehow we don't always seem to notice them in ourselves.

Let us look within—not in the first place to find the 'Buddha-nature' or some such thing (though we might eventually come to that)—but to detect the stirrings of greed, hatred and delusion inside our own minds. These are the real obstacles, not those outside. 'External' troubles like sickness, poverty and so on may be the product of past kamma and possibly have to be borne with as much cheerfulness and resolution

as we can manage. They can also provide the spur to look within and see what is wrong with ourselves. If, because I'm ill or too poor, or merely too old, I can't go out and have a 'gay old time', then maybe that gives me all the more chance to meditate instead. It might even be better that way ...

Yes, life is an obstacle race, but where are the real obstacles—without, or within?

Is There Free-will in Buddhism?

“Is there free-will in Buddhism?” is one of those hardy perennial questions that crop up at meetings. And I have heard it answered, by different speakers, both positively and negatively. Now strictly speaking, this is not a Buddhist concept at all: it is a Christian one (and the Christians, too, have come up with different answers to it!). Still, we needn't quibble about terms too much. Though the question could be differently put from a Buddhist point of view, it is a problem

which worries some people (though I don't think it has, somehow, ever particularly worried me!), and so we must try to answer it. Before attempting a reformulation in Buddhist terms, let me say at once that the short answer is "Yes". This needs explanation and qualification, but it is as well to note that, broadly speaking, such is the case.

We ought, probably, to consider briefly what the idea of free-will means in Christian theology. True, most professing Christians today are not, to put it mildly, very strong on theology, but all the same their thinking on such subjects is conditioned, however remotely, by what the Church Fathers had to say, many centuries ago. Broadly, free-will in a Christian sense means that man is permitted by God to choose between good and evil, with the corollary that his choice of the one or the other will determine his place of residence in the Hereafter. While most Christians accept that man has free-will, some (notably the Calvinists) declare that God has fixed each individual's destiny in advance, so that he really cannot help himself and will automatically go to Heaven or Hell as the case may be. But the matter can also be argued out on a secular basis, in which case Predestination (by God) is replaced by Determinism (by genetics, etc.). In the latter case it is normally thought that the consequences do not extend beyond

this life, since this is all we have.

All views such as the above were, in essence, to be found in ancient India in the Buddha's time. With others, they are included among the 62 types of wrong view enumerated in the Brahmajāla Sutta, the very first discourse in the Pali scriptures. Another type of view there mentioned has recently been dug up, with a great air of triumphant originality, by a French scholar, Prof. Monod, to the effect that everything there is, including man and all his works, is the result of pure chance. This, too, is refuted in the Brahmajāla Sutta (a text which is well worth reading, for those who hanker after such philosophising).

From a Buddhist point of view, the whole thing is, of course, a question of kamma. I use the Pali form of the word *karma*, for a variety of reasons. Karma is used by Mahāyāna Buddhists, it is true, and many of them use it precisely and correctly. But it is also used by Hindus, Theosophists, and nowadays by all sorts of people, with a variety of different meanings which may or may not be legitimate but which certainly are not applicable in correct Buddhist usage. The literal meaning of kamma is "action". But the Buddha defined it with another Pali word, *cetanā*, "volition". It therefore means "volitional action". Whatever I will to do, good or bad (in Pali *kusala* "skilled" or *akusala* "unskilled"), constitutes my kamma. This is a "deed",

but it also is a “seed” which I have planted, and in due course that seed will ripen as *vipāka* or result, nice or nasty as the case may be. As a man sows, so shall he reap—in this life or some other. This looks in a way very like the Christian idea, so that a Christian formulation could even be applied to it. The difference is, of course, that kamma-vipāka is an impersonal process, whereas in the Christian view it is God who rewards or punishes us, Of course, too, the rewards and penalties of kamma are not eternal but temporal and commensurate.

Now we go through life committing acts of kamma of various kinds all the time. We are therefore continually sowing seeds which in due course will ripen, with nice or nasty results for us. Obviously also, we are now reaping the results from the past, including previous lives.

There is therefore no doubt whatsoever that, in the Buddhist view there is an element, at least, of what we may call free-will. In a given situation, I can at least to some extent choose to do the “right” thing or to do the ‘wrong” thing. The fact that I may not always know clearly which is the “right” choice is neither here nor there. If I want to go to Upper Popple on I may come to an unmarked crossroads and guess that I should turn left. If I end up at Nether Wallop instead, it is because I guessed wrong. I should have studied the

map. It is in fact just not true, though some would argue for it, that my choice of path was predetermined either by God or by some mysterious force such as genetics. Nevertheless, the odds may have been weighted in favour of my choosing the path I did. It may have looked more attractive. It may in fact have been something like “the primrose path to the eternal bonfire”. I may, like Macbeth, have listened to bad advice and false prophecies (of which there are plenty about nowadays). But still I could have chosen to go the other way.

So far so good. Probably most people would really agree with what has been said so far, by and large. After all, many a man must have got up early on a winter’s morning, reluctantly, because he knew he would lose his job if he didn’t. We all know that we can choose to do, or not to do, certain things only if we are prepared to take the consequences. And we generally accept that we have to pay for our pleasures whether in cash or otherwise. At this level, kamma is only glorified common-sense. “You pay your money and you take your choice,” though it may rather be a case of “live (or love) now -pay later”.

Now come the clever objections. There are at least two of these. One is: “If all things are the result of previous conditions, then there is no room for freedom of choice, it’s all predetermined” The other is: “If the

self is not real, then there is no 'I' to choose," the argument then probably proceeding further as Objection 1.

Conditions are not immutable "causes". They are always multiple—in fact extremely complex—and changing. We can prepare the soil and plant the seed. If all the necessary factors are favourable, that seed will grow. If any one necessary condition is absent, that seed will not grow. The conditions are both external to the seed, and internal to it. If we are talking literally of a plant-seed, the concept of kamma does not apply. But if by the seed we mean the mind of man, it does. This brings us to Objection 2, and involves some discussion of the nature of that which we call "self".

Of course it is a basic Buddhist tenet that what we call "self" is not real. But at a certain level, that of conventional truth, it exists. And it is in this sphere of conventional truth that kamma actually operates. Remember that kamma is a volitional act which is going to have results, nice or nasty, for that being which I think of as "me", even if it may be "me" in a future life. Therefore, Arahants create no kamma, because they don't think of themselves as "me" any more. What then is the true situation concerning this—whatever it is—that I call "me" and that I love so much? Perhaps we can find out something about this

by meditation. But we can also read up a bit about it in the books, which is not as good in the long run, but can still be quite helpful.

To put it briefly, “I” am a process. Every bit of “my” mind and body is changing the whole time with inconceivable rapidity. The mental process consists of a continuous series of ever-changing (but not arbitrarily changing) constellations of factors. These are listed under various headings in the first book of the *Abhidhamma*, the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* translated by Mrs. Rhys Davids as *A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics*. Each such infinitesimally brief constellation is of one of 89 different types. Some of the higher of these types of consciousness are never experienced by the ordinary person. Of the 89, twenty are karmic, i.e. they involve kamma or volition, whether skilled (“good”) or unskilled (“bad”). A wonderfully vivid account of the interplay of these factors in (by way of example) just one type of consciousness is given in *Abhidhamma Studies* by the Ven. Nyanaponika: a little book every Buddhist should have at his bedside.

It is the factor “volition” which operates to produce kamma. It is the persistence of this factor through a series of consciousness-moments which, above all else, produces the illusion of “I”. Normally, in the ordinary person, it manifests as *taṇhā* or craving. And here we can get at it.

In the formula of *Paṭicca-samuppāda* or Dependent Origination we find it stated that Contact (of sense-base and sense-object, e.g. eye and that which is seen) conditions Feeling (pleasant, unpleasant or neutral), and that Feeling conditions Craving. In other words if, (conventionally speaking), I see a desirable object, I have a pleasant feeling, and then I react by wanting that thing. It is possible, however, by Mindfulness to inhibit the arising of that wanting, simply by observing the feeling with detachment.

These turn out, on closer inspection, to be deep matters which, as the Buddha has said, cannot be fully comprehended by the ignorant. Nevertheless by the practice of Awareness (or Mindfulness) we can increasingly learn about them. The point really is that theoretical debates about “free-will” and the like are arid. But by practice we can find out the truth, and *the truth shall make you free.*

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