

In the Middle of the Muddle

by Randal Daigu Pride

Muddle, according to *Webster's Dictionary*, is the state of being confused and, in context of this talk, a metaphor for samsara, loosely translated as “cyclic aimless wandering” or, more precisely, as “world”—our world being earth whose ground we walk on is dirt, which when rained upon becomes mud, which when splattered upon our windshield by a passing truck makes it difficult to see where we are going.

Middle, as you have already guessed, refers to one of Buddhism's primary signifiers: the Middle Way, first elucidated in Shakyamuni's first sermon on the Four Noble Truths, the fourth being the Eightfold Path—the middle path between the extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification, both of which he famously experienced as a prince and, abandoning that, as an ascetic, which he also abandoned before realizing, in deep samadhi, the cause and cure of suffering (or dukkha).

Buddha situated this cure, this path of suffering's cessation, in the middle of the second truth's two causal forks of suffering: Attachment to what we prefer and Aversion to what we reject, which we cycle through continuously. These eight functions of Right (or Correct) View (or Understanding), Concentration (or Meditation), Mindfulness, Effort, Thought, Speech, Action, and Livelihood are the fundamental tools of our travel kit through samsara—the eight spokes of our Dharma vehicle's first wheel.

And this middle path is joined at the hip with his Right View teaching on the 12 Links of Dependent Origination—the causes and conditions of samsara—succinctly stated as:

When there is this, that is
With the arising of this, that arises.
When this is not, neither is that.
With the cessation of this, that ceases.

In the *Kaccanagotta Sutra* (Pali; Sanskrit: *Katyayana*), he further explains Right View as avoiding the extreme concepts of existence (or eternalism) and non-existence (or annihilationism); or in terms of a sentient being:

- that there is something unchanging in a self, is called Eternalism
- that there is no link between a self through time, is called Annihilationism.

In the second century CE, Nargarjuna, in the 15th chapter of his *Mulamadhyamakakarika* (or *Verses on the Middle Way*—the foundational text of the Madhyamaka school of Mahayana Buddhism) refers to the *Kaccanagotta Sutra* when deconstructing those extreme concepts and to show how they are incompatible with the causality engine of dependent origination. As Nargarjuna concisely sums up:

Whatever is dependently co-arisen
that is explained to be emptiness.
That being a dependent designation,
is itself the Middle Way.
Something that is not dependently arisen,
such a thing does not exist.
Therefore a non-empty thing
does not exist.

Out of this formulation, Nargarjuna introduces one of the other significant pairings in Buddhism, that of the Two Truths: Conventional and Ultimate. These are not extremes of polarities like indulgence vs self-mortification or conceptual dualities like eternalism vs annihilation but two interrelated ways of understanding reality— two sides of one ontological coin. The Heart Sutra's: form is emptiness, emptiness form, is presenting this same teaching under the aegis of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara.

The Buddhadharmā's most extensive exploration of the middle way metaphor is of course the Avatamsaka Sutra, which emerged in stages beginning also in the second century and has been appropriately called the Bodhisattva Pitaka (or basket of teaching), as it includes such topics as the Bodhisattva path and the equality of things in emptiness. Among its most notable declarations is the description of the cosmos as infinite realms upon realms mutually containing one another, eloquently expressed in the elaborate metaphor of Indra's Net where at each node of the intersecting cords sits a clear jewel reflecting all the other jewels ad infinitum. This vision of interdependency had a huge influence upon the emerging Buddhist schools in China such as the Huanyan and Chan. Chang Chun-Yuan, in his book, *Original Teachings of Ch'an Buddhism* describes it in this manner:

[It] is the unimpeded mutual solution of all particularities, where each particularity, besides being itself, penetrates all other particularities and is in turn penetrated by them. This harmonious interplay between particularities and also between each particularity and universality creates a luminous universe, free from spatial and temporal limitations and yet no less the world of daily affairs. This is called Dharmadhatu. In it, the boundaries of each particularity melt away, and the reality of each becomes infinitely interfused with every other being.

These are descriptions of reality from the perspective of a Buddha, an awakened one, and won't be showing up in our telescopes or microscopes though perhaps physics' quantum entanglement and multiverse theories approach some hint of it. But since Charles Darwin's 19th-Century discovery of the natural-selection mechanism of evolution has yet to budge the beliefs of much of humanity, especially on the nature of cause and effect and the

interdependency of all life, we can still benefit from and make use of this all-inclusive vision of reality to guide us in these times of self-other discord and environmental degradation.

We do not need an advanced degree in mathematics or biology to practice the Middle Way's various functions and experientially become acquainted with equanimity, compassion, and insight into samsara's muddying machinations. As Buddha has said, it is a path for the sharp and dull witted among us, in other words, a universal path.

Chan and Zen have other notable texts poetically explicating these truths such as the eight century poem "Sandokai," or "Merging of Difference and Unity" by Shítóu Xīqiān, which is chanted in Zen temples to this day; the ninth century "Five Ranks" by Dongshan Liangjie; and the 13th century *Shobogenzo* fascicle "Genjokoan" by Japanese Soto Zen's founder, Eihei Dogen. Its ninth verse, in Rev. Shohaku Okumura's translation reads:

When a person attains realization, it is like the moon's reflection in water. The moon never becomes wet; the water is never disturbed. Although the moon is a vast and great light, it is reflected in a drop of water. The whole moon and even the whole sky are reflected in a drop of dew on a blade of grass. Realization does not destroy the person, as the moon does not make a hole in the water. The person does not obstruct realization, as a drop of dew does not obstruct the moon in the sky. The depth is the same as the height. [To investigate the significance of] the length and brevity of time, we should consider whether the water is great or small, and understand the size of the moon in the sky.

There are 86,400 seconds in a day. In each second, science informs us, 37 thousand, billion, billion chemical reactions take place within our bodies' cells, while 5 million of those cells are replaced by new ones; our brains' neurons fire off 20 million messages; and our hearts beat only once but in an electrical signal synchronization of millions of cardiac muscle cells; and for the most part, we do not interfere.

In our day to day lives, how often do we get to evaluate situations and options of response through a middle way lens? Too often we act impulsively out of habit, a subconscious reaction with mixed results. From a very practical perspective, the Eightfold Path, especially its mindfulness practice—grounded in meditation—can help slow the karma train down and open up the middle of the world.