

The **Middle Way**

‘Life is indeed an elusive reality that transcends both the words and concepts of existence and non-existence. It is neither existence nor non-existence, yet exhibits the qualities of both. It is the mystic entity of the Middle Way that is the reality of all things.’

The sole purpose of Buddhist philosophy is for people to overcome suffering and establish true happiness. The early Buddhist sutras taught that suffering was the result of trying to cling on to people and things, which by their very nature are temporary. We die, loved ones die, fortunes change. Life is in a continual state of flux. In the early days of Buddhism, therefore, people devoted themselves to eliminating their attachments to temporary things through various meditations and practices.

However, trying to detach oneself is, in the end, not an answer. Getting rid of all attachments includes ridding oneself of the desire to eat, sleep, have sex and so on. This extreme approach ultimately leads to a denial of life itself. This cannot be said to be the secret to a happy life!

In order to clarify the true nature of life, Mahayana Buddhists formulated the concept of the middle way. Although a familiar sounding phrase, its meaning in Buddhism has nothing to do with compromise. While it may seem, at first glance, to be advocating 'moderation in all things', it goes well beyond that idea. It does not mean to steer a middle course between extremes; rather, it means to unify and transcend duality.

The middle way derives from a principle, central to Buddhist philosophy, known as the unification of the three truths. These are the truth of non-substantiality (*ku*), the truth of temporary existence (*ke*), and the truth of the middle way (*chu*). Although all life can be viewed from these three aspects, they cannot be separated, so they are sometimes called the threefold truth.

The truth of non-substantiality (*ku*) means that nothing in life is unchanging or fixed. The nature of all things is *ku*, or potentiality, which cannot be defined as either existence or non-existence. The concept of *ku* is often understood to mean nothingness, void or emptiness, but this is not at all its true meaning. On the contrary, *ku* indicates the infinite potential of life at each and every moment.

The truth of temporary existence (*ke*) means that whilst all

things are non-substantial, they do have a temporary existence. The truth of the middle way (*chu*) is that everything is both non-substantiality and temporary existence, yet its essence is neither of these. *Chu* is the true entity of life, defined by Nichiren Daishonin as Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

All of this is rather hard to grasp. Indeed, the true entity (*chu*) is beyond the limitation of words or concepts. But if we consider some examples, we can get an idea of what it means. If we look at a chestnut tree, we see that it changes from season to season, dropping its leaves in winter, flowering in spring and producing nuts in autumn. The way the tree changes each season, the life-span of the tree and its health, all correspond to the truth of non-substantiality (*ku*). Its outward physical appearance, at each stage of its cycle, corresponds to the truth of temporary existence (*ke*). The tree itself is *chu*. It is at the same time unified with nature and unique in itself, possessing the capacity to produce nuts instead of, say, apples.

All things can be seen in terms of these three truths, including inanimate objects. If we take the example of a mirror, it has the potential to be clear, dirty, chipped and so on, which corresponds to the truth of non-substantiality. Any images it reflects are its physical aspect, or the truth of temporary existence. The mirror itself is the entity, or the middle way.

In terms of human beings, we can see the truth of temporary existence (*ke*) in the way a person looks and speaks which corresponds to the physical self. The truth of non-substantiality (*ku*) refers to the mind or spirit, which has unlimited potential. The truth of the middle way (*chu*), or the entity of a person's life, is the inherent capacity to be unique as well as at one with the universe. This entity is often called the true self, the greater self, or the universal self. Between birth and old age a person changes many times, both physically and mentally. Nevertheless, there is always something about an individual which is intrinsically the same. This

THE THREE TRUTHS

| | |
|-----|----------------------------------|
| KE | the truth of temporary existence |
| KU | the truth of non-substantiality |
| CHU | the truth of the middle way |

is the entity of life: it is what makes each person unique, what makes us human, and what connects us to the universe.

If we have difficulty grasping this concept it is because we are trying to separate the three truths. This is not the intention of the analysis. It is quite the reverse. The Japanese term for the three truths is *santai* which means three (*san*) and to be obvious or clear (*tai*). Obviously, or clearly, we can look at life from any of these three viewpoints but, since each one contains the other three and they are unified, we cannot separate them.

There are many ways in which dualistic thinking has underlain the development of our civilisation: the separation of mind and body; the separation of man and nature; the separation of good and evil. This has led to many problems in society. The oneness of mind and body, and of self and environment, are discussed elsewhere in this book, so let us consider good and evil.

Traditional folklore is about 'goodies' and 'baddies'. There are, for example, very few European fairy stories where the 'baddies' turn into 'goodies'. Buddhist literature, however, is full of fables in which demons turn into gods. This is because Buddhism views people as neither good nor bad intrinsically. Rather, at each moment we have the potential to exhibit either enlightenment or delusion.

From the viewpoint of the unification of the three truths, when we are deluded, the physical aspect of our lives (*ke*) manifests itself as greed. Greed is the insatiable desire to fulfil our own physical needs, regardless of the needs of others. Our mental aspect (*ku*) manifests itself as anger - the desire to dominate others and to be

right at all times. The entity of our lives (*chu*), when deluded is, as it were, shrouded in fundamental darkness, blind to the true nature of life. This is usually called ignorance or stupidity. It is the fundamental illusion from which both greed and anger arise.

When enlightened, the physical aspect of our lives is transformed into compassion: empathy for others and a desire to help them overcome their suffering. The mental aspect is transformed into wisdom: the capacity to see the best course of action in order to improve the quality of life for everyone and everything. The essential aspect of life, or the middle way, becomes the source of life-force itself, which is unified with the life-force of the cosmos. From this fundamental enlightened life, or the greater self, compassion and wisdom are able to flow freely.

However, we need a way to access this greater self, or universal energy. Nichiren Daishonin taught us how to do so:

A mind which presently is clouded by illusions originating from the innate darkness of life is like a tarnished mirror, but once it is polished it will become clear, reflecting the enlightenment of immutable truth. Arouse deep faith and polish your mirror night and day. How should you polish it? Only by chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo.¹

Chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo enables us to return our lives to the source of fundamental life-force, or the greater self, and live with wisdom and compassion, without denying any aspect of our lives. We can then fully appreciate everything life has to offer. This is the middle way which unifies and overcomes the contradictions of a 'lesser self' based solely on the limited and changeable physical and mental aspects of life.

We can see the importance of the approach of the middle way in society. The mental aspect of life (*ku*), where ideas are formed, is the driving force behind the progress of civilisation. The physical aspect of life (*ke*) works to create harmony in ourselves, with others and with nature. The middle way (*chu*) is the unchanging foundation

of life itself, which supports and stabilises the other two.

All three aspects are needed for a healthy society. Progress without harmony leads to idealism. Ideas only become practical and worthwhile when placed in the context of the needs of others and the laws of nature. On the other hand, if every great idea was scrapped because it was considered to be too difficult, then progress would be sacrificed for the sake of harmony and this would lead to stagnation. Harmony without a firm foundation leads to apathy or compromise. Progress without a creative basis becomes destructive. All three aspects - harmony, progress and life-force - are needed for the betterment of society. This is what is meant by the middle way.

To live for the greater self does not mean abandoning the lesser self. The lesser self is only able to act because of the existence of the greater self. Desires and attachments experienced by all of us as smaller selves have stimulated the advance of civilisation. If man had not been attracted to wealth, economic growth could not have taken place. If man had not struggled to overcome the natural elements and provide relief from such things as cold, the natural sciences would not have flourished. Without the mutual attachment and conflict of the sexes, literature would have been deprived of one of its most famous and enduring fields of expression... Desire and all it implies constitute a generative moving force in life. But they and the smaller self they affect most directly must be correctly orientated. Buddhist teaching strives to discover the greater self and, instead of suppressing or eliminating the smaller self, to control and direct it so that it can contribute to the growth of a better world civilisation through its relation with the greater self.²

1 *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, Vol. 1, p. 5.

2 Daisaku Ikeda, *A Lasting Peace*, Vol. 1, pp. 122-3.