

Key Points of the Great Middle Way

Jason Espada

Over the last half of 2011 I've been listening to, reading, and reflecting on Lama Zopa Rinpoche's teachings on the Middle Way, as contained in his Light On the Path series, (available online) and other of his books and recorded talks. Here are a few notes I've made on the distinctive features of Middle Way teachings.

The Middle Way is called that because it seeks to avoid the two extremes of eternalism and nihilism. Eternalism fabricates and then grasps onto or reifies the idea of a self, an object, or an action. Nihilism, on the other hand, errs by asserting that nothing exists, and therefore there is no reason to avoid negative actions and to practice what is right and good. Right practice avoids these two extremes.

With us all the time – the habit of ego grasping

Our grasping at the idea of self, that is the cause of suffering, is with us all the time. It doesn't have to be produced by an act of volition. Rather, it is *a deeply ingrained ignorance*, the result of unawareness, and having mis-apprehended things in the past. This will continue to be with us until we are realized, or accomplished in meditation.

We can say that the *imprint* left on our mental continuum lies dormant, is activated by contact, and is reinforced by deluded, egocentric action. This tragically binds us further to the continuation of samsaric suffering. It has been this way again and again for living beings, not only in this life, but throughout countless lifetimes.

Unless it is seen through, this habitual, reflexive ego grasping that is with us all the time, is being reinforced continually in the mind. For the ordinary person, without knowing it, these limitations are always being projected and repeatedly strengthened everywhere, throughout all aspects of experience.

For truth to be known comprehensively, and freedom attained, the very characteristic of mistaken consciousness needs to be seen

To uproot the ignorance that is the cause of suffering, it is not enough to just rest in a peaceful state, or in space-like equipoise, or in the clarity of the mind, useful, or even necessary as these meditations may be at times. Rather, the exact characteristic of this mistaken, self grasping consciousness has to be fully recognized and seen through. Following the Buddhist teaching of realizing the Four Noble Truths, what is called in Tibetan ‘gak-cha’ or ‘the refuting object’ needs to be precisely seen: its **cause** is conditioned ignorance and the reinforcement of that; and its **consequence** is suffering. Then the discriminating wisdom **practice** that brings the dissolution of mistaken consciousnesses needs to be engaged in; and the **result** achieved – which is freedom at once from the whole range of self-created problems.

The result of analysis needs to be unified with deep, powerful, and wakeful calm abiding meditation, free of faults, over a sustained period of time

Ignorance exists in us, until removed, in gross, subtle, and very subtle forms. To remove the cause of suffering in its most subtle form, we need to generate a very subtle and thorough going wisdom consciousness. Anything less than this would be just dealing with problems relatively on the surface, leaving the root cause of all our samsaric sufferings intact, to manifest again and again and again. Only when this wisdom that thoroughly understands the nature of experience is then applied on the subtle innermost level, over a sustained period of time, long enough to transform the mind, can we ultimately cure all the sufferings of samsara.

Developing Wisdom has a ‘global’ effect

When thinking of ‘an object’ or of ‘a self’, or of an action, ordinary beings conceive of, project, and superimpose limited ideas onto things. Recognizing the emptiness, or the ultimate non-existence of this, that it doesn’t exist *at all* in what is there, in other words, seeing that this idea is a mere label, and how things are *in actuality*, has a global effect.

I borrow this term from how it is used in computer programs: there is a way to replace one term, hit a key, and have that term replaced throughout an entire document.

In a similar way, recognizing the non-existence, for instance, of a table, or a chariot, or an action, such as ‘making soup’ – recognizing that these terms are just concepts superimposed onto a collection of parts – has the effect of seeing that same principle everywhere, and seeing through all of our projections everywhere at once. Each of the Middle Way reflections, if engaged in and entered into meditatively, can be universally freeing in this way. That is their purpose.

Cutting through the cause of suffering, even temporarily, removes all the afflictive emotions at once. To the extent that we have removed the cause of suffering through wisdom realization, to that extent we are free, healthy, and capable.

Going beyond ego grasping reveals things as they are, and enables us to live full and meaningful lives here in this world

Ego-grasping keeps us from seeing what is actually here. Since beginningless time, we have accumulated the habit of wrong views and the obscuring effects of all the afflictive emotions. Cutting through ego grasping is radically different from this, and it reveals things as they truly are.

When brought together with the full complement of meditative practices of calm abiding and loving kindness, the practice of wisdom reveals at once our innate freedom, and our own and others’ inherent richness. It reveals the preciousness of life; the insubstantial as insubstantial, the impermanent as impermanent, non-duality, and our interdependence with all of life. We become fully capable beings, naturally living responsible, caring lives, lives of both wisdom and compassion.

In *The Three Levels of Spiritual Perception*, Deshung Rinpoche quotes Shantideva as follows:

‘If no beings exist [in ultimate reality], toward whom should we have compassion?’

To attain the result [of buddhahood, which is to be achieved only through the awakening of great compassion], one should direct one’s compassion toward whatever it is that unenlightened beings call ‘beings’.

Deshung Rinpoche then adds: ‘On the conventional level of reality, beings do not exist as they are perceived by other unenlightened beings. The bodhisattva realizes that, in ultimate reality, there are no beings who exist as unenlightened beings think, but he directs his mind toward those beings as they perceive themselves. On the ultimate level, he sees no beings, but he realizes that on the conventional level, beings think they exist and do experience suffering. Out of objectless compassion, therefore, he directs his mind toward them.’