

WHAT A CONCEPT: The Middle Way
Transcending Extremes
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Buddhism is known as the Middle Way because as a practice and collection of teachings it's humble and all-inclusive, yet it makes strong, decisive assertions based on an awareness of reality. Further, Buddhism neither advocates worldly indulgence nor rigid self-denial but harmonizes these extremes.

In Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, the Middle Way denotes Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, which is the essence of the body and mind of human beings. Further, it could be said that the Middle Way is both Buddhahood and life itself. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, Buddhahood and life itself are neither born nor do they die — therefore, they can't be defined by the extremes of either birth or death. They exhibit qualities of both, but neither alone can fully express Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, Buddhahood or life.

So the Middle Way includes two polarities as well as a third *something*. This third something can be explained in terms of what Buddhism calls the three truths, three perceptions, or *ku ke chu*. The first truth is that all things are *ku* (formless or non-substantial in nature), which means that things and phenomena have no fixed existence of their own but exist only as potentialities.

But while all things are *ku*, they nevertheless have a provisional or temporary form (*ke*), which is in constant flux. *Chu* (the Middle Way) is the truth that all things are characterized by both non-substantiality and temporary form yet display the ultimate reality.

These three views of truth are like the three sides of an equilateral triangle; all three are equally enlightened, equally valid and essentially inseparable from one another. The Buddhist view of truth, then, is invariably the broadest possible view, denying nothing.

Based on this view of truth, Buddhism makes decisive statements about what is correct or incorrect in terms of practice. For example, we can say that the Gohonzon is in *ku*; it exists in faith alone and is not in essence a fixed existence. At the same time, the Daishonin depicted the life-condition of Buddhahood in the form (*ke*) of a paper scroll that we call the Gohonzon. Recognizing these two truths, we can make the assertion (*chu*) that the Gohonzon is a thing that embodies the Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. The *chu* in this case is to say that the Gohonzon is the true object of devotion and that chanting to the Gohonzon enables all people to manifest their Buddhahood.

While the Chinese character *chu* literally means middle, the Daishonin emphasizes that the character also means to tap, as in to tap our innate Buddha wisdom. This wisdom, which is rooted in our lives at the most fundamental level, allows us to harmonize polarities and at the same time give them direction.

To illustrate, the Daishonin compares the Middle Way to the mast of a ship in "The Ship to Cross the Sea of Suffering." This mast is like our Buddhahood. Even though the winds of formlessness (*ku*) blow, and the sea of *ke* is in constant flux, the Middle Way (*chu*) stands firm. Faith, practice and study are like sails on this mast, allowing us to use both *ku* and *ke* to move forward.

SGI President Ikeda once wrote: "It is extremely important to understand that we are talking about one reality viewed from three different standpoints, not three separate entities. The Middle Way sustains the tangible and the intangible, *ke* and *ku*, but that is not the whole story of the nature of life. The Middle Way appears in the tangible, and it exists in the *ku*. The three work together to produce a single life. The complete interexistence and interfusion of the three perceptions into one is the ultimate principle of the Lotus Sutra."

On the most practical level, living the Middle Way means chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Chanting wholeheartedly enables us to develop the flexibility to examine reality in a variety of ways or contexts. It also harmonizes body and mind, self and environment — and propels us forward.

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