THE MIDDLE WAY: THE REALITY OF THE UNREAL

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The paradox of contemporary Buddhism in Japan is its radical world affirmation against a philosophical background of radical world denial. The key to this paradox is the dialectic of the Middle Way[1], that is, the Middle Way between asserting that things *are* and asserting things are *not*. The universe neither exists, nor does not exist. Though this doctrine was first formulated by Nagarjuna and his Madhyamika School (Middle Way Doctrine School) in India back in the first or second century A.D., it is as up-to-date in practical application as this morning's newspaper. Modern Buddhist[2] thought and practice are simply a running commentary on this world view.

The Middle Way can only be understood in experience, never through the rational approach. As a Zen priest told me recently during an interview in Kyoto, "the philosophy of the Middle Way is merely an attempt to describe the Life of (Enlightenment) *satori* 悟り."[3] The Life, the existential experience, comes first, is the reality concerned; conceptual formulations such as the Middle Way are nothing more than attempts to verbalize what is actually happening, nothing more than fingers pointing at the moon, nothing more than rabbit-tracks in the snow. To gain an inkling of the inner content of the Middle Way we must turn our attention from the finger to

the moon; we must follow the tracks until we catch the rabbit; we must move beyond words to the Way itself. We must seek an answer to the question: What does it mean to *live* as if the world neither exists nor does not exist?

In emotional content it is delicious liberation; it is to dwell in a luminous realm of crystal clarity where nothing tarnishes, nothing dulls, n thing corrupts or smears or clings. Here all things are pure — how shall I say — fluid-free like a cataract of mercury, like a slow moving lava-flow of mercury, like a pool of mercury in momentary pause shimmering on the brink of flow. The quality of the experience of the Middle Way is captured in these lines of poetry:

> The bamboo-shadows move over the stone steps
> as if to sweep them,
> But no dust is stirred.[4]

One of the best models of the Life of the Middle Way which I have thus far encountered is in, of all unlikely places, Disney Land's Bell Telephone Company exhibit. This is not Cinerama, but Cyclorama. You stand completely surrounded by a circular movie screen about seventy feet in diameter and twenty feet in height. As you move down a street in Washington, D. C., the city is all about you. You can look in any direction and see what you might see if you were actually there. All the sensations of motion through space are experienced though one does not move a step. Indeed, in an airflight sequence I came near losing my dinner. Someone with no knowledge of cycloramic projection, — for instance, a savage from an African jungle, — would take it all for real. In his ignorance the

savage would try to stalk the deer, flee the tiger, take the women, fear falling from the heights; each of which we enlightened urbanites would know to be nothing more than shadows on a screen.

Imagine the change of the savage's attitude at the moment a realization of the true situation dawned on him. He would continue to see the same show, but no longer with the serious involvement of his emotions. From that moment he would be delivered from fear of, or desire for, the things around him; from that moment he could watch the show with the tranquility of detached interest. Limited participation in the events would continue: he could laugh at the clown, curse the villan, sing along with the chorus, thrill at the scenic beauty, but there would no longer be the radical involvement which generates paralyzing or compulsive emotions. In the midst of a great variety of changing sights and sounds he would abide in serenity.

We have in this illustration a suggestion of the experiential content of the Middle Way.

> The bamboo-shadows move over the stone steps
> as if to sweep them,
> But no dust is stirred.

The shadows of the phenomenal world move over the surface of the consciousness, but there is no radical emotional reaction. There is no repulsion or attachment.

In the Middle Way things are experienced as not there, and neither aspect is ignored: Things are experienced. The consciousness is filled with them. Yet they are not *there*; not

over there apart from the consciousness as external objects. This is precisely what is meant by the companion doctrine to that of the Middle Way also propounded by Nagarjuna; namely, the doctrine of the Emptiness or Voidness of all things.[5] Things are experienced as not there; they are experienced as Emptiness.

Now this is not empty Emptiness or void Voidness. The whole of the pulsing, teeming universe is not *there*; but *is*. Things neither exist nor do not exist.

In terms of Occidental philosophy, the world-view involved is absolute monism. There is only one order of reality, the Consciousness; its objects are no more objective to it than waves are to the sea. Approaching this Consciousness and the visions which people it with religious reverence, the Western philosopher might designate the Middle Way a type of pantheism. All is divine; for the It and the All are One.

But efforts at further catagorization break down. Is this cosmic or a-cosmic pantheism? Is the One substantial or insubstantial? From the viewpoint of the Middle Way the question is meaningless. It is not either/or, but both/and. Though known to be insubstantial, the world is experienced as substantial. One walks its streets as before *Enlightment*; one hears the same sounds, sees the same sights as before; one engages in the same activities as before; — even though all is changed. Jōshū 趙州 refers to the principle of the Middle Way when he writes, "Zen [in the sense of enlightenment, *satori*] is your everyday thought."[6] Commenting on this, Suzuki says,

> it all depends on the adjustment of the hinge whether the door opens in or opens out. Even in the twinkling of an eye the whole

> affair is changed and you have Zen [enlightenment], and you are . . . *as normal as ever*. More than that, you have acquired in the meantime something altogether new. All your mental activities will now be working to a different key, which will be more satisfying, more peaceful, and fuller of joy than anything you ever experienced before. . . . The spring flowers look prettier, and the mountain stream runs cooler and more transparent.[7]

Along the Middle Way things are utterly changed, yet life goes on as usual. Things are realized to be insubstantial, but experienced as substantial. The universe neither exists, nor does not exist.

In our attempt to understand what it is like to live as if this were true, it will be of assistance to us to see how writers of some of the basic Mahayana Sutras attempted to describe this state of consciousness. For instance, in the *Diamond Sutra* or *Kongō-kyō* 金剛経 we read:

> Listen, Subhuti. Within these innumerable Buddha-lands there are every form of sentient beings with all their various mentalities and conceptions, all of which are fully known to the Tathagata, but not one of them is held in the Tathagata's mind as an arbitrary conception of phenomena. They are merely thought of. Not one of this vast accumulation of conceptions . . . is graspable.
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> The Lord Buddha resumed: — Subhuti, if any good and pious disciple . . . were to take the three thousand great universes and grind them into impalpable powder and blow it away into space, . . . do you think this powder would have any individual existence?
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> Subhuti replied: — Yes, Blessed Lord, . . . it might be said to have a relative existence, but as the Blessed One uses the words, it has no existence — the words have only a figurative meaning. Otherwise the words would imply a belief in the existence of matter as an independent and self-existent entity, which it is not. . . . .
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> The Lord Buddha was much pleased with this reply and said: — Subhuti, although terrestrial human beings have always grasped

> after the arbitrary conception of matter and great universes, the conception has no true basis — it is an illusion . . . . all the mind's arbitrary conceptions of matter, phenomena, and of all conditioning factors and all conceptions and ideas relating thereto are like a dream, a phantasm, a bubble, a shadow, the evanescent dew, the lightning's flash.[8]

The various forms are experienced in the consciousness and therefore may be said to have a kind of relative existence, yet it must be realized that the apparent objectivity and substantiality of these forms is merely an illusion.

Next, let us attend a passage from the *Lankavatara Sutra* or *Ryōga-kyō* 楞伽経:

> The Blessed One replied, saying: Mahamati, the error in these erroneous teachings that are generally held by the philosophers lies in this: they do not recognise that the objective world rises from the mind itself; . . . but depending upon these manifestations of the mind as being real they go on discriminating them, like the simple-minded ones that they are, cherishing the dualism of this and that, of being and non-being, ignorant of the fact that there is but one common Essence. On the contrary my teaching is based upon the recognition that the objective world, like a vision, is a manifestation of the mind itself; . . . it teaches the cessation of suffering that arises from the discriminations of the triple world . . . . Objects in themselves are neither in existence nor in non-existence and are quite devoid of the alternative of being and non-being, and should only be thought of as one thinks of the horns of a hare . . . which never existed.[9] . . . all things are un-born [are unproduced, uncreated, do not come into objective existence]. It is not asserted that things are not born in a superficial sense, but that in a deep sense they are not born of themselves. All that can be said, is this, that relatively speaking, there is a constant stream of becoming, a momentary and uninterrupted change from one state of appearance to another. When it is recognised that the world as it presents itself is no more than a manifestation of mind, then birth is seen as no-birth and all existing objects, concerning which discrimination asserts that they are and are not, are non-existent and, therefore, unborn. . . .[10]

He who walks the Middle Way confronts the ordinary world, but he does so liberated from the dualistic illusion that it is external to his own mind. He sees things apparently come into being, be produced, be born, as he did before Enlightment, but he is delivered from the error of thinking they gain some kind of objective existence. He now knows that the born are un-born, that the produced are not produced. The world is experienced as not there; things neither exist nor do not exist.

The whole mystery of the Middle Way is expressed in this brief poem:

> How wondrously strange,
> and how miraculous is this!
> I draw water, I carry fuel.[11]

The ordinary chores of life are performed as usual, but they take on a quality of wonder and delight. The most arduous duties are done while realizing with joyful abandon that all is Empty, clean, devoid of objective substantiality. One is in the world, but not of the world; for that which is, is not.

> How wondrously strange,
> and how miraculous is this!
> I draw water, I carry fuel.

What might be called the practical application of the Middle Way experience is a kind of spontaneity of action in which one is freed from the hindrances of self-consciousness and reflective thought. There is no one before whom to show off, nothing to lose, nothing to gain, nothing to avoid, no one to

adore, no one to abhor. Thus liberated, one moves decisively, immediately. There is no pause for conjecture and calculation; no hesitation for counting the cost or for backward glances. The hand is put to the plow with no wavering and no second thoughts.

The tranquility of the Middle Way is not vegetable inactivity, but poise in the midst of doing. It is the spirit of judo wrestling, fencing, archery, the tea ceremony; in this spirit one executes the brilliant surgical operation, the deft stroke, the crucial business transaction.

We close with Takuan's application of the Middle Way principle to fencing. Similar application might be made to any decisive activity.

> This — what may be termed the 'non-interfering' attitude of mind — constitutes the most vital element in the art of fencing as well as in Zen. If there is any room left even for the breadth of a hair between two actions, this is interruption. When the hands are clapped, the sound issues without a moment's deliberation. The sound does not wait and think before it issues. There is no mediacy here, one movement follows another without being interrupted by one's conscious mind. If you are troubled and cogitate what to do, seeing the opponent about to strike you down, you give him room, that is, a happy chance for his deadly blow. Let your defence follow the attack without a moment's interruption, and there will be no two separate movements to be known as attack and defence . . . . in Zen, and in fencing as well, a mind of no-hesitation, no-interruption, no-mediacy, is highly valued. . . There is something immovable within, which, however, moves along spontaneously with things presenting themselves before it. The mirror of wisdom [enlightenment] reflects them instantaneously one after another, keeping itself intact and undisturbed. The fencer must cultivate this.[12]

This is the Middle Way: the movement of the immovable; acting spontaneously, immediately in the ordinary world as if

what is not, is; because one realizes that what is, is not.

NOTES:

1. The Japanese term is *chūdō* 中道.
2. The type of Buddhism referred to throughout this paper is that generally found in Japan; namely, Mahayana.
3. Ogata, Sōhaku 緒方宗博 of Chōtoku'in 長徳院 within the precincts of Shōkoku-ji 相国寺, on December 6, 1962.
4. D. T. Suzuki, ***An Introduction to Zen Buddhism,*** London: Rider and Company, 1934, p. 132.
5. The Japanese term is *Kū* 空 (*Skt. sūnyatā*). Closely associated with it is another, *Mu* 無, meaning Nothingness.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
7. *Loc. cit.* Italics mine.
8. Wai-tao's translation in 1935. Contained in: Dwight Goddard, ***A Buddhist Bible,*** Second Edition, Revised and Enlarged.
   Privately published by Dwight Goddard, Thetford, Vermont, 1938. p. 100—102.
9. Suzuki's translation in 1929. *Ibid.*, pp. 283f,
10. *Ibid.*, p. 296.
11. D. T. Suzuki, ***Essays in Zen Buddhism,*** Third Series (London: Rider and Company, 1934), p. 83.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 335f.