

LEADERSHIP AND THE MIDDLE WAY

Ginny Whitelaw

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If you were to Google “Middle Way” you’d learn it’s a central tenet in Buddhism. You’d probably read about the story of the historical Buddha who started out with a life of privilege—the son of a king. You’d learn that he abandoned that life and studied with ascetics who trained to tortuous extremes. And you’d learn that once he enlightened, he came back to those ascetics to tell them of this Middle Way (or Middle Path), which is neither dwelling in indulgence nor stuck in ascetic extremes. You might think this is another example of Benjamin Franklin’s “moderation in all things;” that it speaks to splitting the difference, or balancing extremes. Depending on your attitude toward moderation, you might think this is good guidance for leaders, as they need to balance so many paradoxical differences, such as cost and quality, people and performance, long term and short term, work and life and on and on. Or maybe you discard moderation, and lean into the image of a “monomaniac on a mission” as the only type of leader who accomplishes big things. Forget the Middle Way, you may think, and all that soft, Buddhist stuff.



But if we think of the Middle Way in this limited sense, whether we embrace it or discard it, we are missing the Buddha’s point. As we see so clearly in the stages of development pulled together in Wilber’s Integral Theory, how we regard ourselves and the world, how we act, think, and make meaning changes at every level. One of the challenges of all great world religions, as

Wilber and others have observed, is that they’re inspired by spiritual geniuses and interpreted by ordinary people. What we interpret as the Middle Way from an ordinary stage of development is vastly different than what Buddha would have meant, operating from unity consciousness.

Table 1 summarizes a few of the developmental stages we most commonly see from leaders, progressing up to the stage of “all is one,” unity consciousness. Each stage is identified with how it would likely interpret the Middle Way, or even why it’s important. Recognizing that these stages are not all or nothing, that no matter how developed we are, we can always regress, and that we may live parts of our life in one stage and other parts in another, you might reflect on your own life and leadership for where these different interpretations ring true in your experience.

Table 1
Stages of Development and Interpretations of the Middle Way

Stage of development % adult population	Focus, Examples	Interpretations of Middle Way
Fundamentalism, Absolutism (pre-modern) 40%	Obedience, right vs. wrong, compliance	What middle way? There's only one right way, one path to salvation, and people should follow it.
Rationality (modern) 30%	Logic, achievement, bottom line thinking	Find a middle point that is optimal; a "Golden Mean" that avoids extremes, and leads to happiness and optimal outcomes.
Sensitive / Strategic self (post-modern) 10%	Community, relationships, EQ, right vs. right relativism, triple bottom line thinking, sustainability	Dynamic moderation in all things, live in harmony with larger forces; balance opposites by moving back and forth between them, like inhale and exhale, leading to sustainable results and happiness for oneself and others
Integrative, holistic, Tier II <2%	Flex and flow, global mindset, recognizing and fostering all stages, right vs. right transcendence	Recognize that opposites arise together – like yin and yang – from perfect wholeness, and leverage their difference to propel a virtuous cycle, leading to higher levels of excellence and, ultimately, enlightenment
Causal	Unity consciousness, Absolute emptiness, spiritual intuition, wondrous activity	Unattached to a self, free to create in the eternal Now, at the intersection of emptiness and existence

What's clear as we progress through these stages is that the point or purpose of the Middle Way changes at every level. At one level we want results or a self to be happy. At another level we concern ourselves with not only our own results and happiness, but also what's best for a bigger picture. At still another level, we dance in the Now, free of a self and self-serving actions, and the whole is naturally accorded. Moreover, how we'd interpret what it means to follow the Middle Way changes at every stage. At one stage we're trying to split the difference, at another stage, we find a dynamic balance of opposites. At causal consciousness, free of self, we are like a "ball on fast moving waters." Can you sense how every stage increases our scale of thinking and agility of action?

Wait a minute, you may say. The Middle Way gives us guidance about spiritual development, but what does that have to do with leadership? If by leadership we mean—as Kevin Cashman would define it: "authentic self expression that creates value," it's clear that, at its core, leadership is a creative act that reflects the condition or maturity of the actor. Who is that actor? Is it a fundamental self who sees only a world of right and wrong and rules that must be obeyed? Is it a rational self who is looking for the facts to support an optimal solution between extremes? Is it a more strategic self who will recognize that opposing "right" perspectives must be dynamically managed to reach more excellent or sustainable outcomes?

For example, in a global organization, there's always a tension between the cost efficiencies of standardization and meeting diverse customer needs through differentiation. What's right to save money at headquarters might be completely different than what's right to serve customers in Thailand. Fundamentalist leaders situated at headquarters will insist that their standardizing policies be followed, end of story. Rationalist leaders might look at the data on both sides of the story, but still arrange and weigh the facts in favor of pre-conceived values as to whether it's more right to save money or to meet customer needs. Regardless of which side they choose for, they will think they've made a fact-based decision and that the matter is settled. Strategic leaders will recognize that both sides are legitimately right, that no static solution exists, yet still they must decide and act. To do so wisely, they'll consider the needs of both sides and perhaps set some thresholds for what's necessary and what's sufficient (e.g., what costs can we not tolerate and how much savings is enough? When do we know our customer service is intolerable and what's good enough?). They'll decide this matter based, yes, on facts, but also in this broader context, and if they decide for one side today, they may decide for the other side in a related decision next month. Frequent readers of these posts will recognize that this is the process described in a [paradox mapping guide](#) from [The Zen Leader](#), which you can [download](#) if you'd like to try this dynamic balancing act on an issue you're facing that simply doesn't admit to a point solution.

In more general terms, the guidance of Middle Way is: don't attach to this, don't attach to that, don't remain stuck anywhere. But trying to follow this way we'll find it's easier said than done. Maybe we can be unattached from casual preferences, such as whether we install Macs or PCs in our offices (OK, so maybe that's not such a casual preference), but when it comes to strongly-held beliefs, great fears, or deep desires, detachment may seem out of the question or even hypocritical. Yet the message of the Middle Way is that in the moment-by-moment movement of life, anything in us that cannot move (i.e., is stuck), will eventually present a problem. For example, frugality is a fine value. But if I decide every leadership situation in favor of frugality, I will blind myself to opportunities when it would be wise to spend. If I take frugality too far, I may become known for stinginess, get panicky when investments decline, or live in fear of never having enough.

But the bigger problem of being stuck anywhere is being stuck to the self who is stuck. Because the actions that come from that local self will somehow end up serving how that self perceives its interests. Granted, as that self matures, as we've noted in Table 1, it perceives its interests more broadly. But it cannot be completely free to create its greatest value or free from suffering so long as it's stuck in the agenda of a local self. The more stuck we are to a self and its attachments, like flies on flypaper, the more we suffer when things don't go as we'd like, and the more we perpetuate suffering as we protect our interests. As we drop our attachments, it is like freeing ourselves from the flypaper, one limb at a time. With each bit of freedom, we find greater agility and create fewer problems. But if even one tiny point of attachment remains, we still can't fly.

If we want to take the Middle Way to its ultimate, and lose that last bit of self attachment, we will need the support of a rigorous spiritual practice - not torturous per se, but what we call *shugyo*, where we put our entire self into it. No part of the self we think we are can remain outside, playing it safe, or else that will

be the limb that never comes off the flypaper. This is where meditation becomes, not a nice way to manage stress, but an all-in activity, conducted over days, repeated over years. Eventually we see clearly that the local self we think we are is nothing more than a well-reinforced, neurotic formation. When all that we imagine we are (that we're really not) is stripped away, what remains is boundless—creative activity at the intersection of emptiness and existence, between radiant possibility and manifestation. Dancing at this point of Now, free to move in any direction, is the ultimate Middle Way. This is where leadership takes its greatest form, rather than serving neurotic illusions, creating wondrous value, according the Way.

About the author: *Dr. Ginny Whitelaw* is a leadership expert and Zen master in the Chozen-ji line of Rinzai Zen. She is the author of *The Zen Leader* (www.thezenleader.com), President of Focus Leadership, and founder of the Institute for Zen Leadership (www.institutezenleadership.org).

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