

Gesshin Greenwood

*The Dharmic Life*

Week Two: “Finding Our Own Middle Way”

April 8, 2019



I'm Gesshin Greenwood, welcome back to “The Dharmic Life.” In the last session, we talked about the Buddha's life inside the palace and the first noble truth. In this talk, we'll be looking at the second noble truth and what happened after the Buddha left his house.

When we left off the story, Siddhartha had left the palace and had traded his fine clothes for beggar's clothes. Next, he cut off his hair and went in search of teachers. Siddhartha underwent what is often called six years of arduous training. He went from teacher to teacher and mastered every meditation technique and yogic technique that they taught. There are many suttas in the Pali canon that describe this time in his life. At one point, he's describing this intensive training experience and he says, “With my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, constrained, and crushed mind with mind. While I did so, sweat ran from my armpits. But although tireless energy was aroused in me and unremitting mindfulness was established, my body was overwrought and strained, because I was exhausted by the painful striving.” You can look more into these suttas, but it's clear from what is described that his practice is actually quite violent and aggressive.

This time in the Buddha's life is very useful to look at because at the beginning of practice people can often become overzealous and push themselves to the limits. I think this is especially true of people who have grown up in developed countries because we are surrounded by so much luxury all the time. Of course, there are people of different socioeconomic backgrounds throughout the United States, but at least compared to other parts of the world, we really have everything we need. We have enough food or even an excess of food. We have the Internet. We have an excess of material things. Often when people come to Buddhism and get a little taste of what it's like to not have these things, it is really intriguing to them. People can flip into the extreme of pushing themselves really hard to make up for the luxury that they've come from.

I'm speaking a lot about my own personal experience. When I first came to meditation practice as a young adult, I was coming from a pretty comfortable background—my father was a doctor, I never had to really worry about where I was going to get my food—then I found Buddhism and became really on fire with the dharma. I would go to meditation retreats during my spring break. I remember going to this one teacher during a meditation retreat and saying, “What more can I do? I want to get enlightened.” They said, “Hm... Why don't you start a daily meditation practice and maybe go to therapy?” I was so offended because this was the last thing I wanted. I wanted a big adventure where I would get enlightened. I wanted something big and I was completely uninterested in taking it slow and integrating this practice into my life in a sane and sustainable way. So I did the opposite of what this teacher was suggesting. I moved to Japan,

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lived in a monastery for five years, and ordained as a nun. I did all of the hard-core things that I was wanting to do: I meditated in a freezing cold zendo, I begged in the snow, and I pushed myself really, really hard. I slept on the floor and shared a room with five other nuns. I was celibate and had a very confined life.

When I arrived at the monastery I decided that I wasn't going to need anything. I remember telling myself this, and I think it's a very 25-year-old way of relating to spiritual practice. I told myself, "I'm just not going to need anything." I ended all my romantic relationships, I gave up coffee, and I starved myself for affection. Partly, this was required of me by the monastic container: there's not a lot of candy. Well, actually, that's not true. There's a lot of candy—but there's not a lot of sex, or TV, or things to distract you. You're quite isolated from your family.

Part of it was the container I was in, but part of it was me pushing myself a lot, because I thought that's what I needed to do. People really rewarded me for that. I was told that I could chant better than a Japanese person. I gained respect by being one of the strictest people. There's a chapter in my book in which I talk about working so hard in the kitchen that I felt like I was going to die. I felt my organs starting to slow down. In that chapter, I also wrote about feeling suicidal and wanting to die, because I was so tired and because everything was just so hard. I was reading this chapter in a book reading once. In a Q&A, a woman in the audience referring to this chapter asked me, "I listen to that and I think 'Wow! Are we doing this all wrong in the West?' Do you think we're spoiled?" My answer is yes and no.

One of my teachers in Japan had a beautiful metaphor of a waterwheel. She said a waterwheel needs to be in the water enough so that the wheel will turn, but it can't be too far in the water or the wheel won't turn. It also can't be too far out of the water. If we think of the water as material existence or material attachments, we need to touch that water a little bit. We need to be in the world, otherwise there would be no way to engage with each other. But we can't be so far away that we're just not going to engage. We also can't be too far in, which tends to be our default. In the West, we're very much in the water. We're so submerged in career, and the Internet, and what we're going to eat next, that we sort of forget what's really important. That's why I think it's not a yes or no answer.

As I read before, Siddhartha was doing all these meditation techniques, but he still didn't find relief from suffering. He decided the way to do this was to push himself even harder, so he decided to restrict his intake of food. In another sutta that describes this time, the Buddha says, "Suppose I take very little food, a handful each time, whether of bean soup or lentil soup or pea

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soup. So I took very little food. When I did so, my body reached a state of extreme emaciation. Because of eating so little, my limbs became like the jointed segments of vine stems or bamboo stems. Because of eating so little, my backside became like a camel's hoof. Because of eating so little, my ribs jutted out as gaunt as the crazy rafters of an old roofless barn."

But despite starving himself, he didn't find the end of suffering. He was so weak from eating so little that he was actually near death. He was about to die. A young girl from the village, Sujata, saw him and took pity on him. She brought him a bowl of milk and he decided that he was going to die anyway, so he may as well take a little bit of food. So he drank the milk and regained his strength. He then had enough strength to sit under a tree and look into his mind. Then (spoiler alert!) he does attain enlightenment, which is what he was seeking, but that's in the next section.

Eventually, the Buddha names and describes this as "The Teaching of the Middle Way." The Teaching of the Middle Way is that it's important to avoid these extremes of excessive sensory pleasure on the one hand, and self-mortification on the other hand. He's talking about pleasure versus self-mortification, but we can also think of the Middle Way as the absence of extremes: it's the Middle Way between two extremes. Like us, the Buddha was raised in an environment that is saturated with luxury. It's important to keep in mind that he ended up in this emaciated state, but that was only because he came from so much luxury. So we're also going to be going back and forth between these two extremes.

As I mentioned earlier, I spent a lot of time in the monastery practicing very, very intensely and similarly, I never found total relief or lasting peace in that environment. I did gain a little taste and some clarity about what real peace would be, but I could also tell that the monastic life was such a narrow sliver of the human experience that there was a big part of myself that was going unexamined. So I left.

When the woman in that Q&A asked if I thought Americans were spoiled, I didn't answer "yes" or "no", because the truth is most people living in a developed country could probably do with a little less. We could do with a little less food, with a little less spending money, and compared to the rest of the world in particular, a lot less greed. Greed is really the shadow side of this culture, it is everywhere. But I didn't answer "no" because there needs to be a Middle Way. It also depends on the person. I don't think it's fair to tell a single mother who's working three jobs that she needs to go meditate on the uselessness of material greed. It might be more skillful to help her get a career that would help her support her family or redress the structural inequality that makes it so that a single woman can't afford to support their family in the first place.

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So I left the monastery, started to re-engage with society, and went to school. I started wearing normal clothing. I actually felt quite guilty about leaving Japan. I wrote a Facebook post that said, “Now I’m looking forward and considering how to continue to develop what I’ve learned and experienced here. Part of me wants to study Japanese seriously, so I can be a better bridge between American and Japanese Zen. Another part of me thinks that I should sit for ten years, and then sit for ten years, and then sit for ten more. Another part of me wants to go back to America, get married, and eat cheeseburgers every day.” Of course, in the comment section, all my friends wrote, “Cheeseburgers! Cheeseburgers! Cheeseburgers!” except for my godmother, bless her, who actually took my post seriously and asked, “What’s the third option?”

Of course, that’s the Middle Way. But at the time, I couldn’t conceive of being married, having a rigorous practice, being in the world, and living simply, for example. Because that’s so much harder. It’s quite easy to do these extreme things of just only caring about money and career, or giving it all up and not being attached to anything.

I’m so passionate about talking about the Middle Way because I’ve felt those two extremes so strongly. For me, this is the time in my life that I’m trying to do moderation. I don’t just mean moderation about money or physical things. It’s also a mental quality in terms of moderation in how I’m relating to things.

The second noble truth is that suffering is caused by craving. This is the second thing that the Buddha discovered when he sat under the tree. To be honest, I struggle with this noble truth, because I’m not sure that this has been my experience, which is maybe a little blasphemous. But this is why I appreciate the scholar Stephen Batchelor, who is a former Buddhist monk, and who is quite famous for championing secular Buddhism.

In the original Pali sutta on the first discourse, the Buddha says, “Now this, monks, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering. It is this craving that leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there. That is, craving for sensory pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination.” But a little later the Buddha says, “This is the noble truth of the origin of suffering. Thus, monks, in regards to things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, penetration, and light, the noble truth of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned.” Stephen Batchelor talks about how the emphasis of these truths is on abandoning suffering. It’s on the abandoning part, not on believing in them as truths.

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Similarly to this process of finding the Middle Way, abandoning suffering is something that we figure out on our own. I don't mean on our own individually and in isolation, but I do mean that it is unique to us. It occurs after a long period of trial and error and self-reflection. At the end of this journey, it's entirely possible that the truth we find is not a Buddhist truth, but just truth and there's no Buddhism necessary. I actually think what the Buddha found was not Buddhism. It was his truth.

For me, walking the Middle Way has meant welcoming love back into my life and working on softening my heart. My teachers in Japan did not stress these things or believe they are “real” Zen practice. But my experience has been that I'm happier and saner when I find a true Middle Way.

Finding the Middle Way is not something that happens one time. It's not like I had my six years of arduous practice and now the rest of my life is hamburgers. To use another analogy, it's said that awakening is like a bird with two wings, wisdom on the one side and compassion on the other. We need both to fly. I believe each of us know whether or not we're flying if we're really paying attention. You can tell, are you flying or not? If you're not, it means that one wing is a little bit too heavy. So you need to rebalance.

The good news is that we can always readjust, it's not a one-time thing. We have to keep flying. We can always start again. Personally, I've found that since coming back to the United States I've flipped a little bit back into an obsession with money and career, because it's all around us. This is why community is so important, because it's being around people who can show us what our values are.

No one can decide for you what your extremes are. You have to do it yourself. But I believe that this is what this practice is inviting us to do. It's telling us it's possible to fly, and then it's bringing awareness to the wings in our life.

This has been the discussion of the second noble truth. In the next section, we will talk about enlightenment—everyone's favorite! So, please come back and watch the next talk.