



The Middle Way to renewing the sacred balance: *A Buddhist perspective*



Based on an interview with Franz Li

Buddhists relate to all sentient beings with a profound sense of respect and compassion. Each one is unique and precious. Each is carrying life's burden of passion and suffering.

We see all sentient beings, ourselves included, as ever-changing life forces intimately connected to all other living things on this planet. What I do to the planet, to others, I inevitably do in some sense to myself. Just as if I pollute the air, I harm the planet, I harm others and I also harm myself.

The Buddha's teachings largely focused on the practical concerns of human passion and suffering. Why do we suffer? Why are we not satisfied? How do we achieve liberation (nirvana) and enjoy true happiness?

To completely overcome suffering, we must attain enlightenment. We must develop the insight to see reality as it truly is: that everything in nature exists interdependently and humans are merely part of a wider interconnected community of beings.

Enlightenment naturally engenders selfless compassion, a core value of Buddhism. Compassion makes it impossible to intentionally harm another. Such insight dictates us to live in harmony, in accord with reality, with nature, not against it.

The Buddhist ideal of a great bodhisattva (roughly speaking, a saint) is one who out of deep compassion vows to help every other sentient being to overcome

their passion and suffering, to attain enlightenment.

The path to enlightenment is the Middle Way, also called the Noble Eightfold Path: right understanding, right thinking (aim), right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

The Eightfold Path leads us to true happiness by addressing our imbalances—the very source of our passion, suffering and dissatisfaction. We begin by addressing the inner imbalances (our understanding, our thought), we proceed to temper the outer imbalances (speech, action and work), and then we return to correct the deeper inner imbalances (effort, mindfulness, concentration). Balance in our outer life is possible only to the extent that our inner life is also in balance.

The Middle Way refrains from asceticism that shuns society and from hedonism that enslaves one to sensory pleasures. Buddhists engage in the material world—it is necessary and useful to our welfare and development—while recognizing that material consumption and wealth alone do not bring true happiness.

The Middle Way rejects a lifestyle of over-consumption and it also rejects poverty. The excessive consumption by a small portion of humanity causes suffering to all who share this planet, while poverty in human society leads to strife, violence and more suffering.

Although Buddhism focuses

"Peace and the survival of Earth as we know it are threatened by human activities which lack a commitment to humanitarian values.

Destruction of nature and natural resources results from ignorance, greed and lack of respect for the Earth's living things.

This lack of respect extends even to Earth's human descendants, the future generations who will inherit a vastly degraded planet if world peace does not become a reality and destruction of the natural environment continues at the present rate...

Clearly this is a pivotal generation...Many of the Earth's habitats, animals, plants, insects and even micro-organisms that we know as rare may not be known at all by future generations. We have the capability and the responsibility. We must act before it is too late."

The Dalai Lama

on human suffering, it does not overlook the suffering of other creatures. All living things have their place in the world—a coexistence that must be respected.

Our world is overstrained. It is calling for our collective effort to restore the balance inside and out, to ensure that mankind can thrive in harmony with other living things. It behooves us to follow the Middle Way, the path to restore the sacred balance.∞

Franz Li was born a Methodist. He became involved with Buddhism 14 years ago and now teaches classes at the Cham Shan Temple. He also speaks about Buddhism at Catholic high schools in the Toronto area.



The Path of Submission and the renewal of the sacred balance: *An Islamic perspective*



Based on an interview with Ahmed Motiar

"Islam" means "peace." From a Muslim perspective, peace comes from submission to the will of God. Indeed, the word "Muslim" means "one who submits."

We understand the whole of creation—the entire cosmos—to be Muslim insofar as all things submit to the will of God. A tree, by its very nature, is an excellent Muslim; it submits completely and without deviation to the will of God. In the fall it sheds its leaves, in the winter it goes dormant, in the spring it blooms and in the summer it bears fruit.

Everything on Earth submits to the will of God. All creatures teach us what it is to be Muslim. Only humans have the choice of submitting to the will of God or not. This option of choice elevates human beings—but it also means that we alone can disrupt the sacred balance.

Prophet Mohammed taught that, **"All creation is God's family as its sustenance is from God. Therefore the most beloved to God is one who does good to God's family."** Humanity is only to use the Earth within the limits prescribed by our own needs. The moment we abuse it, we fail to be good submitters—we fail to be good Muslims.

The most sacred phrase of Islam, *"La ilaha illa Allah,"* could be translated as, "There is no reality outside of the One." The Qu'ran intimates that we can see God through God's manifestations. It acknowledges the presence of God within all creation as

God is in me. If I hurt you, or harm a tree, or neglect a plant, or abuse the Earth, I am hurting the same God that is present in me.

We choose to be greedy instead of generous. We choose personal riches over generosity. Mohammed taught, "Riches are not from an abundance of worldly goods, but rather from a contented mind." Without a contented mind, we become avaricious. The avaricious person is poor even though they own the world because they can never be content with what they have.

With love, we see all things as beautiful. Everything has value, must be respected and honoured. Living this way actually increases our own joy and happiness—our inner contentment.

The Muslim's spiritual practices help to maintain a constant awareness of the sacred balance. We pray five times a day, giving thanks for our food and shelter, and reflecting on what we have done and what we are doing. Constant communication with the Divine is embedded into the very fabric of our lives.

In this communication, we are also reconnected to the universe. We know that the trees and animals are in constant worship. The leaves of the trees are in the position of bowing, as are the heads of the animals. When we pray, we bow and prostrate ourselves, identifying with all the trees, plants and crawling creatures of the Earth, imitating their respectful position. It is a position of absolute humility. Our prayer

"I look at the camel droppings, and this points to the existence of the camel. I see footprints in the sand, and I know that a traveller has passed by. Then, I look at the heavens with its stars, and the Earth with its mountains and valleys, and the sea with its waves. Do they not all point to the Maker, the powerful, the all-knowing, wise and caring God?"

Sufi (Islamic mystic) story of a desert dweller

postures not only remind us of our responsibility to all creation, but that we are dependent on creation for our sustenance.

In Islam, the highest form of righteousness is to strive to eliminate injustice and oppression—not only to humans, but also to other creatures and the planet. Renewing the sacred balance, then, is an integral part of achieving the peace that comes from being true submitters to the will of God.

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