The Threefold Model of Practice

By Robert M Ellis

Introduction

This paper is intended to propose a threefold model of practice for the Middle Way Society (MWS) and suggest practical ways it could be developed. It also offers some reflections on my past experience of practice with the Triratna Buddhist Community (then FWBO). I have included this to provide an explanation as to why I have drawn the conclusions I have about practice through experience and critical reflection. The criticisms of Triratna implied by these reflections are intended to be balanced and contextualised, and directed towards ways that MWS could learn from Triratna's limitations.

The personal background is this. I was involved in the Triratna movement from 1985 until 2008 (with a few years' gap in the early 1990's). I learned a great deal both about Buddhism and about spiritual practice from this movement, for which I remain very grateful. I did this in the context of local groups in Cambridge, Lancaster and Birmingham, and went through the course of training for ordination in a series of retreats at Padmaloka Retreat Centre, before being ordained as Upeksacitta in 2004. During this time, however, I was also developing Middle Way Philosophy, which increasingly seemed to challenge the metaphysical commitments of traditional Buddhist practice that remained in Triratna. Due to this conflict I resigned from the Order in 2008, and for some time cast around for other ways forward in which I could work with others. In 2012 I encountered Secular Buddhism UK. Although I don't really identify either with Buddhism or secularism (only with more basic principles that can unite them), nor did many of the other people involved, so I found some kindred spirits there, but not a worked-out movement or clear principles. It was through a group of people that I met through Secular Buddhism UK that I set up the Middle Way Society in August 2013.

The rationale behind Middle Way Philosophy has always been (at least ultimately) practical, but my friends can perhaps be forgiven for not always discerning this beneath my layers of philosophical preoccupation, and the philosopher's weakness of focusing most on the things I disagree with. I have spent considerable effort on trying to get the theory right – that is, right in the sense of being compatible with practical experience in the long term: but if that theory is to be of as much help to people as I believe it could be, it clearly needs to be linked more effectively to immediate practice. It is in practice, too, that I believe philosophical disagreements are often sidelined by direct experience, allowing an incremental practical unity to emerge amongst a wider group of people.

When I first founded the Middle Way Society, I thought of it mainly as offering a theoretical structure that could provide a sort of umbrella for a range of possible practices, with these practices presumably being learnt and taught elsewhere. However, more recently my thinking about this has developed further, and I have begun to see the Middle Way as offering distinctive approaches to practice that, as far as I know, are not already offered elsewhere. Furthermore, I think that widespread engagement with the Middle Way is only really likely when people are introduced to it through the medium of practice. Since my own understanding of the

Middle Way has been arrived at by combining a prior practical experience with philosophical reflection, it is hardly fair or realistic to expect others without that prior practical experience to understand it just through philosophical discussion. Even the way that people have learnt practices elsewhere may or may not have given much emphasis to the practical Middle Way.

Reflections on my experience with Triratna

I am going to discuss my experience of Triratna first in order to try to convey some of the basis of the judgements I'm going to be making about how practice can succeed, and what sorts of practice MWS would do best to focus on. There will be implied criticisms of Triratna, but my purpose is not to criticise it for the sake of doing so, so much as to learn from the wider experience it offered. I remain appreciative of everything I have learned from Triratna, and of the virtues of the many members of the order I'm still in touch with (including my wife!).

The basic model of practice in Triratna rests initially on meditation. Most people enter the movement through meditation classes. To varying extents, these classes also offer training in Buddhism. The approach is incremental to the extent that people can just come and learn meditation without engaging much with the Buddhism if they wish. However, all the other aspects of practice – community, ethics, the arts, study – tend to be associated with Buddhism, and people can only really engage with them through involvement in a Buddhist community. Although there is no pressure to commit oneself (by becoming a mitra and asking for ordination), the other aspects of practice are inextricable from distinctively Buddhist ceremonial and the public celebration of Buddhist beliefs.

If I think back to my first involvement with Triratna, as a Cambridge student, my main early motive was admiration of the intellectual calibre, cultivation and energy of the people involved, which went well beyond anything I had encountered in the rather less dynamic Baptist Church background in which I had been brought up. I had a certain degree of curiosity about meditation, but this was rarely a big deal. I don't think I would have got particularly interested in Buddhism itself if it wasn't for the vibrancy of the people.

My sense is that this vibrancy developed from a committed focus on a range of practices that addressed different aspects of human integration in a flexible and open-ended way. The FWBO (Triratna) Community makes widespread use of practical developments of Western psychology such as Jungian integration theory, neuro-linguistic programming, transactional analysis, psychosynthesis, and focusing. It also has an enthusiastic and often celebratory involvement in the arts – with arts centres being opened and the Cambridge Centre even taking over a theatre. The arts – visual, literary and musical – are seen as an agent for refinement of sensibility, not just as entertainment. Its sense of community is constantly reinforced by gatherings, meetings and retreats at various levels. It has also developed enduring and successful businesses such as Windhorse Trading in Cambridge. There is also ongoing discussion of the application of theory to experience in study groups, and an ongoing discussion and practice of ethics.

All this practical success is centred around a shared sense of certain core principles: principles that are identified with Buddhism. However, from where I stand now, the traditionally metaphysical Buddhist elements look entirely contingent. There is no reason to think that the specific belief in the Buddha's enlightenment, for example, makes any positive difference to practice. If you took away all the Buddhas and put Teletubbies there instead, and instead of Buddhist texts Triratna studied randomly selected philosophers and mystics through the ages, they would be no less effective in what they do. To assume otherwise involves a correlation-cause confusion that I will return to.

There are some practices that have been taken from the resources offered by the Buddhist tradition, but all of these have been selected for their practical value and could have come from any other tradition. Meditation practice, and the five precepts as practical guidelines for ethical conduct, have both emerged directly from Buddhism and have a daily direct effect on the judgements of people in Triratna. In practice, the Middle Way is also used as the basis of many practical judgements, whether these are concerned with how to meditate, how to interpret moral guidelines, or how to administer a local group, but oddly, the Middle Way receives little emphasis in theory (although it is discussed briefly, and rather unconvincingly, in Sangharakshita's writings). I have come across one talk about the Middle Way given by a leading order member, but it is not generally the theme of books or retreats. Hardly anyone discusses it in theory, except perhaps indirectly through the study of Buddhist texts such as Nagarjuna, where much digestion of traditional material has to take place before you get anything with practical applicability. Yet the Middle Way is the one genuinely Buddhist thing that makes Triratna work – through practice and culture, Order Members usually make balanced judgements that take into account conditions and avoid metaphysical extremes.

There are also archetypal relationships developed by Buddhist practitioners through ritual and *sadhana* practice, in which Order Members meditate on a Buddha figure. But archetypes are universal, and thus the particular archetypal forms one chooses to use are contingent. The idea of using Teletubbies instead will only seem preposterous because it has not been enshrined by habitual use – but meditate on Teletubbies for ten years and they are likely to assume archetypal forms.

Traditions in general have two sorts of elements that need to be separated out. There is the tried-and-tested practical element of tradition, and there is the succession of authority. Practices such as meditation can be adopted from Buddhist tradition because they are tried-and-tested. In the original Asian Buddhist context there is also an argument that rituals involving Buddhas etc. are a tried-and-tested practical element of society, that should not be meddled with because it is a robust element in a traditional society with many subtle interrelationships. However, when used by people who only a few decades ago (at the most) were rebels who rejected the religious traditions in their own society, the argument that the whole of Buddhist tradition, including its metaphysical elements, are part of a tried-and-tested system that should not be interfered with, is enormously incoherent. The tradition has already been deracinated when it was removed from its original homeland. If we are to adopt elements of Buddhist tradition it has to be on practical criteria, and the same criteria make their traditional provenance irrelevant. If one persists in adopting traditionally Buddhist elements without a direct practical purpose, one is left with a

succession of authority – i.e. a series of metaphysical claims going far beyond our experience, which are about the Buddha's enlightenment experience and the experience of others who succeeded him.

However, I would go further than just arguing that traditional Buddhist metaphysics are irrelevant to Triratna practice. I would also argue that they are actively unhelpful. They are unhelpful because they become a rallying-point of defensive identification. In my experience, even Order Members trained for many years in meditation and other Triratna practices can flip rapidly between open pragmatism and defence of the Buddhist tradition against its perceived enemies. There is ongoing tension between conservatives and progressives in the Order, but many of those somewhere in the middle can change rather unpredictably between the two. Triratna still excludes other Buddhist or spiritual organisations from its centres, and Subhuti (a leading order member) has issued a series of trenchant and fragile defences of the central role of faith in the Buddhist tradition. Sangharakshita, the founder of Triratna, also continues to be given the status of a guru despite having given a much-studied talk in which he said that formal guru-relationships were not necessary. Those who engage first with the progressive and practical aspects of Triratna will soon meet another side to the movement: one that is deeply divided, self-contradictory, and inward-looking.

Metaphysical identifications are also a major obstacle to the practice of those who encounter Triratna. In many cases they are put off by the traditional Buddhist elements. In some cases they wholeheartedly embrace them, but in such a deracinated way that they subsequently react against them. The symbols and theoretical structures that people encounter should be such as to help them in their practice, but in Triratna they are more often a hindrance or a distraction.

So, these are the conclusions I would draw from my experience of Triratna, not in the heat of recent withdrawal but after five years' reflection:

- Meditation needs to be supported by a range of other practices
- Practice needs the wider context of the Middle Way, which relates different practices to each other in a framework of ethics and spiritual progress
- The Middle Way is best understood in relation to practice
- Practice needs to avoid disruptive metaphysical commitments that distract one from the Middle Way and create unnecessary defensive identifications
- Traditions can be fully utilised and respected for the robust resources they provide, without metaphysical commitment to the authority of that tradition
- Theoretical structure is helpful for practice, but it needs to be a provisional structure in constant dialogue with that practice, not one imposed from the past. It needs to be fallible as well as coherent.

These, not coincidentally, are all core principles of Middle Way Philosophy.

Key practical elements in Middle Way Philosophy

I am obviously not going to go into all the details of Middle Way Philosophy here – for those see the Middle Way Society website (www.middlewaysociety.org) and my books, particularly the 'Middle Way Philosophy' series. However, I do want to highlight the key elements in order to show how they can be directly applied to a distinctive approach to practice. These key elements are:

- The Middle Way itself, i.e. the practice of balancing between metaphysical affirmation and metaphysical denial
- The integration model
- The analysis of human neural habits into desire, meaning and belief, drawing on the embodied meaning thesis

1. The Middle Way itself
The Middle Way itself provides a guide, not so much as to which practices to do, but of how to do them and thus, by implication, of how to teach them. The value of any practice in addressing conditions will arise from the extent to which it avoids either affirmative or negative metaphysical claims.

This will have been directly experienced by anyone who has ever meditated. There are a series of metaphysical dichotomies to be avoided in defining, setting up, and maintaining meditation practice. In defining it, there is formalistic belief in a "practice" to be rigidly adhered to as it was taught, as opposed to abandonment of the self-imposed rules that are necessary to engage in the practice. In setting up the practice, there is a balance to be sought between physical rigidity (linked to a belief in uprightness) and physical relaxation (linked to a belief in relaxation). In maintaining meditation practice, there is a balance between wilful effort and passivity in maintaining continuity of purpose whilst engaging with experience.

Exactly the same kind of balancing is required in almost any other directed activity. As I sit here typing at a computer there is the same balance to be sought between rigidity and relaxation, order and chaos, effort and passivity both in my physical state, in my mental processes, and (in the case of writing) in my use of language. In each case the extremes to be avoided involve metaphysical beliefs in which this extreme would be taken to be the correct and final solution in addressing conditions.

2. The integration model
In contrast to the Middle Way, which emphasises the avoidance of unhelpful approaches, the integration model (which I regard as the Middle Way inside out) takes what is positive from each extreme in our experience and aims to unify it by resolving conflicts. The integration model thus provides a goal for practice where the Middle Way alone leaves goals completely open. Since integration is continuous and incremental, so is the goal. It is not a final or remote goal such as enlightenment, but an immediate one that constantly uncoils before us.

The integration model helps to explain both what can be achieved in practice and why it is worth achieving. For example, by regular meditation one can start to retrain one's habitual states towards a greater degree of integration, and also temporarily achieve especially integrated states such as dhyana. A more integrated state is its own reward, having all sorts of positive side effects in terms of its impact (relative to other conditions) on health, happiness and worldly effectiveness, and it is thus far more potent, in practice, than an ultimate promise of nirvana.

3. The analysis of desire, meaning and belief
The analysis of desire, meaning and belief is also a central part of Middle Way Philosophy, and one that challenges many entrenched religious and philosophical positions that rely on metaphysics. Using the embodied meaning thesis developed

by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, it understands meaning as built up through habitual physical associations motivated by desire, then belief as built up from the metaphorical extensions we develop out of more basic bodily meaning. This challenges the misleading distinction between cognitive and emotive meaning, and thus also the fact-value distinction and the reason-emotion distinction. It is a revolutionarily different way of understanding ourselves, the implications of which are only just being grasped. We are so much in the habit of seeing our beliefs as primary and everything else as tributary to them, but in doing this we get the pyramid of dependency the wrong way up.

The embodied meaning thesis provides further confirmation of the delusory nature of metaphysical claims, which assume our responses to be formed and developed on the basis of belief. This is not because belief has no effect on desire or meaning, but rather because absolute metaphysical beliefs consistently overestimate those effects (as well as often assuming effects that are actually mildly negative to be ubiquitously positive or negative). Theists, for example, are not kind and charitable because of their belief in God's revelation, but in spite of it, their kindness and charitableness emerging at the levels of desire and meaning despite a belief that would otherwise dispose them towards defensiveness and prejudice.

If we start to recognise that we operate at all three of these levels, and that they are loosely interdependent, the important implication for practice is that we need to work at all these levels. Although most practices will have some effect at all three levels, they are most often targeted particularly at one of them. For example, if we do a meditation practice such as the mindfulness of breathing, which is primarily directed at the desire level, it may have some positive effects on the other levels, but if left in isolation its integrating effects at the level of desire may be reversed by disintegrating conditions acting on meaning and belief. Similarly, if you integrate your beliefs through careful and reflective thinking, this degree of integration may be reversed by other conditions at the levels of desire and meaning, unless you also work to integrate these levels. Despite their respective efforts, intellectuals can be ambushed by their emotions, and anti-intellectuals can get unreflectively stuck in prejudices.

Desire, meaning and belief in Triratna

I am going to return to Triratna here to make some further observations that need to be informed by this structure of desire, meaning and belief.

In the context of Triratna, my experience was that practices at the level of desire and meaning were generally effective, with an emphasis on regular meditation practice, and a general recognition of the important role of the arts in integrating meaning. The weakness lay at the level of belief, where a superficially critical culture did not extend to the real examination of traditional Buddhist assumptions. Study groups were confined to the works of Sangharakshita and traditional Buddhist texts, where the assumption was that one needed to absorb insights that would then be practised, rather than contribute to any further refinement of the beliefs concerned. If one questioned a claim by Sangharakshita, one was always assumed to be misinterpreting him. This pattern was also reflected in talks, where again the general assumption was the mere passing on of a model, rather than its refinement through genuine challenge.

Triratna, in short, does not train people in the skills they need to integrate beliefs, as well as desire and meaning, perhaps because it has followed the assumptions of Buddhist tradition in seeing itself as primarily passing on the wisdom of ancient sages and guru lineages. It was seldom, if ever, noticed what little connection there was between this wisdom as it was passed on and the effectiveness of practices. Preachers of metaphysics, whether in Buddhism or any other religion, tend to be subject to the control illusion: they preach the dharma and people make progress, so they take this as proof that the formal metaphysical commitments were responsible for the practical progress, rather than just the communal organisation and support, or the specific practices. If they had studied critical thinking, however, it might help to make them more aware that correlation does not imply causation.

There has been some attempt to teach Critical Thinking (under the cautious heading of 'clear thinking') in Triratna. I was not directly involved in this, and it was only introduced about the time I was leaving the Order, so I have only a second-hand impression of it. However, my impression is that it was only introduced at an advanced level, not as a regular part of the training offered to every member of the community. My impression is also that this training has not been very far reaching, because – as far as I was told by the organiser – it did not include any questioning of the philosophical assumptions of Buddhism itself in comparison to alternatives. Critical thinking is exactly the kind of discipline that is needed to integrate belief, but it can do no more than make one's existing beliefs a bit more coherent if it is not prepared to question sceptically. The discipline itself is significantly undermined by no-go areas.

My experience of the treatment of belief in Triratna, then, is that it was the Achilles' Heel of the movement, as it is of Buddhism more generally. A superficial open-mindedness was much more a product of regular practice at the levels of desire and meaning than of a genuine culture of enquiry. This makes me all the clearer that effective practice needs to be pursued at the level of belief as well as that of desire and meaning.

Practical proposals for the Middle Way Society

To develop beyond the limitations of Triratna (and other religious or secular groups), then, I propose that MWS adopts some distinctive principles of Middle Way practice:

1. That practices addressing integration of desire, meaning and belief need to be pursued in parallel from the beginning, with roughly equal attention given to each of them. This is the 'threefold model of practice' of my title.
2. That the goal of all practices needs to be framed as the continuous intermediate goal of integration, avoiding either final goals that depend on metaphysical beliefs, or on the other hand any limitation to closed models such as the concept of 'cure' in the medical model.
3. That all practices need to be taught in a way that emphasises the central role of balanced judgement in pursuing them successfully. The theory of the Middle Way can then mesh organically with such practice.

1. The threefold model of practice

The pursuing of all three types of integration in balance with each other does not need to imply only three practices. On the contrary, there are a range of practices that can be centred on each type of integration. Here is an indicative, not exhaustive, list:

Practices focused on desire	• Mindfulness-based meditation (e.g. mindfulness of breathing, zazen) • Psychotherapy • Physical disciplines (yoga, Tai Chi, dance etc) • Mediation techniques (e.g. NVC) • Political activity
Practices focused on meaning	• The arts (visual, literary, performing, applied etc) • Some forms of meditation (e.g. loving-kindness) • Focusing • Participatory, creative ritual (i.e. not most actual ritual!)
Practices focused on belief	• Reflection • Critical thinking • Philosophy • Cognitive behavioural therapy

My proposal is that MWS practice classes offer at least three practices (one from each box) in parallel. An obvious example combination, such as I might consider offering myself, would be mindfulness meditation, creative writing, and critical thinking. Which particularly practices were offered, however, might depend on the expertise and confidence of the person leading the class.

There is a danger that this might prove too daunting for some people, either to lead or to practice, so we will need flexibility. However, the important thing is not to develop a model that basically privileges one type of integration over the others, or leaves one only for advanced study. The different practices could be introduced in separate successive courses, or in a three-week cycle: we'd need to experiment as to what worked best.

2. Integration as the goal

Having an open-ended goal is important here. We don't want people to finish a 'course' and then feel to any extent that they are cast adrift to get on with it – with the likely result in many cases that their practice will just peter out. Open and intermediate goals enable everyone to make progress from wherever they start, and it would be good to make this explicit at the beginning of any practice class. This is an important aspect of the distinctiveness of what MWS could offer – neither 'religion', nor 'therapy', but nevertheless ongoing practice with a supporting community, clear values and a worked-out philosophy.

3. Emphasis on balanced judgement

I have already discussed above the different ways in which the Middle Way can be applied to balancing judgement in every aspect of meditation. The same applies to any of the other practices. However, developing a sense of that balance obviously involves far more than just a theoretical understanding of the Middle Way. People need to learn to recognise rigid assumptions in their experience that form one or

other of the metaphysical poles to be avoided – a process probably best tackled in discussion about practice.

To give another example of how balanced judgement would apply to a different practice, let's take Critical Thinking. Critical Thinking involves understanding and evaluative awareness of patterns of reasoning in all sorts of different contexts. However, if you pursue Critical Thinking in a rationalist, pedantic way, picking up even very minor issues with reasoning that are not practically important, this will not help you to integrate beliefs. At the other extreme, a lack of rigour and too much fuzzy thinking will mean that you miss the point of the practice altogether. Critical Thinking as an integrative practice means working from whatever level of reasoning skill you start with, and trying to improve it by being a bit more rigorous than you were, whilst applying that rigour with careful judgements about the context. It's important not to confuse scepticism in Critical Thinking with pedantry. Just as you wouldn't give unnecessary space to a trivial worry in meditation, but you need to recognise and address a major conflict that disrupts your practice, similarly in Critical Thinking genuine critical enquiry needs to be pursued no matter how radical, but trivial issues left aside.

The relationship to Middle Way Philosophy
For these three approaches to be understood, some degree of theory will need to be introduced alongside these practices. Participants will need to have a basic understanding of the concepts of the Middle Way and integration, and the differences between desire, meaning and belief. However, this more conceptual material can perhaps often be introduced gradually in organic relationship to the practical elements. At all stages I also suggest that the ethical implications of the practice be explored. There is thus a case for a fourth strand – of theory, and a question as to whether it should always be integrated with the practice or to some extent explained separately.

How could MWS practice classes actually get going?

As a starter, I am intending to try to get some going in my own local area. I would also like to encourage members of the society to start up classes in their own local area as soon as they feel ready. However, I recognise that there may be issues both of expertise and confidence, so I would like to develop a programme of training. It won't necessarily be me doing all the training – rather those who have expertise in a particular practice can share it with others who do not. In some areas I would appreciate more training myself. Such training could be done using a mixture of Skype, resources on the website, and weekend sessions and retreats, even if we live at some distance from each other. Of course, one could also go to sources outside MWS for specific training – e.g. to train in focusing with a trainer from the Focusing Institute, or do an intensive meditation retreat with a Buddhist group. I suggest that anyone interested in undertaking such training gets in touch with me in the first instance (robert@middlewaysociety.org), and we arrange it all on a personal, ad hoc basis to start with.

I suggest that all practice classes should be run by members of the society, so you will need to join the society in order to run them if you are not already a member. This will just ensure that there is a degree of consultation about any classes we run,

and that those who invest time into our activities in this way can also contribute to decision-making that may affect them. Joining the society does not require giving up any other group or tradition in which you may already be involved – only being clear that you do not accept it as having any metaphysical authority.

Funding may be a problem. Our current funds are based only on subscription payments, and are thus very limited – at least until we get more members. This limits our ability to pay any expenses incurred by members either in training for classes or in giving them (e.g. hiring premises). One way round this may be either to charge for classes or to ask for donations. I suggest that we leave this up to the person organising the class in discussion with the treasurer.

Finally

I am putting forward this paper for comment, and would welcome responses on any aspect of it from anyone – members of MWS or not, and including people involved in Triratna. I'd particularly welcome suggestions that could improve on these proposals, which are provisional and will need to be approved by the society committee in consultation with members.