



This document is an extract from the full chapter which is available for download in the table via this [link](#) and is intended for use by participants of meetings.

56 – Gotama’s Middle Way Programme

Overview of the operating protocols

The ecology of Freedom

“To avoid all evil, to cultivate the good, and to purify the mind – this is the teaching of the Buddhas.” ~ Gotama (The Buddha)

“There is a Middle Way discovered by Gotama that avoids both extremes... it leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna.” ~ Gotama

The operating manual for the voyage

We’ve done the groundwork. We’ve learnt how to orient ourselves (the map), how the sense of ‘me’ gets built up in real time (the five components), and how experience enters through the senses (the six sense doors). Now we turn to the question that matters in daily life: how do we live in a way that reduces harm and increases freedom? In the RAFT to Freedom workbook, we study ‘Gotama’s Middle Way Programme’ (traditionally called the Noble Eightfold Path).

It isn’t a list of commandments, and it isn’t a ladder where we climb up from step one to step eight. It’s more like a set of eight living skills that support each other all the time. Work on one and the others are strengthened; neglect one and the whole system wobbles. It’s an ecology rather than a checklist – a way of training the whole person: how we understand, speak, act, earn, practice, steady the mind, and see clearly.

The 'Middle Way' also names something very practical: a route between two extremes that tend to trap us on the journey to freedom. At one end is indulgence – chasing relief, pleasure, numbness, or escape. At the other is self-punishment – shame, harsh discipline, and grim white-knuckling. The Middle Way is not a lukewarm compromise between the two. It's a steadier third option: using desire as energy without letting it run the show, and using discipline as support without turning it into violence against ourselves.

The eight factors of the Middle Way are often grouped into three broad areas of training.

1) Wisdom – the navigator: This is the part that reads the conditions and sets the course. It includes 'Skilful Perspective' and 'Skilful Intention' .

2) Ethics – the compass and crew: Once we have set a course, we need a way to stay on it and a crew that we can trust. This strand includes 'Skilful Speech' , 'Skilful Action' , and 'Skilful Livelihood' .

3) Mental discipline – the stability of the vessel: Even with a good course and a reliable crew, our raft still needs steadiness to handle the waves. This third training strand includes 'Skilful Effort' 'Skilful Mindfulness', and 'Skilful Collectedness'.

Self-Reflections

1. Do I swing between indulgence (craving/tuning out) and self-punishment (white-knuckling/rigid regimes)?
2. Do I hear 'the Middle Way' as boring, or as poised and steady?
3. When I chase new experiences, is it healthy interest or restless craving/escape?
4. Is it helpful to consider the eight factors working as one system, not separate steps?
5. Which is strongest for me right now – wisdom, ethics, or mental discipline – and which needs attention?
6. Do I secretly believe life shouldn't be this hard for me? What changes when I bring in a wider perspective of how things really are?
7. Am I trying to build mental discipline (effort, mindfulness, collectedness) without a base of ethics? What happens to my stability when I skip that

foundation?

Journaling prompts

1. **The Middle Way map:** Draw a line. Label one end 'Indulgence' and the other 'Self-harm' Place an 'X' where you usually live. Write a brief description of what the space in the middle feels like.
2. **The wild and precious life:** Reflect on Mary Oliver's question: *'Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?'* How does the Eightfold Path support this plan?
3. **Intention-to-action diary:** Choose a value in the morning (for example, care, patience, resolve). At day's end, record the exact step you took to enact it, noting obstacles and supports.
4. **Progress, not perfection:** The Middle Way does not ask me to get everything right; it asks me to keep practising. Where have I made a small but real movement in the right direction recently? What helped me return to the voyage, even if I did not do it perfectly?
5. **Effort tune-up:** Document one task where you used the minimum effective dose of effort (not too tight, not too loose). Did it change your energy level or the outcome?
6. **The three-legged stool:** Imagine wisdom, ethics, and mental discipline as legs of a stool. If you remove one (for example, ethics), what happens to your mental stability? Write about the collapse.
7. **The vow of the path:** Write a personal statement of commitment to the process of the Middle Way, acknowledging that you will drift and return, drift and return.

Remember to remember

The Middle Way Programme is the standing order for the rest of our lives — not a set of demands, but a description of how a freer life gradually becomes possible. It keeps practice grounded in the day-to-day: how we understand what is happening, how we choose our direction, how we speak, how we act, how we earn, how we steady ourselves, and how we return when we drift. The

programme does not ask for perfection. It asks for honesty, steadiness, and the willingness to begin again and again and again.

Remember: the voyage is how freedom stays lived. Each skilful step makes the next one more possible. A little more perspective softens intention; a little more care in speech and action reduces inner noise; a little more steadiness helps us see clearly when the weather turns. Over time, the Middle Way becomes less like something we are trying to follow and more like a way of travelling: less pulled by extremes, less trapped by old reactions, more guided by wisdom, ethics, and care.

“You cannot separate mindfulness from mindful speaking, acting, working, and engaging in the world.” ~ Plum Village, Key Teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh

“Don’t worry about achieving. Don’t worry about perfection. Just be there each moment as best you can.” ~ Pema Chödrön

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