



Philosophy

Guided by a number of Buddhist teachers and scholars, the Middle Way School will be the pilot school for a model of Buddhist education with a comprehensive curriculum and teaching methodology that can be used to create new schools, redefine existing schools, and support children's programs around the world. Middle Way is not tethered to one single Buddhist tradition or path. It is said that the Buddha taught in 84,000 ways, the dharma travelled, and still travels, across cultures, there are three major yanas or schools of Buddhism that coexist harmoniously, and within those multiple paths an individual can pursue. This is the wealth of the dharma.

The Middle Way Education integrates these Buddhist wisdom traditions with progressive education in a contemporary setting. There are three primary aspects of the Middle Way Framework: The Ground of Shunyata and Bodhicitta, or non-dualistic altruism, the Three Branches of Development and Training, and the Five Guiding Principles and Domains of Learning. Together, these create the framework of our pedagogy and the basis for curriculum development.

Shunyata and Bodhicitta

The view of Shunyata and Bodhicitta inform the entire Middle Way model. The view of emptiness and the accompanying wish to benefit all beings underlies all our initiatives, from curriculum to methodology to the cultivation of school community. With shunyata and bodhicitta as the ground, a less rigid and more vast view emerges, allowing for tremendous possibilities. Shunyata and Bodhicitta provide the natural flexibility and openness needed for deep learning to occur.

The Three Branches of Development

A deep understanding of human development, from infancy to adulthood, is at the foundation of the Middle Way Education and influences all aspects of our comprehensive model, including pedagogy, teacher training, school design, and the scope and sequence of our curriculum. What makes the Middle Way Three-Branch model unique is that it merges current research on human development in the fields of psychology, medicine, and education with Buddhist psychology and practice.

The Three Branch model is based on the development of body, speech, and mind, and is guided by the classical Buddhist threefold training of Prajna, Samadhi, and Shila, which support and refine cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development (Appendix A).¹

In the context of education, Prajna, Samadhi, and Shila can be understood as knowledge, meditation, and discipline. On an ultimate level, they are perfected, naturally arising qualities. On a relative level, they are the paths that students travel toward progressively understanding and manifesting these qualities through body, speech, and mind. On a practical level, they serve as a reference for teachers in tracking students' learning and differentiating instruction.



The Three Trainings are perfected by the Noble Eightfold Path, the Buddhist practices that lead to liberation: right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, right intention, and right view. In the course of training in Shila, right speech, right action, and right livelihood naturally arise. In the course of training in Samadhi, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration naturally arise. In the course of training in Prajna, right intention and right view naturally arise.

Body | Physical Development | Manifesting with Confidence in the World

Our physical body is the vehicle of all of our actions from birth to death. When the stages of physical development are aligned with the three trainings, the capacity to embody the teachings of wisdom and compassion increases. With Shila, the relationship to physical form is refined, intrinsic discipline and confidence unfold, and a sense of contentedness grows. With Samadhi, the power of form as a vessel for cultivating meditative awareness and compassion is realized. With Prajna, view is applied to physical conduct, understanding why and how we do what we do. And knowing our limits — and our limitlessness — confers inspiration and confidence.

Speech | Social Emotional Development | Exchanging with the World

Humans grow through stages of social-emotional development, expanding from familial connections into the development of community and the eventual connection with society as a whole. In order to live harmoniously at all of these stages, an awareness of our connection to others is essential. When the stages of social-emotional development are aligned with the three trainings, the capacity to exchange with the world with wisdom and compassion increases. With Shila, we become aware of how our conduct impacts relationships. With Samadhi, non-distraction is the foundation for developing compassion for all beings. With Prajna, an understanding of dependent arising strengthens our appreciation for the necessity of relationship and a reverence for other is cultivated, while an understanding of the logic of emotions increases self-knowledge.

Mind | Cognitive Development | Understanding the World

Cognitive growth starts in infancy with limited distinctions between self and other. As children grow, they move through stages of concrete, critical, and systems thought, and the ability to understand oneself and the outer world is progressively sharpened. When the stages of cognitive development are aligned with the three trainings, wisdom and compassion increase and students develop a deep understanding of the phenomenal world. With Shila comes an awareness of the far-reaching impact of personal conduct, and the habit of mind training is developed. With Samadhi, meditative focus is used for increasingly complex cognitive tasks. When cognitive development is trained with Prajna, the realm of pure intellect, metacognition is magnified. When the root cause of suffering is observed with pure intellect, it can be cut at the source.



The Five Guiding Principles and Domains of Learning

Middle Way Education's Five Guiding Principles, inspired by the qualities of the five elements—water, earth, fire, air, space—guide our approach to teaching and learning as well as our five content areas of study. Each of the Five Guiding Principles correlates with a Domain of Learning. When the Three Branches meet the Five Guiding Principles and Domains of Learning, they create a comprehensive pedagogical and curriculum framework., the basis of Middle Way Education.

Element	Guiding Principle	Domain of Learning
Water	Precision and Insight	Sciences
Earth	Appreciation and Connection	Humanities
Fire	Authentic Communication	Arts
Air	Synchronized Activity	Embodiment Disciplines
Space	Awareness	Contemplative Practices

Water | Precision and Insight | Sciences

Just like water's capacity to both reflect and be absorbed, the guiding principle of Precision and Insight cultivates an intelligence that is exact and penetrating. The domain of learning that arises from this principle is the Sciences, which include studies in logic, mathematics, systems, biological sciences, computer sciences, physical sciences, ecology, and Abhidharma. We approach the sciences with an emphasis on deep understanding, creative thinking, problem-solving, and mastery of skills and content. Curiosity is key to this process of learning; students learn to question assumptions and open up to greater levels of perception and innovation. Essential outcomes of this domain include increased discernment, cognitive and emotional flexibility, innovation, and the ability to observe, perceive, and understand one's mind and the outer world with less rigidity. In this way, the sciences generate mirror-like precision and insight, building the capacity to focus on minute details while maintaining perspective of the big picture.

Earth | Appreciation and Connection | Humanities

Like the richness of earth, the principle of Appreciation and Connection cultivates a sense of diversity and abundance and an awareness of how all things are dependent. The domain of learning that arises from this guiding principle is the Humanities, which include the study of world history and culture, the human condition, literature, politics, world wisdom traditions, and Buddhist history and culture. To study the humanities is to delve into our heritage as human beings, to connect to the world in the context of all who have come before us and all who will follow. Students are supported in experiencing their lives as small but significant parts of a greater whole, bringing a grounded element to their education. Essential outcomes of this domain include increased humility, a deep respect for tradition, and the commitment to honor diversity without arrogance. In this way, the humanities generate a sense of appreciation and connection rooted in equanimity and the understanding that all things are dependent.



Fire | Authentic Communication | Arts

Just as fire results from elements coming into contact with each other to create a vivid, dynamic display, the principle of Authentic Communication relies on the spark of interpersonal connection to create the display of self-expression. The domain of learning that arises from this guiding principle is the Arts, which include the study of world languages, communication skills, community service, dance and theater, music, and visual and sculptural arts, and Buddhist traditional arts. Students are encouraged to exchange with the world and to explore and hone their creative energy, integrating personal meaning into their education. We approach the arts with an emphasis on understanding the dynamics of communication and authentic creative expression. Essential outcomes of this domain include increased compassion and empathy, a nuanced capacity for interpersonal exchange, an appreciation for the power of the artistic process, and the ability to express oneself without being self-absorbed. In this way, the arts generate a sensitive and discriminating awareness that ignites authentic communication.

Air | Synchronized Activity | Embodiment Disciplines

Just as air has the capacity for dynamic movement, the principle of Synchronized Activity brings inspiration, resourcefulness, and initiative into the process of learning. The domain of learning that arises from this guiding principle is the Embodiment disciplines, which include studies in athletics, health and nutrition, sensory integration, primitive skills, activities that coordinate sensory experience with social skills, and body/mind activities. Students are supported in aligning action with intention. Embodiment disciplines synchronize mind and body. We approach this domain of learning with an emphasis on cultivating a relationship to form and freedom, synchronizing physical education with the student's developmental potential. Essential outcomes include increased grace and ease, balanced levels of effort and effortlessness, a keen sense of timing, personal responsibility, and a strong sensory relationship to the natural world. Neurotic speed and ambition are tamed. In this way, the embodiment disciplines lead to accomplishment through synchronized activity.

Space | Awareness | Contemplative Practices

Just as space has a quality of total accommodation, the principle of Awareness guides some of the deepest learning we do as human beings, learning that requires the ability to remain open. The domain of learning that arises from this principle is the Contemplative Practices, which include the study of meditation, ritual, design and art, and other methods. Spaciousness permeates the process of learning, as students cultivate awareness and deepen their connection to the present moment. Contemplative practices require proper training from an authentic practitioner and a link to a lineage tradition. Essential outcomes include increased tolerance of ambiguity, impulse control, a habit of being in awe, and a sense of humor. The tendency to be absorbed by ignorance is lessened. In this way, contemplative practice generates the capacity to experience learning and life with an expanded sense of awareness.