

Thematic Units



MIDDLE WAY
EDUCATION

Middle Way Thematic Units Overview

Organizing the learning at Middle Way

updated July 2022

A Middle Way academic year is framed by thematic units. Each unit has a flexible duration of 1 week to 2 months and is designed so that it can be adapted to suit the structure of a variety of learning environments, whether it be a school or a camp or even at home.

One of the beautiful things about the dharma is that almost anything can become an entry point for understanding. There are countless pathways to approach the truth. For simplicity's sake, Middle Way selected 10 themes drawn from traditional Buddhist practice and study that have proven fertile for student inquiry. This is not a fixed list, it reflects five years of ongoing research and development at the Middle Way School of the Hudson Valley (MWS).

Taking Your Seat
Refuge
Lineage
Impermanence
Cause and Effect

Interconnection
Harmony
Bodhicitta
Ahimsa
Dignity

An in-depth unit document exists for each theme. These include essential questions, big ideas, benchmarks, and expectations (in the KUD format—Know Understand Do) with examples across the Five Domains. The units are refined and tailored by teachers and advisors to meet the developmental stages of the children. Using guiding questions, we begin by shining light on the children's prior knowledge and innate understandings. We then help cultivate that understanding in age-appropriate ways—engaging the body, speech, and mind with increasing subtlety and depth over the course of their education.

The teachers use the themes to draw connections between their academic coursework and larger issues. Science, literacy, social studies, nature study, practical skills, movement, and art are easily woven into each unit. **Exemplar** → a study of ecosystems and life cycles proved to be a great lens for exploring interconnection; Aikido makes the study of cause and effect experiential; A study of the local watershed or delving into historical biographies brings immediacy to the understanding of lineage; and so on.

Inquiry as the Basis

Each unit is designed to build on the natural interests and understandings of children. Essential Questions are open-ended questions that teachers can use to promote student learning by building on their natural curiosity. The same questions may be used year after year, and as students mature, they will find their answers and their findings result in a deeply grounded understanding of these core concepts. Essential Questions are supported by more granular Guiding Questions, which organize our thinking and lessons.

Exemplar → Sequence

Teachers at MWS begin the year with *Taking Your Seat*, which helps children settle into the school year, create a sacred boundary around their campus, learn rhythms, make friends, and understand their roles and responsibilities. The rest of the units are interchangeable. We recommend working with the immediate environment of the school, taking note of the seasons and celebrations that might have natural intersections with a theme. The themes can be repeated each year, spiraling through all the grade levels. What refuge looks like for a preschooler is both the same and very different for a highschooler. Following is a brief outline of the themes we have explored thus far.

Taking Your Seat

When children start the new school year, it's a time of finding their place, preparing to learn, and getting familiar and comfortable with their learning space. At Middle Way, it also means learning to pay attention to their inner worlds and setting meaningful intentions. Younger students, spending large amounts of time outside the home for the first time, must learn how to be in community. Older students start to consider their individual role and the school's role in society, the art of leadership, debate, organizational structures, rights and responsibilities in communities; they also go deeper into developing healthy lifelong habits such as daily meditation and setting up a home. On the ceremonial side, students can request local deities and other unseen beings for permission and blessings to study on this land. They can set a boundary around the school with a flower parade, burying special objects, marking the sacred space of the school itself. This is also a time to build trust, welcome new friends, learn routines, and co-create and establish community agreements and classroom values that align with the Noble Eightfold Path. Through reflecting on our freedoms and advantages, we humbly recognize that we are so fortunate to be together with good health and all the causes and conditions, precious resources, loving teachers, guidance and support of great masters that make this a unique education. During morning assemblies, we introduce the ideas such as the seven point posture, ten wholesome acts, ahimsa, impermanence and cause and effect. We also introduce the concept of respecting your teacher and what they teach. Students learn to make a proper cup of tea and throughout the year take turns offering tea for the teacher once per week to request them to continue being their friend and guide.

We ask: Why am I here? What are my roles and responsibilities? What makes school a place I want to be? What do I want to learn?

Refuge

Teaching the concept of refuge to young children presents interesting challenges and wonderful opportunities. Taking refuge comes naturally to all of us, even if we may not use that phrase. At Middle Way we seek to convey the essence of refuge—a sense of reverence, protection, and inspiration—in ways that are appropriate to a child's developmental stage, noting that what each of us takes refuge in can be different based on our identities, beliefs, and values. Objects of refuge might be physical things or places that provide safety, comfort, and protection. Objects of refuge might also be people who can be counted on for love, support, and protection. Most importantly,

we teach that refuge can be internal—the mind and its awesome capacity to learn new things, to be still, to be wise. Students can explore the possibility of finding support from the non-physical and unseen world.

This unit lends itself to wonderful nature studies of animal habitats as well as survival skills such as shelter building, knot tying, orienting by maps and compasses. By developing the ability to name the parts of the body, and cultivating awareness of sensations and emotions, as well as the communication skills required to clearly articulate needs, children are building natural safeguards to protect themselves and others.

Older students, once they have developed a felt sense of refuge, can be introduced to the idea that some people take refuge in the Buddha, the teachings, and the community who practice those teachings, and that this practice looks different in different contexts (i.e., the different *yanas* and cultural contexts). Our exploration of the idea of refuge is secular—we are not expecting children to take refuge in the three jewels. This topic lends itself to the early part of the year because it coincides with the students' needs to be comfortable and feel safe at school.

We ask: What makes me feel safe and inspired? How do I seek help and from whom? How can I be a refuge to others? How do you seek refuge in yourself?

Bodhicitta

Bodhicitta is one of the two main underpinnings of the Middle Way education so we do a deep dive into a dedicated unit for students to really understand the concept in a dynamic way. *Bodhi* means awake in Sanskrit and *citta* means something akin to mind so Bodhicitta is explained as “awakened mind.” Here, being asleep is a narrow state of ignorance, like a dreamer having a nightmare. For that duration, the dreamer thinks this is reality. When you are truly awake, your world gets much larger and you see all the causes and conditions that connect us and begin to see the results of our actions and reactions much more precisely. Seeing the big picture, we are more equipped to break that cycle. We are more compassionate. Ultimately, bodhicitta is the heart of the Buddhist path. The wish to benefit all beings, to reduce their suffering, to help all beings achieve true happiness, is the foundation and motivation for almost all our practice. One must be awake to do this, otherwise one might be operating within a dreamlike egotistical motivation.

From day one, students learn the Sanskrit mantra LOKAH SAMASTAH SUKHINO BHAVANTU, (May all beings everywhere be happy and free, and may the thoughts, words, and actions of my own life contribute in some way to that happiness and freedom for all). This is a good unit to introduce compassion in action. Classes can create a project to help save a life, whether it be raising money for a farm sanctuary or releasing fish bait. Studying the brain and how it functions, how we must care for our earth, and engaging in awareness exercises all fit well in this unit, and if it is scheduled to overlap with one of the cultural celebrations such as Thanksgiving, Valentine’s Day,

Christmas, or Lunar New Year, students can connect the sentiments that are being celebrated in a much deeper way. We like to start it at the beginning of the calendar year.

As they get older, students will deepen their understanding of Bodhicitta, study various bodhisattvas (from the Buddhist canon and other historical figures) and will engage with the greater community in ways that support the health and well-being of others.

We ask: What does it feel like to be truly awake? What are the tools to wake up? What is the path to feeling really happy? Why should we try to take care of other beings? What does it mean to “work for the good” of other beings? What does it mean to “practice” bodhicitta? Is “thinking good things” a good thing to do? Can we help others by thinking?

Impermanence

Impermanence is one of the cornerstones of the Buddhist view. It is one of the Three Marks of Existence. Students are invited to explore the phrase: Everything is impermanent. Is it true? Can it be disproven? How does thinking about impermanence change your view of the world?

Because of how fundamental impermanence is, there are countless ways to infuse other topics into this unit, depending on the interests of the students and skills of the teacher. When we study history, seasons, geography, forest botany, philosophy, or culture, we clearly see that change is inherent. Young children are encouraged to start attuning themselves to the changing world around them. It’s an excellent unit for autumn when the leaves are turning. We look at impermanence through the lens of perspective and feelings. How can your perspective change? The younger students focus on awareness of feelings because if you aren’t aware of them, you can’t notice the changes. We noticed how our perspectives change through drawing and mood charts.

Older students can explore responsible media consumption, how stories are told and how they shape our understanding and experience of the world. They can develop social change projects. They can also learn about their changing bodies. They can look at the impermanence of power structures and schools of thought. On an inner level they deepen their awareness of their own emotions and develop the tools to not be swayed or taken for a ride by these changes. During the Preparatory and Liberation developmental stages (see overview for details), higher level academic Buddhist studies will address impermanence from a philosophical perspective using classical Buddhist texts.

We ask: What is change? Does anything last forever? What are the ways our feelings change? What is my role in change?

Cause and Effect

Learning about *karma*, the law of cause and effect, emphasizes that whatever we do with our body,

speech, and mind will have a corresponding effect. And that every effect has a corresponding set of causes. Students will know about the importance of the law of cause and effect and understand their personal responsibility to do no harm, to do good, and to work with their minds. Students should be able to develop the habit of examining their actions and intentions, and be encouraged to choose actions that bring happiness and reduce suffering for themselves and others. Intention is brought into sharp focus.

Exploring cause and effect is a natural part of being human and is a particularly rich area of study for young children finding their way in the world. Focusing on something that is so readily experienced, tangible, easy to test, and relatable, make it a wonderful focus of study for the school. While it is an essential part of the Buddhist view, one doesn't have to identify as Buddhist to accept it.

The unit lends itself to engaging studies of the physical world, pushes and pulls, mechanical objects, Rube Goldberg machines, the composition and interaction of materials, ecosystems, sense objects and sense perceptions. For example the study of music would start with the countless causes and conditions of a simple composition being played, from intention to neurological impulses to the mechanics of instrumentalization, sound, and sound waves, the perception of sound, the emotional reaction and so on. We think about how different actions feel depending on your intention, and the roles that motivation, habits, and self reflection play in our day-to-day experience of the world. The early learners are at an age when Buddhist precepts and ten negative/positive actions can be introduced. Intention is explored on increasingly deeper levels, observing the different consequences of doing something on purpose or by accident.

Older students can engage in altruistic projects of larger scope or more global impact. They will also be able to self-examine for intention more critically to test for self-serving intention vs. true altruism. They can examine intention in other religions and philosophies. Likewise, they can consider intention in global systems (financial and political systems, systems of power). Higher level academic Buddhist studies will address the laws of cause and effect from a philosophical perspective using the classical Buddhist texts such as the Madhyamikavatara.

We ask: How do my actions affect others? What is intention and how does it change an outcome? How is cause and effect in scientific realms different from human/social realms?

Lineage

Where do things come from and where do they go is a question that is woven through the fabric of a Middle Way education from start to finish. Nothing spontaneously arises truly independently. Middle Way teachers are encouraged to regularly connect learning to lineage by informing students where they learned what they are teaching, where their knowledge comes from and why they are continuing this thread of knowledge.

We also give this question some undivided attention in a dedicated unit in which students explore aspects of their everyday lives through the lens of Lineage. They can start with an inquiry such as *Where does my water come from? Where does it go? How do I commute to school? Where did the oil come from? Where are these sneakers from?* From there they can study history, science inventors, patterns, and so on. In fourth grade they start to ponder where their opinions come from, and what needs to change in this world. With an understanding of cause and effect, students can reflect on how their choices have long-lasting consequences.

This unit works well around celebrations and major holidays. We ask: How did these customs and traditions get passed down and why? Should we continue to pass them on?

Ultimately, the students are equipped with confidence to move through the world knowing what to adopt and what to discard. As Jigme Khyentse Rinpoche advised us, even extremist thinking can come from an authentic lineage. It's up to each individual to use their critical thinking and altruistic intention to decide what should be propagated. Students are their own masters, making up their own minds about the world, bolstered by a vast attitude of Bodhicitta and the framework of the all-determining quality of actions, the precepts, the positive and negative actions. Their habit of asking where things come from and where things go informs their decisions and actions as they go about becoming citizens of the world.

We ask: *Where do things come from and where do they go? How do I know what I know? Where does my information come from? Is it trustworthy? How is knowledge transmitted? Why do I think what I think? What makes something worthy of continuing? How did these customs and traditions get passed down and why? Should we continue?*

Interconnection

Interconnection begins with understanding how things function on the relative level and leads up to the much larger philosophical topic of Dependent Origination. By tangibly exploring these topics in the early years, the significance of deeper levels of Buddhist study can be more deeply appreciated in later years, such as the relationship between the Buddhist concept of “dependent origination” and emptiness.

This unit lends itself to studies of circuits, nature study, radio, gardening. In particular the study of water can be very easily aligned: looking at the cycles of water, the sources of our drinking water, and the connections inside of our bodies. Springtime is a wonderful time to introduce interconnection, tuning in to the symbiotic relationships of birds, seeds, and plants. On an inner level, students explore how people are different but the same, how we can live in harmony with one another in a not-too-tight, not-too-loose connection.

Older students will delve deeper into the differences between interconnection and dependent origination. They can study the financial markets, globalization, and food supply chains. On an

inner level they begin to deepen their understanding of perspective, and how everything they experience depends on their karma, their perceptions, their sense faculties and so many causes and conditions. Therefore they will be less likely to grip too tightly onto one perspective.

We ask: What do I rely on to be alive? Does anything truly exist independently? How are people and plants and fauna connected? How are people connected in societies? Who am I connected to? How are we connected?

Harmony

There is rich potential embedded in the idea of finding how things work together in flow. How can individuals with different wishes, needs, tastes, strengths, be together in peaceful community? Happiness is not the goal in life so much as harmony, learning how to surf the highs and lows without getting too caught up. Not trying to win the game for yourself but winning it for everyone.

Harmony has proven to be a very fun and fruitful unit to experiment with. We talked about wabi sabi, how things don't have to be perfect, just harmonious. The unit coincided with our study of Japanese culture and art. We made samurai hats, dumplings, *wabi sabi* art, we listened to Japanese stories and made a big beautiful mess to produce the most gorgeous *shibori* tapestries. In music we sang in rounds. Parkour, aikido or other martial arts are a perfect complement to this unit.

Older students can examine power structures and leadership, the art of war, the importance of dignity and grace, strength and sacrifice. They adjust their aspirations to become resilient with a view that is more vast, rather than constantly striving, always dissatisfied.

We ask: What is harmony? How do we create harmony? For ourselves? In our communities? How does it feel when things are out of balance?