
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment



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Please adopt a comfortable, relaxed posture and make sure that you don't lose the peaceful feeling within your mind.

Indeed, when remaining relaxed and comfortable physically, if we are able to maintain a composed, quiet and focused mind, it brings about a calmer and more peaceful mind.

As we can easily manage to sit comfortably relaxed for a period of time, we may be able to contain our mind and focus for a few minutes as well. However, what we would notice is that our mind very quickly starts to become distracted following disturbing discursive thoughts again. If this is the situation, it is reasonable to question why it is so. Why is it that we are not able to contain our mind for a significant period of time? Why does it get so easily distracted again?

In pondering this question, if we were to do an honest inner search, we would come to acknowledge that it is because we have an uncontrolled and untamed mind. When we don't have adequate control over our own mind, it is easily influenced by afflicted distractions. When the mind is more controlled, we will be able to maintain our focus steadily for a longer period of time. We can use the illustration of well-trained pets; when they have been trained well they are easily controlled. For example, they will sit outside a shop very quietly until the owner comes out. So, if the mind is not controlled, it is easily influenced by distractions and excessive thinking. Having excessive thinking might not be such a bad thing if it did not cause distress. However, the excessive thinking that we normally engage in is relation with objects that cause afflictions to arise in the mind. As a consequence, we often have an unsettled state of mind, which is scattered. We feel empty and we don't have sense of peace in our mind. That is the consequence of having an unsubdued mind.

If we don't lessen the discursive states of mind, or make attempts to lessen distractions, it is really hard for the mind to be genuinely calm and tranquil. As I sometimes say half-jokingly, if we were to verbalise whatever goes in our mind, people would probably think that we have gone crazy.

If we can ensure that we contain our mind where our physical body is, and not allow it to be dispersed in every direction, then that is the beginning of this mind training practice that we call meditation. This can be understood with simple reasoning or logic. We don't need profound logic to understand this. For example, if someone who is writing has a pen and paper and is sitting somewhere comfortably, and their mind is really focused on the writing they are doing, the writing will be much more effective. In contrast if the mind is scattered, then even if they attempt to write, they will make many mistakes. That is similar in any other work situation.

Thus, if the mind is not settled and focused we will experience a lot of difficulties in whatever we intend to do.

This is true in a worldly context, as well as in spiritual endeavour. In meditation, our physical body may be in a meditative posture, but if the mind is not settled and focused a meditator will experience a lot of difficulties. This is also true in a work environment. There might be situations where someone is dressed smartly and appropriately and is in a pleasant environment. Then, while they are writing or doing something, a memory may occur to them and they cry. These are actual situations we can definitely see.

What I am emphasising here is the necessity of familiarising our own mind with being more steady and focused. That familiarity is something we need to have and it comes through training.

This is where the significance of meditation practice comes in. When we engage in meditation, we are applying a technique where we are training our mind to be focused on an appropriate chosen object. 'Appropriate' object implies that we do not choose a meditation object that causes afflictions to arise in the mind. The literal meaning of the word meditation from Tibetan is 'to familiarise', which implies 'familiarising the mind with a positive object'. Familiarising our mind in a positive way will have a positive effect on our speech and physical actions as well.

Training one's mind to focus on an appropriate object, will influence appropriate physical behaviour and speech, which contributes to making others happy. The more one trains one's mind in a positive way, the more our negative verbal and physical actions reduce. As this positive transformation takes place within an individual, it will definitely be noticed, and others will then begin to really appreciate that there is a positive change in an individual who takes up this practice.

When one adopts a practice of focusing inwards and having an honest investigation of oneself, a positive state of mind can be adopted and negative states can be discarded. When one recognises that, one is able to abandon the negative and adopt the positive. This is a very worthwhile practice. Rather than being obsessed with constantly being judgemental and looking at others' faults, it is much more helpful to take personal responsibility for oneself.

In this way, we begin to understand the effectiveness of meditation practice and we will be able to apply targeted meditation practices to overcome specific afflictions in our mind. For example, if someone, due to intense attachment, experiences an agitated state of mind, the advice is to meditate on the imperfection of the object of attachment. Focusing on the imperfections of the object will cause that intense attachment to reduce and that individual will experience a relief of the agitation that it causes. For certain individuals anger might be more of an immediate problem. For someone who is affected by intense anger, the advice is to engage in meditation on love towards the object, or focus on cultivating patience. These are effective remedies or antidotes to overcome anger.

For someone who is particularly affected with discursive or disturbing thoughts the best remedy is to just focus on one's breath. It would not be ideal for someone who is affected by a lot of discursive or disturbing thoughts to meditate on something more elaborate. These kinds of meditations would not work. The best remedy for them is to focus on the breath. This will help to settle the discursive thoughts in one's mind. This is the real benefit of meditation practice. Being able to focus single-pointedly on a particular object for a length of time is, in itself, not so remarkable. If it does not

really help to overcome the afflictions in the mind then the benefit is very limited.

Having given an introduction to the effectiveness and purpose of meditation, we now come to the application of the actual method of meditation. I have already covered in our last sessions about how to adopt the physical posture.

We need to first understand what it is that we are trying to achieve in meditation. The technical term is meditative concentration, which is also understood as single-pointedness, or being able to single-pointedly focus on a chosen object. So, what is meditative concentration?

Meditative concentration is the combination of having a single-pointed focus on the meditation object with a clear and lucid mind that has an intense focus on the object.

Having defined meditative concentration, the next question is how do we achieve this meditative concentration? Firstly, there are conducive conditions that will assist us to develop meditative concentration and adverse conditions that we need to avoid. Of course, this is true for anything we wish to achieve.

There are two main obstructions and two main antidotes for overcoming the obstructions to developing meditative concentration. Excitement is the obstruction to single-pointedness, and the obstruction to a clear and lucid mind is laxity. Thus, excitement and laxity are the two main obstructions for developing meditative concentration.

There is a particular reason in using the term 'excitement' rather than distraction. Excitement is caused mainly by objects of attachment. While distractions in general can be caused by objects of anger and other afflictions as well. Sometimes one can even be distracted by positive states of mind. However, the obstruction here is specifically excitement because it is an object of attachment that causes our mind to lose focus on the meditation object. The mind comes wanders off the object that we are meant to be focusing on. To further emphasise the point, overcoming excitement is important because separating from the object of attachment is very difficult.

As explained in great detail in the teaching by the great master Shantideva, when one is strongly attached to an object, then due to the strong familiarity, it is almost as if the mind becomes inseparable from it. It is hard to imagine being without the object of attachment. When it reaches that point it becomes very, very difficult indeed to separate our focus from the object of attachment.

Overcoming an obsession with focusing on an object of anger is a bit easier because the agitation that is caused by anger is much more noticeable to our mind. The ill-effect of attachment is hard to recognise. Thus, it is difficult to separate from it. When we are focusing on the breath as a meditation object, we may start even thinking about positive things such as love or compassion. These are virtuous and positive thoughts. However, if one is attempting to develop single-pointed meditative concentration, one needs to be consistent in focusing on one particular object. Until one develops that concentration, even thinking about positive things such as love and compassion is a distraction for the purpose of achieving meditative concentration. Although not a negative distraction, for this particular purpose even that is considered a distraction.

Laxity, the next obstruction, is where the mind becomes duller. While one may still be focused on the object, one loses clarity and lucidity, and the intensity of the mind

wanes. Of course, as with excitement there are gross and subtle laxities. We do not need to go into great detail about the distinction between these now. On a grosser level, it is more noticeable, while subtle levels are harder to notice. Gross levels are where one might be focused on the object slightly, but then because it is duller the object is not as clear, the mind is not as fresh and the intensity of the focus begins to wane.

As with obstructions, there are two main conducive conditions that are required to develop meditative concentration. These are called mindfulness and introspection. Mindfulness is a mind of having a constant remembrance of the object. In a worldly context we would say, 'Oh, I remember so and so'. When you miss someone, you might say, 'Oh, they come to mind'.

Certain memories can cause distress. With meditation practice and our daily life, we can apply logic and reasoning. It is suggested during the meditation training, not to focus on another object, so that we can bring full attention and focus onto the chosen meditation object. Likewise, the effectiveness and practical benefit of that can be applied in normal situations. Constantly thinking about objects that cause distress will continue to cause us more distress and more mental agony. The most practical advice that can be applied here is just to forget about that object, don't focus on it. Think about something else. Changing or switching one's focus can reduce the agony in our mind.

For mindfulness as an aid to developing meditative concentration, there are said to be three main attributes. I have mentioned in the past that I have experience of how bringing certain objects to mind can cause distress, but bringing other objects to mind can cause more soothing and relaxed states of mind.

Mindfulness is said to be focusing on an object with which one has past familiarity. We cannot remember something with which we don't have prior familiarity. So, focus on an object we have prior familiarity with. It is appropriate to choose a meditation object with which one already has some familiarity because it is much easier to focus on that object rather than choosing a random object or something with which we are not familiar and which we don't understand.

The second attribute is to single-pointedly hold that object of familiarity in one's mind. The third attribute, after familiarity and holding single-pointedly, is not allowing the focused object to waver. That is the function of mindfulness. The main point really here is to focus on an object with which one has prior familiarity, hold that object single-pointedly and not allow the mind to waver or lose focus on the object. When these three are applied, one is applying mindfulness.

When one holds the focus on that chosen meditation object, it is said that one needs to have an intense focus on the object. However, the advice is that one needs to be careful not to hold the object too tightly. If the mind is too tight or too tense while focusing on the object, that can be an obstruction which can cause excitement to arise in the mind. At the same time one needs to be careful that one's focus on the object is not too loose either. When it is too loose it can cause laxity to arise.

Therefore, it is important to find the right balance of focusing on the object i.e. not too tight nor too loose. That right measure is something which would come with experience for someone who has made genuine progress in meditation practice. When one is focusing on an object, one

needs to have the right measure of intensity. When one finds the right intensity, the clarity of the object will increase, the appearance will be very clear and one will have a lucid state of mind. When the focus on the object has reached the point where it is clear and lucid we are making genuine progress in developing meditative concentration.

Now we come to introspection, the next conducive condition for developing concentration. Introspection is a state of mind which periodically checks whether one is focused on the object or not. It is like a guard. Basically, its function is to guard and check whether one's mind is focused on the object or not. We do not need to apply introspection throughout our meditation, but introspection should always be in the background, periodically checking our focus on the object. If we find that our focus on the object has lapsed and our mind has wandered off due to either excitement or laxity, we need to reapply our focus. The intensity, clarity and lucidity of our mind needs to be reassessed. If our focus has been steady, just continue. We need not apply extra effort there. This is how one uses introspection.

To use the breath as an example, when using the breath as an object of focus, by understanding the conducive and obstructing conditions that are needed to be able to focus well on the breath, one's ability to focus on the breath becomes more manageable and constructive. We make sure that our mind is not distracted by using introspection. Applying mindfulness and introspection while focusing on the breath can be understood in that simple way. For beginners, it is said that it is good to meditate even for just a few minutes. If a point is reached where one is able to have clear focus on the breath, it is good then to come out of the meditation and not to meditate for too long because, for beginners, seemingly good meditation can easily lapse into distracted mind. Continuing to maintain meditative posture while the mind is distracted is not a healthy approach for beginners because a bad habit where we are seemingly in meditation, but the mind is still distracted. It is better to have a short session and maintain a joyous state of mind. The quality is much more important than the quantity.

To be more specific, first make an attempt to focus on the object, in this case the breath, for one minute. If we can achieve focus on the object for one minute, then we should temporarily be satisfied with that and come out of the meditation with a joyous state of mind. After that we will be able to willingly and joyfully meditate again. If we come out of the meditation session feeling quite tired, we will not be too enthusiastic about going into meditation again. Therefore, start with a minute's focus and when that is done well, increase to a minute and a half, then gradually two minutes and so forth. This is how one gradually increases the duration of focus on the object comfortably and without distraction.

The optimum state of reaching meditative concentration is to develop what is called 'mental serenity' or 'calm abiding'. There are actually nine stages to developing one's meditative concentration and those nine stages are to be followed one stage at a time. Firmness and stability is the first stage of the meditative concentration, then one proceeds to the second stage and so forth. One cannot skip those stages and try to develop calm abiding right away

In summary, we need to check our mind and observe what state of mind we are in. Assess and investigate whether we are in a positive state or negative state of mind, then think about the actual process of meditation. This is a form of

meditation that would fall into a particular category of meditation called analytical meditation. So, there is stabilising meditation and analytical meditation. Stabilising meditation is where one tries to develop single-pointed meditative concentration, whereas analytical meditation is where we use intelligence to think about certain points by systematically going over them.

It is advised for beginners that between analytical and stabilising meditation, analytical meditation is actually much more effective than stabilising meditation. This is mentioned by the great master, Lama Tsongkhapa. He is advising us from his own experience and his practice.

Analytical meditation is also utilised very much in other topics that we learn in the teachings, such as developing the altruistic mind. The mind of awakening is a very altruistic state of mind which has seven stages of development. This is called the seven-point cause and effect technique of developing the altruistic mind of enlightenment. The seven stages are recognising all beings as being one's mother, thinking about their kindness, wishing to repay their kindness, meditating on love, followed by meditating on compassion and then meditating the superior intention. Thinking about each of these stages is part of analytical meditation. It really helps the mind to really settle down and think about these points. One does not use analytical meditation and completely leave aside stabilising meditation. They are to be used in conjunction. First one analyses, then one focuses and stabilises one's mind on the conclusion of that analysis. This is how to use analytical and stabilising meditation in unison.

As usual we choose our breath as an object of focus. This means that we bring our full attention and focus upon the breath, not allowing our mind to be distracted with the other thoughts and objects. We completely withdraw our mind from other disturbing or distracting thoughts and place it completely entirely on the breath, being fully aware of only the breath. Meditate in this way for the next few minutes.

[Meditation]

While maintaining a focused mind, change the object of our focus to the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is the name of Buddha Shakyamuni. When the recitation subsides try to maintain that inner focus for a few moments.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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