
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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As usual, it would be good to spend some time in meditation.

In previous sessions, we covered the requirements for adopting the correct physical posture and mental state for meditation, particularly in regard to the use of mindfulness and introspection as a means of developing a single pointed focus on the object.

Another important element in ensuring we have a more meaningful meditation practice is to set the proper motivation before we begin. First of all, we can think about the implications of meditation. In meditation, we train the mind to become familiar with focusing on a positive object. This is what meditation really means. We all like to have positive things in our life. In fact, a driving force is our desire for good things. So, it is quite natural to wish for goodness in ourselves.

We naturally wish for good and appealing things in our life. However, in order to acquire them we usually focus on external objects. In doing so, we fail to acknowledge that what we really need to focus on is having a positive state of mind. A positive state of mind promotes a genuine sense of goodness and happiness. By failing to recognise and understand this point, we instinctively focus outwards, continuously pursuing external objects—specifically, objects relating to our five senses, i.e. sights which appeal to our eyes, sounds which appeal to our ears, tastes which appeal to our taste buds, smells which appeal to our nose and tactile sensations which appeal to our sense of touch. Generally, we focus on these sensual external objects.

We place a lot of attention and focus on the sense objects because they are indeed essential for our existence. We could say ‘ah we can’t blame ourselves for pursuing sense objects because we need them for our survival in our everyday lives!’ However the question is, ‘is it really making us happy?’

To give a more specific illustration of how focusing on the sense objects can in fact cause distress in our mind, we can take the example of eye sense objects. Basically, objects of the eye sense are explained as being ‘forms’— shapes and colours. So our eye sense focuses on attractive forms and, as a consequence, desire and attachment arise in our mind.

In contrast, when we see an unattractive or unappealing form, it can cause aversion to arise in our mind. This can lead to a negative or angry state of mind.

The main point to be understood here is that when we see an appealing or attractive object, it causes the mind of attachment to arise, which then leads to agitation and distress in our mind. Of course, an attractive object does have certain qualities of beauty. But the mind of attachment, being a faulty state of mind, actually exaggerates the attractive qualities of the object, causing the mind to perceive the object as being extremely attractive and

beautiful. Thus, a strong longing and desire to possess the object develops in our mind. We don't notice that happening, but that is what attachment does and that's how the mind of desire develops.

This is also true when a mind of aversion exaggerates the natural defects or imperfections of an object. It goes to show that, depending on our state of mind, an object can appear to be extremely attractive or extremely repulsive, well beyond the reality of its natural attributes. Thus, how we perceive an object totally depends on our state of mind.

The crucial point to understand here is that the one and very same object can be perceived as being either extremely attractive and appealing or extremely unattractive or unappealing. To make that illustration even clearer, we can use an example from life. Depending on your state of mind, your partner may sometimes appear to be very appealing and you feel great affection towards them. At other times, due to faulty perceptions, that same person, who earlier appeared so attractive and appealing, can now appear to be quite annoying and unattractive. However, there has not been a drastic change in that object—in this case our partner or companion.

We are talking about how your partner or companion appeared in the morning, versus how they appear later in the afternoon. In the morning, they might seem quite appealing and attractive and you might feel quite affectionate towards them. Again, due to circumstances later in the afternoon, you might feel quite hostile towards them. In that situation, it is not as if your partner has drastically changed. If we were talking about the duration of a few years, then yes, it is natural for change to occur. But within a day, a few weeks or even a month, especially if they are quite young, no drastic changes occur to someone's physical appearance. Yet, there is this fluctuation in how you perceive your partner.

There is a term for this in the Tibetan language *nam-tok* which is usually translated as discursive conceptual thoughts. The literal translation can also be ‘superstitions’— a mind which does not see things in their true light or in actual reality. A superstitious mind is a disturbed, conceptual state of mind that can cause a lot of anxiety, fear and doubts.

For example, when we have an overly superstitious mind, we imagine we see things in the dark when, in fact, there is nothing there. A superstitious mind starts to exaggerate things; this generates fears and so forth. This is an example of how, when we have an underlying basis of superstition or discursive conceptual thoughts in our mind, these unwanted and unfounded exaggerations occur.

Again, harking back to an earlier point, the conclusion is that, due to our habitual tendencies, we naturally seem to focus outwards on objects such as beautiful forms and sounds etc. By seeing them as being appealing, we pursue them. This is how we are misled. Rather than focusing outwardly, we could change our approach, and start to look within and try to identify the appealing inner qualities, such as an appealing state of mind. This would bring much more solace to our mind; a real sense of wellbeing within ourselves. It's not something we may notice right away. Focusing inwardly and searching for the appealing inner qualities of our mind is not something we normally do. But if we really pay attention and investigate, then we will begin to notice the value of this approach.

When we are completely consumed or overwhelmed by a mind of attachment and anger, inner turmoil results. The mind will constantly be in an agitated and unsettled state. Intense attachment and anger can even cause obvious distress. Our breathing becomes irregular or we may even find it hard to breathe. This is an obvious indication relating to the inner turmoil we are experiencing.

If we let this situation be and didn't do anything about changing it, then it would be quite hard to find a real sense of inner joy and happiness.

So, how do we go about changing our attitudes? How do we actually change our perception or familiarity with appealing sensual objects? The way to do that is by acknowledging that if we were to maintain or continue to focus on appealing objects which cause attachment to arise and unattractive objects which cause aversion to arise, then, for as long as we are completely obsessed with that, it will cause distress and turmoil in our mind. To overcome that situation, we can do the exact opposite, which is to choose objects which do not cause attachment to arise in our mind. We can familiarise the mind with focusing on objects which do not cause attachment to arise and, furthermore, focus on objects which do not cause aversion or anger to arise in the mind. The more we familiarise ourselves with objects which do not cause the afflictive states of mind to arise, the more tranquil and settled our mind becomes.

As I have presented in our earlier sessions, the best way to oppose attachment arising in our mind, in relation to a particular object towards which we have a strong attraction, is the meditation which focuses on the imperfections of the object. This serves as an antidote for overcoming attachment. When we focus on the natural imperfections of the object, then attachment—which is the exaggerated mind of seeing the object as being hundred percent appealing and attractive—is overcome. Thus, the attachment starts to diminish. Likewise, with anger. When we have strong anger towards an object, the best antidote to overcome that anger is to meditate on developing love or patience towards the object. These are the most effective meditations to overcome particular afflictive states of mind. When we are not affected by the afflictions, such as intense attachment and anger, then the mind is clear. When the mind is in a clear state, we can then better utilise our intelligence and wisdom to make better judgement.

What I'm trying to clarify and point out to you here (many of you would have already noticed this) is that by engaging in meditation practice, choosing an appropriate object and focusing inwardly, the mind naturally settles down and we experience an inner sense of calmness. Even though it may be temporary, we have an experience of a calmer and more tranquil state of mind. So, I'm attempting to explain, systematically and logically, how and why this occurs. By choosing an appropriate object which does not cause the afflictions to arise and focusing on it for a certain period of time, naturally, by virtue of not focusing on objects which cause either attachment, desire or anger to arise, the mind settles down. That is how it works. Recognising this connection will enable us to develop a general cautionary measure. In our everyday lives, when we come out of a meditation session, it will help us to develop a cautionary measure in our mind. When we see attractive objects and so forth and the mind of attachment and desire starts to arise, we will be able to identify them and say, 'ah, I need to be careful as this is the mind of attachment—the mind of anger arising here, which causes so much distress and turmoil; a

mind of attachment and anger which destroys any sense of tranquillity and peace within myself.' Over time, this countermeasure will naturally arise.

This reminds me of an earlier time when I was explaining these points. During the questions, there was a young lady who, having heard the description of the meditation, made a comment. She was quite a young lady and she said, 'I find this to be very true and effective.' Nevertheless, she confessed that she found it very difficult to overcome attachment to her friend. She was being very honest and relating her own experience. She said that by attempting to meditate in this way, she found it to be somewhat effective, but when it came to meditating on her friend being unattractive, she found that very difficult. She was expressing what in fact, most people find difficult. At the same time, she acknowledged how failing to meditate this way can cause distress to the mind.

The main point to summarise is that if we focus on an object which causes afflictions to arise, then it causes distress to the mind, which then becomes unhappy. If we were to reverse that situation and focus on an object which does not cause the afflictions to arise, then, in contrast, it will bring peace and happiness to the mind. That is what I am saying.

An object which does not cause the afflictions to arise is referred to as an appropriate meditation object. It is an 'inner object' as opposed to an external object. An inner object or a mental object is what we need to be focusing on in meditation. When we focus on an inner object which does not cause the afflictions to arise, then naturally the mind will start to settle down and become tranquil and calm. Then we experience a positive effect. During the meditation session, in order to maintain attention and focus on the object, we need to apply two mental tools—mindfulness and introspection. This is essential. But after we come out of the meditation practice and begin to interact with the external world, this may cause attachment and anger to arise once again. However, if we maintain a degree of mindfulness and introspection, this will help us to be more cautious and not react to the afflictions arising in our mind. At another course another young lady commented that, during meditation she feels a great sense of relief and her mind becomes tranquil. When she finishes the meditation, afflictions such as anger and attachment do arise, but by thinking about the faults of these afflictions, she said it really helps to reduce the intensity. Again, that was a very insightful remark.

I have also shared in the past some very significant advice by the great master Atisha. Atisha stated that 'our best friend is mindfulness and introspection'. Some have said they find this advice extremely useful. In fact, many find it to be the most essential and useful advice of their lives. Another lady confided in me during a course that she had been meditating for ten years, and yet this was the first time she had heard about the importance of mindfulness and introspection as specific tools to aid meditation. She found it extremely significant.

Having explained the benefits and the purpose of meditation, we can now spend some time in meditation. So please adopt a relaxed posture.

Again, going back to the start of the teaching—the motivation for doing the practice is really important. We need to have a really keen mind; a very strong wish to engage in the practice. As the teachings explain, whatever we do, whether positive or negative, is determined by our

mind. More specifically, it is the motivation or intention that determines our actions.

Another great master, Shantideva mentioned that when we wish to say something or engage in some physical activity, we should first check our state of mind. Furthermore, Shantideva said that if we have checked our mind and detected some anger or attachment there, then, temporarily, we should not enact our words or deeds. We should just remain idle for a while. Once our mind has settled down, then we can enact our words or actions.

So many people have found this to be extremely useful advice, and indeed, very true. If we want our words and deeds to be of some use or benefit for others, then they would fail to bring that benefit if they were acted upon out of either anger or attachment. Therefore, when the mind has settled down and when it is not influenced by intense attachment or anger, our words and actions will be most useful and beneficial for others. This again is tied in with our motivation. We must ensure we have a good motivation with regards to doing the practice. At best, in simple terms, we can generate the intention or motivation that 'may my practice serve as a means to benefit others in the best way and may it cause others happiness and joy and become a means to alleviate others' suffering'. That would be the most positive motivation to develop. I could, of course, elaborate on these points but we don't have the time to do it now.

If we can generate a positive motivation from the very beginning, before we engage in the practice of meditation, then our practice will, most likely, become meaningful and virtuous. By virtue of having a positive motivation, an underlying good intention, it will serve as the underlying basis for the practice. This will make the practice very significant. In fact, generating this positive motivation can be a practice in itself. We can just focus on the motivation and think 'may my time and energy now become only a means to benefit others and may it not be in any way a means to hurt and harm others'. Just focusing on that becomes really meaningful as a practice of meditation.

Next, in the actual practice, as we regularly do here, we choose an appropriate object. So, we choose to focus on our breath. For beginners, this is the most appropriate object to focus on. In order to maintain a complete focus on the breath, we make a decision. We intentionally decide that 'I will not follow my discursive disturbing states of mind'. The discursive disturbing states, conceptions or thoughts arise, either in relation to past memories, to distractions in the present moment or with speculation about the future. Past memories could be either of times when we engaged with objects of attachment which then caused attachment to arise or when we engaged with objects of anger which then caused anger to arise. These disturbing thoughts are what we refer to as discursive disturbing conceptions. Even in the present, we might start to focus on and think about certain objects, thus causing disturbing conceptions to arise. Or, we could be speculating about the future. In this way, by recognising that, we need to intentionally withdraw from all disturbing conceptions; to prevent our mind from entertaining any kind of discursive thoughts and just let it be. Then, we constantly remind ourselves to focus on the breath. By bringing our focus inward, we place our full attention and focus on the breath. So, that's what we will be engaged in for the next few minutes.

[Meditation]

While maintaining our focused mind, we can just change the object of our focus to the sound of the mantra being recited, which is the name of Buddha Shakyamuni. During the recitation, we try to maintain our focus on the sound. When the recitation subsides, we then try to maintain that inner awareness and focus for a few moments.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

That is sufficient for now.

If there are any questions, I can address one question.

Question: I have read in some teachings that this period of our time now is called the 'degenerate age', however during the Nyung Nye fasting retreat the practice mentions the 'fortunate eon'. So, I am wondering what this means?

Answer: A practice such as the Nyung Nye involves taking precepts and observing the precepts over the time of the practice. Then, on top of that, it involves engaging in various practices of enduring hardships and so forth. It is said to be an incredibly meritorious deed when it is based on a good motivation. The teachings mention that doing this practice now, in what is known as a degenerate time, is much more meritorious than doing it at a time when everything was much easier.

However, when we refer to a 'degenerate age' we need to understand its actual implication. It's not to be understood in a subjective way to the time itself; that there is something wrong with the times and external environment. Rather, it actually refers to individual beings. When, due to strong afflictions in the mind, the delusions are very strong and rampant, that, subjectively, becomes a degenerate time. It means that the beings at that particular time are very hard to subdue. It would be difficult for the afflictions to be overcome and subdued. So, this is a reference to what is referred to as 'degenerate times'. It's more to do with our inner state of mind rather than the time itself.

To give a more contemporary illustration, it's like in normal speech when we talk about good days or bad days. This is dependent on the individual talking. For someone who had everything go well, they would say, 'I had a good day'. That doesn't mean that it was a good day for everyone. But for that particular individual it was a good day. Whereas, when certain things go bad or wrong for that individual, they would say, 'it's a bad day today'. They are not referring to the actual day being bad or good.

To give another illustration, if there are two shopkeepers and one did good business that day, he would say, 'oh, it was a good day today!'. Whereas, the other shopkeeper nearby would say, 'oh, it was a bad day today!' if he hadn't had many customers. Yet both shopkeepers were referring to the same day.

So, this is something to understand in a contextual sense. We need to understand that this is what it means in reference to 'degenerate times' or 'bad times'.

Thank you very much. You all listened very well.

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