
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

འཕམ་ལམ་རིམ་འགྲིང་བ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

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21 March 2018

In our last session we covered how to engage in the meditation practice, such as the posture and the manner of focusing on the meditation object.

One way to understand the purpose and need for meditation practice is to consider how our normal state of mind functions. If we are allowing our mind to follow every distracting thought and focus on objects that cause the afflictions to arise, resulting in negative states of mind, consequentially we will start to feel agitated and unsettled within our self and within our own mind. Upon further contemplation it is important to consider, particularly for the sake of our mental wellbeing, that if we don't contain our mind and we do nothing to change it from being completely distracted, we will then become a victim of constant agitation which will lead to greater mental angst and problems. The process of how to change this situation is to first of all acknowledge the fact that if one allows one's mind to become completely distracted, focusing on objects that cause negative states of mind to arise, the result will be further complications in our life and greater turmoil in our mind. Once this is acknowledged, we should adopt a different approach to change our state of mind and our attitudes. A reasonable question could then be posed, 'Is there a method or a means to change my way of thinking?'. The process of doing this internal investigation in the form of an internal dialogue of checking within oneself, is in itself a practice, which will help the mind to settle down.

Whenever we face difficulties or challenges in our life, it is reasonable to assess the situation in order to understand the nature of the problem. A practical way of dealing with it is to check whether there is a solution and then seek a method to overcome these inner problems and particular challenges. If there is a solution, we need not feel too anxious; we can feel more relaxed because the problem is solvable, and methods can be applied. However, if there is no immediate solution for a particular problem one is facing, then there is no point worrying about it or feeling anxious; it is best to accept the situation. This attitude or way of thinking is really helpful.

Problems or challenges are bound to arise at different times of our life. We have all experienced various difficulties and when one problem is solved, yet another arises! This is part of the nature of our existence. Since we cannot completely avoid or escape problems, it is worthwhile to check how best to deal with them. If we don't acknowledge our problems or we try to ignore them, then we will reach a point of becoming overwhelmed with a feeling of there being no hope.

Whereas, if we look into the situation and assess the problem properly, if it is solvable, there is no need to worry! We can acknowledge to ourselves that most of the inner turmoil we experience is due to allowing our mind to become completely distracted and focused outwardly in every direction. For as long as we focus mostly on sensual objects that cause agitation to arise, we will not be free from an agitated state of mind because the conditions are always present. Thus, having assessed whether or not there is a method of looking into the situation, and understanding how the mind becomes affected in that way, we will then be able to acknowledge that the situation can be reversed, and we can choose to focus within ourselves rather than allowing our mind to focus outwardly. When we place our focus on an appropriate inner object, by the virtue of being withdrawn from all the distracting external objects, the mind will naturally settle down and the agitation, the anxiety and the worries will begin to subside. This is specifically the meditation method or technique which we adopt.

Having specifically outlined how the meditation practice works as a way to bring about a more settled and calmer state of mind, we may engage in that practice in a more formal way. I feel it is important to emphasise that whenever we face problems or difficulties in our everyday life, if we have the right attitude we will not become overwhelmed, which is an important point to keep in mind as a way to not feel too discouraged. When problems or challenges arise, particularly when we are engaging in something worthwhile, it is not always going to be easy when we expend some effort. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has emphasised in his teachings that by willingly accepting certain problems and difficulties, knowing that it is for a good purpose, can help us to feel more encouraged. Far from being completely overwhelmed we will be able to take on these challenges, willingly. The moment we begin to accept a problem or a challenge, it is no longer a problem or a challenge. By using our ability to think rationally and to work out a solution, our intelligence and wisdom will be able to function more effectively and thus we will be better equipped to think straight in order to work out the solution. As soon as we experience a difficult or challenging problem, if we allow our mind to become completely overwhelmed and think, 'Oh it is too difficult', then that in itself can become a habit. If such habituation reaches a certain point, every difficulty and problem will seem overwhelming and we will not be able to face anything at all, which is an unfortunate state to be in. Besides the meditation practice helping us to maintain the integrity and inner strength within ourselves, even on a secular level by maintaining a positive and correct attitude, we can also endure physical challenges without the mind becoming weighed down, unhappy and overwhelmed. Some people are able to face great physical challenges with quite a strong mind which of course does not come about spontaneously and naturally; adopting a positive way of thinking and attitude requires some mental training.

Whatever worthwhile activity we engage in, there are bound to be some challenges and difficulties. If we adopt the right attitude by willingly accepting these challenges

and difficulties, we will not become overwhelmed. There is a lot of stress particularly for those who are engaged in study, as it can be very difficult and challenging at times. If an individual were to readily give up pursuing their studies by thinking, 'oh this is too difficult' and they become easily overwhelmed, they will lose a great opportunity for future success. Whereas those who can accept and withstand the challenges, show resilience and are persistent, later on their life will be much better. There are many accounts of people who have persisted with their studies and after having finished, they have secured a good job. This is something even on a practical working level we can see has great benefit, and these are points to keep in mind.

Leading back to the problems that we face on a psychological level, those psychological challenges and difficulties are caused from none other than a disturbing conceptual state of mind which is an overactive mind, obsessed with a lot of different thoughts. When one is obsessed with so many different thoughts and excessive thinking it will result in mental turmoil but adopting a mental solution to apply a method will enable this overly conceptual state of mind to subside. Thus, the meditation practice is a most effective practice to help an overly thinking mind to subside. So, when we understand the essence of the meditation practice, it will then serve a great purpose.

We can now engage in the meditation practice. However, prior to doing so it is worthwhile to acknowledge that the disturbing conceptual thoughts or ideas that pop up in our mind or even specific thoughts we are able to notice, immediately cause distress in our mind. As according to the great Master Shantideva to make a resolution that, 'I will not allow my mind to follow these disturbing conceptual thoughts even for a second'. With that commitment in our heart when we engage in the meditation practice, our mind will be more alert and fresh and able to maintain a focus on the actual chosen object that we apply here in our meditation practice, which is our own breath. Based on our natural breathing we will bring our full attention and focus and make the commitment that, 'I will not allow my mind to follow other discursive conceptual thoughts that may arise. They may pop up, but I am not going to follow them'. After making this resolution, we bring our attention and focus onto the breath itself.

So, in that way for the next few minutes we can focus on our breath.

(Pause for meditation)

Are there any questions?

Question: Geshe-la, in one of the previous sessions, you mentioned that is much more worthwhile to focus on inner appealing objects. What is the appealing internal object that one should be focusing on?

Answer: To reiterate what I specifically mentioned two or three weeks ago about how we are so used to looking at external appealing objects that are distracting objects and we fail to notice the appealing objects within ourselves, specifically love and compassion. So, while failing to notice that we have something so appealing within

ourselves, we don't focus on it and therefore it doesn't appear to us as being appealing, so we keep looking outside and we become distracted by external objects.

Following the objects that appear to our sensual mind such as appealing forms, colours and shapes, will induce attachment or desire to those objects. In relation to our auditory sense factor, we are attracted to nice and appealing sounds which will then in turn cause our desire to arise towards those pleasant sounds. Likewise, with pleasant smells, tastes and tactile objects and feelings. When our mind becomes completely obsessed with these external appealing objects, attachment arises, and the mind becomes agitated by the attachment to or desire for these objects. Furthermore, unappealing objects appearing to the mind will cause aversion to arise. Experiencing attachment and aversion causes so much turmoil in our mind. Conversely, if we are able to focus inwardly and notice the appealing objects within ourselves, such as love and compassion, and develop them further, that will bring so much joy and happiness to our mind.

An illustration of how turmoil, angst and complications can arise if we were to allow our mind to further immerse itself in appealing objects of attachment is, for example, a committed relationship between married couples. If the husband starts to notice other attractive women and his mind follows that attraction, and if attachment develops and he starts a relationship with someone else, then there is no need to mention how the subsequent complications and difficulties will impact on the committed relationship with his wife. In this particular case, if the husband's mind had been trained to not become completely overwhelmed by attachment upon seeing other attractive individuals, he would not have acted on the attraction in the first place and the attachment would have therefore been negated and consequently, the complications and problems would have been minimised. This example shows how, with some training of our mind, even though desire and attachment still arise, we should be able to contain ourselves to not become overwhelmed by attachment - which would otherwise completely override our mind and impair our judgement. That is the main point.

Another noteworthy point I have mentioned in the past relates to when you are young and have the ability to go out and enjoy yourselves. You gain a certain amount of enjoyment and level of satisfaction, however if you allow yourself to become completely immersed in that, especially during your youth, then you will be continuously seeking pleasures and enjoyment. It seems to be apparent that in later years when someone reaches their seventies or eighties, their mind continues to seek pleasures and enjoyment because of the habituation of having spent their life in pursuit of them. Their mind still seeks them but physically, the person is no longer able to pursue them which will cause so much agony and difficulty in their mind. Such an individual may be well endowed with wealth and not deprived of the essential conditions for their needs, but when staying at home by themselves for example, they are totally unhappy, and their mind is in constant turmoil. Even with the good external conditions, their mind is in turmoil. This

situation will come about if one does not take precautions to contain one's mind in the earlier stages of life, and the means to help the mind be contained and controlled is the practice of meditation.

It has been confided to me, particularly by the elderly, that meditation practice is really helpful and beneficial to their lives. The effectiveness and value of the meditation seems to be more readily accepted and understood by the elderly. Some have confessed to me that, 'I wish I had known about this technique earlier in my life. I only started understanding it and came into contact with meditation when I was sixty plus in age, and that seems to have been too late for me!'. The reason why they see particular value in the meditation practice at that age is because they have considerable experience of immersing themselves in enjoyment and pleasures and they have now come to a point where they realise all of that has been quite futile and the main source of gaining some mental tranquillity and happiness is through the meditation practice. This is what they experience! Having said that, it is also a fact that during our younger years, it is harder to recognise and understand the real value of meditation. One may assume the values of meditation and notice some benefit, but actually the real benefit may yet to be understood and experienced. So, it is good at a younger age to learn from the examples of the elderly, and what they express through their own experiences as it being something of value. Particularly those who suffer illness have commented about the power of the meditation practice and how it has become a valuable aid which brings solace to their mind. They have confided about not having seen much value in meditation when they were well and healthy, but after experiencing ill health it has become apparent that the real solace for their mind is the meditation practice. So, I regularly emphasise that our best friend and companion is our happy and positive state of mind which can help us at all times.

The emphasis here is on recognising that a positive mind, which encompasses a kind and happy mind, is the most valuable asset we can ever have. We must make every attempt to retain our happy state of mind and not allow it to decline, because once it declines and the happy state is lost, we can reach a point where it is very hard to restore the positiveness in our mind. So, the way to achieve and maintain a happy mind is through focusing on virtuous objects to have a virtuous mind. We need to understand this connection – adopting a virtuous mind and acquainting ourselves and focusing on virtuous objects is how we attain a happy mind.

In saying that one needs to maintain a positive state of mind, is in contrast to the negative states such as anger and jealousy. As I have shared in the past, in my early days I trained my mind to combat the negative states of anger and so forth, and I can now safely say that it is several years since I have been affected by intense anger or a mind of jealousy. As a way to protect myself from the minds of intense anger and jealousy I apply cautionary measures and conduct a dialogue with myself saying, 'oh be careful, anger is arising here'. Then I call my own name and say, 'you must be careful here because giving in to the anger will only cause you distress and make your life miserable and it will be much worse for

you'. Likewise, I caution myself when jealousy arises. When anger arises in your mind, this tactic involves looking at the anger itself rather than focusing on the object that has provoked the anger, and understanding the nature, disadvantages and faults of the anger. By observing and then investigating such negative states of mind in this way, whether they be negative emotions or afflictions, can help to appease our mind so that we do not become consumed by them. Although this method can help to the extent of enabling intense moments of emotion to subside, it does not serve to completely uproot the negative state of mind. However, we will still reap great benefit from having momentarily overcome an intense negative state.

Before we conclude the session for the evening, let us again spend a few minutes in meditation focusing on the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is the name of Buddha Shakyamuni. While the name is being recited, we maintain our focus just on that sound and when the recitation subsides, we maintain the inner focus just for a few moments which will itself, be a good meditation.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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