
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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Tonight we will meditate together.

What is important for meditation is that you have a comfortable sitting posture and that your whole body is completely relaxed. Then you direct your attention to your mind and make sure that it is very relaxed.

Whatever activity we undertake, we have to check whether conditions are favourable or unfavourable. We need to think about possible obstacles. For meditation practice to be effective and beneficial, we need to have a good understanding of the things that make meditation effective, what conditions are favourable and what obstacles can prevent good practice.

The main tools that we need to utilise in our meditation practice are mindfulness, introspection and mental alertness. Equipped with these tools, the main challenges that we face in meditation are 'mental sinking' and 'excitement'. Both are detrimental to meditation practice.

We have to understand that, like anything else, in order for our meditation to be successful, we should acquire knowledge of how to develop good skills. We need skills as well as knowledge to meditate. If we are very clear about what these are and are able to recognise the shortcomings which affect our meditation, as well as working on creating favourable conditions, we will make our meditation successful. If we have an understanding of the details of 'mindfulness' and 'introspection', we will be in a better position to be able to effectively use these tools in our meditation.

If we want to reduce negative and create positive qualities and we investigate carefully, we will realise that they depend on our own mental outlook. Important aims of meditation are to control, transform and safeguard our mind. When we talk about mindfulness, introspection or alertness we have to understand how these tools can actually help us to transform our negative states of mind.

Shantideva said, 'with my hands folded together I advise those who want to transform and subdue their mind, to apply mindfulness and alertness, whatever it takes'. Even if it takes our own life, we should remain steadfast in applying these tools in our meditation practice.

What is the role of mindfulness in meditation? Mindfulness is a mental factor that helps us to keep our focus on the meditation object. Why we keep the mind focused on the object of meditation is to free it from mental afflictions. Also, the object of the meditation is a virtuous or wholesome object. The effect when our focus is on that object is to enhance happiness, rather than bringing disturbance or restlessness.

When we talk of 'mindfulness' here, it also means memory or not forgetting. So, if we apply mindfulness our whole attention would be on our present actions. The role memory or mindfulness when we are engaging in meditation is to keep our attention only on that object.

The role of introspection or alertness is monitor the meditation. With introspection one has the ability to discern whether there are any obstacles, which cause weakening or loss of focus. When we sit in meditation we exert a lot of effort to develop the power of memory and mental alertness, or vigilance. While we are sitting we find a moment of peace and stillness, but the benefits we get afterward, are as important as those experienced in the sitting.

Also, we should understand the importance of continuously maintaining mindfulness and introspection. Even after meditation, as we move onto our normal activities, using mindfulness and introspection we should always observe our actions of mind, speech and body. Through mindfulness we will always be mentally present and remember to act in ways which are beneficial. In our daily activities using mindfulness we try to minimise any kind of behaviour which is negative and destructive.

At the same time, it is important to apply introspection, which will help us to remain vigilant so that we are in a position to immediately recognise if there is something negative in our actions. If we don't apply introspection, or even recognise negativity or the destructiveness in our actions, we cannot prevent such actions.

We can clearly see that our mind is the source of all our actions, whether those actions are positive or negative. The source of all our actions is our mind. Actions are predetermined by the mind. Therefore, we have to focus on controlling the mind in order to bring about change in our actions. If we really work hard to observe our mind and cultivate a positive state of mind, then as we make progress we will notice that automatically we find more stability, happiness and joy in our life. These experiences of happiness and joy happen unexpectedly. It's almost impossible to find enough peace and happiness if we don't work on cultivating positive states of mind and pay attention to our actions. This is because we are not habituated to a positive way of thinking and doing. When we don't pay attention, we will naturally go the other way. Our actions will be negative and therefore, it is very difficult to overcome problems. Through mindfulness we can see positive qualities and beautiful things. At the same time there are also very negative and nasty qualities inside us.

If we observe our actions - be they verbal or physical, we are able to recognise that there are a lot of actions which can be valuable, almost priceless. Likewise, there are other actions which are horrible and destructive. When we talk about developing ourselves we have to take into account the positives and the negatives of our actions and then work on them on a daily basis.

It is said in the text that the result of meditation should be a decreasing of the influence of mental afflictions. When we engage in spiritual practice, our focus should be on enhancing positive states of mind and diminishing the

negative ones. As a result of practising meditation, we expect to see a lessening of mental afflictions.

It is not always the case that all of the people who practice meditation will see this benefit of meditation in terms of the diminishing of mental afflictions. Therefore, in order to see the expected result, it is important to know how to meditate properly and do it continuously

To experience these benefits, we need to understand what to do. The very important thing is to apply mindfulness, which means to direct our focus onto a virtuous object. Familiarising ourselves with meditation practice is a way of breaking bad habits of mind and developing a happy mental attitude. Meditation is training our mind to think in a more positive and creative way.

It also helps us to immediately get rid of anything that we find disturbing. For example, some people might find holding resentment for those who have hurt them is disturbing. In order to overcome the suffering caused by this hatred, it is necessary to look at the causes. One obvious cause is the object. Thinking of that object causes feelings of resentment. There are certain objects which it is important for us to forget. By forgetting those objects we will find peace and relaxation. There are other objects we need to remember because they bring more peace and happiness. If someone suffering from an intense feeling of resentment, is successful in the practice of redirecting their attention, they can experience peace instead of anger. Initially, this may take time, but if you manage to shift the mind to the meditation object and sustain that focus, then even if you come face to face with that person, you may not experience any feeling of resentment. It will depend on how much effort you put in. Logically, we can see that meditation is a very effective tool to overcome anger.

Sometimes it is not necessary for us to gain a great deal of knowledge of meditation, but it is more important to apply meditation practice in our life. Which practice we should apply depends on our situation. In some situations, you do not need any objects in order to free yourself from mental stress. We can find a quiet place, relax and try to empty all of our thoughts, as if there is nothing. If we sit in that kind of meditation even for a minute, we will find it very peaceful to be away from the overwhelming mental stress or the anxieties that we experience. Once we have created stillness and stability within, it is better to do a different meditation.

Now we will do some meditation.

In this meditation we will be focusing the mind on the incoming and outgoing breath. When we engage in meditation practice, the challenge that we face is the unruly mind and distracting thoughts. First sit and relax. Then direct attention to your mind. Try to keep your mind within. If your mind goes to something else, see it as a distraction. Try to recognise with a sense of accomplishment and joy that you have found your real enemy. You could think, 'It's you, unruly mind, who is the continuous source of my problems and difficulties in life. I am not going to give you a chance. I am going to challenge you and rather than being dominated by you, I will be directing myself to something else'. With this in mind, direct your mind to the incoming and outgoing

breath. As much as possible, always try to bring the mind back to this breathing.

[Meditation]

We will chant Shakyamuni Buddha's mantra. Keep the focus of the mind on the sound of the mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

There's not much time left but maybe room for one or two questions. Does anyone have a question?

Geshe-la, do we create karma while in the bardo?

I need some clarification of your question. If you're talking about the question as literally karma which is responsible for the state of bardo, then it's the same karma. The karma which prepares one to take a human rebirth is the same karma that also prepares the bardo, or the intermediate state for human rebirth. Is your question more to do with whether you will be creating karma while you are in the bardo?

Student: Yes

For those who are not familiar with this term, 'bardo' is called the intermediate state of being. It means when someone leaves this life and is when taking the next rebirth is coming back as a human being. In between is something called 'human bardo' or the 'intermediate state', which finds the next rebirth. While you are in that bardo state, there may be a possibility of creating karma. Maybe.

Any other questions?

I was wondering if Geshe-la can verify the concept of the merit field. A merit field is almost like a place where you plant seeds. When we are referring to a merit field ... so how does it actually function as a field of merit or a merit field ... ?

The question is related to the practice wherein the meditator visualises in their mind all of the objects of the merit field. You may be visualising all of your gurus and other deities. These visualised objects are called the 'field of merit' because they are the base upon which you'll be creating merit. If your question is whether all the objects you have visualised are real or imaginary, then it all depends. It is supposed to be real, but at the same time it could be just an image. It is possible for a meditator to develop these visualisations to the point where everything in that visualisation becomes real. You can vividly see them as though you are seeing your gurus, deities, buddhas etc. with your own eyes !

There are stories of meditators who revealed that they had actual visions of deities, such as a vision of Manjushri. You can have direct visions of the deities when you are at a very advanced level on the path. However, when you are already very high on the path, there's not much point. There's not much benefit you can get from the buddhas. Somebody who is very rich or very wealthy doesn't need much help from other wealthy people. When we are at low stages of the path we rely on the teacher, who is really like someone who gives food and shelter to beggars.

There is a great degree of emphasis placed on the great kindness of one's teacher because the immediate guru

directly supports and guides at a time when you are in need and desperate. It is really beneficial when we are desperate.

Lord Buddha himself talked about the great kindness of one's parents. If we think about our early stage where we are absolutely helpless, we even do not even know how to feed ourselves. Even if food to drink is in front of us we can't use it. It is our parents who fed and supported us by giving immediate help and direct support.

If we look at evolution we see how, when some animals are first born they are much smarter and more capable than human beings. I once saw how, as soon as a baby giraffe was born, it didn't take long to actually find its mothers nipples and was able to stand up and find its own way. We should show our gratitude to our parents. I have never forgotten my mother although it is nearly 70 years since I left home.

I have made a lot of observations of the parent-child relationship and I really believe that the bond that the children establish, especially with their mother, is so strong. There is no doubt that intimacy with the mother is very special. You may have heard that even His Holiness the Dalai Lama frequently mentioned the intimate bond he shared with his mother.

It is important for good development that children at the early stages receive close physical affection, especially from the mother

Apparently scientists have conducted tests of two children - one who has received good affection from the mother and the other one who did not receive the same affections. The outcome the scientists found is that the one who received more affection has better development at the early stage and this has a positive impact on the later stages of life.

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