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# Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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Please make sure that you are in a comfortable sitting posture and that your body is fully relaxed. It is important not only to feel relaxed in our body but also in our mind. When we experience true relaxation in both body and mind, we experience true peace. Our experience of peace and relaxation is something in our mind, where we can say, 'I feel peaceful and relaxed'. The conditions which enable us to say this have a lot to do with our state of mind. Therefore, we must ensure our mind is not under the influence of wandering or racing thoughts. It stays with us wherever our body is.

Our existence is constituted of something we call, 'my mind, my body and me or the 'I'. It is important to understand the relationship among these three; particularly the mind and body relationship which has a great impact on our emotional wellbeing. Whether we are peaceful and happy or not very much depends on the state of wellbeing of our mind and body. When there is something wrong with our physical health we say, 'I don't feel well'. Likewise, when our mind is agitated or bothered by something, we say, 'I don't feel right.' Therefore, there is a clear connection between the mind, body and us. Our emotional wellbeing is pre-determined by our physical, as well as our mental and psychological health.

Whether we consider ourselves a believer or non-believer, regardless of what activities we do or different views we hold, our over-all aim and objective throughout our life is the same— that is to get rid of or avoid things that are harmful and to adopt or achieve things that are beneficial. What things should we adopt? We have to adopt something beneficial; something that gives us a sense of achievement, fulfilment and satisfaction. On examination, we will see that the most important factor for our wellbeing is enjoying good physical and mental health. When people enjoy good health and feel good in both mind and body, they can say they are happy. Therefore, we have to recognise that no matter what we do in life, our physical and mental health should be given the top priority and taking good care of your mental and physical health is fundamental to living a happy life for everyone. If we do something harmful to our body, then we are harming ourselves. If something damages our physical health, then it has a detrimental effect on us, so we should avoid it. On the other hand, when something is good for our body and mental health, it benefits us. so we should make an effort to adopt a positive habit of doing things which benefit our health.

We should have more awareness and understanding of our physical hygiene. When we recognise the importance

of good physical health, we will focus on maintaining it. As to good mental health, we are talking about having a calm and happy mind. We need to recognise the importance of having that kind of mind and examine what jeopardises or enhances our mental health.

There is a lot to learn to maintain good physical health but simply gaining knowledge is not enough. To ensure good health, we also have to implement that knowledge. When we talk about physical health, we are really talking about what goes into our mouth, like food and drink. This is obvious. We may question why we eat and drink? Is it mainly the taste? On examination, we should know that the main reason we eat and drink is to sustain our body and life. Taste is also important, but it is not the main reason. There is a tongue consciousness which senses the taste through the taste buds, which are along the sides of tongue. But we all know that once we swallow and the food goes down there is no taste. We should not put everything into our mouth, whether it be food or drink, just for the sake of the taste or some immediate feel-good effect. We have to consider its long-term effect once it goes into our system, particularly at a young age when your body is fresher and cleaner than when we are older.

As you know some food and drinks carry toxins which, even if they don't have an immediate affect can damage our health in the long run. The poison in our system will slowly build up and sometimes, in later stages, people find it difficult to cope with their deteriorated physical condition due to the built-up toxins. When we talk about ensuring the health of our body, we not only need to be educated but we should also think seriously about the importance of enjoying good health to live life fully. We need to remember what is good or bad for our health and then be mindful of what we eat and drink and adhere to our discipline.

Just as our physical health is important, we need to ensure the wellbeing of our mind in order to experience joy and happiness. First of all, we need to recognise the importance of guarding our state of mind. When we think about how we can safeguard the good health of our mind, we will realise that meditation practice is the most effective thing and we will consider engaging in that practice. In fact, the very purpose of meditation should be to safeguard our mind. What does safeguarding our mind mean? Safeguarding from what? When we look within ourselves, we see that, fundamentally, we have creative and positive potential. However, when our mind falls under the control of sudden afflictive emotions such as strong anger, we become helpless and we lose our self-control. When someone is completely overpowered by strong hatred and anger, they have no choice but to be totally driven by their hatred and anger. Therefore, safeguarding here means to protect our mind from afflictive emotions. Without afflictive emotions, we can have access to and be able to utilise our own true insight-wisdom-knowledge which will ensure our deeds are right and positive.

If we don't challenge the afflictive emotions arising within us, they then will overpower our mind, thoughts and actions. We human beings have great potential,

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knowledge and wisdom but unfortunately, when we are completely overwhelmed with afflictive emotions, we don't have the chance or the option to utilise these positive qualities. If we don't do anything to challenge afflictive emotions, then we are placing our future in the hands of emotions such as obsessive desire, jealousy, anger and hatred. We know from experience how we feel when these emotions overtake our mind. We can see people harming others and how they lose peace and happiness; their minds overpowered by afflictive emotions. Therefore, we have to understand and recognise that just as, due to certain causes and conditions, these afflictive emotions arise, likewise due to other causes and conditions these afflictions can be brought to an end. There is a possibility to manage and overcome them. When a sudden and strong afflictive emotion arises, what does this indicate? If we look into it, then we will see that it is because we have become so habituated to it by regularly feeding it over a long period of time. We have become too familiar with that emotion and so it is very difficult to overcome. If we are very familiar with a particular afflictive emotion, then it only takes a minor cause for it to strongly arise. Whereas, if we are less familiar with it, then it won't arise so easily. This shows that the fluctuation of arising emotions depends on familiarity with those emotions. It also shows that there is the possibility of overcoming and minimising these afflictive emotions.

Meditation practice can help us to overcome afflictive emotions. When we look at the causes and conditions which give rise to afflictive emotions, such as desire and attachment, we see that they usually arise because we perceive a desired object as being very attractive. Regardless of the reality of the object, we mentally project beauty and attractiveness onto it which then arouses desire and attachment. In order to overcome this propensity, we must train the mind in meditation to perceive the object another way.

We see the ugly side of the object, reinforcing this image in meditation and thinking of the shortcomings of our attachment to the object. When we develop this way of perceiving the object, it counteracts and minimises desire.

There are also meditation practices to remedy anger and hatred. It has to do with our perception of the object as an object of hatred. In order to motivate ourselves to engage in meditation practice we need to recognise the shortcomings and disadvantages of being angry. We can say, 'I must get rid of that otherwise there will be a lot of disadvantages'.

When we have understood the shortcomings of hatred and anger, we can overcome them by cultivating love towards the object of hatred. We imagine the positive aspects of the object. If we have a negative state of mind, then we can see there's an opposite force to that. Therefore, meditation practice is a practice of training our mind to become more familiar with a positive way of thinking on wholesome objects. As we train our mind to think positively about objects, it has the effect of remedying the negative force and minimising our negative states of mind.

It is said that the breathing meditation is particularly effective for overcoming the various disturbing thoughts which fill our mind. In terms of the object of meditation, the breathing meditation is very simple. We inhale and exhale. It does not require a lot of study or any need for logic. The breathing meditation is the preliminary practice and is a prerequisite to other forms of meditation practice.

For our practice to be effective, we have to ensure we have a calm state of mind. If our mind is very distracted and going everywhere, if there is too much noise in our head, then it is very hard to begin the practice. Therefore, it is recommended to begin with breathing meditation. This directs the mind inwards. We become aware of inhaling and exhaling, thinking, 'I am breathing out', and 'I am breathing in'. We repeat the same cycle. Initially, you may only be able to do 3 or 4 rounds of breathing with good focus, but if you practice over and over again you will be able to maintain focus for up to 21 cycles of breathing. Your mind will stay still, and you will feel very calm. When this happens, you can see the freshness, vividness, clarity and luminosity, or simply the awareness of the mind. When we recognise this, we can find ourselves in whatever practice we do. With this in mind, we will do the breathing meditation.

Of course, there are meditators who want to achieve the state of meditation called *samadhi*, or 'calm abiding' in which they may choose this breathing on a focus object. In this situation, this becomes their main practice. Likewise, breathing meditation is our main meditation here. Just try to sit comfortably and relax your body and then focus the mind just on the incoming and outgoing breath. We always start with the sitting posture, ensuring that our body is relaxed. Then we direct the mind inwards. It is important to begin the meditation with a strong motivation and determination. We determine that during this short meditation, we will not allow any objects or thoughts to distract our mind and we make sure that our mind is focused on the incoming and outgoing breath. If you are distracted by any thoughts just bring the mind back to the object.

*(Pause for meditation).*

We will continue with the meditation by chanting the Buddha's mantra. Move your mental focus to the sound of the mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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