Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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So as usual we will begin with meditation. Just feel comfortable and fully relax your body.

When we look within our mental continuum, it is filled with a variety of disturbing thoughts in the form of mental confusion, conflict, stress and restlessness etc. These thoughts deprive us of peace and happiness and make us suffer unnecessarily. In order to minimise such unending disturbing thoughts, we practise meditation. This enables us not only to recognise the cause of problems within us, but it also enables us to reduce and counteract them.

How does meditation practice work to counteract disturbing thoughts? When we engage in a meditation practice, we discipline and control our mind by directing its attention to only one object. This means we only experience one state of mind, rather than various thoughts arising within us. As the object that we use in meditation has an effect of calming our mind down there is no room within us for any disturbing thoughts or negative states of mind to arise, and we can experience peace within us for as long as we place our mind on that object. So, we can see for ourselves the benefits and effectiveness of meditation in calming our mind and enhancing peace within us. When we place our mind on a particular object, our mind stays on that object, and this naturally prevents unwanted thoughts and gives rest to our mind.

Whenever we begin a meditation practice, the first thing we need to do is to check our motivation, which is to say, 'Why we are engaging in meditation practice?' We need a good motivation to begin with. As to the instruction in relation with cultivating a proper motivation, sometimes you hear the statement, 'Correct or modify your motivation or cultivate a motivation.' So when we say correcting a motivation, there is some notion there is something at fault within us and we need to replace that fault in our motivation with the right frame of mind. Whereas if we have already produced the right state of mind, such as loving kindness for all other beings, then we simply need to generate and cultivate that and use that as our motivation to begin the practice.

Ideally it is good, before we engage in any meditation practice, to cultivate this feeling of love and compassion for other beings, and then try to use that as our motivation for undertaking meditation practice. So in this way, the meditation practice becomes as a good means for us to habituate our mind and our mental attitude with this sense of showing love and compassion for other beings. Because even though we know how great it is to be able to extend our love and compassion for others,

these kinds of feelings do not arise naturally, including for beings who are in great need of help. When we see other beings in suffering, even if we have some capacity to help them, we don't automatically feel concern about their suffering or think, 'We should help them out', let alone actively doing something to benefit them. The reason we are not able to show love to others and help free them from suffering as much as we want is because internally we have not cultivated enough love and compassion in our mind. In other words, our mental attitude is not habituated to showing love and compassion to other beings. So this is why it is always good before beginning your meditation practice, to spend time really reflecting upon the wellbeing of others. Think of other beings who are in great need of help, deprived of any happiness, those who are afflicted with a great deal of suffering. Let love and compassion arise within us by cultivating the thought, 'May those beings be free from suffering, may they have happiness'. So you let these kinds of thoughts and feelings of love and compassion and empathy arise as you begin your meditation practice, and utilise these as a motivation saying to yourself, 'In order to free others from suffering, or to create a cause for happiness, we engage in meditation practice'.

It is important that as a result of practising meditation we gain some sort of benefit from the practice, as well as bringing benefit to other beings. There is not much point if our meditation practice is something where we just sit and feel a sense of emptiness, nothingness, almost like state of sleepiness. Nor if, when we come out of meditation, it doesn't bring a difference to our everyday life in terms of bringing some positive transformation such as our way of thinking and our actions, which others can also see. No matter how much meditation you do if you always remain the same person, then, as the saying goes, you are just like an animal's horns, nothing changes what you do.

However, the benefit we can derive from engaging in meditation that develops and enhances love and compassion towards others in the depth of our heart is amazing. As a result of such meditation practice, you will become a more loving, caring, compassionate and empathetic person in thought and action. If you come across any others who are in need of help, you will feel empathy and reach out to them. When we develop this quality of love and compassion, then this has an effect on our everyday actions, and we can see the world with more love and compassion within our mind. Not only will our actions benefit others, but we will also find that there is more peace, joy and satisfaction within ourselves as well.

The great Lama Tsong Khapa said that if we benefit other beings then all our self-interest will take care of itself and be fulfilled automatically. If we sincerely cultivate love and compassion within us, then we will engage in acts of benefiting others. However, if we inwardly lack the cultivation of love and compassion, the fact is that such feelings don't arise automatically due to some circumstantial conditions. Then we won't even mentally think of or consider benefitting others, even if they are suffering. Therefore, it is important to recognise this benefit and the impact of cultivating love and

compassion, and how it can be a source of lasting peace and happiness for all beings including ourselves. When we talk about changing society and changing people in the world, it all starts from our own self. If we cultivate love and compassion and we engage in this act of benefitting others, then that inspires others to do the same. This is how we can share and promote love and compassion throughout the world.

Meditation practice should not be separated from how we live our lives, rather it should be closely interwoven with our lives and that's how it can make a difference to our lives. I consider meditation practice as a means to produce a good person, a good human being, a calm person, a good-natured person. In particular, the meditation on love and compassion is an indispensable tool for developing these good qualities as a human being. In such a positive way, this love and compassion can transform us, and also it effectively prevents a lot of suffering such as suffering because of loneliness, a sense of rejection and helplessness etc. Many friends, helpers and admirers always surround a loving and compassionate person.

On the other hand, nobody would trust or want to be a friend of a selfish person who lacks a sense of care and consideration for others and who always focused on their own self-interest. If he or she faces difficulties, or is in need of help, no one will want to support them. So without cultivating and nurturing love and compassion for others, then our own life will become so miserable, so lonely and empty.

Looking into our relationships, if there are some elements of love and compassion in the relationship, then there is a great deal of mutual benefit. I can categorically say that in a relationship between two partners, love and compassion is never a cause of conflict and tension! Rather the relationship breakdown and problems in it arise as love and compassion between the two parties begins to diminish. So whether we talk of individual lasting peace and happiness or we talk of living with other people, the most important factor for peace and happiness is to bring love and compassion into the relationship.

You can see even when animals like dogs and cats show love to each other, they become very close friends. This all shows when someone shows love to others then they don't feel any threat to their life, but they feel very safe and enjoy each other companionship. It is the nature of all living creatures to want to be close to beings who show them love. When we show love to animals, they react, and respond with the same love and friendship; they know how to acknowledge and appreciate someone who shows them love and compassion.

I once he saw on a Channel Ten TV show, a doctor who was taking good care of a little lamb. Eventually he tried to free it so it could go its own way, but the lamb kept coming back and began to jump up and down in a playful manner, hoping the man would to keep it. So if you look around you can see the effect of love and compassion and what it can do to others. It is amazing how it has the power to make other beings feel so peaceful and so safe and protected.

Another time I saw a man who was close to a lion. On one occasion as part of their playful game the lion opened his mouth wide, and the man stuck his head inside. Can you imagine the trust in their relationship? We as human beings are supposed to be more intelligent and have more of a sense in knowing who is benefitting and who is harming us. We can see the benefit of love in building trust, harmony and stability in our existing relationships, bridging any gap in our relationships and building new relationships.

So at this point we better begin the meditation because if I continue talking as usual, then one thing leads to another, and something else comes out from that topic and it goes on and on. So we will just stop here and do the meditation.

The meditation is just on breathing. We'll do this for a short time. Just begin with fully relaxing your body again; feel comfortable and try to get rid of distracting thoughts completely out of your mind. In this way you can direct your complete mental attention just on the incoming and outgoing breath. And as much as possible during this short meditation, keep your mind on the inhaling and exhaling of the breath. If you get distracted, then just keep bringing the mind back to the inhaling and exhaling.

Now we will chant the Buddha's mantra, again making sure you keep the mind inward and direct your focus on the sound of the mantra without being distracted by any other object.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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