Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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As much as possible try to fully relax your body and feel comfortable, and at the same time try to find a very relaxed, joyful and happy state of mind.

When we engage in meditation practice, and also in everyday life, we have to not only think of our physical peace and happiness, but also of the importance of having or experiencing, a very clear, happy, calm and peaceful state of mind.

It's important to think over and over again about how important it is to always have a very peaceful and happy state of mind present within oneself, like our best companion.

Having recognised the benefit of cultivating or possessing a very peaceful happy state of mind, one should then also always have a thought or some sort of determination or pledge, that 'I must maintain, and safeguard this state of mind, and never be separated from it'.

Indeed, this positive, clear and joyful state of mind within us should be recognised as a friend from within, an inner friend. If we think about the value and the reliability of this inner friend compared with any outer friends we have, then we can notice that its benefits are far greater. By having this inner friend, we can live a happy and self-sufficient life even if we don't have any outer friends to lean on for support, or even if we face adverse situations. Besides, we won't feel a sense of isolation, and are not so prone to suffer if our friends dump us. However, without having this inner friend, then sometimes even if we have many friends, we feel we don't have enough and we feel lonely. Also if you are separated from or lose those outer friends, it will bring much suffering and sometimes it even becomes a major disaster.

So throughout our life we will find that the most beneficial and reliable friend, providing us with unfailing support, is the one within ourselves. It is always there within us, but we need to activate, recognise and lean on it. It is a positive state of mind that ensures within us a stable peace and happiness, and an ability to think clearly, wisely and sensibly. When we take into account the fast-changing world that we live in, and how sometime things happen so quickly and so unpredictably including various adverse situations and circumstances, without something to rely upon from within ourselves in the form of positive thinking, and positive energy, our life can be too difficult a challenge to cope with. Sometimes we face situations where we don't get help from others, or there is nothing more they can do to help. and therefore, of all the things that we can possess in our life, we will find that the most valuable, reliable and beneficial one, is peace and happiness within us.

In short, we need to first realise that having a positive state of mind is something very important, and then we need to think about how we are going to protect that, and to prevent it from diminishing. We also need to think about and recognise obstacles and hindrances which can prevent us from having a positive state of mind, or which can destroy the positive state of mind which we already have within us.

The opposing force to our positive state of mind is mental afflictions or delusions, for example anger or jealousy. When these mental afflictions arise in our mind, we lose the positive state of mind within. Also, with our own experience, when we give rise to thoughts of anger or jealousy, we should ask ourselves, 'are we happy and at peace whilst under its influence?'. If we ask this question to ourselves, or to anyone else, no one will say that they are happy and at peace while their mind is occupied with mental afflictions.

The next question is how we are going to prevent mental afflictions from arising. When we think about this, we can see that one of the primary causes of mental afflictions is mental distraction. With mental distraction our mind is agitated, wandering out, and preoccupied with many thoughts; we have no peace and calmness within us, nor control over our mind and hence mental afflictions can easily arise.

Therefore, we need to overcome mental distraction, and the way to do so is, as much as possible, to try to maintain our mind within ourselves, rather than allowing our mind to always wander outside after the various external objects. If we make an effort to keep our mind within ourselves, this will have the effect of reducing mental distractions and thereby reduce the mental afflictions.

So in order to overcome mental afflictions we have to apply the meditation practice. And as we apply the meditation practice, we should have some understanding of how meditation works in terms of transforming our mind.

So what we are saying here is that first we need to understand the causes of the various states of mind. If an afflictive state of mind arises, for example anger, then we look at that state of mind because we have to understand how it arises, and under what causes and conditions it arises. What kind of mental outlook or perceptions of that object arise in our mind when we are under the influence of anger? We can recognise that anger arises when there is a strong feeling of aversion or hatred or animosity towards that object.

Therefore, in order to overcome that, we need to consider a completely opposite way of thinking, we need to cultivate an opposing mental outlook. So in meditation practice, we direct our mind to an object or thought which doesn't arouse anger or that has the opposite effect on our mental outlook than the kind of outlook we have with anger. In this way we have made it impossible for anger to arise through cultivating in our mind rather a pleasant or desirable mental outlook towards the object.

To quote the great Kadampa master Geshe Langri Thangpa:

In my every action, I will watch my mind, And the moment destructive emotions arise, I will confront them strongly and avert them, Since they will hurt both me and others.

A way to prevent anger, or to counteract it, is to engage in the meditation practice whereby you try to divert or redirect your mind to an object or thought that doesn't cause anger to arise or opposes the mental attitude of anger. And you will notice that with effort, as you manage to settle your mind on that object, the anger will slowly diminish because it simply cannot co-exist with it.

This also shows that the anger is not really in the nature of the mind, because if something is in the nature of the mind, it cannot be separated from the mind. So the fact that there are moments when there is no anger in the mind shows that anger is not embedded in the very nature of the mind. This means that it's possible to overcome anger.

Likewise, in order to overcome any kind of mental affliction, you need to engage in a meditation practice that directly opposes and counteracts the corresponding mental afflictions. This is especially important if one's mind is strongly and overwhelmingly afflicted with certain mental afflictions or afflictive emotions. In that moment, or in that circumstance, it is important to make an effort, with full concentration, to engage in meditation, and to utilise all of one's intelligence to try to direct the mind away from that affliction. In this way, as we do this, we don't always have to fall prey to the mental afflictions; rather we can challenge them and win, and we can be on top of them.

As we always say, meditation practice is not just simply about focusing our mind on a particular object, but it should also help us to develop and enhance our knowledge and a greater sense of discernment. Basically, the term 'meditation' means 'to become familiar with', so when we think about this term in the context of our practice, it means that we aim our practice at familiarising our minds with a positive way of thinking, with a virtuous or a positive object.

This is the opposite to our state of mind which is under the influence of or is overpowered by mental afflictions. So there are tremendous benefits that follow from the practice of meditation. We were just saying how important it is to cultivate a positive state of mind, and then if we manage to protect or safeguard that, it can have great benefit for our entire life.

Whenever we engage in meditation practice we need to remember that the focus of the meditation is really to counteract mental afflictions, because if it doesn't counteract mental afflictions, then the meditation won't have much lasting benefit. So with this in mind, we can now do a short breathing meditation.

There are many people who have greatly benefitted from meditation practice, and some of those people are here. So people who get benefit from meditation don't necessarily have to be great meditators, but just ordinary people who study meditation over a number of years, and integrate it into their lives.

There are many instances where people are afflicted with a serious physical illness, but they remain calm and even able to say they are happy and everything is OK despite their health conditions, because of integrating meditation into their lives. In fact, I was surprised to hear from some people I know, who are undergoing serious health problems, that they are very peaceful and happy inside their mind. These kinds of life stories should inspire us to do the practice more.

Now we will begin a short breathing meditation. So please sit in a comfortable posture, place your hands with the right over the left below the navel in a meditation posture, and then as much as possible try to gently calm the mind so that your mind is fully drawn inside, and try to get rid of all the thoughts of any external objects, especially try to overcome the influence of any mental afflictions.

Here, the object of meditation is the inhaling and exhaling of the breath. So after getting rid of all the distracting thoughts, we should rest or sit the mind on inhaling and exhaling. Just as our physical body touches certain objects so it can't move, it is also like that with your mind; when we fix our mind on the breathing, just stay there on the inhaling and exhaling of the breath without being distracted by any other objects.

[Meditation]

Now just make sure that you hold your mind inward and we will chant the Buddha's mantra. With the chanting, you direct your mental focus onto the sound of the mantra, rather than being distracted by any other object.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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