
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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As usual we begin with meditation.

Meditation practice is a means to train our mind. It is important that we recognise the benefits of training our mind, and also understand what we should be doing when we engage in meditation practice in terms of what we should be thinking and so forth.

Through meditation practice we train our mind in order to cultivate a good, positive state of mind or attitude. We want this positive mental attitude to supplement the great human intelligence that we already have within our great human brain. Although as human beings we are gifted with this great sense of discernment and intelligence we can enhance this intelligence with a positive mental attitude.

There's not much use in simply having this great intelligence and a great brain if it is not used in a meaningful way. Therefore, we need to have a positive and wholesome mental attitude so that we can direct our human intelligence to a more beneficial purpose.

If we investigate we will find that we quite often misuse our human intelligence to cause harm to other beings, so we can see how without the right state of mind, it can be easily misused for wrong purpose, in a destructive rather than beneficial way. On the other hand, if, on an everyday basis, we have within us a positive state of mind, then we will find that because of the force of this positive state of mind, there is more joy, more positive feelings and more happiness within us. When we have a positive state of mind, it has the benefit of maintaining clarity, clear thinking and some sort of sanity.

If we say meditation practice is effective in terms of cultivating and enhancing such a positive state of mind then we also have to understand how meditation actually brings this about, and conversely how, if we do practise meditation, we are not in a position to cultivate or maintain this positive state of mind. If we look into meditation practice, we find that it is a form of a mental discipline. We are disciplining our mind by, for example, placing the mind on a specific object, and the kind of object we introduce to the mind in the meditation practice is usually virtuous and positive.

In other words, we are pointing the mind in the right direction, which brings about personal benefit. Whereas if we don't apply meditation practice and simply let the mind just follow wandering thoughts then the mind can be so easily go the wrong direction and follow wrong objects. Therefore, meditation practice is a way of connecting our mind with the right direction, and the right kind of object.

When we engage in meditation practice, we are trying to redirect our mind from going after negative objects and the wrong direction towards positive objects and a positive direction. This is how, through meditation practice we bring about changes in our mind. In fact, we call meditation a spiritual practice or the Dharma. Etymologically the term 'Dharma' has the connotation of correcting, amending, changing or fabricating. So from that perspective, when we engage in meditation practice the literal meaning of Dharma really fits as meditation is indeed correcting or amending our way of thinking. The implication of course is that our mind needs to be corrected. What correction does our mind need? Normally, the mind is very much habituated with negative ways of thinking, and negative objects. However, in meditation we prevent that and then place the mind on a positive object. That is real meaning of Dharma - correcting, transforming, and changing the mind. Here the term Dharma refers to something that we need to practise.

From a wider perspective, the Sanskrit word 'dharma' also means that which holds its own identity, or nature, or characteristic. From that perspective, everything is dharma and there is nothing that is not included in that. From that perspective all the objects of knowledge are dharma. For example, this glass is dharma in the sense that it holds its own characteristics and identity. That makes it unique and distinctive from all other objects. That's why we can differentiate this glass from any other objects.

However, when we talk of the Dharma as something we put into practice and apply in our life we are talking about the practice where we focus the mind and remove all negative states of mind, replacing them with a positive state of mind. Sanskrit is one of the oldest languages and it is very rich in the sense that those who understand that language semantically also understand the actual contextual meaning of the words.

In order to appreciate the benefit of meditation practice, we should understand that how meditation deals with the very root of all our problems. For instance, if when your mood swings from happy to unhappy within a short period of time you investigate what changes have taken place in that short time you can note that when you feel very unhappy, your mind is very agitated and disturbed. So, you can clearly connect the cause of the mood change to your state of mind. When you are experiencing unhappiness, your mind is restless or very distracted, and perhaps filled with negative attitudes and thoughts, whereas when you were happy it was not like that. So from that perspective, we can understand that how beneficial meditation practice is, because it helps us to transform our mind and get rid of disturbing thoughts. Through this it enables us to gain control of our mind rather than allowing our mind to be overwhelmed by disturbing thoughts and mental afflictions.

From another perspective, unwanted experiences and unhappiness and are directly related to our own way of thinking. So, we have to understand that the only way to overcome this problem is to cultivate a different way of thinking. Even if someone else is trying to help nothing

will happen until we personally do something to remove that way of thinking.

It is important to recognise that sometimes we tend to hold onto a certain thought as if it is very precious and trustworthy, even though it is the reason why we feel so agitated, tense or anxious. Through engaging in thought transforming meditation practice, the moment we cultivate a different way of thinking we will be healed from this unwanted and very painful state of mind. So from this perspective we can call meditation practice the best healing medicine for curing the real cause of illness within us.

We begin our meditation by choosing the sitting posture that is most comfortable and suitable for ourselves. Those of you who are familiar with the seven features of the sitting posture should try to adopt that posture. Then we should think of the true source of the unending suffering and misery we experience in life. The true cause lies within ourselves in the form of negative states of mind or thoughts.

We should recognise those thoughts and point to them saying, 'It is you who is the source of my continual suffering! I cannot find anything else other than that which causes my suffering'. Think of the excellent external conditions in your life. Think of how fortunate you are in having an abundance of food, drink and a comfortable home. Everything you want is there and yet there is continuous suffering. You cannot find external things that you can point out as a cause of suffering, but can you recognise suffering arising internally from the negative states of mind, so point yourself towards this negative state of mind that lies within yourself as the cause of suffering.

As you focus and direct your mind towards that negative state of mind, try to cultivate some sort of aversion towards it. Then say to yourself, 'I want to finish it off, and that's why I am engaging in this meditation practice'. In this practice you determine that you won't give a chance for these negative states of mind to take control of you for even a second. Develop this kind of determination to challenge and defeat this negative state of mind. With this determination and motivation, begin your meditation practice by fully resting the mind inwards, removing all mental and external distractions.

As the mind rests within you begin this meditation, simply direct the mind to inhaling and exhaling as an object of the mind. Remembering this point, we can now begin the meditation practice.

[Meditation]

If anyone has a question, please feel welcome to ask it.

Question: If there is a wolf attacking a flock of sheep killing them and affecting the livelihood of the farmer, what should the farmer do with the wolf?

The shepherd's job is to stop the wolf from attacking the herd. You also don't want to harm the wolf as well, so there is a moral dilemma. You can also raise question of what should you do if someone abuses a family member like your wife?

A student once asked another geshe, 'What if another person abuses my wife? What should I do? Should I fight back?'. When this geshe asked me for my opinion, I said that this is the time for you to support your loved ones. In this situation if you don't have the guts then you can't do much except run away or just do nothing. However, it is a normal human reaction to stand up to perpetrators of harm.

Of course, it is good to apply skills and tactics to defeat the enemy. Sometimes you simply have to show bravery, and that will be enough to discourage the enemy, and you don't have to do anything other than that. Normally an enemy will attack if you seem weak, whereas if you seem to be stronger that will discourage them. That is the way it works. If you they realise that you have a stronger and bigger weapon, then they will retreat.

Some of you might have heard this story in the past but when I was studying in Varanasi I was at a bookshop in the city with a close friend, who has now moved to America. At the shop there was an Indian boy who started to cause trouble and then slapped my friend, then more other Indians joined in and they started to steal my friend's wristwatch. I knew that it was a well known in the Indian community that Tibetans always carry a knife, so I moved my hand into my pocket as if I carried a knife and they all just ran away! My friend was pretty impressed my move and said, 'You are very clever!'

What is important is that we should not lose our compassion and our spiritual qualities. However spiritual practice doesn't necessarily mean that you have to run away in the face of challenges and difficulties. For example, if an enemy attacks you, sometimes we need to confront and challenge them. What is important is that you have to maintain your motivation, and a clear state of mind.

That was a good question. Is there another?

Question: Following on from that, there is a very important ethical dilemma that lot of people have in Australia and elsewhere concerning the environment. Native creatures suffering as a result of changes to the environment. So there is a culling program and a split between those who support this and those who don't want to do any killing. How is that dilemma resolved?

That is a very difficult question. From the Buddhist perspective you cannot really say one is right and one is wrong. There is a quotation from the Lord Buddha that is often used, 'I accept the norms of the conventional world and I do not go against those norms'. So from that perspective, we have to abide with what is agreed by the majority. But we can also make a judgement in terms of context, and in terms of the number of lives at stake by taking certain actions. It all depends on a case-by-case analysis to weigh which decision is the right decision.

From the individual person's perspective each one has the right, and freedom to do as much as possible is to prevent harm to other beings.

Of course, laws change depending on the type of government but overall everyone holds responsibility for the laws in the country. In bringing in a law we have to look not just in terms of current situation. It is more

important is to look to the long-term future. This is a worldly decision. You have to look to the long-term future, and long-term benefit. Of course, this differs from spiritual practice in that this worldly view only relates to this life. As Buddhist practitioners the real long term is our many future lives. From that perspective, this life is very short.

Most religious teachings emphasise the ethics of refraining from, for example, adultery. This is not just based on the effects on this life but in the future as well. The spiritual practitioner has to look into the impact of their actions in the long term. In the immediate time frame some actions are very satisfying and bring pleasure but in the long term they may have a negative impact. In our everyday life, sometimes we not only engage in negative and destructive actions, but we actually rejoice in engaging or having engaged in those negative actions. That is very sad.

The previous owner of this place was the Christian order, the Daughters of Charity, and the room in that corner was a confessional, where the priest heard confessions of negative acts. We should not be rejoicing in our negative actions; we should be declaring and confessing and purifying them. Their belief is that if you commit any negative actions, you have to do confess and purify them. Buddhists also believe any negativity that we have accumulated can be purified. That is common to spiritual traditions.

Avoiding the en non-virtuous actions is also common to all religions. No killing, no stealing, no lying, no harsh speech, no gossiping – all religions are the same.

That was a good question, thank you.

If we look at Buddhist ethics, we can see the many exceptions the Lord Buddha made. In some situations, you are allowed to one thing, but in a different situation you are not allowed to do it. It also depends on the person. If the person is sick some things are allowed whereas if you are not sick, they are not allowed. Context and purpose, and a case-by-case analysis determines what is right and what is not right.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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