
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

འཇུག་ལམ་རིམ་འགྲིང་བ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

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Before we begin the meditation make sure that you feel relaxed; that's why you are here to find some relaxation, peace and tranquillity. Of the various activities that we do in our life, we can say meditation practice is the most beneficial one, because it truly brings mental and physical peace and happiness. It is very wholesome. We call activities that harm the wellbeing of our mind destructive or unwholesome activities.

We always hope that any actions we undertake in life will bring happiness and overcome difficulty or unhappiness in our life. However, if we check the actual outcome, it does not always accord with our intentions. Sometimes our actions actually destroy the joy or happiness that we already have. Instead of overcoming difficulties our actions have brought more suffering.

What we are talking here is actions that we undertake and the outcome of those actions. We realise how difficult it is to find the true peace, happiness and satisfaction that we are looking for. No matter what we do or achieve, in the end we are still frustrated and unhappy. We are not satisfied with the outcomes in terms of securing peace, happiness and satisfaction in our life. This is where some people will consider alternative methods such as meditation.

Meditation is quite different from other things that we do in that it directs us to find happiness and peace within ourselves. Indeed, through meditation practice we find more peace and happiness and reduce the suffering in our lives, because true peace and happiness lies within us. When the things that we normally do are not giving the answer that we are looking for we should stop doing that, and we should consider doing something different such as learning about meditation and finding out how it can help us.

In a nutshell, meditation practice is about safeguarding our mind and enhancing our peace and happiness. It is about developing more concentration. It is also a means of overcoming distracted and agitated thinking and allowing our mind to rest in stillness.

Here we use the term safeguarding, disciplining or controlling our mind. What does that mean? It doesn't necessarily mean that we have to sit in some specific posture, like a sitting posture. The great Indian master Shantideva advised that those who wish to control their mind should apply mindfulness and alertness with effort. He said,

O you who wish to guard your minds,
I beseech you with folded hands;
Always exert yourselves to guard
Mindfulness and alertness.

We can find a lot about the meaning of mindfulness and alertness in the Buddhist scriptures, such as Asanga's *Compendium of Knowledge*. The Tibetan word for mindfulness is *drenpa* which literally means memory or remembrance.

From this point of view mindfulness refers to remembering the spiritual instructions concerning what to accept or what to reject. Therefore, if you practise mindfulness, you won't commit non-virtues and will make a conscious effort to refrain from them.

With mindfulness or the power of memory we will never forget relevant advice, particularly concerning the ethical practice of refraining from harmful actions. Hence, the practice of mindfulness is particularly important for ordained monks and nuns to safeguard their vows and adhere to pure ethical discipline. That is why His Holiness the Dalai Lama often advises people to never forget mindfulness and alertness.

Here we have many older students who have taken all the different levels of vows – the pratimoksha, bodhisattva and tantric vows. So they should understand that the only way to protect these vows is to apply mindfulness and alertness. If you practise mindfulness of, or keep remembering all the precepts, and the practices of what to do and what not to do, you will not break any precept or vow. That is very important.

You will find various terms in English to describe alertness, such as introspection, vigilance or awareness. Basically, alertness or introspection is the wisdom or intelligent part of our mind that has the ability to discern the pros and cons of our actions of body, speech and mind. Through alertness we can recognise if our actions are corrupted by any faults, and this allows us to take appropriate counter measures. As part of applying alertness we always need to be vigilant and watch our verbal, physical or mental actions, and monitor whether they are positive or negative. So, alertness is an important tool to apply in our practice. With mindfulness we are able to retain our full focus on the practice while alertness enables us to prevent faults or obstacles.

Not only should we apply mindfulness and alertness in sitting meditation, but we should also apply it in our everyday life so that whatever actions we do will be effective and beneficial. As said before, by virtue of applying mindfulness in meditation we will be able to retain our mental focus on a virtuous object. Because of the force of mindfulness, we won't forget the object, just as someone who is very hungry will always remember food and can't get rid of the thought of eating. I remember a young boy when I was in Varanasi, who missed his elder brother very badly especially when he was hungry. He had a very affectionate brother who used to feed him with his hand. So, the boy used to say that when he got hungry he remembered his brother's hand. The boy left Varanasi after a couple of months.

You should hold or remember the object in meditation with mindfulness, just as the boy remembered his brother's hand when he was hungry. An example closer to our own experience is when we fall in love with someone, and how we become so obsessed and attached to that person. At that time thoughts of that person are always present in our minds or, in other words, the image of that person appears spontaneously and continuously. In a similar way, we need to develop the force of mindfulness so that we are able to retain our focus on the object continuously, forcefully and spontaneously in meditation practice. However, every now and then we should apply alertness, checking whether the mind is really focusing on the object or not. Doing this will help to bring more clarity and stability to the mind during meditation.

We will do just a few minutes of breathing meditation. First make sure you relax your body. Then check your motivation, in order to know why you are meditating. Sometimes, if you have more time, do a bit of reflection on the benefits of practising meditation and shortcomings of not practising meditation. After you have cultivated the right motivation, try to get rid of all outgoing thoughts or external distractions, so that your mind will fully abide within. Having brought the mind inward, then instead of wandering off to any other object, direct the mental attention just on the incoming and outgoing breath, without being distracted by any external objects. Begin this meditation now please.
(Pause for meditation)

Begin chanting Buddha's mantra, again without losing your focus to any external objects, as you chant, just focus on the sound of the mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNI YE SOHA

There is an opportunity for questions and answers. Please raise your hand if you have a question.

Question. Sometimes when I am busy, I get distracted and then disturbed by something like a news item on my phone. After that I find it very difficult to return my concentration to the task at hand. What can I do to overcome this problem?

You may have to take the state of your concentration to the next level. Initially our concentration can only last for a minute or even a few seconds. In order to stay there longer without losing concentration, whatever the other causes, we have to have an increased state of concentration. In order to achieve this, we need to do more meditation. Does that relate to your question?

The question is how we can make progress in meditation. If we are not careful we can fall into bad habits when we are doing meditation. Usually when distraction arises we try even harder and sometimes even force ourselves to return to meditation. However, distraction arises easily, and then we get frustrated. If we approach meditation like this, then, no matter how long and how many times we practice, we always fall into the same bad habit and don't make any progress.

Lama Tsong Khapa advised that for beginners it is good to make the length of your session short but have more frequent sessions. So, initially if you may be able to stay on your object of meditation for only two or three minutes and after that your mind wanders off. At that time, it is better to take a short break instead of trying too hard to get the mind back on to the object. You can utilise the break time for some relaxation. You should then return to the next meditation session and see whether in this session you can retain your concentration a bit longer than in the previous session, say one to four minutes longer. If your concentration lapses again and you are unable to focus, take another break. Quality is far more important than quantity if you want to learn how to tame your mind.

Between mental and sensory consciousness, mental consciousness is the more dominating in the sense that when the mind is fully focussed on a particular object, then the sensory consciousness ceases to be functional in the sense of not noticing form, sound, smell etc, even if these objects are present. That's why we won't be able recall perceiving any sensory objects later on. Therefore, if we are meditating well

with good concentration then we should not be hearing noises or visually seeing things even if these objects are present.

The benefit of meditation also extends to your everyday life, where an increased state of concentration is a very useful tool to do your job more effectively.

One of the goals of meditation practice is to be able to gain control of the mind, so that it is in your hands when you want your mind to concentrate. If you have the ability to direct your mind in whichever direction you want, you can use the same ability with any other things that you do in the world. There is no doubt there are very many benefits of practising meditation and thought transformation. So, we must practise meditation and make no excuses for avoiding practising it.

Some people say that due to traumatic experiences from childhood due to too much pressure from or abuse by family members, they find it too difficult to apply the practice. Some people think they do not have time for meditation, but they go to a movie or go jogging. Five minutes of meditation in the morning will make your jogging much better. What we need to do is to make a consistent effort and hope for gradual progress. In the scriptures there is an illustration of a large tree which has a very sour taste. You cannot change the whole tree to taste sweet by adding one drop of sweetener. However, there is a chance to change the taste if a drop of sweetener is added over a long period of time.

Likewise, if we think of our own view of happiness and the actions we take to bring about happiness, we see that for a long time, we have had a fixed idea that happiness results from external objects, and so all our actions in pursuit of happiness have had an external focus. We don't have a genuine knowledge or conviction of the fact that true peace and happiness is lying within us, let alone the importance of doing regular practice. It is not realistic to expect profound happiness from a bit of spiritual practice.

At the same time, we should not give up. We should persevere on a regular basis. If we don't achieve our goal in this life, at least we plant some seeds for future lives. Grasping too much at this life, always thinking of money is not good. It is better not to think too much and to just relax. You don't have children?

Student: One.

My younger sister has nine children! One is Kelsang, who works in Café Bliss. I was seventeen when I left, and my younger sister was nine. Australia is a very good land of opportunity, but some leaders here do not care about the people. They cry if they lose their seat in parliament, but they have no compassion for the homeless. Women are more suited to leadership roles because of their natural tendency to compassion and loving kindness. It is good to think about harmony and happiness in the home and make sure you do no harm.

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Edited Version

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