
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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10 October 2018

So, as always we should begin with a fully relaxed body. In addition to achieving a relaxed body, one thing I always make an effort to do, and also advise other people to do, is to try to achieve a restful, peaceful and clear state of mind so that we can truly feel at rest.

We say that we don't have time for rest and enjoyment, which is really not true. If we think of the time we have, we spend more time at home than at work. However, even though we don't have any obligations or are not physically occupied with work, we may not feel we are at rest, rather we may feel stressed and anxious. If we check the cause of our stress and anxiety, obviously it is not work related or because we are overly busy with some physical activity. So the obvious cause of our restlessness is the lack of peace and tranquillity within our mind because mentally we still are keeping ourselves overly busy with too many distracting thoughts. If we check at that particular moment and ask ourselves if our mind is at home or at work, then most likely we will find that our mind is at work or outside, not at home. If we think along these lines, then we can recognise that we disadvantage ourselves when our mind is not present or not where our body is.

This shows us how wonderful it would be if our mind was resting in the same place as our body. I think there is a tremendous benefit in gaining some sort of skill and knowledge about achieving peace and happiness both on the physical and mental level to ensure that when we are physically at rest and enjoying life's comforts, we are mentally at rest and happy too.

When we age, like when we live to over seventy years old, obviously we will be doing less externally or physically. We will be spending more time at home or by ourselves. Therefore, at this time, if we have an ability to mentally or inwardly find peace, then we will truly experience a sense of a deeper, greater and more meaningful life with peace, happiness and satisfaction.

Most people work hard and try to save money during the early period of their life so when they retire or reach the age of seventy, materially they have enough to provide for themselves and will have nothing to worry about. Therefore, at that time, if they also have enough inner knowledge and meditational experience to maintain a peaceful and clear state of mind that would be a tremendous benefit.

Essentially, peace and happiness in our life is contingent upon external and internal factors, although our view of happiness is primarily based on the external or physical level in terms of material conditions. Of course, good material conditions are very important. Therefore, I

particularly advise younger people to complete their education, work hard and secure wealth for the future. However, good material conditions alone are not enough so I also advise them to learn about Dharma and meditation to maintain a positive mental attitude, peace and clarity within their mind.

I encourage people to make the best use of their time because whatever we want to achieve in life takes time. In other words, it is not something we are going to achieve all of a sudden. It's the same with meditation practice. Here, we are talking about training; about being able to control and calm our mind. Through our knowledge and experience of mind training, whenever we are confronted with a disturbed, unhappy or agitated state of mind, we will be able to utilise our knowledge and overcome that. In order to be able to do that, we need to train ourselves in meditation practice. So we have to start at the beginning.

I always say we have to start from a young age to meditate and get insight into our mind. If we have been training and doing the practice for a long period of time, then we will find it easier when we are old. Sometimes, if we don't practice for long enough, then in old age, we may find it very difficult. In fact, sometimes I find it is easier to influence or teach people at a younger age than to teach older people whose mind can be too fixed. I find them more accepting and receptive to what I am trying to say.

Therefore, we have to realise, particularly when we are young, how important education is. No matter what priorities we have, like having a social life and making friends, it will be very harmful in the long run if we waste opportunities in our youth. We should concentrate on getting an education rather than wasting time socialising with friends and just going along with them. We must make the best use of this time and be successful with our education and our career and save money for the future. It is important to save money in the bank but at the same time we should invest in developing our knowledge in regard to maintaining a positive state of mind and overcoming negative states of mind. There is no point in increasing our savings if we cannot use them to find true peace and happiness. Along with material wealth, we need to increase our investment in terms of securing peace and happiness within ourselves; not decreasing or losing that. Here, we are talking about mind training, knowledge about our mind and meditation practice.

Unless we have some ability to subdue our mind, we will find it very difficult to find mental peace, without which we cannot be at peace – even if we find peace externally by taking a break from work. We can observe that we can be physically at rest and doing nothing, and how our mind can be preoccupied by various distracting thoughts and how, as a result, we feel restless. In such times, we may find it extremely difficult to bring our mind back from disturbing thoughts and emotions, which overwhelms and overpowers our mind. We simply become prey to these disturbing thoughts and this clearly shows our inability and weakness in subduing the mind. Therefore, in order to overcome and minimise the influence of disturbing thoughts, we engage in

meditation practice which is a form of mind training or discipline whereby we make the mind stay inward by placing it on a given object.

Meditation is a way to bring the mind inside. When we talk about getting control over the mind, sometimes people get this wrong notion that meditation means that we can't think about the outside world or engage in it. They think that when someone meditates or is a spiritual person, they are inward or will always be withdrawn. But in fact, that is wrong because meditation practice is simply a means of gaining control over or subduing the mind. If we gain control over our mind, then we can engage in the external world more effectively and positively.

With a controlled state of mind, if we see external objects, for example a very attractive object, our mind cannot easily become obsessed with it or crave for it. Whereas, if we do not have a controlled state of mind, then sometimes we easily get attracted to or obsessed with an object and then suffer as a result. In a way, that object becomes like a power which controls our mind and we lose our self-control. We lose control of the mind and feel so weak, as if that attractive object has almost sucked all the energy out of us.

So, the whole point of meditation practice is to gain control of the mind and stop disturbing thoughts. When we have a controlled state of mind and engage in an activity or with an object it won't have much impact on us. Whereas, if we don't have control over our mind, then, in a sense, we become very vulnerable to external things and situations.

When we talk about meditation practice it usually involves some sort of discipline including a physical posture with specific features. Of course, that alone is not enough. At the same time, we need to try to discipline the mind by focusing on a particular object. It is recommended that initially we should keep the duration of each session short by dividing it into a number of sessions. As we make progress then we slowly extend the length of each session and minimise the number of sessions. What is more important is to consider the effectiveness or the quality of our practice than the length or frequency of the practice. By doing the meditation properly, we will gradually notice an improvement, such as an increased period of good concentration on the object.

We need to understand the benefit and the method of meditation practice very clearly so that we can be more motivated and effectively engage in the practice. Of course, in the end, it doesn't matter how much we learn about meditation practice, the most important thing to do is to put it into practice. In this regard, it is not good enough for me to advise others to do meditation practice and be kind to others and so on but I must also put that into practice. If I do not put it into practice then I, as a follower of the Buddha, am lying to myself as well as to the Lord Buddha. Also, I would not be able to consider myself a spiritual practitioner because I would not be practising what I teach others. Therefore, both teachers and disciples must take their spiritual practice seriously. Not only should they say that they should practise but

they must also find the time and use that time to practise. This is very important.

In fact, there is some advice relating to teachers called the four means of gathering disciples of which two are about teachers teaching in accordance with the interest and needs of the disciples and then putting that into practice themselves. In other words, they should inspire others to put the Dharma they teach into practice, as well as putting it into practice themselves.

So, we will begin the usual breathing meditation. In this meditation, we will be focusing our mind on inhaling and exhaling as an object of the mind. Sometimes, we call the object of meditation an object to place the mind upon, but I would also like to call that object an object that obstructs or blocks the mind. Here, the object is the breath upon which we place our mind but it is also an object which blocks or obstructs the mind from running away after other objects. We are supposed to fix the mind. In meditation, when we focus the mind on the breath, we want to make sure that our focus is not just half and half, rather that it is fully focussed on the object.

We are applying some sort of discipline, some sort of training to the mind in which we make it sit on that given object. Obviously, in the beginning our mind might not be able to do this. It is not used to sitting or listening to us, so it may not sit there or it might sit there only for one or two minutes, definitely not for an hour. However, if we meditate, which means to familiarise ourselves in this practice of mind training or meditation practice, then eventually we get some sort of confidence or some sort of capacity to retain a longer period of our mental attention and also have some control over our mind. We can then utilise the same capability of controlling the mind in our everyday life or outside of the meditation practice. For instance, afterwards, if we experience some unwanted, agitated state of mind, we can redirect and divert the mind to a different object or thought. Therefore, our knowledge and familiarity with the meditation practice will be very useful in helping us overcome lots of problems in everyday life, particularly those which are mainly related to our mind. So, we now begin the meditation.

[Meditation]

So we will now chant the Buddha's mantra. Just continue our meditation and instead of losing our mind to any external object, we redirect it to the sound of the mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

Question: My father is very ill and I am finding it difficult to look after him. What advice do you have?

I understand and am sorry to hear that your father is very sick and also that you are finding it very difficult to look after him. I encourage you to continuously take good care of him. It is said that supporting and taking good care of your parents is the true Dharma practice and in fact the excellent Dharma practice. Normally, it is regarded as a rightful duty of children to look after their aged parents just as they showed much care and support to them in

their childhood and throughout their whole lives. Besides, the parents appreciate any help they receive from their children more than help they receive from other people. Some old parents keep aside a bunch of flowers they receive from children and take great pride in telling others that it comes from their children. So, your help means a lot to your father. I understand it is a tough time for you and that there are lots of things happening in your life but you should try to be a bit braver and endure whatever you are going through and do your best to support your father.

When we accept our situation, when we are willing to take upon certain situations, our willingness and our acceptance of the situation actually transforms the situation into something easier and lighter. A mother who has a very difficult child, like a child who is not sleeping at night, has to stay up the whole night, yet she is quite happy to make that sacrifice because she has willingly accepted it.

It is said that the most important factor in overcoming difficulties is our mental acceptance or preparedness to confront the situation. Whereas, if there is not enough mental determination, if we cannot accept hardship or difficulty and are not prepared to endure it, then the situation will overtake us, and we will fall under its pressure. We won't be able to bear that situation. Whereas, if we are mentally determined, then we are on top of it, therefore we will not feel that the difficulty or hardship is too stressful.

Given that your father is old and sick and given that he is also your father, from the point of view of the Dharma, there is no better object for you to practise Dharma on than him. There was one monk who had a very aged mother. She was very sick and he was very concerned about her. However, her sister was taking very good care of her. I asked him how is his mother? 'My mother's mind is very, very happy,' he said. 'She is very sick but very happy. Her sister is looking after her very well – twenty-four hours a day.' I said to the monk, 'well, her sister is demonstrating true Dharma practice. There is no doubt about that. Her actions are truly benefiting another, especially someone who is in need and dependent on receiving help from others.' What I meant to imply to the monk is that when we do meditation practice it is doubtful whether or not it is even Dharma practice.

It is good that, at the moment, you have the opportunity to support your father because it is better to support him than regretting it later if you haven't given him the support he deserves. There are some people who didn't support their parents while they were alive and after they passed away they feel bad; they feel regret. What's the point of that? Therefore, if you do your best to be supportive, then you will feel good that you did everything you could.

From this question, everyone can get some idea of the importance of supporting each other. Especially those who are close to us, like our family members. In fact, I have been advising people over and over again to be kind; to be friendly to others. My intention in teaching has never ever been to convert people to Buddhism or for people to become Buddhists. That was not my intention.

Even His Holiness Dalai Lama advises that should not be the intention. What is most important is to benefit others from my heart. Out of that spirit of helping or benefiting others, I always come here trying to share my knowledge and to say that the most important thing is to maintain good relationships with other people and be kind and support each other.

Thank you

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