
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

འཇུག་ལམ་རིམ་འགྲིང་བ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

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As usual, please make yourself comfortable and relax your body. It is also important that our minds are at rest and at peace. We may be physically at rest but if our mind is not at rest and is busy with distracting thoughts or any negative states of mind, then we cannot feel at rest. We need to recognise the effect our mind has on our experience and feeling. In fact, how we feel, whether we are happy or unhappy, depends upon what frame of mind we have within us. Therefore, while we find some rest physically, if our mind is also at rest or abiding in virtue, then we can naturally experience a **true sense of peace and tranquillity**.

All religious traditions advocate the value of cultivating a virtuous state of mind and abandoning non-virtuous states of mind. How do we differentiate between these two minds? As we are talking here about our own mind, and our mental attitude, we need to turn our focus inward and observe our own thoughts, and states of mind, so we know the difference between a virtuous and non-virtuous state of mind. **Our best tool is our own intelligence or sense of discrimination**, which we need to observe our thoughts and emotions. A virtuous state of mind results in happiness, and a non-virtuous state of mind results in suffering. Therefore, the defining characteristics between the virtuous and non-virtuous states of mind lie with the consequences of those minds respectively.

If the consequence is desirable and pleasant, we identify the state of mind as virtuous and positive, whereas if the consequence is undesirable and unpleasant, we identify it as non-virtuous and a negative state of mind. From this perspective, we understand that the happiness that we continuously seek stems from a virtuous state of mind, and the unhappiness that we do not want (and try to avoid) stems from a non-virtuous state of mind within us.

Furthermore, on closer investigation, we can understand that, in fact, the main factor that determines our experience, feeling, wellbeing, happiness or suffering, peace or confusion, is within us, our own mental attitude and not the external causes and circumstances of our lives. If we observe how we feel as we experience the various life events and circumstances that we face, we will see that our own mental attitude, way of thinking and outlook has more effect on us and our experiences than the circumstances themselves, regardless of whether they are favourable or unfavourable. Therefore, we can understand the benefits of maintaining a virtuous or positive state of mind in order to find more happiness and reduce suffering. We can do this simply by training our mind.

If we recall from our own experience a certain time or situation where we may be feeling very restless, stressed or anxious, the primary cause for this is most likely some sort of disturbing thought. This disturbing thought can be overwhelmingly powerful and dominating. It can accompany us all the time, spoiling everything we do. It impedes us from

moving ahead or working towards a better future. Because of it we cannot function as normal. The first step to change our situation around is to recognise that the main cause is our disturbing thought.

Next, we need to be motivated and determined to change and clear away that thought. Then, **'how do we get rid of these disturbing thoughts?'** We need to take into account how those thoughts arise. They arise because we look at things in a certain way. This means that if we manage to look at things in a different way, then we can cultivate a different thought that runs counter to the previous thought. Since these two thoughts are mutually exclusive, both cannot be present within us at the same time. To go about cultivating desired positive states of mind and getting rid of unwanted negative states of mind, we **engage in meditation or mind training practice**.

We need to practise meditation consistently over a period of time to see its effect in altering our way of thinking and transforming our negative states of mind into positive states of mind; or increasing positive states of mind and decreasing negative states of mind. A little bit of effort over a short time will not make much difference to our neurotic mind. However, if we understand the mind and the ways and means to training it well, and then engage in a daily meditation practice diligently, we will gradually see its effect in gaining control over our mind. We will gradually notice disturbing thoughts losing their grip on our mind. As a result, we will find more space in our mind for peace, happiness and shining of joy and lucidity from within. These kinds of inner qualities are extremely beneficial because they enable us to live a stable life in a fast-changing world.

Cultivating knowledge and conviction or faith in this is essential. We need to recognise that we must understand our mind and make an effort to practise meditation, as well as having a strong belief that it is possible to train our mind. A disturbing thought can be cleared away, but because we harbour it within us for a long time, we become so habituated to it; we hold on to it tightly as if we cannot separate it from us. No matter how forceful the thought is, it is important to recognise that we can decrease its intensity and eventually get rid of it completely.

Generally speaking, if we look at the scale of which direction our mind is leaning more towards, between the positive and negative state of mind - for a lot of us, it may be leaning more towards the negative state. Therefore, if we are beginners in meditation, we have to expect a strong challenge from our unruly mind. As mentioned earlier, we can eventually diminish and win over the negative states of mind through our consistent meditation practice and developing our intellect and knowledge. The term 'meditate' in Tibetan is *gom*, which means to become familiar with or get used to. As literally indicated, to meditate means to familiarise ourselves with a virtuous object. In meditation practice, we direct our mind towards a virtuous object and let it sit there through effort and through applying mindfulness and awareness. In this way, all the distracting thoughts subside. This paves the way for more peaceful and virtuous states mind to arise within us. This is how we can increase our familiarity with positive states of mind while decreasing familiarity with negative states of mind. This is what a meditation practice is all about.

Meditation is not simply a state of nothingness. It is rather an awakening of our intellect and knowledge. As a benefit of meditation, we think wisely and act wisely. That's why

meditation involves us to direct our focus inward, observing and watching our thoughts and emotions. It involves recognising how our thoughts, our mental attitudes, create and shape the world we live in, and pre-determine our experience of it being happy or unhappy, pleasant or unpleasant. Meditation shows us that happiness arises from mind. Similarly, unhappiness arises from mind. Therefore, the key to living a happy life is having a steady, calm and positive state of mind. This we can cultivate through meditation practice.

To have a genuine interest and motivation to practise meditation, we need to recognise the benefits of meditation. And to meditate effectively, we need to understand how to meditate. Just like being successful in completing a project, not only do we need to have a strong motivation with a clear recognition of our goal, but also belief and confidence in how to reach our goal. Similarly, to do well in meditation, we need to have a clear **understanding of meditation in terms of why and how we meditate.**

Talking about knowledge, there are **different levels of knowledge** we must develop along the path. In the initial level, our knowledge is based on or arises from others, listening to others or reading books. This type of knowledge is not enough. So, we need to take it to the next level by making it our own knowledge through fully applying our intelligence and self-analysis of the initial knowledge. In the next level, our knowledge is based on and arises from our contemplation and analysis. Finally, we need to further develop or refine our knowledge so that it is based on and arises from our meditation. In this final level, it becomes our inner realisation and experience. It is important, therefore, to be more inspired and motivated to engage in meditation practice and to do the right thing in order for the practice to be effective.

We should apply the same methodology used in developing knowledge in our approach to meditation practice. First, learn and study meditation well. Next think over it again and again, then check its benefits and relevance to our lives. Finally, we need to practise meditation hard and diligently. With this approach, our meditation practice will benefit us not only while we are meditating, but also while we are not meditating, and we will be able to maintain a calm and positive state of mind. As a benefit of meditation practice, we can say that a person will become stronger, more resilient, more self-confident, live a more stable life, and will not be easily deceived by other people or influenced by the outside world. Relating to this the Lord Buddha said, **'you are your own protector and saviour;** other than yourself, who else can be your protector and saviour. Subduing your own mind is the way to bring about happiness.'

I am saying that we generate two types of mind - virtuous and non-virtuous states of mind. A virtuous state of mind is something that we should possess and rely upon. A non-virtuous state of mind is something that we should not possess and rely upon. Think of them like we choose our friends. We won't knowingly choose people who are bad natured as our friends unless we are foolish or stupid. We will choose good people as our friends. So, the above quote by the Lord Buddha resonates along the same lines in saying we have a choice in choosing between virtuous and non-virtuous states of mind.

We will now do our usual breathing meditation. Begin with choosing a comfortable sitting posture and relaxing our body. Let go of all distracting thoughts. As our mind begins to settle

within us, as all the distracting thoughts subside, we will begin to feel a state of vacuum within us. Try to remain in that state for a little while or until just before your mind wanders off outside. Then begin a breathing meditation by directing the mind to fully focus on the inhaling and exhaling of the breath, without being distracted by other objects.

(meditation)

We will continue the meditation with the chanting of the Buddha's mantra. Again, we maintain the focus inwards. However, as we chant, we simply direct our mental focus on to the sound of the mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

There's room for a question. Please raise your hand if you have a question.

Question: If my dying friend is a Christian, is it ok to say Buddhist prayers for my friend to find a good rebirth in future?

Answer: You can do the Buddhist prayers or Christian prayers, both are good. It doesn't matter that the two religions have different views on the future life. As you know according to Buddhism, sentient beings can take rebirths in any of the three realms of samsara or achieve liberation from samsara. Therefore, you can pray for the good rebirth and subsequent attainment of the liberation. Alternatively, I believe according to Christianity, after death, people can either go to heaven or hell, so of course, we should pray for them to go to heaven. I don't see Buddhist prayers contradicting that.

Question: My question relates to the use of the terms 'transforming the mind' and 'getting rid of the negative state of mind'. Do we need to recognise the mind that needs to be got rid of?

Answer: Maybe the question is more to do with the contextual meaning of the English words. We normally say we need to abandon or purify or get rid of negative or non-virtuous states of mind. 'Abandon or purify' here means sterilising the non-virtues so they can't produce results or preventing them from yielding their result, which is suffering.

We can purify the specific negativities that we can remember or recognise that we created, as well as purify those negativities that we don't remember or recognise having created, such as negativities we created in past lives. Therefore, it is not necessary to recognise the negativity in order to be able to purify or abandon it.

All are good questions and I hope my explanations are relevant to your questions.

Thank you.

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Edited Version*

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