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# Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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As usual, we begin with a very relaxed and restful body. Including myself, we are all here to find peace and relaxation.

When we speak of peace and relaxation, we are speaking about the peace and relaxation of our mind and body, which are closely interrelated. When we feel physically relaxed and comfortable, this helps us to mentally feel good, think properly, and maintain a positive mental attitude. Likewise, if we are happy and peaceful mentally, that makes a difference to our physical health and wellbeing. On the other hand, imbalance and disturbance in the wellbeing of our body can affect our mind, and vice versa.

In meditation practice, we learn about various factors that are either conducive or an obstacle for bringing about peace and happiness, particularly on the mental level. We understand that it is important for us to be away from the hustle and bustle of the outside world in order to find some physical peace and relaxation. If the outside environment and conditions are crowded, noisy and hectic, then it is more difficult for us to feel relaxed, and we are also more prone to physical harm. Similarly, we need to understand that it is important to get rid of all our distracting thoughts or mental chatter in order for our mind to be at rest. Distracting thoughts destroy our inner peace, as well as greatly harming our mental health.

Let me give you an example of how our physical activity can sometimes take over our mental activity and emotion. Let us say people go to a concert to see their favourite performance on the stage. However, the performers make the audience physically engage in the event to the point where sometimes the audience goes delirious and immerse themselves in dancing and singing such that they completely forget the performers. Both the audience and the performers become one. This shows the influence of physical movement and environment over our mind. Unfortunately, sometimes at such events, the crowd goes out of control and there's violence. At the end of the show, some people go home with wounds and blood. That's sad, and not the reason why people participate in the event. Our mind can greatly affect our overall wellbeing and physical health. In fact, the primary focus of learning and practising meditation is protecting, safeguarding and taking care of our mind.

So, we have to ask what we know about our mind, thought and emotions. We have within us two types of states of mind. Positive states of mind, which are creative and beneficial; and negative states of mind, which are destructive and harmful. If we have this sense of discernment between negative and positive types of

mind, then we will then know the meaning of protecting our mind. We will then understand that the point of protecting or safeguarding our mind means safeguarding the states of mind that are positive and beneficial, and not losing or weakening them. Protecting our mind also means rejecting or eliminating those states of mind that are negative and harmful by applying an appropriate remedy.

Here we understand that not all the thoughts that we generate are beneficial. Some are destructive and harmful because they serve as a source of suffering, unhappiness and dissatisfaction. However, there are other states of mind and thoughts that serve as a source of happiness, joy, peace and stability. Strangely, we normally do not talk or think about the causes of happiness and suffering from the perspective of our mental attitude. However, many problems we undergo in our everyday life are directly related to our mind and can be traced back to a certain thought or emotion.

If people who experience this kind of mentally-related problem don't recognise the cause as being their mind, they will continuously hold on to the very state of mind that is the cause of their problem, and some will even intensify that mind. Hence, they will continuously suffer and will not find the way out of their problem. No matter what they may try, for as long as that state of mind is within them, they will suffer regardless of where they go or what they do, or who they spend time with. On the other hand, if people maintain a positive state of mind within themselves, then they will find peace, happiness and joy, whether they are alone or with others - whatever they are doing.

It is very clear to all of us as far as what we want and do not want. What we want is happiness and what we do not want is suffering. This is the fundamental wish of all of us. The reason why religious people seek liberation from worldly existence or full enlightenment is because they wish to achieve happiness and avoid suffering. Non-religious people too do things in their lives to be happy and avoid suffering. People consume food, drink and even smoke in order to find happiness and avoid suffering.

So the area where we are under the control of delusions and confusion relates to our understanding and practise of the law of cause and effect in order to achieve happiness and avoid suffering. We particularly need to understand and recognise that the significant cause of happiness and suffering lies with us. As we are saying here, holding on to some states of mind or emotions brings suffering, whereas some other states of mind bring happiness, which means that external factors become ineffective and insignificant. This fact we can understand from our own experience.

The next question is how to safeguard or protect our mind? The answer is to apply a meditation practice, particularly one that can counteract any disturbing thought or emotion that is most immediately harmful to us. When we talk about disturbing thoughts or emotions, we are talking about mental delusions or afflictive emotions such as jealousy, anger, pride, attachment, desire etc. Each one of these mental afflictions has the

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effect of destroying our peace and happiness, as well as bringing unhappiness, suffering, fear, anxiety, tension and inner turbulence.

In terms of our experience, the destructiveness or disturbance of mental afflictions, such as anger or hatred, is very obvious; whereas that of attachment-desire is less noticeable unless we take into account a strongly obsessive desire. Also, we can notice that people have varying degrees of specific afflictive emotions. This is to say, some people are more prone to anger, others to attachment and so forth.

When any mental afflictions overpower our mind, we will feel down, unhappy and disturbed. At that time, we will lose our self-control, peace and sanity. We should reflect upon the effects of each one of these afflictions. For example, we should think of how we feel when our mind is overpowered by anger. As we think over anger in relation to our experience and anger's potential to destroy our life, we are clearly able to say to ourselves, 'I don't want anger'. If we ask anyone, they will also say anger is bad. It can harm others and us.

However, some people might say anger is good or necessary to feel more courageous when fighting and defeating enemies. It is true that anger can inflate our mind, even with a thought of forsaking our life or the lives of other people in order to defeat enemies. However, anger is a force of destruction. Let's say you are able to greatly harm enemies. But the question is, what have you gained from that? If you think over this further, then you realise you have not gained anything at all, other than causing harm to others, which in fact is also causing you harm. You will find that just as anger has inflicted so much loss and damage on the enemy, it has also done the same to your own life. So, we can see that there is no virtue or benefit whatsoever in holding a mind such as anger. It is important to know or to be able to say to yourself, 'Anger is a destructive force, is of no benefit, but is full of short-comings and something I need to overcome.'

Likewise, if you consider the shortcomings of attachment or desire, particularly strong attachment when our mind is overpowered by it, we will feel as if it has sucked away all our energy, self-knowledge, freedom and willpower. You cannot think properly, nor can you direct your mind to any other objects but just the desired object. You will feel frustrated, depressed, weak, hopeless and feel that there are no future opportunities. You will feel totally confused and deprived of a sense of discrimination of knowing the difference between right and wrong, beneficial and harmful.

Considering all these shortcomings, you need to apply the remedy for afflictive emotions. The remedy to counteract anger and hatred is to meditate on something that opposes anger and hatred, such as cultivating loving kindness. With loving kindness, you are showing genuine care and concern for others, so you do not want to harm them; whereas with anger, you hate or want to harm others. Therefore, if we meditate on loving kindness, in the sense of getting our mind acquainted with warm-heartedness towards other beings, the result is being able to counteract, or diminish the force of anger, and

eventually even completely get rid of it. Similarly, as a remedy to overcoming attachment or desire, we meditate by imagining or deliberately seeing the desired object from the perspective of undesirability and unattractiveness. This imagination or perception directly opposes the perception of the object as being desirable. This way of meditating counteracts attachment and desire.

So, we understand here that meditation practice helps us in counteracting mental afflictions. It enables us to realise our self-potential or make the best use of it. Mental afflictions, on the other hand, hinder us from using our self-potential; instead they enslave us and inflict suffering upon us. It might be too hard for us at the moment to completely prevent any mental afflictions such as anger from arising. However, gaining some understanding that anger, for example, is very bad and harmful is of tremendous benefit. Then, when anger arises within us, we can at least remain cautious by saying to ourselves, 'it is very bad and can be very harmful and destructive to myself and others.' To be aware of the arising anger and recognising it as a negative state of mind shows that we are not totally under the control of anger. Whereas someone who does not have such an awareness of anger being a negative state of mind can easily fall prey to anger and suffer a lot as a result of it, as well as causing suffering to others.

Meditation practice is also like a form of education to learn about our own emotions, thoughts and states of mind, and the various causes and conditions that induce them. For example, as we mentioned earlier, if we mentally perceive or project an object in an unpleasant, undesirable way, we get angry, whereas by perceiving and projecting the same object in a pleasant and desirable way we generate attachment. We can't have attachment and aversion towards the same object at the same time, however, the change from one to the other can occur even in a very short span of time.

Hence, we understand the fact that the type of object and the way we perceive it is an important determining factor for the states of mind and emotions that arise within us. This means that one way of preventing or getting rid of a particular mind or thought is by switching our mind away from the particular object associated with that mind or thought.

Therefore, I advise people that if they feel anger towards some other person, then they should try to not focus their mind on that person, they should rather try to focus their mind on the anger that arises and that they feel within themselves. We will find that shifting the object of our mental attention is very effective in getting rid of any unwanted states of mind, as well as bringing us inner calmness.

I say that attachment and aversion are the two main sources of problems throughout our entire life. We suffer because we are caught in a battle between these afflictive emotions, which rise and subside depending on our way of perceiving and grasping at things as being either pleasant or unpleasant.

In plain language, meditation practice is a means of training our mind to see different ways of thinking or

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looking at things. So, we are never short of topics for meditation. Meditation is all to do with our mind; it's a skill or technique for modifying or changing our way of thinking. To overcome desire, we train our mind to perceive an object in an opposite way from our usual perception of that object of desire; we just have to train our mind such as imagining or thinking of it in an unpleasant way that is the opposite of desire. Likewise, to overcome anger or hatred we have to perceive the object from the perspective of its pleasantness or desirability. By training our mind in this way, through meditation practice we can at least prevent or extinguish the manifested form of anger.

Before we begin our usual breathing meditation, please bear in mind that we should always start this meditation with a relaxed body. We then need to direct our attention to our mind and try to overcome all distracting thoughts. We should note that our usual mind is very unstable because it always tends to go from object to object. It never wants to sit but is continuously on a trip. It has the bad habit of not settling down or being content with the things that we have. It rather tends to fantasise or go after things that we don't possess or with places that you have never been. As a result, it makes us exhausted, stressed, agitated, frustrated and unhappy. It also uses up our energy and burns us out.

Realising this, we should try to relax the mind inward after relaxing our body, by letting go of all distracting thoughts. However, our mind relies on objects for its existence, because the mind is a phenomenon that is a subjective thing or an object possessor. So, therefore in this meditation, you introduce your incoming and outgoing breath as an object for the mind, and thereby ensure that your mind simply focuses on the incoming and outgoing breath without being distracted by any external objects. With this in mind, we will begin the meditation now.

*(Pause for breathing meditation).*

We now continue with the chanting of the Buddha's mantra. So again, as we chant the mantra just focus on the sound of the mantra, and just make sure that your mind is not distracted by any external objects.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNI YE SOHA

Thank you for your very good attention to the teaching.

It is good to engage in meditation practice because you will find it is very effective in bringing about peace and relaxation within your mind. Scientific research has also found that mental peace and happiness supports or facilitates better physical health too. This is now commonly accepted. Even those people who have a serious physical health issue should practise meditation so that at least they are not adding more to their health problem by mentally worrying about their health too much.

It has been found that those patients who mentally worry too much are just adding more suffering to their existing physical pain and suffering. However, those patients who don't mentally worry too much or who mentally and emotionally manage well recover better, or at least don't

add extra problems to their physical sickness with mental worry.

If we hold a negative or pessimistic view about our situation by thinking, for example, there is no point to living or that there is no happiness in our life, then we end up suffering more and feeling depressed. On the other hand, if we are more accepting of our situation, such as a health problem or any adverse circumstances, and we maintain a positive mental attitude, then we can still mentally and inwardly maintain our peace, sanity and joy. In this way, if patients cultivate a positive mental outlook, then they can still enjoy their lives as much as anyone else.

I come across some people with chronic diseases who mentally are very strong and happy as well. For example, if there is a person who suffers from some eyesight problem, and then if they worry and become anxious about going blind, not being able to see anything, worrying about who will look after them etc., then they will experience traumatic mental problems. This adds more problems for them, which in a way is unnecessary because they are not blind yet. So, we can see here how we can mentally create problems by simply thinking negatively, pessimistically and not checking and controlling our wild mind.

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