
Middle Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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As usual we can spend some time in meditation. Most of us would describe ourselves as meditators, so our job as meditators is to meditate. First though, we need to remember and understand the significance of engaging in a practice of meditation.

Adopting an appropriate posture is important when we meditate, but more important is the need to establish the right state of mind. Establishing the right state of mind evolves when we understand the purpose of our meditation practice. We need to periodically remind ourselves that we meditate to make our minds gentle and positive. That is our main goal when meditating and the reason for our meditation practices.

We all recognise the need to be a person of good conduct, but what makes a person “good”? Being a person of good morals and good behaviour does not depend upon the kinds of clothes an individual wears – a person wearing neat clothes doesn’t mean that person is “good”. Neither does being well-educated – a person having a good education doesn’t mean that individual is “good”. When we investigate the idea of a “good person” in this way, we can clearly see that external circumstances are not determining factors. So what is? The answer is the individual’s *state of mind*. When a person’s mind is genuinely gentle, kind and considerate, then that person is considered “good”. A person’s behaviour and attitude, or what we could describe as an individual’s personality, is linked to the state of that person’s mind. This is what we need to understand.

The relationship between being a good person and meditating is that a meditation practice is a tool that enables an individual’s mind to become clear and positive. To ensure a good state of mind, or a clear conscience, the individual needs to look honestly at his or her mind and analyse its state. A person doing this sincerely and openly can detect destructive states of mind that are not conducive to good behaviour. This means that the process of self-analysis enables us to see how negative states of mind influence us to engage in misbehaviour and misconduct.

Detecting negative states of mind doesn’t come to our attention naturally because of the devious ways of the delusions. Our negative states of mind might be hidden from us so that we don’t really notice them until things go wrong. If we are not careful, our bad characteristics can easily come to the surface when something relatively insignificant occurs. The instant turmoil in our minds that results when this happens leads us to either get hurt or want to defend ourselves. However, being agitated by

small and inconsequential matters will not occur if we pay attention to our minds on a constant basis and have a consistent meditation practice.

We need to remind ourselves again and again that the reason we meditate is so we can develop a clear mind in order to honestly analyse our attitudes and detect negative tendencies. We can then work towards transforming these negative states of mind so that we can develop the opposite of an agitated mentality: a genuinely relaxed, calm, happy and joyful mind. When we meditate, we can reflect as individuals on the significance of the practice in these simple terms: I am meditating because I want to have a genuinely calm and clear mind, so that I can be a person with good morals and behaviour.

We can further reflect upon the need for a meditation practice by recognising how the state of our minds determines the kinds of experiences we have and the quality of our lives. We can see this by investigating our circumstances and noticing that our wellbeing is primarily related to the state of our minds. We feel uncomfortable and uneasy in difficult situations because our mind is in turmoil, rather than because of the situation itself. Some people experience great unease and agitation in their minds even when their external circumstances are favourable, while others have a pleasant and easy-going state of mind even in unfavourable external conditions.

I can attest to maintaining a sense of joy in my mind while experiencing unfavourable external conditions. My state of mind is what kept me going during a period of twenty years or more when, after escaping from Tibet and living in exile, the external conditions I experienced were extremely poor. During that time I persevered and maintained my sense of internal joy, which enabled me to withstand my external difficulties. I even found that my sense of joy and happiness increased, rather than decreased. Of course, my external conditions today are comparatively good, but I can confirm that it is possible to maintain a sense of joy and happiness in one’s mind even when conditions are really bad over a long period of time.

I am sharing this with you because I have experienced internal joy while facing external hardships, so I want to assure you that it is possible to have a happy mind during external difficulties. However, when I have described my past experiences in greater detail, even though the hardships are not experienced by those listening, the accounts have brought tears to their eyes. A few years ago, when I went on a pilgrimage to Nepal with a few students from Tara Institute. I think Damian might have been present and some of the other older students. One of them asked me to tell them a bit about my life. I related aspects of my experiences and, although I was relating my stories in a joyful way, those who were listening began to cry. As they wept, I thought I’d better not tell them any more! [*Laughter.*]

Anyway, the point is that the state of our minds can lead us to destructive behaviour. An example of this is consuming substances that clearly harm our bodies and

minds. By not paying attention to the state of our minds we allow ourselves to fall victim to these substances, and we may reach a point where we are compelled to engage in destructive activities. This happens because we didn't pay careful attention to our minds and we didn't make a strong determination to look after ourselves. If we disregard the state of our minds, their strong tendencies can lead us to engage in negative ways of thinking, which can lead to negative behaviours and ultimately result in unpleasant and unwanted circumstances for us. If we are seriously concerned about our wellbeing and how our wellbeing affects others, then we need to reflect on this and use our own life experiences to take the initiative and make the strong determination to overcome our internal negativities. The practice of meditation helps us to do that. First by making us aware of the negative tendencies we have, which may not be obvious to us initially, and then by transforming these negative tendencies into more positive states of mind. We all have the potential to have a clear and bright state of mind, and we all have the potential for genuine goodness. Meditation reminds us of this, and helps us to rekindle and develop our positive inner qualities.

We need to understand that transforming our mind to become more positive is not only possible, but that this transformation is limitless. We can transform our minds to an immeasurable extent because that is the capacity of the mind. This is in contrast to our physical capabilities, which have obvious restrictions. For example, those who engage in a sport may train hard, but there is a limit to their physical potential. We all have physical boundaries – that is the nature of our physical existence. However, mentally, the potential we have is boundless. The teachings explain that there is always room for us to improve the training of our minds and achieve limitless positive qualities. Therefore, we need to appreciate the significance of meditating as a way to train and transform our mind into positive states for our inner wellbeing.

Another significant point that may be appropriate to share this evening relates to the younger generation because they have so much physical and mental potential. Many youngsters can be easily misled and influenced to lead self-destructive lives, which is a waste of their potential and a great pity. Therefore, I'd like to take this opportunity to remind the younger generation to utilise the great conditions they have now, such as their young bodies and fresh minds, for a good purpose so that they have a meaningful life. I urge them to not waste their lives by allowing their minds to be completely distracted with meaningless things, but rather to watch the state of their minds and take the initiative to use their time to get a good education. From a worldly perspective, a good education is important and necessary. One of my students, who has a Chinese-Malaysian background, shared with me that her grandmother is ninety-two years old and is learning English! [*Geshe-la laughs.*] If someone in their nineties is keen to use her mind, it would be shameful for all of us not to take the initiative! [*Laughter.*]

Having mentioned the significance and the purpose of a meditation practice, we can now meditate. We need to adopt an appropriate physical position, which is upright

but relaxed, and cultivate a clear and comfortable state of mind. The teachings explain that our motivation is of primary importance in whatever activity we engage in, so we also need to establish why we are meditating. The supreme motivation would be to meditate so that we can develop genuine kindness, love and compassion in our hearts in order to be of benefit to all other beings. Our motivation will develop with a regular practise, but it would be extremely beneficial to build a state of mind that is determined, or aspires, to the following intention: From now on I will not engage in any deeds and actions that harm other beings, and I will do everything possible that will be of benefit to them. This motivation is a commitment to not harm any living being and a determination to serve other beings by contributing to their happiness. Generating this motivation on a regular basis and spending just a few minutes thinking about its relevance to transforming our attitudes is an essential practice.

Now that we have set our good motivation we can settle into our meditation practice, which is to focus on the natural rhythm of our breath. We bring our attention to the natural inflow and outflow of our breath, which is unlaboured and free from deep inhalations or exhalations. Our focus on our breath means that we do not allow our minds to be diverted by discursive thoughts or any other forms of distraction that may arise. Instead we constantly and gently bring our minds' attention to the natural flow of our breath and nothing else. In this way we will spend the next few minutes in meditation. [*Pause for meditation.*]

That will be sufficient for now. If you would like to ask a question, you can raise your hand.

Question: How do you not offend others by declining an alcoholic drink, at a party when it's offered to you?

Answer: The most obvious way would be to have a full glass of a non-alcoholic drink, so that when your companions are offering alcohol, you can say you already have a drink. Bringing something along to drink yourself and filling your glass so it is not empty is a practical way that you can continue to engage with our companions without drinking alcohol. Of course, what you are drinking is not the same as what they are! [*Geshe-la laughs.*]

As you have mentioned, covering your glass or keeping it empty at a social event, or just not wanting to drink at all, could be seen as offensive or impolite. We need to conform to the majority of society in a polite way, but, in doing so, we need to avoid letting ourselves be influenced in ways that could harm us. I have noticed that people who go to parties and bring their own drinks, are often praised for not drinking by the people they thought they might offend. Not necessarily at the time, but later on their companions often recognise the non-drinker's willpower and stance as good, and appreciate the initiative the person has taken.

If you are inclined to drink a bit, then another way to avoid an extreme situation would be to accept the first drink and then take a long time to finish it! [*Lots of laughter.*] If you are only having small sips, your glass

won't be empty, so no one will offer you a top-up. But, also, taking small sips is practical because it will taste better. If you gulp everything down, there's not much time to taste, and after a while, gulping becomes such a habit that you give yourself no time but to gulp, gulp, gulp! [*Laughter.*] This is true for anything we drink or eat. For example, if you drink tea quickly, you won't really taste it. So the best way to drink tea is slowly so you can taste its flavour. Our tastebuds are on our tongue, so when we have a sip of tea and swish it around in our mouth, we actually taste it. Even if you eat a lolly and put it right in the middle of your tongue you won't get the full effect of its flavour; its sweetness only starts to pervade your tastebuds when it touches the sides of your tongue.

Something else to consider is that your peers may challenge you and test your willpower. So initially they may try to persuade you to have a drink or more to drink, but if you stand up for what you know is best for yourself, and bring your own non-alcoholic drinks, or limit yourself to small sips, then eventually they will get the message. No one can force you to drink. Your success depends on your own determination. If you take the initiative and are strong in your commitment, then others will have to understand and eventually they will no longer ask you to partake.

In terms of big parties, who cares what you drink, anyway? Why should we be too concerned about offending strangers? With your close friends, however, the advice shared earlier can be adopted. Our close friends will want to know what our preferences are and they would come to know what we like and don't like. So asserting ourselves is helpful to them. However, limiting your drinking is good and being conscious of not overdoing it is important because drinking too much makes no sense. Some teenagers bring lots of alcohol to parties as though they are competing to see who can drink the most! [*Laughter.*] When people binge drink, you see them staggering, falling over and injuring themselves. Some people become so drunk they have no real movement any more, so they need to be carried away and put somewhere like a dead body. [*Laughter.*] Initially, this may seem like a fun thing to do, but drinking alcohol can reach a point where there is no enjoyment, and the person just drinks the alcohol like water and gulps it down. Unfortunately, a habit of drinking, or alcoholism, can develop from this sort of seemingly playful situation.

To give an actual account of someone who was brave and said no to alcohol, I recall some time ago I was invited to the birthday party of a young teenager, who had just turned nineteen. The party was at a restaurant and attended by other friends and some relatives. Some people were drinking alcohol, but this youngster, who had just turned nineteen, refused to drink. When I noticed this I was surprised and commented that, although he could legally drink and others were drinking to celebrate his birthday, his decision to not drink was remarkable. This boy was adhering to his own principles of not drinking, which is a really good example for all of us. Adhering to our principles and applying discipline to do so is important. We all need to apply strong discipline

so that we don't lapse from our principles and become swayed or overwhelmed by a situation. Of course this example was a seemingly harmless situation of not drinking. However, if we were influenced by or did not want to offend others, then, if our friends were involved in a robbery, we might think that we needed to steal too! [*Geshe-la laughs.*] There are many examples where we may think we have to do something because our friends or peers are doing it, but that is not using our intelligence and wisdom to judge whether the action is useful. The great master Atisha mentioned that the best friend we have is our mindfulness and introspection, so we should rely on this inner wisdom when we feel pressure from others.

Before we conclude for the evening, we can spend a few minutes in meditation. This time the object of our meditation can be the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. We can try to maintain our full focus on the sound of the mantra, which will suffice as our practice.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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