
Middle Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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Let us spend some time in meditation. It is good to adopt a comfortable, relaxed posture. If the physical posture is uncomfortable and tense, then that will affect the concentration of the mind.

As His Holiness the Dalai Lama mentioned in his teachings; he looks at westerners and says, 'if you find it too painful to sit crossed legged, don't even attempt to try—just sit, relax in whatever position is comfortable for you to sit in, lest you walk out of the teaching'. The reason he said that is because when we experience a nagging ache somewhere, then our mind and concentration naturally goes there.

The most important thing is setting the right motivation or intention for the practice of meditation. It is also good to recall the reason why we are meditating. In brief, the main purpose of meditation ultimately is to protect our mind—this is a good way to understand the significance of meditation.

Meditation as a protection of the mind

In reflecting upon the need to protect our mind, we need to think about the consequences of not protecting it. We might question, 'what do I need to protect it from'? Thinking about these questions helps us to clarify the purpose of meditation. Reflecting and thinking about the reasons for meditating is significant, in that it points our mind in the right direction.

In one of his works, Shantideva mentioned that if you are keen to discard negativity from your mind and adopt positive qualities, then that can be done only through the medium of our mind. There's no other way to do that than through our intentions, which comes from our mind. This is a very significant point.

So these few simple words point out in a concise way the whole structure of what we need to adopt and what we need to discard.

Mindfulness and introspection

Carrying on from Shantideva's earlier point about how the practice of discarding negativities and adopting the qualities is dependent on our mind, he further mentioned that the way to use our mind to engage in meditation is by applying mindfulness and introspection. That becomes the optimum way to protect the mind from negativity, and ensure that it is in tune with a positive state of mind. He further emphasises the point by mentioning that, without applying mindfulness and introspection, there will be no real purpose gained from any meditation practice we engage in. He points out that there are different ways of practising such as sitting

down formally for meditation, or including prayers or other forms of practices. Whatever way we may engage in practice, the point that Shantideva is making is that if we don't apply mindfulness and introspection, we will not be able to derive any benefit from the practices. The main point Shantideva is making is that when we apply our mind in the right direction for meditation, we need to ensure that we have the essentials of mindfulness and introspection in order to protect the mind.

Mindfulness and introspection

To further emphasise the importance of applying mindfulness and introspection, Shantideva mentions: 'thus I implore you with my hands folded, to please pay attention in adopting these two essential points of mindfulness and introspection'. The great master Shantideva, out of great humility and concern for us, pleads with us to apply mindfulness and introspection as way to maximise the benefit from our meditation practice.

It is with great humility and modesty that Shantideva points out the importance and significance of applying mindfulness and introspection. Shantideva is a great master in his own right; it is not as if he is demanding a disciplinary act, telling students that they must apply mindfulness and introspection and if they don't they will be punished. That is not his approach at all. Rather, he pleads and says, 'I fold my hands in front of my chest and I plead with you to please apply mindfulness and introspection'. With great humility he points out the importance of these essentials.

Choosing an appropriate object for meditation

We have covered the significance, purpose and manner of engaging in the practice of meditation, and we can now look at the appropriate object that we need to focus on in our meditation. This is another significant point. There may be various objects people may choose for their meditation, but the most important thing is to ensure that it is not an object that causes our mind to become more agitated and distracted, particularly in relation to the object itself, which may cause negativities to arise in the mind. If we focus on an object and our mind is not able to maintain a focus on it, then it could be that the object is unsuitable for meditation because it can cause agitation. However, even when we do find the right object, we may find that our mind is not able to, from our own side, maintain a focus. That is something lacking from our own side. As mentioned earlier, we could be lacking mindfulness and introspection.

We need to ensure that, first of all, we choose an appropriate object. It is not so much whether the object itself is valuable or not, but mainly we choose an object that does not cause agitation to arise in the mind, such as attachment. Because of the nature of some objects, they may induce attachment and desire when we focus on them. In contrast, other objects may cause aversion to arise in our minds. Agitation and aversion are signs that the object is not appropriate for us to focus on, because the whole point of the practice of meditation is to develop concentration and to appease the mind, to make the mind calmer and more peaceful; not the opposite, which is

creating a more agitated and distracted mind. So the object needs to be an appropriate object for us to focus on.

One of the best objects for us as beginners is said to be the breath. As a neutral object, focusing on the breath does not cause any agitation, such as attachment and anger to arise. If we keep our mind and focus on the breath, we will notice that our mind naturally settles down and has a tranquil effect. So for beginners, using the breath is an appropriate object to help us overcome our distracted minds.

There are extensive explanations in meditation texts and teachings about how to avoid distracting objects, particularly in relation to the explanation about avoiding the ten signs of distractions during meditation.

However, in summary, all masters and particularly Shantideva emphasise the point that one of the main culprits that distracts us from our meditation object is attachment. That is something we need to be mindful of; to not to allow attachments to influence our mind so that they disrupt our meditation. To put it bluntly, if, for example, a man who is inclined to meditate uses an attractive woman as an object of focus, then it is an inappropriate object because as soon as he focuses on the object, an attractive woman, his mind immediately gets excited. Likewise, for a woman who wants to develop single-pointed concentration, using an attractive man as an object to focus on is also inappropriate because it will immediately cause excitement to arise, and that excitement is induced by attachment.

Inappropriate objects

Using objects that influence attachment to arise in our mind will cause our mind to become excited, and we will definitely go astray. Anyone who has made an attempt to seriously meditate will have noticed this through their own experience. One of the main culprits that obstructs the mind from focusing single-pointedly on an object is when the mind becomes a little bit excited affected by attachment. The other extreme is when the mind becomes very dull.

However, the main culprit that disturbs us in an awake state, when we have a clear and conscious mind, is excitement. As soon as excitement arises, it causes us to waver from our focus. Excitement is one of the main causes of disruption, and an obstacle to our focus in meditation. But the breath will not cause that to happen. By focusing on the breath, there's no real opportunity, unless the mind has wavered off and is thinking about something else. For as long as we are focused on the breath itself, there's not much room for attachment or aversion to arise because it is a neutral object.

People may have come across the instructions in meditation texts that say, 'as far as choosing an object for one's concentration is concerned, one can choose any object.' We need to understand this in the proper context. For someone who already has developed a certain level of concentration, then choosing any object to further focus on will be fine because it will not cause excitement to arise in the mind. Even beautiful objects, in contrast to what was mentioned earlier, will be suitable to focus on because they will not cause obstructions or obstacles of

excitement to arise. For people who already have developed a high level of concentration, an attractive object can be a suitable object as it will not cause excitement to arise in the mind. When people have developed their concentration to a significantly high level, then any object, regardless of its attraction, can become a suitable object of concentration. But for beginners, we need to think carefully about the object of focus, and then step-by-step gradually we can build up on that and use any object as our focus.

Furthermore, the passage states: 'All existence and phenomena can be an appropriate object of concentration'.

For an enlightened mind all phenomena can be focused upon within a single meditative equipoise. A Buddha's mind is able to focus on all phenomena within a single-pointed equipoise, which is with single-pointed concentration. This is where the phrase 'all phenomena can be a suitable object of concentration' is applied. Likewise, the Foe Destroyers, even though not enlightened, have reached a level of overcoming their delusions, such as attachment and anger. For these beings, their concentration is acute and indestructible. They can focus on any phenomena and it will not cause delusions to arise and create excitement, because they have overcome the delusions.

Thus, for an enlightened mind or for the Foe Destroyers, all phenomena can be a suitable object to focus on in single-pointed concentration. But for beginners there is specific advice about choosing meditation objects to overcome particular delusions in the mind. For people who have strong attachment, focussing on particular objects is suggested to reduce attachments arising in the mind. Likewise, for those who have strong anger, then there are particular objects to focus on that help them reduce anger arising in their mind. For particular delusions, there are particular objects to focus on that are an antidote for appeasing those strong delusions arising in the mind. We need to understand the proper context in terms of choosing the proper object for meditation. The breath is a suitable object for beginners, particularly for those who have a problem in keeping the mind settled, and have a busy, unruly mind that is always active. For beginners, the breath is initially the most appropriate object to focus on.

Different objects overcome different delusions or afflictions arising in the mind. From our own experiences in life, we can understand that particular delusions at certain times affect our mind more strongly. Sometimes anger is an issue. And that's when we try to appease the mind from being an agitated and angry mind. Because anger disturbs the mind, we feel uncomfortable as soon as it arises. Likewise, there are times when attachment may be the main issue to deal with. With strong attachment arising, again the mind becomes overly excited and is not able to focus well. The mind can't be clear because of the strong disturbance, attachment or desire, arising in the mind. We need to find ways to help ourselves help our own mind. Thus these various objects of meditation are presented as a way to help us overcome these strong delusions and try to pacify our mind.

Meditation

We will meditate now, and the object we will focus on will be the breath. However, we only have a short time here for our meditation. We could benefit more from meditation if we could find more time for meditation in our daily life. Now, adopt a comfortable physical posture, set our mind with a good intention and reminding ourselves why we meditate. Of course meditation requires some discipline. Like anything else we want to achieve, we have to apply discipline. The discipline here is making the determination that for the next few minutes, 'I will not allow my mind to be distracted,' and thus we place our focus on the object, which is our breath.

Focusing on the breath here means having a single-pointed focus. In order to ensure we have a single-pointed focus on the breath, we need to apply mindfulness and introspection.

Mindfulness, in relation to focusing single-pointedly on the breath, means continuously remembering to focus on the object, the breath itself. If you forget and allow your mind to drift and think of something else, then the moment we forget about focusing on the breath is when our mind becomes distracted. Mindfulness is being constantly aware of the breath itself. While we may be determined and be mindful of the breath, after awhile, without being fully aware, we may slowly slip away and start focusing on something else, and the mind becomes distracted. A part of our mind can then apply what is called introspection.

Introspection is the part of the mind that acts like a surveillance system. It is periodically checking whether our mind is focused on the object or has become distracted. If our mind is focused on the object, then we don't need to do anything further but just maintain that focus. But if we were to find in this periodic checking that the mind has wavered and our attention has gone elsewhere, then we can bring our mind back again and place it on the object. We may not have time with our short session to apply this fully, but it is good to understand how the actual practice is done.

So, to the best of our ability and intention, let us now apply the meditation technique for the next few minutes (*Pause for meditation*).

Questions: I read in the *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, that the eyes are kept open in meditation, but here we seem to meditate with the eyes closed. What is your opinion?

Answer: First of all, in our tradition, there's no suggestion of completely closing the eyes. So here, the suggestion is not to have the eyes completely shut. There are certain traditions that suggest having the eyes open. However I don't think the author of the book follows the tradition of meditation where you keep the eyes wide open. So I am not sure if you read the passage in the right context.

There are certain traditions, such as the Hindu tradition, that suggest having the eyes closed when meditating. While there are some other traditions, such as an ancient Tibetan tradition called Bon which is more of a shamanic tradition, that suggest having the eyes open when meditating. However the Buddhist tradition is

somewhere between that, where it says having the eyes wide open is not suitable, but having the eyes completely shut is also not suitable for meditation. So somewhere in-between, where the eyes are not completely open but not completely shut either.

In the Buddhist tradition, we have the eyes at a level gaze—not completely wide open nor completely shut. This is for a significant reason. Particularly for beginners in meditation, it is suggested that if your eyes are wide open, it is very easy to be distracted with the first thing you see, which could make you easily excitable.

This seems to be our experience, doesn't it? There are many people who often say that, 'if I have my eyes open and I see all sorts of things then I will start getting excited.' It seems true if we check upon that. The other extreme, according to Buddhist tradition, is that if you have your eyes closed or completely shut, initially it may seem to be conducive for meditation because suddenly you block out all external sights and you don't have external stimulants from the outside. However, if this is done for a longer meditation, it can cause the other extreme of dullness or laxity to occur. Initially, closing the eyes completely can cause dullness. When you have your eyes closed, it is as if darkness descends, and it is very easy to go to a state of dullness and laxity, and then of course you may fall asleep. So have the eyes not completely wide open but not completely shut; just put your gaze on the tip of the nose, and this will help to prevent the obstacles of dullness and laxity.

However, for someone who has developed and reached a certain level of concentration, then it doesn't seem to make much difference whether the eyes are open or shut. There are some who, when in deep meditation, seem to have their eyes open, but external things do not cause them any distraction. Ultimately, it is for you to decide on a personal level whatever seems suitable for you. If it seems more suitable to have your eyes closed and if you find that helps you to focus on the object, then have your eyes closed.

Whether the eyes are slightly open or shut, the main thing to understand from our tradition is that concentration is not developed upon an external visual object, but rather concentration is developed on a mental object. So when we are meditating, it is not appropriate to visually look at the object of our focus because it is not the visual object that we use for our concentration. Even if we were to choose an image of an external object, it is through the familiarity of the external aspects of the object that we internalise, and we ultimately focus on the internal image of the object rather than the actual external object. It is clearly explained in the Buddhist texts that single-pointed concentration is developed upon focusing on an internal object as opposed to an external object.

Question: Can Geshe-la explain the term 'suchness'?

Answer: That basically is another term used for emptiness. It is a synonym. But in a loose conventional term, it means 'just as it is'. Whatever you are seeing, whatever you are applying to, is just 'that'. It is 'that' you are referring to and nothing else. That is suchness. However, from the philosophical context in Buddhism, suchness is used as a substitute or synonym for emptiness.

So whether we use loose terms or more conventional terms, we can say suchness in the Tibetan context can be used as what appears—what you see is what you get, and nothing more than that. It has another meaning when it is used in a certain context, in Tibetan language. For example, sometimes if you refer to beauty, you may refer to someone being externally beautiful but just that, nothing more. Of course, depending on what context you use, one word can have different meanings or different connotations in relation to the context being used.

Likewise with the word, 'emptiness'. When some people hear the word emptiness, they don't really understand it and the actual implication. It may sound just like something being just empty, like there's nothing there. And you're not to be blamed if you don't understand the context. There's a difference between the words 'empty' and 'emptiness.' 'Emptiness' doesn't imply the literal meaning of 'there's nothing there, nothing at all,' but the voidness or emptiness is in relation to something. It has a quality of being empty of something.

Question: I would have thought that the breath is a subject, but you describe it as an object. So what is the difference between subject and the object?

Answer: For example, the colour of a blue flower, the quality of 'blue' or the hue of blueness on the flower will be the object, and the eye consciousness that perceives that will be the subject.

According to Buddhism, anything that exists can be an object as it can be perceived by awareness or consciousness. The awareness is the subject, and what we are aware of is the object. Thus the breath fits into the category of object. You can feel the breath whether it is warm or cold and you can feel it going in and out, you can feel it on your body. It is made out of atoms. Any tangible object consists of atoms.

This is also described in Buddhism, where the sun's rays are made up of particles, which may not be obvious to the naked eye. My own feeling about the sun's rays is that they do have particles. So I think, particularly in Australia where there's a great scare and caution against skin cancer, that if you are exposed too much to the sun, perhaps some sun particles enter the skin and cause skin cancer. I am not sure if this is the case or not, but that's what I think.

It seems that the scientific explanation and the Buddhist explanation have much in common.

Question: Can a human being be truly detached and can one become attached to the detachment?

Translator: I wonder if the word detachment is the proper word to really explain Buddhist non-attachment. In English it seems that the word detachment has a sense of not being involved, and disconnected with things – I am not too sure. But the Buddhist context is that it's more a specific, literal translation of non-attachment. If the question is whether it is possible for a human being to develop non-attachment, which is the opposite of attachment?

Geshe-la: Definitely, it is possible. When we truly develop non-attachment, it would be like defeating itself if there was attachment to the non-attachment. So, that wouldn't

be possible. Because of the state of non-attachment, there's no such thing as being attached to non-attachment, because it is free of attachment; it's a state of mind that is free from attachment.

There's actually a good example that one of the great Buddhist masters, Nagarjuna, presented about attachment. The illustration that Nagarjuna gave was in relation to the significance of developing non-attachment. The question can go further—what purpose does it serve to develop non-attachment? It is possible to think that without attachment, we cannot enjoy anything. Nagarjuna points out that the significance of developing non-attachment is like an itchy rash: it's far better to be void of an itchy rash than to experience the pleasures of scratching the itchy rash. This is a very, very poignant illustration.

The point that he made is that we may experience a certain level of pleasure with attachment, but the ease and peace that we obtain from having no attachment and no desire at all is far greater than the pleasure that we do experience from attachment.

We can end our session for tonight. Before we end the session for the evening, let us again spend a few minutes in meditation, and this time the object we focus on is the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. As we hear the chant of Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra, try to apply our full attention and focus just on the sound. As the recitation ceases, try to maintain the focus on the residue of the sound with a sense of ease in our mind.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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