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# *Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*

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As usual it would be good to spend some time in meditation, which is a technique that allows us to acquaint our minds with positive attitudes and good conduct.

We all have the choice of engaging in either good conduct or negative conduct, and as we have intelligence and wisdom, we can easily consider what the better choice would be. Common sense tells us all that engaging in positive conduct is the better and far more worthwhile choice. So if we are inclined to engage in positiveness, then meditation practice is a way to assist that.

## **What influences the mind to be positive or negative**

What are we more inclined to be acquainted with? Positive attitudes and positive conduct, or negative attitudes that lead to negative conduct? Anyone in their right mind would naturally want to be more acquainted with positive attitudes and conduct. The question though, is how do we become acquainted with positive and negative thoughts and behaviour? If we really investigate further we will come to realise for ourselves that our thoughts and behaviour are actually very much dependent on the objects that we focus on. Some objects influence us in negative ways and others influence us to have positive attitudes and positive conduct.

Everything within us has a cause and effect sequence. So it is really important to recognise that the objects that we focus on can influence us to be in either a positive frame of mind or a negative frame of mind. This is something that is very important for us recognise and understand for ourselves.

How does this all tie in with meditation? Given that we want to acquaint our mind with positive ways of thinking, positive ways of looking at things, and positive conduct, meditation is none other than a technique that helps us to become acquainted with positiveness. That is because the meditation technique itself involves choosing an appropriate object. So by virtue of focusing on an appropriate object, the mind will naturally calm down and, more specifically, not be focused on negativity.

For as long as we engage in meditation focusing on a positive object, the mind naturally experiences a very immediate tranquil effect, because it naturally avoids focusing on negative objects. That being the immediate effect, the long-term positive effect is that the more we focus on the positive object, the clearer, the more focussed, and the brighter the mind becomes. This state of mind can then be utilised to achieve great things for oneself.

## **The mind is like a mirror**

The way the mind works when it focuses on positive and negative objects around oneself can be understood with the illustration of a mirror. A mirror naturally reflects its surroundings; it doesn't discriminate between positive and negative, it merely reflects whatever is around it. So if the mirror is focused on negative or ugly objects, then that is what the mirror will reflect.

Our mind functions in the same way. If we allow our mind to become acquainted with negativity, then that is what the mind will become more and more familiar with, to the point where it seems to become part of the nature of the mind. However this is not fixed, because the moment we choose to focus on something positive, we experience a positive effect.

## **Focusing on an appropriate object**

So what we choose to focus on, and familiarise our mind with, is really up to us. The practice of meditation is an intentional choice that we make to focus on a positive object, thus acquainting our mind more and more with that positive object and increasing the great qualities of our mind making it clearer, and brighter. Our wisdom and intelligence becomes sharper and more acute, and in this way all our positive qualities and all our potential will be utilised and activated. That is how we need to understand the technique of meditation.

Returning to the analogy of the mirror, not only does the mind reflect whatever is around it, but its very nature is that it is always engaged with things. There is not one moment when the mind is not pre-occupied with something. Even on a subconscious level, the mind is always engaging with objects, and we can verify that for ourselves.

## **Noticing a busy mind**

We all know that when we are awake the mind is always running after something, always engaging with one thing or another—the external stimulation of objects that we see, hear or smell, and our internal thoughts. There is always some object that the mind is engaged with. One of the functions of the mind is to cognise things, which in simple terms means perceiving and engaging with objects. That is the basic nature of the mind. So we need to make sure that the mind is engaged with positive objects, and not those that just cause us more confusion, more worries, and fear, and anxiety.

When we allow our mind to run around and focus on every possible object that it comes in contact with, without any discrimination as to whether we're focusing on something positive or not, then we are bound to engage with things that basically cause mental chaos. We have all had the experience of being disturbed and confused, full of anxiety, worries and fears, lost hopes and so forth. And we have reached this state because we have not deliberately paid attention to identifying the kind of objects that we choose to focus on.

## **Making wise choices**

At this point I would like to relate the advice that I share with youngsters, as it is relevant to how our mind

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functions. Half in jest and half seriously I tell them to be really be careful in choosing their friends and companions. I say, "Don't just jump upon the first person that you meet and immediately engage in a serious relationship with them, because that can cause you problems in life". [laughter] Rather, I tell them to step back and take the time to investigate before making decisions and commitments. It is much more worthwhile to not allow the mind to engage with the immediate appearances of the other person, and to really take time to investigate and identify their qualities and whether they are compatible and so forth. I tell them to look for all of the things that are necessary for a good relationship.

I give this advice to youngsters because when you are quite young you have a natural tendency to long for companionship and relationships. It is a time of maturation, and wanting to have that experience. But it is much more worthwhile to take time, and not to rush into things. "Furthermore", I tell them, "you are at the stage in life where you have a really heightened level of intelligence, your mind is fresh, and your physical body is very healthy and mobile, and you can really achieve quite a lot. So at this unique time in your life it is really crucial to focus that vital positive energy in the right direction, focusing on the right things".

This advice also applies to study. Securing a good education is really very important in terms of our worldly existence. But at the same time they also need to focus on developing a kind mind that has a clear and bright state. And this is where meditation is very helpful, even for the younger generation. Actually meditation is essential for the younger generation, so that they can really ensure that they develop that a meaningful, purposeful life.

### **Meditation**

Returning now to the actual practice of meditation, when you focus on a positive or appropriate object then, by default you are not focusing on disturbing objects that cause the mind to become overly excited, or depressed, or anxious, or fearful. And when you seriously engage with a positive object, you experience an immediate release from all of that mental chaos, and then your mind becomes more tranquil. So there is a definite benefit in the practice of meditation.

In fact, I don't really have to convince you about the benefits of meditation practice. Many students have come to me and confided that meditation practice has been really beneficial in their life. They come up with remarks such as, 'Engaging in the practice of meditation on a daily basis over a period of time has brought me so much mental ease'. They mention that it is even hard to express in words the benefit they have received from the practice of meditation. So when people seriously confide in me in this way, it must mean that meditation has actually worked for them.

### **Advice for the young (and the young at heart)**

In my regular teachings, I emphasise again and again how important it is to have a clear state of mind, with which we can develop a, positive and kind mind. As living beings all we really need is a good state of mind

and a good healthy body. So that is why I implore the younger generation again and again to really pay attention to their mental and physical health.

Again and again I remind those youngsters with whom I relate to directly, that at every cost they should ensure that they do not waste this precious opportunity that they have to secure a good education. After all, we live in the world, so we need to survive, and thus we need to have sufficient means for our survival, and that comes from wealth. As the great Indian master Chandrakirti has mentioned, survival and worldly wellbeing comes from having sufficient means, and it is something that we cannot neglect. We have to take personal responsibility for making sure that we have sufficient means for our survival, which is why we get an education.

From a Buddhist perspective what would be considered as worldly study is, in fact, needed for worldly survival. However, as mentioned previously, we also have to work on developing our mind. Furthermore, we cannot underestimate the importance of being careful in choosing companions. I share this advice out of the genuine concern that I have for the youngsters.

This is something that parents also need to understand. When children reach a certain level of maturity it is natural for them to want companionship and relationships. I even tease the parents saying that if the parents themselves are keen on having relationships, why would that not apply to the children too? It would be unfair to impose restrictions on the children when the parents themselves are in need of relationships.

The main thing for parents as well as youngsters is to be sure that they make the right choice of companions. We can all too easily be influenced by our surroundings. If we just operate on a surface level and don't really take the time to ensure that we have a companion who can help us mature, who can nourish and support our intention to develop into a good person and get a good education, then it is very easy to be influenced in a negative way, and become involved in substance abuse and so forth.

However if youngsters are prevented from having relationships and so forth, then that can cause depression. Sometimes the depression can be so bad that it can have drastic consequences. We need to be careful to avoid the extremes of being too restrictive and not being discriminating enough. We also need to be really sure that we have a focus and purpose in life.

### **Benefits of meditation**

How does this all tie in with meditation? Meditation will help one to develop a clear mind, a more intelligent mind and thus be able to make right choices. If we develop our intelligence we will be able to utilise our own wisdom in order to make the right choices. This is where meditation is most beneficial and helpful.

In a formal meditation it is important first of all to ensure that one is physically relaxed. Then within a physically relaxed state of body, also ensure that one has a positive intention or motivation for doing the practice.

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It is good to make the following determination: For the duration of our practice of meditation, even if it's just for a few minutes, I will not allow my mind to be distracted with the things that normally cause me worry and fear and so forth. I will not allow my mind to be influenced by negativities, not even for a moment. That sort of self-discipline is important.

We need evaluate whether we can clearly distinguish between what is positive and the negativities that cause disturbance and chaos. As mentioned earlier it is important to really identify the cause of a chaotic mind. From that comes the determination to not be distracted in meditation.

To understand how these negativities arise in our mind, let us consider our present situation. None of us here are deprived of food, drink, clothing or housing. As far as external conditions are concerned, we have plenty, and none of us are deprived of the essentials. That being so, if we find that our mind is still restless, and not content or happy then that is pointing out that a happy, joyful mind is not dependent merely on the external conditions. There is something beyond that, something more internal.

### III effects of delusions

What is it that is causing us to be restless, discontented and unhappy? If it is not because we deprived of the essentials, so it must be something else. When we do this investigation we will come the conclusion that, as explained in the Buddhist teachings, the causes for our disturbed, unhappy, discontented mind do not lie externally, but within our own mind.

It is the negative attitudes, what we call the delusions, that cause that inner turmoil, and because the causes lie within ourselves it is possible for us to deal with them. But it takes a certain amount of determination and willpower to address those negative tendencies within ourselves.

The practice of meditation is an opportunity to train our mind not to allow itself to be influenced by negative tendencies and attitudes, which are called delusions. As I share with you regularly, this is something, that I do in my everyday life. When I find some negative tendency arising, I immediately tell myself "Be careful, be careful. There is something arising here which will cause me trouble". And through mere recognition of a negative tendency or thought we loosen its grip upon us. One is actually saying, "I am ready for you. I am not going to allow you to weigh me down. I am not going to let you overpower my mind". That readiness to combat negative tendencies basically comes down to our determination not to be overwhelmed and influenced by the delusions. We all have that potential ability, but we need to take the initiative for ourselves. Thus the purpose of meditation is to train our minds to do just that; even for a just a few minutes we need to develop that determination to not allow our mind to be distracted.

Using the earlier analogy, our mind is like a mirror, where we allow everything to be reflected in it. Whenever, in our normal state, we just allow every kind of whimsical thought to arise and follow whatever we see

or hear, then that is when we are not applying the disciplinary willpower of restricting our mind from going there. Here, in our practice of meditation, we are intentionally deciding not to allow our mind to be exposed to all of those different distractions.

Rather, we withdraw our attention and focus and bring it within. Because our mind, cannot sit still without having something to focus on—the very function of the mind being to focus on something—we need to anchor our single-pointed focus and attention. The object that we choose here for our meditation is our breath. We develop the determination to keep our full attention and focus just on the chosen object, which is our breath, and nothing else. In this way we will experience relief from all internal and external stimuli, and our mind will be appeased. So for our practice we will keep our attention on just the breath for the next few minutes. (*meditation*)

Does anyone have any questions? We can go through the text or if you have any questions, you may raise your hand.

*Question:* Some time back Geshe-la suggested the practice of visualising Buddha Amitabha on ones head while engaging in daily activities. I am wondering why particularly Amitabha and not other Buddhas?

*Geshe-la:* That was just a suggestion of a practice you could do, but of course that is not mean that you cannot do visualisations of other Buddhas. In fact, as you are aware, prior to doing a great initiation you throw a flower to check which directional Buddha you may have a connection with. And it is that particular connection that you may have with a particular aspect of the Buddha that you choose as a personal deity for practice. In fact we have connections with all of aspects of the Buddhas, but for a particular time or purpose some aspect of the Buddha might be more suitable. Ultimately you need to find whatever connection you have at a particular time and so forth. That reference to Amitabha was just a suggestion.

In fact there are many forms of the aspects of the Buddha, and Tibetans have a tendency to rely on all these different aspects. When the great Indian master Atisha came to Tibet, he noticed this and commented, "Tibetans have a tendency to rely on one hundred deities, but might not accomplish even one properly".

In contrast, being able to accomplish one deity properly is said to be equivalent of making connections with all of the hundreds of deities. However, going back to what Atisha was saying, the main significance of making a connection with any aspect is to make oneself closer to them, so as to become more receptive to receive the blessings of, and be inspired by the qualities of that enlightened being, Buddha.

That is the reason why we have this tradition of making ourselves closer to the deity through meditation, and practice of initiations and so forth. What Atisha was implying is that if one does not do it properly, then even if one were to rely on a hundred deities, it will not suffice for making a proper connection if one is not doing it properly. I have received one of the initiations called the

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*rinjung gyatsa*, which has over a hundred deities. But whether I have made a connection with all of them is hard to say.

Earlier I suggested using Amitabha as an example of an enlightened being with whom to make a connection. When we go to bed imagine that Amitabha Buddha is above us. And when we wake up imagine he is with us all the time. We can protect our mind if we acquaint it with Amitabha Buddha so that we feel his presence on all occasions. Then, ultimately through that acquaintance in our daily life, before going to bed, when waking up and so forth, it will be natural for us to be able recall enlightened beings at the time of death, which will then definitely help to ease the mind and protect it from fears and anxieties and so forth. That is really the significance of the practice. It is most important to really internalise that connection, seeing it as a source of protection and refuge.

The essential point here is the meaning of the word 'spiritual'. What does it mean in English? I think it refers to something inside. I once went to the dentist, and he said he had treated me so many times he felt he was my friend. He commented that every time he saw me I was happy. He asked me how old I was, and I said 74, he commented that he wouldn't have thought I was that old. Then we talked about spirituality and he said that to him it meant that the inside was clear, which is what I think as well. It has something to do with an internal sort of development, an internal happiness. That is what spiritual really means. I was happy that we had this common understanding.

There are many who comment that what seems to be lacking in their life is spirituality and that is why things seem to go astray and why they are not able to behave themselves and so forth. It is really important for us to understand what a spiritual life actually means and what the term 'spirituality' connotes? How can one ensure that one does have a spiritual life? That is a significant point for us to understand.

*Student:* When I was practising as a nurse in a hospital, and someone passed away, I felt that something was leaving the body; for me that was a strong feeling of what the spirit of the person is.

*Geshe-la:* Of course, whatever term we use, 'spirit' or 'soul' or in Tibetan the term 'life force', it refers to suitable conditions within the physical body. When these conditions are intact then the life force is able to remain inside. Those conditions include warmth and so forth, and as the elements in the body begin to slowly wane, one begins to also notice that the warmth begins to diminish. When the warmth of the body is completely gone, then that is said to be when the life force is completely extinguished. That is when, according to Buddhism, the consciousness, the equivalent of the spirit or soul, actually leaves the body.

I'm often intrigued by the great living force of what we call 'consciousness' or 'mind'. According to the Buddhist view, conception takes place when the consciousness enters the mother's womb. It is when the consciousness is not able to enter the womb or when does not remain that

miscarriages happen. So what allows the foetus to form, to mature and become bigger and bigger and eventually take birth is actually the consciousness. Prior to that it was just a gelatine-like substance, but the moment the consciousness enters, that seemingly insignificant, small matter slowly matures, becomes bigger and bigger, and is born and so forth. That's how I see the great potential power that the consciousness or mind has.

That was a good sharing of views, so thank-you. It is always good to share experiences, particularly something that one feels positive about. When we share our experiences, then others can understand and learn from that, which is why it is always useful.

In one of his teachings the Dalai Lama mentioned that what Christianity calls the 'soul' is what, in Buddhist terms, we would call the self. As His Holiness explained, when Christians think of the soul leaving the body, our tradition says that the entity of the self is actually leaving the body.

Before we end the session for the evening, let us again take the opportunity to spend a few moments in meditation. This time the object to focus on will be the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. It is good for us to again take this opportunity to keep our entire focus and attention on the sound itself. Then, when the recitation ceases, just maintain a focus on the residue of the sound, and keep that focus on the joyfulness in one's mind. That will suffice for our meditation.

*TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA*

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*Edited Version*

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