
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

འདྲི་བའི་ལམ་གྱི་ལོ་རྒྱུས་ལྟ་བུ་ལོ་རྒྱུས་སོ།།

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As usual, we can spend some time in meditation, since we are a gathering of meditators. So adopt a comfortable, relaxed posture. We notice that if our physical body is not relaxed, then this can cause the mind to be chaotic and not relaxed as well. If the body is not well, then the mind is not well also. More specifically, when the body is in pain, for example, when there is physical pain in the joints or knees and legs and so forth, then the mind's attention will turn towards that, and the mind will not be in a focused and relaxed state. This is the main point.

To give an illustration, in order to have a good sleep we need a comfortable bed, not too hard but not too soft either, with just the right firmness that will allow us to have a good sleep. Likewise, the physical body in meditation needs to be in an appropriate posture where it is comfortable; not too rigid while not too relaxed either.

The main thing is that a correct posture will help us to focus well on our chosen object. Another point in the posture is to sit up straight. When the body is aligned in a straight position, it allows the winds, which are the subtle energy in the body, to flow well and freely. When the winds flow well within the body, it will help the mind to also become clearer. This is the significance of maintaining a straight body during meditation.

It is really important for the practice of meditation to ensure that the mind is in a clear and bright state. This allows us to focus well, to have our full attention and focus on our chosen meditation object. So we need to periodically check whether our mind is in a fresh and clear state or not.

As I regularly emphasise, the real purpose of meditation is to acquaint our mind with a virtuous state of mind, which in essence is a kind mind. We need to familiarise ourselves with a kind mind. This is the main purpose of the practice of meditation. This is in line with the Buddha's own words, where the Buddha mentioned that we are our own protector, and being our own protector means we depend on no-one but ourselves.

All that we experience depends on us. In essence, the Buddha was indicating that our own happiness and our own suffering depend on no-one else but ourselves. We are affected by our own state of mind, thus it is more beneficial for one when the mind is in a virtuous state.

Virtue is a cause for happy experiences. Non-virtue causes us to experience unhappiness or unpleasant experiences. The intention in our mind leads to either happy or unhappy experiences. Uncomfortable and unpleasant experiences arise from a non-virtuous state of mind, whereas pleasant and happy experiences, and a

joyful mind is the consequence of virtue. When we are able to distinguish between virtue and non-virtue, then it becomes our responsibility to ensure that we have a virtuous mind.

Meditation practice helps us to achieve a virtuous state of mind by single-pointedly focusing on virtue. When we come out of the meditation session, we need to be more inclined to keep our mind in a virtuous state. Having a virtuous state of mind secures the causes and conditions for our happiness, and this is the main benefit of meditation.

Another practical way to understand the Buddha's words is as an encouragement for us to develop mental strength or strong determinations. It is up to us if we want to be happy. We need the mental strength or determination to take the initiative to apply the causes for our own happiness and avoid the causes for our own unhappy mind.

The most essential point of the practice of meditation is to maintain the stability of mind. During meditation we might experience a good, calm state of mind, and achieve good consequences from the practice, but if we don't have the determination to maintain the stable mind gained from meditation practice, then there is a danger that when we come out of the meditation session and we face the outside world, that we become upset and angry again. This may be true particularly in relation to our partner, friends, or colleagues. So it is really important that we develop the determination to maintain a calm mind particularly when we come out of our meditation session.

It is most important for our regular practice that we don't allow our state of mind to decline, making sure that our awareness and mindfulness are not waning. We are protected when we are mindful of the differences between what harms our mental stability and what benefits it. This is how the meditation practice is a way to serve as the ultimate protection for our mind. This is an essential point.

When we are able to maintain our focus, then we will be able to generate the capacity to distinguish between what is beneficial and what is harmful for us. This involves self-assessment—assessing how a beneficial state of mind of compassion and kindness is beneficial to us. If we lose a compassionate state of mind and genuine consideration for others, then we need to recognise how that would lead to an unhappy state of mind. This is how we increase the analytical wisdom to clearly distinguish between what is beneficial and what is harmful to us. This self-developed analytical wisdom becomes our ultimate aid in whatever we do.

We need to understand how a meditation practice helps us to develop protection for our mind. It is also important for us to know the distinction between protecting and refraining. For example, when we practise refraining from the very beginning we don't allow our mind to engage in an attractive object of attachment. Protection is applied when we notice our mind is about to be influenced by an attractive object of attachment and we intentionally prevent our mind from being swayed by the object. If we focus on the object of attraction, this is how

attachment develops. To refrain from engaging with an object of attachment, we may close our eyes so we don't see the object. If we don't even see an object of attachment, then we are less likely to be influenced by it.

In relation to distractions that arise in our mind and in relation to the five sense objects, we can use seeing beautiful objects as an example. When we see objects that are attractive, then that influences our mind to develop an attachment to those beautiful objects. Likewise with taste: when we experience something tasty, it influences us to become attached to the object that gives the nice taste. Relatively speaking, smell might not seem like such a big distraction, however there are some people who are influenced by nice smells, which can be a form of distraction as well. When we are influenced by pleasurable sounds and touch, then we are attracted to the sense of the object, and our mind is influenced by them. The mind is completely immersed and completely distracted with these sense objects, and that is how we lose a focused mind. Our mind becomes distracted and we experience a chaotic and busy mind.

So, to avoid that we need to protect the mind from being persuaded by those objects of attachment. We do this by intentionally focusing on a virtuous object and maintaining our focus and attention on it. By doing this, we are intentionally not allowing our mind to be influenced by attractive objects. And it is in this way that we can protect the mind from delusions, such as attachment and so forth. This is how we protect the mind. When we develop concentration on a virtuous object, as Lama Tsong Khapa mentioned, we need to free our mind from external distractions, and maintain a continuous focused mind as a way to develop concentration. Never allow the mind to be separated from concentration; this is how we maintain our composure. This is how Lama Tsong Khapa advises us to apply the meditation. This is the essential point.

In summary, this meditation technique involves intentionally diverting our mind from objects that cause distractions or delusions to arise in the mind. We do not allow our mind to focus on a distracting object, but instead intentionally focus on a virtuous object. This is what meditation entails.

In order to apply this meditation technique in the most effective way, we first of all recognise what causes us the most turmoil within our mind. We all individually may have a particular object or situation that causes us distress or agitation. It could be an object of attachment or anger; whatever it may be, each person may have a particular object that they find difficult to deal with normally. So it is that particular object that we need to intentionally try to divert our attention from. We reverse our mind from focusing on that upsetting object and apply our focus and attention on the chosen virtuous object for our meditation practice.

For our meditation practice now, we can focus on the breath. So, we will be placing 100% focus on our breath and on nothing else. It is important that we identify what causes the disturbance within our mind, whether it is a situation or an object that diverts us from our practice. When we recognise what is disturbing us, we

intentionally don't allow our mind to focus on that so that it doesn't disturb our mind. As we slowly become familiar with this practice, our mind becomes more and more capable of not being swayed or influenced by disturbances and distractions.

Thus for the next few minutes we will focus on the breath. As advised in the teachings, we need to be naturally breathing. The breath itself needs to have a natural rhythm. Keep our breath on that rhythm and then focus on it. *[meditation]*

Just as we have attempted in our short session now, it would be good to take the initiative to implement a meditation practice regularly in our daily life. It is through a regular meditation practice in our daily life that it becomes helpful and beneficial to calm down and stabilise the mind.

The main point about focusing on the breath, based on the natural rhythm of the breathing, is to be fully aware of the breath coming in and going out. Just be aware that the breath comes in naturally, and as we breathe out, the breath is going out. Maintain that focus on and awareness of that natural inflow and outflow of the breath. Focusing on our natural rhythm implies breathing that is not laboured. It is not a forceful breath that we are using in meditation; that is the instruction. However, if some of you find that having a forceful breath helps you to be focused on the breath, then maybe that is fine. However, in my experience it seems that when the breath is in a very natural rhythm, it is free from labour and it is not forced, then this helps us to be more aware of the breathing itself. However, whatever suits you, you can adopt.

Question: Is focussing on thought the same as being aware of the breath?

Answer: Being aware that the breath comes in and out, just like being aware of thoughts—another comes, another goes. As you say, do not be concerned with the actual breathing process itself, but just be aware of the natural breath coming in and going out.

This practice of focusing on the breath seems to be helpful when we do it correctly. It seems to be helpful in settling down the mind, which otherwise might be very distracted. Definitely, there is an immediate benefit that you will find from this practice when it is done correctly. When we notice the mind settle down, then that becomes an appropriate measure of the practice.

The advice in the teachings is for people who are affected by a very distracted and busy mind. Focusing on the breath is the most appropriate practice to appease the busy mind. This is the advice in the teachings, and it seems to be true. For example, when we find our mind is busy or completely in turmoil, and we feel angry or upset, then having someone tell us to focus on the disadvantages of anger and practice meditation might not work for us in that instant. Instead, this technique of focusing on the breath seems to help settle down a very busy mind. As an object to focus on, the breath itself seems to be a very appropriate object to settle down the mind because it is an object that is colourless and shapeless. There are no attributes that will cause

distraction for the mind. Furthermore, focusing on the breath seems to also help to regulate and channel the wind energy within our body as well. This also seems to help the mind.

The consequences of the wind energy within our body not flowing freely and being tight can be experienced as the physical affect of having tight knots in our body and feeling tense. The mind is very tight. When the subtle wind energies are not flowing freely within our body, it also affects the mind. If the wind energy is tight, then the mind is also tight. This can also affect the physical body to be tight as well. These are the ill-effects of the wind energy not flowing freely within the body.

Question: Is it possible to believe in God at the same time as having a belief in Buddhism?

Answer: Can one accept Buddhism and believe in God? Of course, there is a personal choice. Whether something you accept becomes a true belief or not is something yet for further investigation.

You mentioned earlier that the Buddha was first a Hindu and derived from Hinduism, and then later changed to a belief where he did not believe in a creator god. There is a Hindu tradition that believes the Buddha is an incarnation of Vishnu. The Buddha is considered to be the eighth manifestation of the Hindu deity of Vishnu. There are ten manifestations of Vishnu, and the Buddha is considered to be the eighth manifestation that has come to the world to purify negative karma. However, from the Buddhist historical point of view of who the Buddha was, that would not be that description.

According to Hindu tradition, there are many different explanations, however, Brahma is generally considered as the creator of all. When Brahma himself was asked who created you, according to the Hindu mythology Brahma just said, 'I am great Brahma'; so there is no other specific answer to that. I think the whole thing is too complex to come to an immediate conclusion.

Of course, according to Buddhism, we don't deny the existence of Brahma. According to the Buddhist historical explanation, it was Brahma who requested the Buddha to give teachings; he was one of the first gods or divine celestial beings who requested Buddha to teach. The historical explanation from the Buddhist point of view is that many beings at that time were under the dominance of a celestial being called Brahma. So when Brahma himself requested the Buddha to teach, then naturally many followers of Brahma also accepted the Buddha's teachings. Some details as you were explaining them, are quite profound and complex; even the Dalai Lama admits that the finer details of the difficult points is something that we cannot immediately comprehend and understand right away.

As His Holiness the Dalai Lama often mentions, for example, that it is not easy to define who Jesus was. The Buddha's explanation of these beings who came to this world in different manifestations are regarded as being manifestations of enlightened beings or bodhisattvas who benefit beings. Their deeds are clearly deeds that benefit others. They are not ordinary beings that we can take lightly and dismiss as Hindu or Christian. In reality,

judging from their deeds that have been so beneficial, as His Holiness Dalai Lama often mentions, these beings can be definitely regarded as highly realised beings.

When, for example, the Dalai Lama talks highly about the founders or the preachers of other traditions, while generally paying respect to their noble deeds, this is also a way for us to develop a keen respect for other traditions. As many people have commented, it is highly remarkable the genuine respect that the Dalai Lama has towards all these traditions. Respect is a key factor in religious harmony, and if others could follow the example and develop genuine respect for other religions, then there is bound to be mutual understanding and respect for each tradition, which in turn leads to genuine religious harmony.

As the Dalai Lama emphasised, for those who follow a tradition that is based on having strong faith in God, that single-pointed faith on God is remarkable and profound. Just as from the Buddhist tradition, when having understood what karma is, and when people develop a strong conviction and faith in the workings of karma, then there is a profound level of understanding and practice. Likewise, His Holiness the Dalai Lama mentions that for those who believe and have strong faith in God, a single-pointed strong faith in God, also have a profound level of spirituality or practice.

The Dalai Lama has also mentioned that within the Christian tradition there is definitely an emphasis on practices that develop contentment and less desire, as well as practices that lessen the grasping of a self and a self-cherishing mind.

For someone, who has strong faith in God, that strong single pointed faith in God serves as an antidote for overcoming the self-cherishing mind, a mind that is centred on oneself. And indeed as the Dalai Lama explained, that seems to be very true. When there is a strong faith in God and a complete reliance on God, there is no way for a self-cherishing mind to arise. We can see how this is a profound practice.

In contrast, if we feel, 'I am in charge here, I am the one who makes things happen around here', then that involves a strong self-centred mind, a self-cherishing mind.

Before we conclude for the evening, again let us take a few minutes to engage in practice of meditation. We focus on the sound of the mantra, which is Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. As we hear the sound of the mantra, try to maintain your focus just on the sound itself. As the recitation subsides, just maintain your focus for a few moments. Practising this way becomes a meditation practice.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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