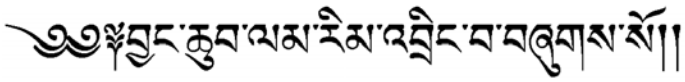

Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment



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Meditation serves as a condition for our inner wellbeing, thus it is really quite important that we spend some time in meditation. While our physical wellbeing is very much related to external conditions, our inner or mental wellbeing is solely dependent on inner conditions. So just as we naturally rely on external conditions for our physical wellbeing, it is also appropriate for us to rely on the inner conditions that contribute to our mental wellbeing. If we really look within and analyse for ourselves, we will come to notice that the conditions that contribute to our mental peace and calmness do not lie in external circumstances. Rather, they are internal qualities; and this is important for us to recognise.

If external conditions did in fact contribute to our mental happiness and wellbeing then, by default, we would have to conclude that the more money we accumulate and the wealthier we become, the happier and more joyful we would be. But that is clearly not the case. In contrast, we come to notice that when our internal qualities are further developed and increased, our happiness and joy also increases as well.

But if we neglect to develop the inner qualities for our mental peace and happiness, then we actually begin to lose those qualities. When we exert ourselves to pursue external conditions, there seems to be no real contentment. There are those who are so busy acquiring and accumulating wealth and developing a good career, yet they find that they have this empty feeling and that they are not really content within themselves. That goes to show that there must be something missing for them not to feel joyful and totally at peace.

Now I am not suggesting that we neglect acquiring external conditions altogether, because we do need them for our physical wellbeing. What is being emphasised here is that, along with spending significant time and energy in acquiring good external conditions, it would be really worthwhile to work on developing the conditions for our happiness, which are the inner qualities. If we pay attention to that, then the combination of acquiring external conditions while developing inner qualities as a condition for happiness and joy, will definitely serve us well. So it is worthwhile to recognise this.

Of the various conditions that contribute to our wellbeing, the very best one is to cultivate a relaxed mind. With a relaxed mind, we have a clear state of mind, and with these two conditions we will experience a sense of wellbeing and real joy.

When I refer to a clear mind I don't mean to imply that such a mind is being contrasted with a mind that has no clarity at all, because we all do have certain clarity that enables us function on a day-to-day level. What I am referring to here is a clear mind that is free from too many worries and thoughts, and free from too much anxiety and turmoil. When we are totally engaged with our external activities it

seems that our mind is being bombarded with so many different thoughts and ideas, and that's what seems to cloud the mind, obscuring what is most important for oneself.

The practical benefit of developing a relaxed and clear state of mind is that with such a state of mind one will be able to identify a sequence for the things that one wishes to accomplish. Even with mundane worldly activities it is quite obvious that if we don't have a sequential order, and we attempt to do everything at once or try to accomplish something before really developing the correct basis for that, then chaos ensues, and we don't seem to be able to accomplish whatever we want to do. It is quite obvious even with mundane activities that disorderly way of doing things comes from an anxious mind that is not clear and relaxed.

On the other hand, a relaxed and clear state of mind will be able to properly distinguish the sequence of what needs to be done, and begins by accomplishing something as a basis for later steps, and then engaging in and accomplishing the next step and so forth. Then things actually go well, and whatever one wishes to accomplish will actually be accomplished. That is just as true for ordinary activities as for developing our inner state and qualities of mind.

When we think about the sequence of doing things, it is clear that if we attempt to engage on a second stage before actually having ventured into the first stage, we will not be able to accomplish the things that are on the second stage, because we haven't really gone through the first stage yet. This is a very practical approach. We can see that whenever we wish to accomplish something it can be divided into different parts and different stages. It is important that we engage in the first stage, followed by the second and third stages and so on. If we attempt to go to the second or third stage prior to going to the first stage, then that is when then everything becomes difficult.

Anxiety may also arise if we begin at the first stage, but attempt to engage the next level before actually completing the first stage. We become anxious when we think about the work involved in the next stage, when in fact we haven't completed the first stage yet. This applies to everything that we might be involved with, whether it is study or work, everything has stages that we need to go through sequentially in order to fully accomplish the task.

As the mind becomes anxious and one becomes fixated with that anxiety, then things become a bit stressful, and that is when one begins to feel aches and pains in the shoulders and neck. You might have had the experience where prior to sitting down to engage in work, you were feeling quite OK, but as soon as you sit down and start thinking about the work ahead of you, you start to feel tense and your neck and shoulders start to tighten up.

It is good to learn from your own experiences. If you find that as soon as you sit down and try to engage in something you start to feel tense and uncomfortable, then try to really look into why that is happening? Why is it so? Is your mind relaxed and in a clear state or not? You might then be able to notice that in fact your mind is not really relaxed or very clear, and that it is trying to think about everything and attempting to accomplish everything at once. This comes from a mind that lacks stability and clarity. When, through one's own experience one notices that, then it is good to remind oneself to try to have a relaxed mind and a clear mind. Making the positive attempt to have a clear and relaxed mind will definitely reap a benefit.

In summary, we can all acknowledge that a training that involves developing a relaxed and clear state of mind is very useful. If we accept his, then the training is meditation.

Having considered the necessity of engaging the mind in developing a relaxed and clear state, we can now take the initiative to engage in the practice of meditation for a few minutes. The best way to ensure that our practice of meditation is most genuine and productive lies in our decision and determination to do the practice.

The determination to engage in a proper meditation practice comes from really thinking about how when we lack a clear and relaxed state of mind it actually affects whatever we do, and how it affects our productivity, and brings more worry, anxiety and doubts. If we find it is difficult to make decisions then that comes from a mind that is lacking in clarity and not relaxed.

In every aspect of our life, in whatever we might be doing, if we find there are problems, difficulties, anxieties, worries, doubts, fears and so forth, then they really all stem from a mind that is devoid of clarity and genuine calm. Having considered all of this and how it affects the positive outcomes in life, we think, 'I must definitely take the initiative to properly engage in the practice of meditation'.

We to begin the practice of meditation by adopting an upright but relaxed posture and then try to cultivate a positive state of mind for doing the practice, reminding ourselves of its purpose, and the need for the practice of meditation.

The actual way to engage in meditation practise is to choose an object on which to focus, which here will be our own breath. Thus we bring our full attention and focus onto the breath itself. This means that for the next few minutes we intentionally divert our attention from all other forms of thoughts and objects and so forth, and place our full attention and focus on the breath. Make the determination, 'I will not allow my mind to become distracted with various thoughts and other distracting objects. Rather I will make every attempt to place my full attention just on my breath'.

The breath here is based on our natural rhythm of breathing, and we breathe in and out naturally without any force, just placing our full attention on the breath coming in and going out. In this way we will put this into practise for the next few minutes. (*Pause for meditation*).

That will be sufficient for now.

4.2.2.1.2.3. The way to train the mind in the stages of the path of beings of the great scope

4.2.2.1.2.3.2. The actual paths

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2. How to develop an awakening mind

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1. The stages of training the awakening mind

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.1. Training the mind in the pith instructions on the six causes and effect, which comes from the lineage traced to the great master Atisha

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.1.2. Extensive explanation

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.1.2.2. The actual training in the stages

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.1.2.2.1. Training the mind to strive for the welfare of others

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.1.2.2.1.1. Establishing the basis for that mind to arise

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.1.2.2.1.1.2. Establishing the appealing aspect of all

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.1.2.2.1.1.2.3. Repaying their kindness

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.1.2.2.1.1.2.3.3. As it is unreasonable to try and repay their kindness through contaminated [goods and responses], seek to liberate them from ignorance

Now we will go through the text a bit. We are at the point where, having recognised and remembered the kindness of others, we generate the thought to repay the kindness that others have shown to us. This is really the main point of the text.

In practical terms, we would all agree with this sentiment. When someone has been kind to us, it is definitely appropriate that we repay their kindness, and do something to show our gratitude and appreciation. We take any opportunity that arises to actually repay their kindness. While this is being explained here in a spiritual context, even in a mundane worldly context the person who recognises someone's kindness and takes some measure to repay that kindness is considered to be a worthy person.

If someone were to fail to remember the kindness that others have shown, then that would most likely be a cause to neglect taking measures to repay that kindness. Therefore remembering the kindness that others have shown us is essential if we are to perform good deed of repaying their kindness. That is good for us to recognise.

What are the means of repaying kindness? Here, in the spiritual context, that is taken to the highest level of kindness. The first level of repaying their kindness is to repay it with material generosity. If someone has been kind to us in feeding us, clothing us, in being generous to us, then we repay their kindness in like manner, giving them food when they need food or giving them shelter when they need shelter, drink or clothing. In short, being generous with material aid is something that is worthwhile and appropriate.

However repaying kindness can be taken to a higher level. As the text explains, it is not sufficient merely to provide others with material aid. Even though that would help to relieve some of their discomfort and suffering, it does not help them to accomplish their ultimate needs. Thus we need to take into consideration how to repay their kindness in order to benefit them ultimately.

As an analogy, we can take example of how parents care for their children. They are definitely aware that just feeding and clothing their children is, in itself, not sufficient. The children also need to be given a good education, so that when they grow up they will be able to look after themselves. Thus along with meeting basic needs of food and shelter and so forth, the parents take great care to provide the best education for their children. They understand that there will be a time when their children have to be responsible for themselves, and if training and education are not provided when the children are young, then it will be very difficult for them to take care of themselves, and stand on their own feet when they grow up. That is why the parents take that great measure of providing the best education and training for their children.

When the text goes into the specifics of how to repay the kindness of all beings, it presents it as a qualm: How do you repay the help of other beings? Then the text goes on to reply:

No matter how much wealth and happiness your mothers obtain in cyclic existence, it all deceives them.

Here we can use the example of Australia. We can see that, as far as material conditions are concerned, people have everything that a human being could wish for. However, while all the good conditions to experience a sense of joy and happiness are present, these good conditions seem to

deceive people who, are still not satisfied or happy. So the good conditions seem to be deceptive, promising happiness but not providing it. The main point in the text is that pursuing a happiness that is derived from material, worldly gain is deceptive, because one is not able to obtain lasting satisfaction and happiness from worldly gain.

At a personal level, most of us would have experienced various types of worldly pleasures in our life. Yet if we were to really look into ourselves and question whether we are totally contented and happy, we might find that the answer is that we are not all that happy. It is quite clear that even though we have had access to so many worldly pleasures, they have not brought about real, lasting contentment within our hearts and minds.

The conclusion is that if, having experienced so many different levels of worldly pleasures thus far, one is still not satisfied and content or really happy, then that must be due to the fact that, as explained in the text, the worldly pleasures of the cyclic existence are not a really genuine source of happiness and wellbeing. The happiness they produce is neither stable nor firm, and it is certainly not a source of everlasting happiness. So in that way worldly happiness is deceiving, because we may pursue it with the intention of gaining happiness and joy. But, in fact, it is elusive, and we don't gain any real lasting happiness and contentment from worldly pleasures. Thus it is not a reliable source of true happiness.

Having considered that worldly gain is deceptive rather than being a stable or ultimate source of happiness, we then consider how best to repay the kindness of those who have been kind to oneself. Rather than repaying kindness merely with material things which, as we have seen, would not be sufficient, we should take an initiative to try to provide them with an ultimate source of happiness and contentment.

As the text reads:

Thus you must repay their help, by thinking, "Formerly my mothers were seriously wounded because the madness of the afflictions possessed them. Then, I produced a variety of further sufferings for these beings who are already suffering, as if I had applied sea-salt to their deep wounds. Now I will establish these beings, who lovingly helped me, in the happiness of liberation, nirvana."

One can relate this point first to oneself and then apply it to others. Even though we have already experienced various types of sufferings, it is as if we engage in actions and deeds that produce even more suffering for ourselves. It is often the case that when we are already experiencing some level of suffering, we tend to add on more complications and more difficulties to the suffering that we are already experiencing. This is the meaning of the analogy of applying sea salt to a deep wound; Applying sea salt would only make the wound much more painful. It is bad enough to have the wound to begin with, but applying an agent such as sea salt would only make the pain worse. But that is how we conduct ourselves—along with difficulties and sufferings that we already have, it is as if we engage in further deeds to cause us even more suffering.

When we understand this on a personal level, then we can see that rather than benefitting others and helping to elevate their sufferings, we sometimes provide them with conditions and do things that might cause them even more suffering. So providing them with temporary material gain and so forth

may not help to relieve their sufferings, but actually cause them even more suffering.

Having considered and understood that then, as explained in the text, we resolve, 'I'll establish these beings, who have lovingly helped me, in the happiness of liberation or nirvana'. Specifically 'who have lovingly helped me' means having lovingly helped me in many past live times. In this life there have been many who have been lovingly helped one with material as well as other higher forms of help, and they have done so in past as well.

The best way to repay the kindness of all those beings who have helped one in the present and in the past, is to lead them to the ultimate state of happiness which, as mentioned here, is the ultimate state of liberation, or enlightenment; the state of buddhahood. So the ultimate way to help other beings is to assist them to attain the ultimate goal of becoming enlightened like the Buddha. There is no greater way to repay the kindness of others than to help to lead them to the ultimate goal of enlightenment.

The implication here is that we need to generate a strong determination to provide the ultimate means of happiness for other beings which is, as mentioned in the text, to lead them to the ultimate state of liberation and enlightenment. In that state they would be free from all forms of suffering, and be in an everlasting state of happiness. There is no higher goal than that, and no better way to repay kindness than to lead beings to that state. Taking the initiative to develop a strong determination to repay the kindness of other beings in that way would be the best way to repay their kindness.

In contrast, the help that we feel that we are giving others may, in fact, only be providing a cause for them to experience much more suffering, not only in this life but in many future lifetimes. There are those who boast about their help and generosity to others, when in fact they might be actually have been providing the means to experience even more suffering, ruining not only this life but many future lifetimes. In fact when one carefully considers this point from the Dharma point of view, it is completely contradictory to provide happiness and help if it just becomes the means for yet more suffering.

These are points that we really need to consider if we are really keen to engage in the authentic practice of Dharma. These points are advice for someone who wishes to practise as explained in the teachings. If we take a superficial view we might not really relate to what is being explained here, but on a deeper level, if we really think about it, these are very significant points.

Before we conclude the session for the evening, let us again take a few minutes to engage in the practice of meditation. This time the object to focus on for our meditation can be the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. As we hear the chant of the Buddha's name, we try to place our full focus just on the sound, and not allow our mind to be distracted by anything else. Then as the recitation subsides, try to maintain that sense of awareness of that sound, focusing on the residue of that sound for a few moments.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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