
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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12 September 2012

As usual, we can spend some time in meditation. So let us adopt a comfortable and relaxed posture. Meditation is useful and essential in our life, because when we don't meditate we have a chaotic mind. Our mind goes off in different directions, which causes anxiety and problems in our life. Simply put, because we lack a focused mind, we end up with a troubled mind.

Meditation is a technique to stabilise and focus the mind, to further develop mental clarity, which in turn develops a calmer and more peaceful mind. When we allow our mind to be busy, and we completely follow the influence of a busy mind, then our mind naturally races around in every direction. The busier we become, the less calm and the less peace we experience. If a busy mind contributed to some inner peace and happiness then, by all means, it would be good to allow ourselves to be as busy as we can. However, the busier we become, the less tranquillity and peace we experience in ourselves. This is why it is worthwhile considering having a less busy mind.

We cannot deny that we have a busy life; however it is good to sometimes reconsider why we allow ourselves to lead such a busy life. What's the reason behind having a busy life? It's actually meant for us to have a happier life; however it defeats that purpose. We think the results of a busy life will make us happier. However, in the process of being busy we find that we lose any sense of tranquillity and happiness within ourselves. So, why are we so busy? In allowing ourselves to have a busy life, are we happier? If not, then maybe there is another way for us to gain some genuine inner peace and happiness. Thinking like this, and considering the purpose of our life, develops a deeper intelligence or wisdom within us. This intelligence or wisdom assists us in trying to find the real solution for our problems.

If we were to take our wellbeing into consideration, then we need to acquire the conditions for our inner happiness and inner wellbeing. We seem to spend most of our time and energy on improving our external conditions; we try to improve the material world rather than spending significant time developing our inner world, or the inner conditions for our happiness. While we seek some inner peace and happiness, we allow ourselves to be completely immersed and busy with improving our external conditions, and fail to look within. While we cannot deny the fact that we do need good external conditions for our physical wellbeing and comfort, we also need to gain some inner peace and happiness. We want to find happiness. So we need to pay more careful attention to how we achieve this. What leads us to having

a happier life, and what are the conditions that lead us to an unhappy life?

We are naturally inclined to improve our external conditions, and we are motivated further when our desires increase. And if we look at the connection, it is when our desire increases, when we are not happy with a certain amount of things or a certain amount of comfort, that we need something even more, something even bigger and grander. As our desire or attachment increases, it motivates us to improve our external conditions. We can see that connection.

The more we allow our desire to increase, the less happy we become. This is because, by its very nature, our state of mind is never content, never happy with material things. The more our desire for external progress increases, the less happy we become. In contrast, the less desire we cultivate the more content and happy we begin to feel. It is important to do a self-analysis and check within ourselves what kind of attitude and state of mind contributes to our wellbeing, genuine contentment and happiness; and what kind of states of mind or attitudes are detrimental to our wellbeing; that cause us worries and problems. This is the measure that I personally take in my life.

In my daily life, in my practice, I do this self-analysis to check whether any attitudes or thoughts arise that are destructive and harmful to my own peace and happiness. I try to recognise and avoid them, while further developing and strengthening the positive attitudes within myself. This strategy seems to be the only real way to lead a more holistic, balanced life. I personally use this technique to derive some benefit for myself, so I share it with you in the hope that it benefits your wellbeing.

If you try to adopt this self-analysis by checking out for yourselves, ensuring that you are not falling victim to your own negative state of mind and attitude, it may be of great benefit for yourself too. If negative attitudes do arise and are taking hold, try to recognise them and try to overcome them. We need to adopt this strategy to work towards our own wellbeing and happiness.

This process of self-analysis and checking our state of mind is a gradual process. The benefits may not be felt immediately, however, gradually over time we will begin to notice the positive effects taking root within our mind. So, on a daily basis we can periodically check our state of mind and our motivation. Initially it might be hard to recognise what state our mind is in, whether it is positive or negative, but with determination and with gradual training, we will be able to recognise these states more clearly. Eventually, we will become more skilled in overcoming our negative states of mind, or at the very least not be completely influenced by them. We won't immediately get quick results; we have to be patient. Results take time—it is a gradual but steady process. It is through the practice of meditation that we are able to do this self-analysis. So, now we can spend some time in meditation.

Let us readjust our physical posture; find a comfortable, relaxed posture. It is also important that we ensure our mind is in a clear state, as opposed to a dull state of mind; like being half-asleep. It is also appropriate to develop a

positive motivation for our meditation practice. From the very outset, recognise that meditation is a useful, meaningful practice. Setting a good motivation encourages us to focus better during the meditation practice as well, because we have reminded ourselves of our intention, and the reason we are doing this practice.

The practice of meditation involves choosing an appropriate object to focus on, as a way to anchor our mind. This appropriate object is called the meditation object. The object of meditation needs to be an appropriate object, something the mind can benefit from. For the purpose of our meditation practice now, the appropriate object we choose to focus on is the breath.

The technique involves developing a strong determination and commitment to apply our full attention and focus just on the breath; not allowing our mind to be influenced by other thoughts, ideas or any other distraction. So, temporarily we withdraw from all other forms of thoughts and distractions and place our full attention and focus on the breath itself. This discipline will assist us in placing our focus on the breath; it is called mindfulness. Applying mindfulness on the breath means constantly remembering that we just focus on our breath and nothing else. We need to constantly remember the breath. When we apply mindfulness in this way, we can, within a few minutes into the meditation, derive the real benefit of the practice.

[meditation]

Just as we have attempted in our short session now, it will be highly beneficial to adopt regular meditation practice in your daily life. This will greatly assist you in having a better life, a more meaningful life. It is not the length of our meditation that counts at the beginning, but the quality of our meditation. Even if we meditate for a short time, if we make a real, genuine attempt to keep a focused mind, then slowly, gradually we can build up on that attention span. But initially if we try to do a long meditation session and keep becoming distracted, then that can become a habit, and we will never develop a single pointed focused mind.

Questions

Question: Geshe-la, you mentioned that we need to analyse our thoughts and not allow ourselves to be influenced by negative states of minds or emotions. I wonder though if it may be a form of denial or suppression if we don't allow the negative thoughts to surface at all. I wonder if it would be appropriate to, on one hand to watch them and see them for what they are, but on the other hand trying not to let them overpower or maybe overwhelm us?

Answer: The word 'denial' or 'suppression' can be ambiguous; it is more like ignoring the negative emotions. If you ignore a negative emotion and it naturally subsides, then there shouldn't be any problem with that; that would be a good thing. For example, if by ignoring an enemy they are less likely to harm you, then ignoring the enemy would be a good thing. Similarly, if ignoring emotions helps to appease the mind and allows us to become more content and calm, then it is not a bad thing.

Emotions, such as anger for example, are destructive, so it is best not to be under its influence. However there are some techniques of developing patience that suggest you intentionally generate a state of mind of anger by thinking of something that would normally annoy you, as way to observe the nature and consequences of anger. When you know how to apply this technique, you are in control, which means that one part of your mind knows that you are tackling anger, but temporarily you allow the anger to arise in your mind to a point where it is almost like you are on fire. It becomes so intense that you are firing with anger. Some times you may even experience sweating because you are emotionally charged with anger.

When anger arises very intensely, you begin to analyse, thinking, "OK, if I allow this anger to carry on and allow it to fully manifest, what will the consequences be for myself? If I acted upon this anger would there be a positive outcome or negative one?" In this way, you use your intelligence to investigate and look into the disadvantages of anger. When anger arises and we experience a disturbed and agitated state of mind, we can clearly see the disadvantages of anger. This then becomes a strong impetus for us to practise patience. Because we can see and recognise the disadvantages of anger, we make the resolve to practise patience. It is said, that the optimum way to practise patience is by recognising the ill effects of anger.

The great Indian master, Shantideva, talked extensively about patience and the ill effects of anger. He dedicated a whole chapter to it in *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life*. He explains that there are obvious ill effects, and more subtle ill effects of anger, which may not be obvious. However even with the obvious ill effects, we can see that there is so much destruction and harm that results from anger.

Question: When Geshe-la was explaining about karma the other night, I understood that of the ten non-virtues, those of body and speech are not karma, and the three of mind are delusion and thus not karma as well. So, I was wondering what is karma then?

Answer: Among the ten non-virtues, the seven of the body and speech are actually explained as being karma, whereas the three of the mind are not karma because they are delusions. However it needs to be understood that the mental factor of intention at the time of engaging in the action of body and speech, is the actual karma and not the physical or verbal actions themselves. That is because the actual karma is the intention during the action. Mental karma is the intention that is not carried out physically or verbally, but created in the mind. When the action is carried out, either physically or verbally, then the intention at the time of the action is what physical and verbal karma refers to.

Karma is defined as the mental factor of intention; which is what moves the mind to engage in a positive or negative action. For example, when we perceive the colour blue, there is a mental factor that moves the mind towards perceiving the colour blue, and this is called intention. So, intention is a mental factor that moves the mind towards an object, such as perceiving the colour

blue. In brief, karma is a mental factor that moves the mind to engage in an action.

Question: How do we prepare for aging and decline?

Answer: We need not worry too much as it naturally occurs very gradually. If we want to live a long life, we cannot prevent old age; which is a natural occurrence. While we may not be able to prevent death itself, we can however prepare for it. There are not many that we can point to now living beyond the age of 100. I think in Japan there is someone who is 120, but it is a rare case. Usually most people don't reach much beyond the age of 100. This is reality and a fact. If we reach a ripe old age, then we have to experience it; so we can't prevent it.

So on one hand, we have to accept that reality, but on another hand, the best preparation for old age is to take care of our physical health. The healthier our lifestyle, the more likely our body will be able to cope with aging. But also it is important to have a happy mind, because a happy mind contributes to a healthier body. A combination of taking care of our health by avoiding things which are harmful to our health, and also working towards developing a more joyous happy mind will definitely help.

There might be some people who try to stop the aging process with plastic surgery and so forth, but doesn't seem to help prevent the aging process.

Since we have to age anyway, the next best thing is to age gracefully and happily.

I know someone well in Bendigo who is past the age of 92. She hasn't drunk any alcohol, or smoked in her life, and she leads a happy life. She is happy and joyous, and attributes that to her fitness. Even at 92, she is doing normal everyday things, living by herself, and even during the fires in Bendigo, she was helping to pour water from pails to put out the fire. She is active even at her age. But she asked me one question: "Even though I haven't consumed alcohol and don't smoke, my blood pressure is a little bit high. I wonder why that is so?"

I know people who are joyous and happy, and that definitely contributes to their wellbeing. The main lesson that we learn from these stories, is that a happy mind contributes to our wellbeing, physical health and happy mind. Of these two, a happy mind is more important. Even if we have good physical health and are wealthy, if we don't have a happy mind, then all the material possessions doesn't serve much purpose. So having a happy mind is the main contributing factor for our wellbeing. This is regardless of whether we are religiously minded or not.

From the religious or Dharma point of view, while we cannot prevent our own death, we can prevent fear at the time of death. This is something we can work towards; we can prepare ourselves so that we don't have fear and anxiety at the time of death. This is profound advice. It is not giving us false hope that we can become immortal and that we don't have to experience death, but rather showing us the reality that we do have to experience death, but we can avoid experiencing fear at the time of death. This is something within our reach; we have the

capacity to work on lessening the fear. There are accounts of people who have died while smiling.

I was acquainted with someone who was not Buddhist. She had three children and I was telling her not to worry about her children, that they will be fine, and to think about her own state of mind. I recommended that she recite Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra and without hesitation she said that she would do that. She was reciting that mantra and then about three weeks later I heard that she passed away. The carers who were taking care of her said that they showed her my picture. I don't know if that was the case or not, however the carer said that she died smiling looking at my picture.

The carer was not Buddhist herself, but nevertheless wrote me a letter with the account of how the woman had a peaceful death and thanked me for my assistance. The main point seems to be in having a steady mind at the time of death.

Our real friend is within ourselves. We don't really need to seek other people to calm our mind when we have mastery over our own state of mind. I have many such stories, but we don't have time to relate them now.

Thanks again for the questions; they were all very good questions. Thank you.

Before we conclude for the evening, let us again spend a few minutes in contemplation. Focus on the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. Let us spend the next few minutes just focusing on the sound of the mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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