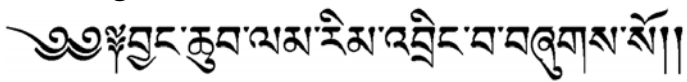


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# Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment



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As usual we can spend some time in meditation. For that purpose, we will adopt a relaxed physical posture. As explained regularly, the literal meaning of the Tibetan word for meditation – *gom* – is to familiarise the mind with positiveness. It is good to understand what that literal translation of meditation implies.

We naturally familiarise ourselves with many different things. If we were to each analyse our state of mind, we would notice that we mostly familiarise our mind with the delusions. Allowing ourselves to be influenced by the delusions is what causes trouble and problems in our lives. The more familiar we become with the delusions, the more we are inclined to engage in harmful attitudes and actions.

The meditation technique here implies that we should familiarise the mind with the opposite of the delusions – with objects that do not cause the delusions to arise. The more we familiarise the mind with an object that does not cause delusions to arise, the more likely it is that we will experience the positive effect of becoming less familiar with the delusions.

According to the great masters of the past, a sure sign our meditation technique is having a positive effect is when we notice the delusions beginning to weaken. On the other hand, if we have spent many years in meditation and find that the delusions in our mind have not weakened, that is a sign our meditation has not been effective. If we experience this situation, there is a danger we will claim that meditation doesn't work; instead of looking at whether we have tried to practise the technique properly or not, we are in danger of blaming the meditation technique itself.

But when we apply the meditation technique and find our delusions becoming less intense, then that is a sign that the technique has been effective. We will also notice our mind becoming gentler and kinder, and consequently happier. These are clear signs our meditation technique is having a positive effect. If we find that our mind is still unruly, self-centred, and lacking genuine concern and kindness for others after we have practised meditation for a long time, that again is a clear sign the delusions have not weakened. The stronger our delusions, the more obsessed we will become with our own self-interest, and the more we will lack concern and kindness towards others. Thus one needs to see that the ill-effect of not weakening one's delusions is that it hinders one's kindness and consequently one's happiness.

The nature of the mind is such that it will naturally cling to appearances. Thoughts, ideas and attitudes naturally

occur in the mind; it has a tendency to be aware of things. However, when we allow our mind to run along its natural course, it seems more likely our thoughts and ideas will be influenced by the delusions. This consequently disturbs the mind. If one's mind were naturally inclined towards positive attitudes or thoughts like kindness and so forth, we could be rest assured it would be good for us. But as mentioned previously, it seems we are more inclined to follow appearances (i.e. thoughts and attitudes) that cause us disturbance. This allows the mind to become more stubborn in thinking about one's own needs.

We need to realise that the mind is influenced by the delusions because we have allowed it to become familiar with those appearances. It seems more natural for us to hold on to attitudes that are disturbing and cause us turmoil. Thus we need to transform that by shifting our focus and only allow appearances that cause a positive effect in our mind. That is why the meditation technique is again relevant here.

When we begin to understand how the undisciplined, unruly mind – the beginner's mind – naturally functions, we can start to understand the advice given to us as beginners. This advice is that when we choose an object of meditation on which to focus, it should not be anything one wishes, but rather an appropriate object – an object that serves as the particular antidote to overcoming particularly strong delusions in one's mind. This contrasts with the general advice, which is also as explained in the teachings, that any object can be an object of meditation; however, that advice is only for those at an advanced level, whereby choosing any object does not cause disturbance to the mind. However the advice for beginners is that it shouldn't be any object – but rather, we should choose an appropriate object.

As an example of how strong delusions affect one's mind, when intense attachment arises, the natural consequence is that the mind becomes disturbed. A mind affected by strong attachment is not calm, but is unsettled and thus not peaceful. If one were to really analyse one's state of mind and honestly look within, one would notice that when strong attachment arises, there is no genuine feeling of calm; rather, the mind becomes disturbed.

Likewise when strong anger arises, it is even more obvious to us that the mind becomes disturbed and agitated: the mind is not calm. Therefore when delusions such as strong attachment and anger take root in the mind, when we notice that the mind is disturbed, for our own good we need to apply an antidote to overcome that strong attachment or anger. Particular meditation techniques are advised for this purpose, such as focusing on the imperfections of an object one is attached to as a way of reducing one's attachment to that object. There is also a particular antidote for overcoming strong anger. Thus in relation to particular delusions that may disturb the mind, we can apply certain antidotes to overcome those strong delusions. Within a single day, we can find many different objects to focus on for our meditation, as a way of overcoming particular delusions that affect us. This is how we can see the significance of the practice.

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For our meditation practice this evening we will use our own breath as an object to focus on, as we do regularly. The breath is said to be an appropriate object to focus on as a way of overcoming a very busy and discursive mind. The breath helps to settle such a mind.

The object itself is not difficult to comprehend, because our breath is something intimate to us – we breathe every day. When we focus on the breath as an object of meditation, it is said to bring a lot of benefits. As explained earlier, it helps to calm the mind. It is said to be an appropriate object because the very nature of the breath itself is that it is colourless and shapeless. Thus it is a suitable object for settling the mind. At a more subtle level, it helps to regulate and channel the body's wind element, helping us to maintain good health. As explained in Buddhist manuscripts, when the wind element – one of four elements within one's body – is out of balance, this causes us to experience physical ailments. Thus focusing on the breath can help regulate the wind energy within us, so it even has a positive effect on our health. Thus we can see there are many practical benefits from focusing on the breath.

Let's readjust our physical posture so that it is comfortable. To engage fully in the practice, we need to also make the commitment that for the duration of the meditation, we will not allow the mind to be distracted by other thoughts and ideas. Rather, we should withdraw our attention from all other objects and bring our full attention to the breath, by focusing single-pointedly on it.

The specific instruction is that our breathing should maintain a natural rhythm; free from laboured deep inhalations and exhalations. As explained in the Buddha's teachings or sutras, there are different techniques of focusing on the breath and some may involve a forceful inhalation and exhalation as an object on which to focus. However the Buddha's teachings advise that the natural rhythm, which we are using here, does not mean to forcefully breathe in and out, because with the natural rhythm of breathing, we don't have to think about inhaling and exhaling; it happens naturally, by itself. We simply focus on the natural rhythm of our breath – being fully mindful of each breath as it comes in and goes out. If some of you find it easier to use other techniques, whatever suits you is fine too. By focusing on the breath itself, let us now spend the next few minutes in meditation. (*Pause for meditation*). That will be fine for now. As we have attempted in this short session, it would be good to try to apply some regular meditation in one's daily life.

As explained in the teachings, we use the breath as a medium for engaging in particular practices, such as the meditation practice of giving and taking or *tong-len* in Tibetan. With *tong-len*, the advice is to inhale and exhale forcefully as a way of giving more force to the taking in and giving. So the meditation practice is conjoined with the breath, but one intentionally adopts a more forceful exhalation and inhalation for this practice. Thus it is different from the breathing meditation practices that we just did now, which focuses on the breath's natural rhythm to settle the mind.

When we use the natural rhythm of the breathing as an object for calming the mind, it means the breath is not laboured and is soundless. On the other hand, when we breathe in and out forcefully, this naturally makes an audible sound. Also with the meditation of focusing on one's breath it is advised not breathe unevenly – taking a shallow in-breath and breathing out deeply, or breathing in deeply with shallow exhalations – but breathe in and out naturally, with the same measure.

In contrast, the practice of giving and taking is done in conjunction with the visualisation of taking in the sufferings of other beings, as a way to develop even more intense compassion. One imagines one is taking in the suffering of all beings, in all its forms. Thus one breathes in forcefully, as it strengthens the notion that we are taking in the suffering, and when we breathe out, that we are giving our own happiness and pleasures to all other beings. So the actual breathing rhythm has an effect in this practice. We will notice that the practice of giving and taking requires us to apply some force; we must put effort into the practice, as it doesn't come about naturally.

We haven't covered the text for a while so we may go through it, or if you have any questions you can raise your hand.

*Question:* Would the meditation technique to overcome delusions be the same for everyone, or would it be tailored to suit different individuals?

*Answer:* The antidotes to overcoming specific delusions need to be understood as antidotes to overcome the manifest level of the delusions, but these antidotes do not overcome delusions from their very root. The one antidote that overcomes all forms of delusions to the subtlest root is the realisation of emptiness.

We need to understand that any specific antidote we apply – for example, meditating on the imperfections of an object to overcome attachment – serves as an antidote to the extent that it overcomes a manifest delusion, intense attachment. But that antidote would not suffice to overcome the root of the attachment: we would need to meditate on emptiness for that.

To understand how the particular antidote for overcoming intense attachment – focusing on the imperfections of the object – works, we need to understand how attachment manifests in the first place. If we were to take a person as an example, when you are attached to a person, you focus on the seemingly perfect attributes of that person, which causes attachment to arise. But when we focus on the faults of the person, aversion or anger may arise in one's mind. Because attachment is manifested in relation to seeing the object's perfections or attractive attributes, if one focuses on its natural imperfections, the unattractive attributes, intense attachment naturally reduces. Likewise if one focuses too much on the person's imperfections or faults it gives rise to anger, so one needs to meditate on compassion to overcome the anger. Generating a compassionate attitude towards the person will appease any anger one may have towards the person.

As explained in the teachings, we cannot overcome attachment completely, from the very root, just by

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focusing on the imperfections; nevertheless, it definitely reduces strong attachment. If we familiarise our mind in this way of thinking, we can definitely be free from manifest or intense attachment, which will help the mind become calmer and more settled. Attachment would not affect us if we could meditate in this way. If we can understand how attachment arises in the first place, we can begin to see the significance of using the antidote of focusing on the object's natural imperfections to overcome attachment, because this is the complete opposite of the earlier appearance.

The main point here is that you understand how meditating on the natural imperfections of the object can serve as an antidote for overcoming attachment. Is that clear? If we can understand how a delusion such as attachment arises, and how the antidote presented as a way to overcome that intense attachment actually works, we can then apply this approach to all other delusions. What we call a delusion is nothing other than a misconception based on a mistaken mind. We all naturally experience both positive and negative states of mind. When a negative state of mind or delusion arises, we apply the opposite state of mind that will naturally reduce that delusion.

A few weeks ago, a young girl made the comment here about how meditating on seeing the faults and disadvantage of delusions has helped her. She tried to meditate for a year, and found that applying this meditation technique over that year definitely helped the delusions to become less intense in her mind. Also when the delusions did arise, she was able to see them for what they are – as faults. Recognising them as faults helped reduce her negative states of mind. However she confided that preventing the delusions from arising altogether seems to be very difficult. So she was being very honest. On one hand, she confided how the meditation technique had been helpful for her in a practical sense; on the other hand, she admitted it was difficult, of course, to overcome her delusions completely.

As mentioned previously, when the technique of meditating on an object's natural imperfections is applied appropriately, one will definitely overcome attachment to the point where it does not affect one's state of mind. However, if you make an attempt to meditate on the imperfections of an object and it doesn't seem to help your mind overcome attachment, this means the technique has not been applied properly. As explained in some teachings, one may focus on the imperfections of the object in a superficial way during one's meditation, thinking 'yeah, yeah, it is not perfect and not entirely attractive'; however, deep within, one still has not given up the notion that the object is attractive and perfect. As long as one holds on to the strong belief that the object is still attractive and doesn't have imperfections, then even if one were to routinely do this meditation of focusing on the imperfections, it would not affect the mind of attachment. Thus we need to do the practice properly, meaning that from the depth of one's heart or mind one develops that definite conviction that the attractive features and seeming perfections is not really there upon the object – they are merely imagined.

The Indian master Nagarjuna explains in his text called *Commentary on the Awakening Mind*, in relation to a man being attracted to a woman, for a meditator who has familiarised the mind with focusing on the natural imperfections of the object, the natural unattractiveness of the object is apparent – they do not see it as being attractive. However, for someone who longs for a woman, the object is seen as attractive; because the desire is already there, they will see it as attractive; as an object of one's desire. For a wild animal such as a jackal, it could be seen as something to be consumed. This relates to the attributes of the object not being fixed – there is no intrinsic, fixed attribute of an object that is experienced by all as being exactly the same. An individual person, for example, can sometimes appear as a friend, someone pleasing to be with, however that very same person at another time might appear annoying and someone to be avoided. This goes to show that one object, in this case a person, can appear sometimes as a friend and at other times a foe. Thus, even though it may be the same object depending on how we perceive it, it can appear in different ways.

The great Indian master Vasubandhu mentioned that there are three conditions for delusions to arise within the mind. With an object of attachment for example, the three conditions are 1) one is in close proximity with the object of attachment, 2) one has not abandoned the delusions within one's mental continuum 3) an inappropriate attention taints our perception to exaggerate the qualities of the object, making it appear extremely attractive and perfect. When these three conditions are intact, attachment will unfailingly arise in the mind. We need to understand that in the case of attachment, it is an inappropriate attention that taints our perception, exaggerating the attractive qualities of the object. The mind superimposes attractiveness where there is none. We cannot deny that for an object which is beautiful, the natural quality of beauty is present. However attachment does not apprehend that beauty, because if it did apprehend that beauty, it would be an unmistakable state of mind. But because attachment is a faulty or mistaken state of mind, it does not apprehend the naturally existing beauty of the object. Instead, it apprehends a superimposed, exaggerated beauty. That is how we need to understand attachment as a mistaken consciousness.

Similarly, the mind of anger sees the object with exaggerated faults, which again is a mistaken state of mind. In relation to an object of attachment some have previously commented that to see faults in an object might not be appropriate. For example, when a man is making an attempt to overcome attachment to a woman, should he need to focus on that woman's faults? It seems inappropriate to see faults in other people, so the word fault can be misleading. If one were to use the word meditating on the "faults" of the object, the question arises, should one think of that person as being at fault? This question was asked sometime last year actually and it is a significant question because the questioner is asking, are we meant to see the faults of the person?

Thus, the term "imperfection" is a better word to use. Finding the right term is necessary so that the translation does not lead to misinterpretations. Seeing the

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imperfections of the object is completely different to seeing the faults of the object. We are not attempting to look at the faults of the person, but at the natural imperfections. Thus the meditation technique involves focusing on aspects that are naturally imperfect. Focusing on that natural imperfection counteracts or overcomes the mind that sees the object as being extremely beautiful and perfect. Developing the concentration that is focused on the imperfection of the object is achieved in meditation. There is a lot of discussion about what kind of concentration that is; one has to be very clear as to what the object is, and how it is being perceived, one has to be clear about this from the outset. One needs to focus on the mental image of the object, not the actual object. One develops concentration or mental stabilisation based on the mental image of the object.

In relation to this point, it is also mentioned in the *Abhidharmakosha* that the meditator or yogi who meditates on the imperfection of the object as a way to overcome attachment would use the image of all the surrounding area being filled with skeletons. They develop the concentration of seeing skeletons in their surroundings. One may argue that would be a wrong perception, because the area is not filled with skeletons. However, it is said to be a genuine meditation technique because the concentration developed has a positive effect for the meditator, so it is a sound concentration, and it is not a faulty concentration. One has to understand this.

Before we conclude for the evening, let us again spend a few minutes in meditation. This time focus on the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. After having spent a few moments focusing on the sound, when the recitation subsides, try to maintain awareness for a few moments.

*TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA*

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