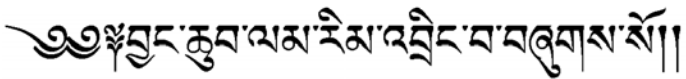

Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment



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As usual, spending some time in meditation would be worthwhile, so, for that purpose, we can adopt a comfortable and relaxed posture.

Meditation, in simple terms, can be understood as a technique to familiarise the mind in a good way. You could be wondering what familiarising your mind in a "good" way means. It means acquainting your mind with positive states and virtuous thoughts—if you familiarise yourself with positive states of mind and virtuous thoughts, the familiarity is "good". The reason why this familiarity is good is because meditating on positive states of mind enables your mind to be free from being influenced by negative states of mind, or what Buddhism calls "delusions". Therefore, if you engage in a meditation practice, you are training your mind to be free from the influence of the delusions and instead develop a familiarity with positive states of mind. Thus, the meditation technique entails intentionally choosing an object to focus on that does not cause delusions to arise, and this focus is beneficial, because it leads to a good familiarisation with an object, which prevents negative states of mind occurring. In this way, by focusing the mind again and again on an object and becoming familiar with it, helps the mind become clearer.

If we do not intentionally focus our mind on a positive object, it will aimlessly go its own ways and inevitably be influenced by the delusions. The lack of awareness about what our minds are focus on is how we lose control over our minds: the delusions drive our motives and actions rather than we ourselves being in charge. Thus, when our minds are dominated by delusions, we engage in activities and deeds that cause us and others harm; when the delusions influence and dominate our mind that is when uncomfortable consequences occur.

Why do we lose control of our minds to the delusions? Well, when we are under the influence of the delusions, we do not have control over the direction we are going, because it is as if we are being pushed from behind by the delusions. The stronger the delusions are, the more likely we will be forced in a direction where we lose control, and cause harm to ourselves and others. Having delusions pushing us and controlling our situations is like being in a small car and having a bigger car ram into us from behind – we are pushed ahead by the force of the bigger car and have no control over where our little car goes.

We need to really think about this and see whether it is true for ourselves. We need to sincerely look into ourselves and ask what initiates our behaviour. What is pushing or influencing us to make unsuitable remarks

and act inappropriately? When we recognise that the delusions are influencing us, we can see that we do not have any real control over our actions, and, if we are not careful, we can lose our reasoning and engage in serious mistakes.

Recognising this in yourself is important and very useful. At the very least, realising that negative states of mind are pushing us in an uncontrolled manner, can be useful in understanding where others are coming from when they are upset and act inappropriately. When others, especially our close companions, engage in inappropriate actions or deeds, we need to remember that the conditions they have are the same as when we are influenced by the delusions. We can help them and ourselves by not taking their actions or words personally, and bear in mind that their dominant negative states of mind are why they are saying or doing inappropriate things. Through realising why we act inappropriately at times, we can recognise that others sometimes do not have control over what they are saying and doing. If we think about their behaviour in this way, and make a distinction between the person and their deeds, we don't take the situation too personally and react critically or negatively towards them; instead, we can hold ourselves back and not retaliate, by becoming upset and angry ourselves. Therefore, investigating your own mind and recognising when you are not in control, can help you have a good understanding of others when they are in a similar situation. Then, when others do inappropriate things, you can relate to them and understand why they are behaving in that way.

When we apply this understanding about the delusions to a person who is acting inappropriately, the person becomes an object of compassion rather than scorn. We recognise and understand that the person is being dominated by delusions, which is why they are acting in such a way. We can see that the wisdom in their mind has temporarily decreased and their ignorance is more prevalent. We can also relate their behaviour to our own experience of being deluded and not being able to think rationally enough to discriminate between what is right and wrong. Indeed, just like what happens to us, their discriminating wisdom has temporarily decreased and they are acting out of sheer ignorance because of their intense negative state of mind. Further, we can see that they are creating the causes for their own misery and suffering. If someone is creating the causes for their own suffering and confusion they are definitely an object of our compassion rather than contempt. For these reasons, people who are affected by negative states of mind are suitable objects of our compassion.

When we have a sound understanding of this and can develop an attitude of compassion towards someone affected by the delusions, then, those individuals affected by the delusions, whether they are close or otherwise, become a great object for us to further develop and strengthen our compassion. Rather than retaliating and getting angry with them, we can patiently accept their behaviour with profound understanding. This is how we can increase our own good qualities of compassion.

Adopting a patient or compassionate attitude will definitely benefit us. It will certainly help our minds to remain calm and undisturbed during challenging situations, and it will directly support the maintenance of our happy minds. Therefore, adopting a patient or compassionate attitude will unquestionably contribute to our wellbeing and happiness. These are the benefits of not allowing our minds to be influenced by delusions.

Since adopting a compassionate and patient attitude enables our minds to not be affected by delusions, and contributes to our wellbeing and happiness, we can appreciate the significance of a meditation practice. Meditating is useful and important because the technique involves intentionally withdrawing your mind and its focus on an object that causes delusions to arise. In fact, delusions, like anger or jealousy, occur because the mind is focused on an object that causes them to arise. However, if we intentionally withdraw our focus from those objects and divert our attention by focusing instead on something that does not cause delusions to arise, we are training our minds to be familiar with positive states, and they naturally will become more settled and calm.

Our minds will become settled and calm when the meditation technique is understood, embraced, and put into practise. This stability of mind, derived from intentionally focusing on a positive object, is the benefit of meditating. Having said this, you may be concerned about the times when you are not in formal meditation, and are engaging in the outside world. Naturally, at these times you will be seeing the objects of delusions, and negative states of mind will arise again. This might make you wary of the benefits of meditating, and you might become despondent by thinking that after meditating you will just return to being influenced by the delusions again.

The Buddhist teachings have a practical approach in dealing with this doubt that beginners like us may have. Many delusions arise in the mind when we relate to objects outside of meditation, and since this is very common, the teachings explain that temporarily avoiding the object, or not engaging with it, is the best approach to take. The teachings also describe how deciding not to ever engage with certain objects that cause delusions, helps to appease our minds too. On a slightly more advanced level, the teachings explain that, as a result of a regular meditation practice, we are able to engage in the outside world when we are not formally meditating so that when we come across objects that normally cause strong delusions we are not affected by them as we previously would have been. In other words, our interaction with the object of delusion before a regular meditation practice becomes different after we have trained our minds, and our minds are not disturbed to the same extent. This improvement is a sign that our meditation practice is benefiting us, because our minds are appeased even when we are in close proximity to an object that usually disturbs our mind. It is in that way that we begin to slowly progress.

So, having explained a bit about how the meditation technique works and what the benefits are, we can now attempt to practise it. Prior to doing so, however, generating a positive motivation for engaging in the

practice of meditation is important. As this is the case, think about your intention for meditating before you begin.

The object we will focus on in our meditation will be our breath. We will withdraw our attention from all external objects and instead place our full attention on the natural rhythm of our breathing. We need to withdraw the focus of our minds from all external objects and bring our attention completely within ourselves. However, maintaining a blank focus within ourselves for a long period is hard, therefore, we use an object to anchor our attention and focus. The breath is a readily available object and is neutral so it is not stimulating for our minds. For this reason, bringing our attention within and placing it on the breath to anchor our attention is ideal. All that we need to do is imagine seeing our breath coming in and going out naturally through our nostrils, and maintain a hundred-percent focus on that process for the next few minutes. [*Pause for meditation.*]

That will be sufficient for now. As we attempted in our short session just then, adopting a regular meditation session in our daily life is a worthwhile exercise. We will probably find, and perhaps we already did in our attempt then, that meditating is a discipline. The discipline is to intentionally withdraw our minds from objects that would otherwise disturb and distract us so that delusions, such as anger or attachment, do not arise. Each time we attempt to withdraw our minds from the delusions to prevent negative states of mind arising, we become more familiar with the technique. The more we familiarise ourselves, the more natural the technique becomes in our lives, and eventually we gradually will be able to withdraw from, and even withstand, negative objects outside of our formal meditation sessions.

We can be confident that we will reach a stage where we will be confronted with objects that cause us delusion, but due to the good familiarity we have cultivated through meditating, we will not be completely overwhelmed and influenced by them. Instead, we will be able to take a step back and analyse the situation before we act – the delusion may still be there but its intensity will have lessened because of our ability to distance ourselves.

The ability to distance ourselves from objects of the delusions is due to the familiarity we have developed by having a consistent meditation practice. We will see the difference a meditation practice makes to our lives and how we have more control over our minds. We will also see the difference between someone who meditates regularly and someone who has no familiarity with the technique.

For people who are not familiar with meditating, the delusions naturally arise strongly. These people might say they have no control over certain negative states of mind and they may feel that their minds are completely outside of their command. These people do not have the advantage of applying a technique to help them pacify their minds. For them, their minds can be completely out of control, so they are objects of compassion. We, however, are familiar with the meditation technique, and we can gain some control over the states of our mind through a consistent practice.

Meditation benefits us by protecting our minds during formal sessions, but also benefits us by protecting our minds outside of those sessions. The protection that arises, particularly when we are not formally meditating, is like an analysis of our reactions to various objects. We are able to see more clearly what kinds of feelings and emotions arise within ourselves when we are in contact with an object, and what our reactions are to it. Our meditation practice will enable us to investigate our interaction with certain objects so that we are able to see how we react to them, what happens in our minds, what influences our speech and what we are thinking. As we become more familiar with this analysis, it will assist us more and more in making appropriate decisions, and to not be completely influenced by the delusions. In this way, our meditation practice is a measure that slowly and gradually improves our lives.

Our meditation practice naturally enhances our self-analysis. In time, this wisdom grows so that our minds become clearer and sharper, and our ability to discern what is right from what is wrong improves. The wisdom we cultivate assists us in making suitable decisions in whatever activity we need to engage in. This is in line with what the great master Shantideva advises in *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life*. In this masterpiece Shantideva explains that before we engage in any activity we need to first apply a good measure of analysis by checking whether we are capable of engaging in that activity and whether it is worthwhile. If we find that the activity is worthwhile and we have the ability to engage in it, then, by all means we can engage in that activity. However, if our analysis concludes that the activity is not worthwhile or we do not have the capacity to engage in it, then, temporarily, it is better to leave it. Shantideva further explained that if we just engage in the activity before analysing or checking whether we have the capacity to complete it, we will probably get halfway through the activity before abandoning it. We can see this is true in our current lives. Many people engage in something they see as worthwhile, but leave it half-finished because they do not see it through to the end. Instead, they start something else and do not complete that task either. An example of this is people who go to university, but after studying for a few months or a year, they leave without completing their course. If we do not complete an activity that we initially felt worthwhile to engage in, nothing of significance can be accomplished. We need to recognise that leaving things unfinished or half-finished becomes a bad habit in this life, and, a familiarity with this habit can continue into our future lives so that we never really accomplish anything.

So, developing a clear, sound internal wisdom is really important and crucial for making decisions for yourself in your life. If you do not cultivate a clear inner wisdom, you will be prone to being easily influenced by what Buddhists call "a negative friend". From the spiritual, or Dharma point of view, the influence of negative friends is something we need to be very mindful about. Spiritually, we do not want to associate with friends who influence us to engage in negative acts. However, even from a worldly perspective, we can see how avoiding negative friends is a sensible choice. For example, we can see how

easily the younger generation can be influenced and encouraged by their peers to engage in behaviours that are not conducive to their wellbeing—parents often worry about their children being misled and deceived by others to engage in activities that are harmful to their studies or detrimental to their wellbeing. Later, parents might worry whether their child will meet the right boyfriend or girlfriend, and settle down with the right partner. These concerns that parents have for their children are justified because they have the utmost interest in their child's welfare. If we can see that the concern parents have about their children being influenced by negative friends is credible, we can also see that protecting ourselves from negative influences is necessary. How we protect ourselves is by developing a sound and clear wisdom, which is done by using our intelligence as a tool.

The great master Padampa Sangye advised that being mindful of associating with negative friends and trying to associate with positive friends as much as possible is beneficial. He explained that the virtue of associating with positive friends is that you will most likely be influenced by their positive behaviours and good qualities, and can adopt those positive behaviours and good qualities more naturally. However, if you associate with negative friends, you are more likely to be influenced by their negative actions and bad qualities. For this reason, we need to be mindful and careful about who we associate with.

However the advice not to associate with negative friends can be easily misinterpreted, so to explain further, not associating with negative friends does not mean we should shun our love and compassion for them. In fact, not associating with negative friends means we should not associate with their negative behaviours. If we are with them, we need to be very mindful that we do not adopt their behaviours. For example, if we have a friend who likes hurting or being cruel to others, we need to recognise this behaviour is not appropriate and we should not try to copy or adopt it for ourselves. This means that if we have to be with friends who have negative tendencies, we need to use our discernment to recognise which behaviours are negative and not to be adopted in order to protect ourselves. Another example of associating with negative friends but not associating with their negative behaviour could be being with a friend who likes to drink alcohol, but you do not want to. If you are not mindful or true to your principles when you are with this friend, you might be in danger of adopting their drinking behaviour. You may not want to drink, but because your mind is not strong, you might be easily influenced by your friend to drink as a way of socialising, then, you might get into the habit of drinking yourself. We all know that a habit of drinking alcohol can have serious and detrimental consequences to our wellbeing, such as impairing our judgement and affecting our health negatively. I share this advice regarding drinking regularly, particularly with the younger generation, who have young and fresh bodies and minds, and are easily influenced in positive or negative ways, but we all need to be very mindful and maintain our integrity when it comes to drinking alcohol. We can

appreciate that having a little bit to drink sometimes might be good for us, but if we do not drink in moderation and a habit forms, then, drinking is definitely harmful.

The two main points I wanted to emphasize this evening are: that the technique of meditation is beneficial to us during our formal meditation sessions and also in our everyday lives; and we need to be mindful of associating with the right kind of people for our wellbeing, which is especially important for the younger generation to remember. I share these points with the best intention in my mind—my only intention in sharing this advice is so it can be of some practical use to you. I noticed while I spoke that you all listened very well, so I appreciate that. Thank you.

Before we conclude this evening, let us again take the opportunity for a few minutes of meditation. This time the object of focus is the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. As we hear this mantra chanted, we can try to place our full attention and focus on its sound. This means that we again withdraw our focus from all thoughts, distractions and objects, in order to place our full attention on one object. When the sound of the mantra's recitation subsides, there will be a sort of momentary absence of everything, where there is no sound or external objects, but a kind of vacuity. Try to dwell in this moment of space for a few moments and focus on its emptiness. Maintaining that focus is worthwhile and significant, and is the reason why we do this meditation.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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