
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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Please adopt a relaxed and comfortable posture, and while you adjust yourself physically, you can also adjust your mind so that it is comfortable and relaxed too.

The best way to train our minds is to be physically and mentally relaxed. Being physically and mentally relaxed is essential in our lives and not just necessary in our meditation sessions here. Understanding this is really important because relaxing our minds and bodies while we conduct our lives is a mental training that acquaints us with positive ways of thinking.

Without proper mental training, our way of thinking in our daily lives is unfocused and can lead to confusion. We tend to be absorbed by attitudes, usually notions or ideas we have about our experiences, that propel us through the day. We are so accustomed to this typical pattern of thinking that we don't question it. Our thoughts carry us along and that's how we spend each day. Some of our thought patterns and attitudes might be inclined towards the positive, but most of our thinking is influenced by delusions, which, if we don't change, can be harmful to our wellbeing.

We can check what our thought patterns are by paying attention to and investigating our attitudes to see the ways of thinking we are most inclined to have. We can ask ourselves if these attitudes are good and whether they contribute to our overall wellbeing. If they do, we don't need to change them, and we can feel happy and rejoice that we have these positive thought patterns. However, we must first investigate and really analyse our attitudes because our negative ways of thinking might not be apparent to us. If our negative attitudes are not apparent to us, we will not be able to see that our thinking patterns are detrimental to our wellbeing and causing us internal turmoil. We would also not be able to work at changing or transforming them into something more beneficial for ourselves and others.

So, how do we discern what is conducive to our wellbeing? And how do we determine what harms it? We can mostly determine the answers to these questions by using our own experience—when we scrutinise our ways of thinking, we come to notice certain attitudes bring us uncomfortable feelings. We can then be mindful of our experiences and use them to detect what is conducive to our wellbeing and what is not. There are, of course, more detailed and subtle levels of differentiation described in the teachings, but leaving these aside, we can all relate to this obvious and direct way of analysing our thought patterns.

Analysing our ways of thinking enables us to familiarise ourselves with, and become more accustomed to, mindsets that are conducive to our mental wellbeing. We are then able to feel the mind become lighter, more joyful and happier because of our positive attitudes. We are also able to see which ways of thinking contribute to having a clear state of mind, and that having a clear state of mind enables us to take initiative, make good decisions, and produce worthwhile outcomes.

Conversely, an investigation of our attitudes will highlight to us that there are patterns of thought that dominate and weigh our minds down. These attitudes make us uncomfortable and uneasy so that our minds become dark, confused and unclear. Further, these kinds of attitudes contribute to feelings of despondency, discouragement and being overwhelmed. Such attitudes are detrimental to our wellbeing because they make our minds confused and unclear. We can see this for ourselves if we investigate our thought patterns.

Whether our thoughts take us to a dark, oppressive place, or whether they promote clarity and joy in our minds, depends on how familiar we are with the different patterns of thinking. This is because the more accustomed we are to a particular attitude, the more inclined we are to be in that state of mind. If, for example, we allow our minds to be dominated by negative states and become familiar with them, the higher the likelihood that our minds will tend to spiral into depression. However, if we notice this pattern, see how being in that dark place is detrimental to our wellbeing, we can take measures to break the pattern by transforming it into having more positive attitudes. We need to take this initiative to change our attitudes when we recognise we are caught in negative patterns of thought.

Further, when we analyse how we become habituated to certain mindsets, we can see that the familiarity takes root because of the way objects appear to our minds. In other words, the state of our minds depends on how objects are appearing to us. An "object" can be something external and tangible or even something internal, like certain kinds of thoughts. Whatever the object may be—whether it is a situation, thought or physical object—the moment we think about it and feel disturbed, weighed down and agitated, we can take those feelings as a clear sign that the more we familiarise with that object, the more our minds will be accustomed to that disturbed and chaotic state. Therefore, recognising how we relate to objects we interact with enables us to see which patterns of thought disturb our minds.

Once we are able to identify the kinds of objects, situations or thoughts that are detrimental to our minds, we can see how incredibly helpful meditation is as a mental training technique. Meditating increases and promotes positive states of mind specifically because its purpose is to intentionally divert our focus away from negative objects. The meditation technique entails focusing our minds on a virtuous object and this prevents our minds being distracted by objects that cause agitation and disturbance. If we maintain our attention on a positive object, our minds will naturally become clearer and calmer because when we focus on a positive object,

we cannot attend to negative objects and be influenced by them. In this way, the mind can be released from agitation and troubles. This is the immense practicality of meditating.

When we understand the significance of the meditation technique—how it works and how it transforms our minds—and experience the benefits for ourselves, we see it is the most effective medicine to cure problematic states of mind. A meditation practice serves to alleviate mental suffering and is the best medicine to take when we are ill at ease.

Many people have confided to me that they have found meditation to be extremely useful and helpful because after they have implemented it in their life, their anxieties, stress and depression were reduced. Of course, while this initial experience is true, if you don't maintain your practice, the earlier benefits will not continue. The meditation technique works, but if you are inconsistent in your practice and don't apply the technique on a regular basis, then, you may feel that meditation is failing you. So, when you notice the benefits of meditating, you can recognise that having a consistent practice in your life will assist your wellbeing.

You do not need to feel that starting a meditation practice is a religious thing to do—there is no need to consider yourself religious or even Buddhist when you practise the technique. You can meditate solely because it helps your mind. My intention in conducting these sessions is for the information I share to benefit anyone who comes here. I don't expect people to want to become Buddhist or even be inclined towards Buddhism. My only intention is to give you something that will benefit and help you in your lives. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has personally advised me, as he has done with other teachers who go to the west and share Buddhist understanding and knowledge, that the intention of teaching in the west is not to convert those who listen to Buddhism. He said that sharing Dharma must be completely free from trying to increase the number of Buddhists. Instead, His Holiness advised that teaching with an attitude to help and benefit others is the spirit in which to share Buddhist teachings. If you come to these sessions with the intention to learn something that will help in your life—really, genuinely help you—then, that serves as the purpose of our gatherings. There does not need to be a religious purpose.

Now that I have spent some time explaining how the meditation technique is useful in your life, we can now practise the technique. We can do this by using the natural rhythm of our breath as the object and focus of our meditation.

The mindset that we have in order to engage in the practice of meditation is very important—we need to make a strong determination to not allow our minds to wander during our practice. Of course this is significant generally in our everyday lives, but the focus is particularly essential while meditating because meditation's purpose is to attend only to a chosen object. So, before we begin to meditate, we need to make a commitment to keep our attention on our breath and not allow our minds to be influenced by other disturbing objects.

A disturbing object could be a thought or state of mind. As I discussed earlier, we are all able to notice which thought patterns agitate us and make us uneasy. Individually, we may have similar disturbing objects which, as soon as they occur, have ill effects we can immediately feel. These are the negative states of mind and thoughts that we need to overcome because they are none other than our own mental creations. We have the power to avert and overcome them because they are internal and shaped in the mind. We need to recognise that not pinpointing the thought patterns that personally disturb us will mean our minds will be overpowered by those negative states.

If we make the strong determination to identify those disturbing states of mind, and after having identified them, not allow them to dominate us, we will be helping ourselves. We can even have a dialogue with the negative states of mind we detect. We can say, "I've recognised you as being a state of mind that disturbs me. You cause me agitation and have been successful in agitating me in the past, but now that I know you are there, I am not going to allow you to overwhelm me anymore. Instead, I am going to choose to focus on an object that prevents me from being influenced by you." This kind of determination helps us to be mindful. It also helps us to identify what disturbs us and see that the disturbance we identify is internal rather than external: the disturbance is within our own minds.

So, with the personal commitment to identify our own disturbing objects and not be influenced by them, we can adjust our physical posture to be an upright and comfortable. We can then bring our focus inward and place it upon the breath, and further commit to focusing on it 100 per cent for the next few minutes. [*Pause for breathing meditation.*]

That will be sufficient for now. We don't have much time left, but we'll nevertheless focus on the content in the text.

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

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.1.2.2.1.2. The actual development of the mind that strives for others' welfare

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.1.2.2.1.2.2. Cultivating compassion

Earlier, the text outlined what love is and how to contemplate it in order to develop the altruistic mind. Now, the text is describing the stages of cultivating loving-kindness.

Of course we all identify with "love" on a mundane level, but the text specifically refers to it as being a state of mind

that focuses on wishing beings deprived of happiness to be happy. This definition of love is based on reasoning and so rules out love being just a random feeling or emotion. Since love is a state of mind based on reason, it can be cultivated and developed. This means we can work towards developing love because it is not a chance sentiment, but has a rational basis.

Love is an altruistic attitude because of its focus on beings who are deprived of happiness and its genuine, heart-felt wish for them to be happy. The reason why I emphasise love as being altruistic is because there are many kinds of worldly descriptions of what love is. Some may consider physical gestures, like kissing or hugging, to be love, but physical gestures are not necessarily love. The text describes love as being a very precious state of mind and explains that we need to clearly understand its definition in order to gradually cultivate it within ourselves.

Thus love, as it is presented and defined here in the text and in the Buddhist teachings, is to be understood as being generated in relation to another living being. We see that the other living being lacks happiness and because this knowledge is unbearable to us and makes us feel uncomfortable, we genuinely wish them to be happy. The recognition of other sentient beings' suffering and the consequent heart-felt wish for them to be happy is the altruistic mind of love. This attitude is a very precious.

Love is a very valuable state of mind, but when it is combined with a superior intention, its value is exponential. If, after seeing a being who is deprived of happiness, and wishing them to be happy, you take personal responsibility to make them happy, you are directly benefiting the other. Your earlier notion of wishing others to be happy was noble, but it was not accompanied by an initiative to reach out to help them. So although you definitely would have personally benefited from having a genuinely good thought, the actual object your love was focused on wasn't affected much. Your gracious thoughts didn't really change their situation! [*Geshe-la chuckles.*] However, when we add a superior intention to our love, it has a direct effect upon the object of our focus. This is because we are taking the initiative to bring the other into a state of happiness by doing whatever we can to help them reach that state.

In the sequence of developing the altruistic states of mind, **compassion** follows love. Compassion is defined as a state of mind that is brought about by focusing on another being's suffering, pain, misery or discomfort, and generating a strong wish for that being to be free from suffering. This wish for others to be free from suffering is an incredibly altruistic state of mind, but again when it is combined with the superior intention of taking personal responsibility to free the other from suffering, then, the benefit to the other is direct. Just as with love, we directly benefit the object of our compassion when we combine our heart-felt wish with a superior intention that actively takes personal responsibility to free that being from suffering. Love—wanting a suffering being to be happy—and compassion—wanting them to free a being from suffering—becomes practical when these mindsets are combined with the superior intention.

We can further ensure the practical nature of our love and compassion by applying our personal responsibility to the situations of beings and individuals we associate with in our everyday lives. We can begin with someone we live and interact with on a daily basis, and see how applying a true sense of love and compassion with the superior intention is the optimum way to maintain a good relationship with the other.

When we personally take the initiative to ensure the other person is happy, we do everything possible to make them happy so that they do not experience any suffering. The other person naturally will appreciate that, and will also recognise and respond in a positive way. In other words, our pure intentions of love and compassion can affect the other's behaviour and attitudes so that they are positive too. This mutual goodwill is what maintains a good relationship. So, when we take the initiative to develop a true sense of love and compassion for the other, our attitude will override any normal circumstances that may irritate us.

If we think about when we get angry or upset with someone else, it is usually in relation to some insignificant gesture or remark that was made. If we take the situation too personally and immediately react, it shows that we don't really care much for how they're feeling or what kind of state of mind they might be in. However, if we had a true sense of concern for them and understood that any inappropriate gesture or remark they made was because they were in a negative state of mind, then, we would easily accept the situation. Otherwise, meditating on love and compassion, and acknowledging that love and compassion are worthy states of mind to develop and cultivate, but responding negatively to someone we deal with in our everyday lives, completely defeats the purpose of our practice. If we get angry and upset with the other, we have not really applied a true sense of love and compassion. We need to really relate to this: we can acknowledge the great benefits of love and compassion, but if we wish to develop and cultivate them within ourselves, we need to train our minds to apply them to those closest to us. This application enables us to develop genuine, harmonious relationships with others and our surroundings.

If we don't take the initiative to implement what we have learnt about love and compassion, then we cannot expect others to truly reciprocate loving-kindness to us—the attitudes are definitely mutual. We also need to consider who will help us when we are in a difficult situation or experiencing hardships. When we recognise who that individual or individuals may be, we need to cherish and appreciate them. Only someone who has a genuine sense of love and compassion will be there for us when we are facing difficulties. A person who has a fleeting attraction to us, based on fleeting attachments, will not be there for us when we need them. Only someone who is genuinely concerned for us will be there during our personal hardships. When we recognise who that person or people are, whether they are our partners or companions, we need to respond to that and cherish them. The best way to cherish someone is to express our own genuine love and compassion towards them. This is something we need to recognise and cultivate within ourselves. We can then

maintain a good relationship with others because of our mutual intentions.

Edited Version

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I have attempted to relate the value and practical benefit of developing love and compassion. In simple terms, if we wish for good companions, the contributing factor to acquiring them is your own sense of love and compassion. If we lack love and compassion in our own hearts, we cannot possibly expect others to show us genuine love and compassion. A good companion is someone we can rely on, someone who is trustworthy, and someone who will be there when we are in troubled times. How do we obtain that good companion? By developing a true sense of love and compassion within our own hearts! This is what the text and teachings present to us. The way to train our minds in developing love and compassion is to first acknowledge the value and practicality of love and compassion, and see how they are the essential element in our lives.

A practical example of this is the care parents give their children. We can see that there is tremendous nurturing from the parents' side for their child, and this is based on the love and compassion they have for the child. The parents' concern for the welfare of their child will cause them to go to great extents to nurture and bring their child up in the best way. In this way we are able to see how the care parents have for their children is a mark of their love and compassion. This is a way we can relate to the practical benefit of love and compassion as a way to encourage us. Only by reminding ourselves and thinking about love and compassion again and again will we be inspired to develop these attitudes and values ourselves.

I have come to notice that there are many parents with a genuine concern for their children's welfare and wellbeing—some of them refrain from spending their earnings because they are concerned that if they spend what they have saved there will be nothing left for their children. [*Geshe-la laughs*] Some parents sacrifice and become frugal because of their wish to bequeath something to their children. This is an example of another way we can implement love and compassion in our hearts and in our daily lives.

Let us spend a few more minutes in meditation before we end the session for the evening. This time the object we can focus on can be the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni's name mantra. We can focus on the sound of the mantra as it is chanted and by doing so, withdraw our minds from all other distractions. When the recitation subsides, we can place our full attention on the vacuity of the sound for a few moments.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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