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## Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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As I regularly emphasise it seems that the practice of meditation is something really beneficial, something useful, and so based on that one may consider the following question on a personal level; why would meditation be beneficial for me? When we consider it in very plain or simple language we can accept the fact that we want to be a good person, to be considered to be a good and kind person, which is something we would all naturally like to be, especially in relation to how others regard us.

So the next thing we consider is whether we have the ability to achieve that or not. According to the Buddha's teachings we all have the ability or potential to be good. In fact, investigation within oneself as to whether one has the ability to achieve something or not is a very significant point to ponder, not only in relation to the spiritual quest, or the Dharma sense, but also in conventional ways. I am sharing this point as something for you to keep in mind, as a significant point to really consider. If we do the proper investigation with a sound mind and using reasons and logic, we would all come to the conclusion that we definitely have that ability. This is something we need to realise.

If we investigate whether we have the ability to be a good person with all the good qualities, we will notice that it is found within one's own mind. The very fact that we have a mind means that it naturally carries that potential and ability to achieve all goodness, and this is true for all our other achievements in life. When we really scrutinise and look into whatever activities and actions we engage in, what precedes that activity is really the intention. So therefore it all begins within one's own mind.

So upon investigation one comes to recognise that everything begins from within one's own mind; all actions and activities that we wish to achieve are preceded by a state of mind. Having mentioned that, the Buddha's teachings then describe the actual potential of the mind, and they explain that the very nature of mind is that it carries the potential to be trained. When asked how far we can train the mind, it is actually said to be unlimited. We would all know that in physical training no matter how hard we exert ourselves there is a limit. For example, I have heard that in relation to jumping, one could jump to a certain point, but apparently after about eight metres there is no one who can jump further than that. So we can see that there is a certain sort of limit that no one is able to go beyond. Therefore in relation to the physical abilities, there is definitely a limit, whereas the training of the mind is said to be limitless, because the potential of one's mind is limitless.

Therefore we need to understand that all knowledge, everything that one acquires, relates to training the mind. When we refer to a person as being very knowledgeable, what kind of training have they engaged in that entitles them to be called a 'scholar'? They have acquired that title because they have trained their mind, they have learned and acquired knowledge through the training of the mind, and with that knowledge they are now respected as being a scholar. Thus, we can relate to the good qualities that can be acquired through the training of the mind.

Having considered that all the knowledge and good qualities that one acquires comes from the training of the mind, we can conclude that if one exerts oneself in training the mind, one reaps the benefit of acquiring knowledge. Conversely if one does not attempt to train the mind then one actually loses out in gaining benefit. This is something that we really need to consider, particularly the younger generation. I emphasise this regularly, because it is really important for you in the prime of youth to use your very intelligent state of mind, to really use it for the training, to acquire good knowledge; you really need to consider this.

To relate the benefit that one gains from training the mind on a practical level, it is the training of the mind and the acquisition of knowledge that serve as a means to acquire good physical conditions for ourselves, including good facilities and conditions that we might need for our physical comfort. More particularly the good conditions for mental wellbeing definitely come from training the mind as well.

Thus on both physical and mental levels the good conditions that we acquire come from the training the mind. As I mentioned earlier, these are things that we need to really consider, something which is beneficial for our whole life, to living a meaningful and good life. These are the very essential points that we need to consider.

Now, if we exert ourselves in merely acquiring the good conditions for our physical wellbeing then we might gain some level of physical comfort, but that doesn't necessarily contribute to our mental wellbeing or happiness. If, as well as exerting ourselves in acquiring good physical conditions, we were to spend significant time and energy on developing the mind, the good conditions for our mental wellbeing, then that combination will definitely contribute to our overall wellbeing. If one wonders how to actually adopt the training of the mind to acquire the good conditions for our mental wellbeing, this is where religion comes into the picture. All religious traditions actually offer various means to train the mind, to acquire the good qualities for our wellbeing. I would say this is where religion began, from recognising that we need good conditions not only on a physical level but also mentally.

Even if we were to leave the religious connotation aside for now, and just concentrate on a personal level again, we can use reasoning and logic to assert that if one is able to acquire good physical conditions by training our mind, then by all means we can train our mind to acquire the good conditions for our mind to be happy as well. Thus,

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the wellbeing of the mind is something we can definitely achieve as well.

How do we begin to recognise that we have the ability to engage in mind training? As mentioned previously the reason why we have this ability is because the potential of our own mind is limitless. We can thus use our mind to acquire the good conditions both on a physical and mental level. When we recognise that for ourselves it encourages us; when we begin to see and relate to our own potential it will help us to feel more encouraged and will also help us to overcome despondency and some forms of laziness where we think, 'Oh, I can't do it' and just set things aside. Because one recognises it, one takes the personal responsibility to apply oneself to acquire it.

From the religious point of view, or more specifically here from the Buddhadharma point of view, there are techniques and methods that are presented in training the mind in order to acquire the good conditions for our mental wellbeing and happiness. If you were to have an interest in that, it would then be reasonable to ask yourself how does the Dharma actually present this and what are the methods and techniques.

One way of thinking about how training is applied for mental conditions is the significant point that relates to all religions. When our physical body comes to disintegrate we don't actually completely cease to exist, there is a continuity which goes on. So all religions, like Christianity, will agree that there is something that continues after death.

So when one considers the probability of a continuity of an essence of oneself, that continues after this life ends, then with that sort of acceptance one begins to focus more on the wellbeing of our future existence, rather than focusing our whole energy and time merely on the affairs of this life. As a result of that our strong clinging to the affairs of this life will begin to reduce and thus, as a consequence, one experiences a more relaxed and peaceful mind. This is one way we can consider the training from a religious point of view.

So applying this from the Christian perspective, the way to practise would be to place their complete confidence and reliance in God, making the resolve in one's mind that 'Whatever happens to me is in your hands God, you know best. You know what is in store for me and so I completely dedicate myself to you'. Placing that wholehearted reliance and faith in God will naturally loosen the strong grip on one's own self importance, one's sense of pride, the self-centred ego. As a consequence of losing that strong grip on one's self-centred ego, naturally we will experience a sense of ease and wellbeing within the mind. So that's how it actually helps.

Yet from another point of view there is the training of the mind which is the practice of meditation. The training of one's mind in relation to the technique of meditation is very much done with the understanding of the actual state of mind, because there is a direct relationship. By withdrawing the mind and bringing it inwards and focusing on an appropriate object, that sort of practice itself helps to contain the mind where it is not completely dispersed externally. Thus when the mind is contained

and placed within, this naturally brings a relaxed state within oneself. That is how, in a very simple way, the training in meditation helps to contain the mind and to feel relaxed and peaceful.

The reason why this meditation technique helps one's mental wellbeing, is that when focusing merely on the wellbeing of our physical conditions, i.e. when the mind is actually dispersed outwardly, it is seeking for an external source of comfort. In that way the mind becomes completely focused on external things and objects and thus it becomes completely distracted. When the mind is completely dispersed by focusing outwardly it causes a lot of discursive states of mind, which we call disturbing states of mind. For example when one is completely focused externally, placing one's entire importance on the material gains, and being completely immersed in that sort of thinking, will lead one to feel jealous of those who have more, or who are better than oneself. Then for those who one may consider to be equal, the sense of competitiveness arises. This is just to name just a few discursive states which disturb one's mind.

So having explained briefly how the process occurs in relation to being completely distracted with the external worldly states of affairs, and how that causes all of our disturbing thoughts such as jealousy, competitiveness and so forth, we can see that the very reason why they are called disturbing thoughts, is that the moment they arise, they disturb the peace and tranquillity of the mind. Thus one becomes agitated and feels all the negative consequences of those disturbing minds. So here one applies the meditation technique, withdrawing our attention from these external conditions, distracting objects and discursive thoughts and bringing the focus within, and placing it single-pointedly upon a chosen object. By the virtue of doing that, it will naturally release one's mind from the fleeting and disturbing thoughts, and thus, the more one trains the mind and becomes familiar in focusing single-pointedly on the appropriate object, the more one experiences the tranquillity and calmness within. As one experiences that tranquillity by virtue of that training, it also helps to slowly increase the clarity and brightness within one's mind and thus the real potential begins to emerge. So it is in this way that one will achieve the great benefit. Then as a result of the mind becoming clearer, calmer and more focused it also becomes a happier mind. A person who possesses such a happy mind will naturally become a more joyful and naturally good person. So thus in relation to the earlier point, if one wishes to be regarded as a good person, then this is how one begins to train one's mind to become a naturally good person.

So when we really investigate in this way we will begin to slowly recognise and detect within ourselves the real causes of what disturbs us. As one begins to recognise that, one will really begin to acknowledge and fully accept that the causes of our disturbance, misery and suffering lie within our own mind. That is the recognition of what is identified in the teachings as the inner enemy—the real enemy that lies within oneself.

Because we are intelligent people who want to do the best for ourselves, once we recognise the inner enemy, why would we allow it to remain within? Why would we feed

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it further? We would by all means want to overcome that inner enemy, just like an external enemy. It might take time to recognise even an external enemy, but once we do, we will do everything possible to avoid or overcome it. Now much worse is the inner enemy, that which really disturbs us and causes the real turmoil within ourselves. So we need to first recognise that and then take the initiative to overcome it.

In relation to the earlier analogy of trying to vanquish and overcome an external enemy, this is what ordinary people will instinctively do. There are certain beings who actually help an external enemy, and those are called *arya* or noble beings, and only noble beings would actually try to benefit an enemy rather than harming them. But we ordinary beings would not consider that, for as soon as we recognise an external enemy we want to do whatever possible to try to vanquish and overcome them, or if not then try to run away and avoid them. So that is at our level. We are on our ordinary level right now where we need to overcome, to vanquish. The main point is that just as we would exert ourselves by putting energy into vanquishing the external enemy, it is more important to spend time and energy in overcoming the internal enemy. That is what we really need to do, and we have the ability and potential to apply ourselves to that. So in this way we begin to understand how this meditation technique works to accomplish that.

As you would have noticed in the Tara Praises that we did earlier, one of the lines says, 'Tara who destroys all and vanquishes all enemies.' That enemy is said to apply to the delusions or disturbing thoughts within oneself.

It is highly significant that when the Buddha's teaching refers to vanquishing the enemy, it is referring particularly to the inner enemy, the disturbing thoughts and emotions that lie within. All the training and practices in Buddhism are really geared towards that end, towards overcoming and vanquishing the inner enemy, because when we really think about it in a practical way that is the worst kind of enemy. The external enemy can only harm us to a certain extent, when we are in close proximity or sometimes when we create the harm ourselves, when by just thinking about them we feel agitated. Whereas the harm that is caused by the internal enemy is constant and as long as we harbour it within ourselves, it will perpetually disturb us in whatever we engage in. When the inner enemy is really heightened, that is when we lose sleep or no longer enjoy a meal, or the company of friends, and likewise with any other activities we engage in, whether we are awake or asleep they become completely tainted and destroyed because of the inner enemy. This is why we need to recognise that, and apply the right measure of exerting our time and energy in trying to overcome the inner enemy, to really pinpoint it and be determined by saying, 'Now that I have recognised you, I will no longer allow you to disturb me'.

To expand a little bit further on how the inner enemy disturbs us, we can use the example of anger, which is considered to be one of the worst inner enemies, because it is one of the disturbing thoughts or emotions which cause us the most distress. First of all let us consider how we define an enemy. The very term 'enemy' would be

applied to someone who does everything possible to harm us and do not help or benefit us in anyway. So if that is how we define an enemy, then that is what anger does to us. As soon as it arises it completely disturbs the tranquillity and peaceful atmosphere within ourselves and we feel agitated and disturbed. We can all relate to that experience and that is one way to identify how wonderful it would be to be without the disturbing state of mind of anger for even a moment; how very peaceful and tranquil that would be. So the longer we can go without being affected by anger, the happier and more joyful we become. So again this ties into the practice of meditation, when we focus within and choose an appropriate object, we are focusing on an object which does not cause a disturbing mind such as anger to arise, on the contrary we are focusing on an object which causes our mind to become tranquil and peaceful, so that training itself is what helps us gradually throughout our life to become more tranquil.

One contributing factor to our happiness is said to be the joy of harmonious relationships, and what disturbs an otherwise harmonious connection with others is anger. The moment anger arises the harmonious relationship is completely destroyed and so again this is how we need to consider the ill effects of anger.

If we were to take what has been presented thus far and to summarise the main point, so that we can take it in on a personal level, we need to ask ourselves whether we want to be influenced by the negative and disturbing states of mind such as anger, or whether would we rather have a clear and happy state of mind? If the answer to that is to be a clear and happy state of mind, then one needs to take the initiative, thinking 'I am going to apply this technique of meditation, which will assist me to be more in tune with a clear and happy state of mind.' So training by withdrawing our focus on objects and thoughts which disturb us and placing our focus inwardly on an appropriate object will then help us to actually achieve that, so we take the initiative in this way and apply ourselves in the meditation technique.

So with that resolve and understanding of the importance of the practice, let us now use the next few minutes to actually engage in the formal practice of meditation. Because it requires some discipline, we need to make the commitment, 'I will not allow my mind to be distracted in meaningless and frivolous thoughts, but rather I will withdraw my attention and then having spent some time in focusing inwardly, I will place my entire focus and attention on the chosen object for the meditation which is my own breath'. Thus when we place our attention on the breath, it needs to be one hundred percent focused, so that in that way for the next few minutes we will try to adopt this meditation technique to the best of our ability in order to derive the benefit.

*[meditation ]*

Since we do not have much time left for our session, if there are any questions you may raise them. ...

The reason why I ask for good questions is so that you don't give me a hard time *[Geshe-la chuckling]*. I don't believe I am giving you a hard time, so it is fair enough to

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ask you to not to give me a hard time with difficult questions *[laughter]*

*Question:* I have worked as a nurse for the past 20 years and have assisted many in the last stages of their life. Often a dying person has shared with me that they see a white light, which is soothing and all encompassing. I wonder what the Buddhist explanation of this light is?

*Answer:* It is explained in the Buddha's teachings that anyone who has conducted their life in a virtuous way, will naturally experience that soothing white light, which makes the mind become more peaceful. So, as a natural consequence of their good deeds they will have that appearance of white light, which gives them a soothing peaceful atmosphere. All these are to be taken as good signs. There could be different explanations from different points of view, different religions might have different ways of explaining this, but basically in Buddhism it would be summarised as being the consequence of engaging in virtuous deeds and thoughts. Naturally at the most crucial time, between this life and next life, the mind will be more peaceful and relaxed. So these are actually good reminders for ourselves, that if we were to conduct our life in a meaningful way, by engaging in virtuous thoughts and deeds, then that will most likely be our experience at the time of death. So in a way it is very generous for others to share that with us as a good reminder for ourselves as well.

I have an acquaintance who is working in aged care and she related to me that if you recite some mantras or prayers for people during the time of their passing, that can bring solace to their mind and they can feel very peaceful. In fact this acquaintance told me that she does these prayers and mantras for some of the elderly people when they are near passing away and they seem to smile and have a very peaceful demeanour. So particularly when one is around someone who is dying, to be calm and to exhibit that sort of gentleness and nice facial gestures can really assist and help them to be very calm and peaceful themselves.

As I regularly share, those who are doctors or nurses are in a really incredible position to do good for others, as well as accumulating good virtue for themselves, because the assistance and help they provide is very practical. The patients or elderly who are dying are really in need of help, and to be able to provide that in a good and gentle way is highly admirable and highly beneficial. I have met patients who have been hospitalised for a while and later they have confided in me that their experience in the hospital was very good because of the kindness they received. When doctors and nurses were kind to them, their stay in the hospital has been a pleasant one and really helped them in their healing process.

I have also heard of some elderly people who do not have any immediate relatives, or who may not be on good terms with them, who, out of great appreciation for the care and kindness that they had received, particularly from the nurses who have cared for them regularly, have wanted to leave their inheritance to them. That is reasonable, because even if they have relatives, if those relatives are not around in this most critical point in their life where they are in need of care, kindness, gentleness

and someone to pay attention to them, then they are not of benefit those elderly people. Even if they had a great house, money, wealth, friends and relatives, all of that has to be left aside and they have come to a place where they need to rely upon the nurses and doctors for their care, which is why they would naturally feel very appreciative of that.

So in relation to our own experiences we might all have accounts where someone helped us when we were in great need and that sort of help, whatever it may be, is something we don't ever forget.

Thanks very much for the question, which was very good and relevant. Before we end the session for the evening, we can just spend a few minutes in meditation again, this time using the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra as the object to be focused on. So as we hear the chant, we try to withdraw from all other forms of distractions, we place our full attention and focus upon the sound of the mantra and when the recitation subsides we just maintain our attention and focus on that sense of vacuity for a few moments. That will suffice for a single-pointed meditation.

*TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA*

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