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than thinking that it *all* lies outside, if we think half of the responsibility for our happiness or misery lies within, it gives us an incentive to take a little bit more responsibility for ourselves. It is in this way that we can start to adopt a practical response to the reality of our situation, and from there we can begin to understand the deeper levels of the causes and conditions that lie within us.

When we start to really consider these points, not just hearing them as mere words, but looking within us and paying attention to our mind we will see how true this is. Then as the reality of the situation dawns upon us, this understanding is really helpful for our psychological well-being. When we realise that the real contributing factors for our well-being and happiness are within us, we can start to consider those good conditions as being an unfailing good friend or a good companion—our real companion lies within us all the time.

By the same token, we can identify that the contributing factors for that which harms us also lie within us. They are the disturbing states of mind that we call negative states of mind. When we have identified that, we can relate to them as the enemy that lies within us. To the extent that we recognise this, we will be able to further strengthen our inner friend and start to combat and overcome the internal enemy within us. The real internal work or mission that we need take up is to further increase the contributing factors for well-being that lie within, what we can call the real companion or the unfailing faithful friend, and also to combat and overcome the internal enemy. When this becomes a part of our life it can help us on a practical level.

We do still, of course, rely on external friends and companions. But that is uncertain and is really out of our control. External circumstances can change at any given time. And when external circumstances do change and a faithful, trusty friend starts to drift away we will not be as affected if we have secured our internal friend. It will not cause us as much misery when external circumstances change if we have worked on developing the internal conditions and circumstances for our happiness and well-being. Because we maintain those within ourselves, even when external circumstances change we will not be affected to a great extent. This is how these practices and the training of our mind to adopt positive attitudes is a very practical benefit to us.

I have shared this approach of taking it as a personal mission to further develop oneself for a long time. I have found that many people with whom I have shared this in the past have confided in me that it has actually benefitted them. There have been situations where having tried to adopt this way of thinking and attitude throughout their life has been of benefit. This is especially the case at the most crucial time of life, when one is passing on to the next life. People have witnessed that having practised developing such good attitudes has really been very calming and soothing at the time of passing on, what we call experiencing death. It has been really helpful at that time. These are accounts that others have shared with me. So there definitely seems to be a benefit in adopting such positive attitudes in one's mind.

On another practical note, one suffering that seems to be quite prevalent in the West is loneliness. The best way to overcome loneliness is by strengthening our inner friend, our inner companion. When we have strengthened our inner companion with a positive, happy state of mind, there is not much room for loneliness to occur because we will always be travelling with our true inner companion wherever we go. Wherever we are, we will always maintain that inner companion. So that is another practical benefit.

We can summarise the positive attitudes or states of mind that we need to develop in training our mind as a genuine sense concern and kindness for others. The more we train our mind to be genuinely kind and considerate to others, the more it has a direct, positive effect upon us and our own state of mind becomes happier and happier. That is something that we need to recognise.

Having identified that there are disturbing, negative states of mind that are also part of our existence, we might now ask, "How do we protect ourselves from them? What are the methods we use? Are there any techniques or methods to protect us?" The answer that we present in our tradition is the meditation technique.

If the meditation technique is introduced at this stage we can see its relevance because meditation is basically is a method of diverting our mind from focusing on the negative. In whatever situation we are in, we are normally habituated with immediately focusing on negative things. In meditation practice we train ourselves to divert our attention from focusing on the negative by intentionally choosing a positive object to focus on.

Having chosen a positive object to focus on, we slowly divert our attention and focus from the negative and place our full attention and focus on a positive object. The more we familiarise ourselves with this positive object then, to that extent, the more our mind becomes attuned to being in a positive state. It is in this way that we can see the relevance of the meditation technique. For those who have meditated for a while, I don't need to say too much about the benefits. You are now beginning to tell me how helpful meditation is. When it becomes your own experience, you see the benefit.

One may ask, "What is the positive outcome of having attempted to practise meditation and continuously tried to adopt it as part of one's life and daily practice?" The positive outcome for someone who has practised meditation for a significant time, and not given up on it, is that their mind naturally becomes more relaxed. Because of their familiarity with focusing on positive virtues or positive objects their mind naturally becomes relaxed. Then, even when they are out of the meditation session and in their everyday life they have a little bit more of a relaxed approach. Because of their relaxed state of mind they are naturally more relaxed physically too. They are not as agitated and as hurried and are less prone to making mistakes out of haste. As a result of being more mindful and mentally more relaxed and consequently physically more relaxed and more stable, whatever they do has a more meaningful purpose. So that is a result of meditation and attuning the mind to being more focused

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and mindful. These are definitely the benefits that one gains.

Then, because one now has a more relaxed and gentle demeanour, this naturally has a positive effect upon one's companions. Then, because of the positive effect that one naturally starts to have on a companion, if one starts to become a little bit agitated our partner, companion or anyone we live with will start to remind us, "Oh, I think it is about time that you go and do your meditation again because I can see you are becoming a little bit agitated." That is the positive outcome when meditation is seen as having a good effect. When we start getting out of line someone, who may not have supported you initially or not really understood what meditation is all about, will naturally start encouraging you to do more meditation.

When we take this realistic and practical approach to the benefits of meditation, then it becomes more reasonable for us to, at the very least, take it more seriously and give it a good try. If it will benefit us, if it will help our overall well-being, so why not adopt a technique that will be beneficial? At the beginning of this year, or last year, a young person shared that she had found through the practice of meditation that they had become a little bit more aware of their thoughts, feelings and emotions. She related that she was more aware when anger arose in her mind which helped her to be more cautious. So, that was a true benefit she found through her meditation!

Having explained a bit about the benefits of meditation, we can now engage in a few minutes practice of meditation. For the purpose, let us readjust our physical posture to be upright and relaxed. We need to also make the commitment: "For the next few minutes, I will not allow my mind to become distracted with trivial thoughts and so forth, but place my full attention and focus on my breath." In this way, we will spend the next few minutes in meditation.

*(Pause for meditation.)*

That should be sufficient for now. There is not much time left so we could use this as an opportunity to ask some questions.

*Question: In meditation can one actually avoid thoughts altogether? What I seem to find is that by trying to avoid it, I seem to analyse it more and think about it.*

*Answer:* There is, of course, a specific technique that, if you master it, involves not having any thoughts in one's mind. That is a possibility. That meditation technique involves not having any thoughts in one's mind, negative or positive. Of course it would initially be hard to adopt that technique because without *something* to focus on we find that it's impossible to keep our mind just blank. However, there is a technique that one can develop where one tries to avoid any kind of thinking process, positive or negative.

Of course, by mentioning that there is such a technique we should not assume that we can adopt this technique right away and could actually master a meditation practice where we have no thoughts in our mind at all. Initially it would be quite hard. It is natural that we find it hard to be without any kind of thoughts because that is

what we are habituated to. However, it is something that can be mastered.

In relation to your particular question and being self-critical for being obsessed with thoughts and not being able to focus on the object that you intend to focus on. If it's any comfort to you, I don't feel that you're alone with that! *(laughter)* That is something that almost everyone experiences initially.

Even when externally someone appears to be in focused meditation, internally they might be quite distracted. *(laughter)* The practical approach to take here for those of us who consider ourselves beginners is to understand that it is natural not to be able to maintain our focus for too long. In fact, because we are not trained yet, the technique suggests that we should not attempt to have a long-duration focus on the object. If initially one is only able to maintain focus on the chosen meditation object for a few moments, be satisfied with that. Then, slowly, we can increase the duration. So initially even if it is a few moments, that is good! Then we slowly increase. Initially, quality rather than the quantity is emphasised.

*Question: What are we actually meant to be focusing on? Do we feel the breath coming in and going out? Do we focus on that, the feeling? Or what is it?*

*Answer:* First of all, that it is a good question. It's a good point that you make. Initially we might definitely notice a cold sensation when we are breathing in. Breathing out there may be a bit of a warm sensation. If we are not careful, then that is something that we might be naturally drawn to. But that would be missing the point. So it is good to recognise early where one is going wrong and be able to go in the right direction. Right?

First of all, what that question suggests is that the manner in which you are inhaling and exhaling is not naturally regulated. We would normally only start feeling the breath coming in and going out if we were breathing in and out deeply. That is when we would normally start to *feel* the breath.

The complete technique suggests that one needs to have a very natural rhythm in one's breathing and to be free from laboured breathing. Naturally our breathing is free from any sound or any strong, forceful inhalation or exhalation. When the breath is in a natural rhythm we don't feel anything. Inhalation and exhalation are very gentle.

When our inhalation and exhalation become very calm and relaxed, what we actually focus on is really the awareness of the breath. As one breathes in one is fully aware that, "Now I am breathing in." As we breathe out, "The breath is going out." Just being focused on having that mental image of the breath coming in and going out. That is what one is focusing on.

Of course, initially, the attempt is to have a focused mind. So if you can have a focused mind, initially even if it's on the feeling, maybe you can be happy with that for a while, too. But that's the technique as presented just now. Did that help?

The point that is that we should not ascertain what the breath is doing. We should just be satisfied with being aware of the breath coming in or going out, whether we

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feel it or not. I think if we ascertain for ourselves what the breath is doing, where it is going and so forth then that, in itself, becomes a distraction if we have to follow the breath. We need not occupy ourselves with what the breath is doing. We just need to be aware that without any force, any labour, the breath just comes in and goes out. So, we are just aware of that.

If one is already familiar with focusing on a particular object and is able to maintain a single-pointed focus on that object, then maybe it is better to just keep that approach and not to try to change it.

*Question: Is it possible, given our busy life, that we can develop concentration gradually? Or do we have to pull ourselves completely away?*

*Answer:* If the question is whether it is possible to be in a meditative state and also do normal activities. The example of this is a buddha. A buddha definitely can be in a meditative state and teach and interact with others at the same time. So it is a state that is possible. As to your specific question as to whether it is possible to develop deeper levels while being engaged in normal activities. Of course we still need to eat, we still need to drink, we still have to walk about. Those are part of our normal activities.

There are definitely those who we call exceptional people, beings who can develop single-pointed concentration without abandoning other activities. It is a possibility.

I think the answer here is that there is not one set of practices that is applicable to everyone. There are certain people who serve a teacher and just from their service to their teacher develop great levels of clairvoyance. There are many stories like that. So for individual beings, different ways and methods of practice might be applicable.

The very basic requirement or foundation for developing single-pointed concentration, or what is called *mental quiescence* or *calm abiding*, is said to be observing morality or ethics. If one is not able to observe moral ethics we don't need mention the rest of the conditions. This is because when one is not observing moral ethics it is very easy for the mind to become completely distracted with things that one is attracted to and attached to. Because of those distractions one is not able to develop single-pointed concentration. Therefore ethics is said to be the basis.

Some have made comments that there are so many things to do that maybe it is best to try to find a technique that transforms whatever one does into a spiritual practice. (*Geshe-la chuckles*) Whatever one does becomes a spiritual practice.

There are people who ask questions about the union between male and female. (*Geshe-la laughs*) The question arises that maybe one could practice something like tantra and that would make the union a spiritual practice. However that question arises from a misunderstanding or a misinterpretation of what tantric practice is all about. There are many, many conditions for the practice to be a genuine practice. Many things need to be in place before one can even attempt to do this tantric practice.

It is said that one has to have complete control over one's channels, the winds and the drops. One has to have complete control over that and without control one cannot even practice. Therefore the normal sort of male-female union, copulation, cannot be a tantric practice. Some geshe have told me that people ask these kinds of questions and they find it awkward to answer. (*Geshe-la laughs, then everyone else*)

What prompted that was the question about not having to abandon normal activities. It depends what you referred to when you said normal activities! (*laughter*) Whether you had that intention or not, that's what I understood as normal activities. (*laughter*) For me, the question sounded like, "Can I still enjoy my normal activities, such as being with a partner while engaging in meditation practice?" (*lots of laughter*)

Before we conclude for the evening, let us again spend a few minutes in meditation. This time we can focus on the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra being recited. As we hear the chant of the mantra, we place our full attention and focus on the sound of the mantra and maintain that for a while. When the sound of the recitation subsides, we just maintain that awareness for a few moments. That will suffice for focused meditation.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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