
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

ལྷོ་ཁྱེད་ལམ་ལུ་འགྲོ་བ་འབྲུག་སྟོན།།

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7 August 2013

As usual, sitting in a relaxed physical posture, we can engage in meditation practice. As I regularly mention, the relevance of meditation is that offers a technique through which we can transform an unpleasant state of mind: a mind that otherwise may be a little 'crooked' can be 'straightened out'!

Indeed if we are not able to settle down a tumultuous mind – a mind disturbed by negative thoughts and ideas – can be detrimental to our wellbeing. Such a person will not feel settled and so will not experience a sense of joy and happiness. Whereas if one begins to settle down an otherwise agitated and disturbed mind, the disturbing thoughts will not be so prevalent. With such a state of mind, one would begin to experience a sense of tranquillity, a sense of ease. That is what we would consider to be a happy state of mind.

When we find the mind to be a bit agitated or on edge, we need to settle down and take time to look within, to do some inner investigation as to what is causing that state of mind. If, instead, we allow our mind to focus outwardly and try to relate our agitation to external conditions and situations, rather than settling the mind, this can actually make it worse.

When we take the initiative to do an inner investigation, it can help us identify our unruly, negative states of mind. This will enable us to take more personal responsibility in trying to overcome negative states of mind. So the task we take upon ourselves here is that of combating the negative states of mind. Basically this means not allowing oneself to be influenced by negative thoughts and attitudes.

On the contrary, if we don't take on the personal responsibility of combating our negative states of mind, and don't do self-analysis, as a negative consequence, we will fall completely under the influence of the negative thoughts and attitudes that arise within us. It is as if we are handing over power and authority to the negative states of mind or thoughts. And if we let those negative thoughts control us, naturally, the deeds we do will be influenced by them, bringing harmful consequences for ourselves and others.

Merely noticing negative attitudes or thoughts when they arise is already a great protection for oneself, because this diffuses the negative states of mind. When we identify a negative state of mind, it will lose some of its power over us. After we identify a negative state of mind and recognise it for what it is – that it will harm us and harm others – that recognition will start to lessen the gravity or

intensity of the negative state of mind. This is how we begin to see the immediate benefit to us of self-analysis.

When we do the investigation, we need to identify the nature of the negative state of mind. How does it arise? We will recognise for ourselves that the negative attitudes or thoughts most often occur in relation to our focus on an external object. Allowing our mind to be distracted by external things causes negative states of mind to arise.

When we begin to recognise this, we will also begin to acknowledge the fault of not maintaining an inner focus, not keeping our mind focused within. Normally, whatever distraction arises, we just allow the mind to follow it. When we recognise this as a fault, we will begin to notice the great benefit of maintaining an inner focus. If we take the initiative to do self-analysis, all of this will become our personal understanding. We will begin to further identify different levels of disturbing thoughts and attitudes, how they arise, how to overcome them, the antidotes to apply to them – we will be able to discover all of this through our own inner research. And this is really valuable for our being.

Of course, when I say there is a benefit from this practice of training the mind, I am just sharing with you what I have found to be useful and beneficial for myself. Anyone who willingly takes up the task of doing inner research and investigation would begin to clearly differentiate between positive and negative states of mind. Normally, we fall victim to negative attitudes when we are unable to clearly identify and recognise them. Doing inner research enables us to begin to identify them.

This ability to distinguish between positive and negative attitudes is a deeper intelligence, or what we call discriminating wisdom – a wisdom that not only clearly recognises and identifies the negative and positive attitudes, but is also able to know that following negative states of mind is harmful to one, and that following positive states of mind is beneficial. This wisdom will help us adopt what is useful so that we can follow a good direction in life by cultivating a positive attitude; and also help us to slowly minimise and eventually overcome negative attitudes. Thus we can see that the practice of meditation is a beneficial and practical means to better our life.

Of course, this involves looking within and not being distracted by external things. It also involves choosing an inner object on which to focus. Next, one applies one's full attention or focus to the inner object. Initially we will find it difficult to maintain our focus on the inner object, even for a few moments, but as we continue to apply the practice and see the benefit, we will be encouraged to keep going. As we continue to apply our focus to the inner object, we will slowly become more familiar with it. We will begin to see the positive effects taking place within us: the mind will naturally become gentler, kinder and clearer; we will have a longer attention span, and be able to better focus on whatever task at hand; and we will also gain a sharper memory. So these are some of the practical benefits of meditation.

Having discussed the technique and its benefits, we can now meditate for a few minutes. Re-adjust your physical posture so that the upper body is upright but –

importantly – relaxed. Having a relaxed posture will ensure that posture does not become an obstacle to our inner focus. If we start to feel aches and pains – for example, if one is not used to sitting cross-legged and one's attempts to do so result in stress, discomfort and aches and pains – one's attention will naturally go there, and the mind will become distracted. That is why a relaxed posture is emphasised for meditation practice. For those who are not used to sitting cross-legged, sitting on a chair is fine. The main thing is to have a posture that it is not stressful when the body relaxes.

Importantly, one must also have a fresh state of mind, a mind that is committed to the practice. Initially, we withdraw our attention from all other concerns; temporarily, we try not to follow any thoughts or ideas that arise. After withdrawing our attention from all other objects, thoughts and so forth, we bring our focus within. When our mind becomes more and more centred, we place our attention and focus on our natural breathing. As we breathe in and out, we bring our full attention to the breath coming in and going out. When we do this practice sincerely, even for a few minutes, we will begin to notice the mind settling down, especially if it has been very agitated or busy. One will begin to notice a sense of ease, a sense of tranquillity within oneself. So one will have achieved an immediate effect of the practice. We will do that to the best of our ability for the next few minutes. *(Pause for meditation)*

That is sufficient for now. When we first adopt this technique, if we do it sincerely, we will notice there is a nice soothing feeling, which is associated with that inner focus. Now when we experience this initially, it is important that we maintain our practice of this inner focus – the session need not be long, but that continuity, regularity and consistency with one's practice is essential. Otherwise we may experience good feelings initially, but then slowly the mind becomes more distracted. Then it would be hard to regain that initial good state of mind one experienced. So it is very important from the outset to maintain some form of continuity with one's practice.

The real transformation takes place when one begins to notice the mind becoming gentler and kinder, as a result of love and compassion increasing in one's mind. This is a most valuable state of mind, an important asset that we need to protect.

In simple terms, a kind mind imbued with love and compassion means one has genuine consideration for others. The positive effects of that mind can be experienced on a personal level and in relation to others around us. On a personal level, as one's kindness and genuine sense of concern based on love and compassion for others increases, one will experience an immediate positive effect as the mind becomes happier and more joyful.

In relation to those we associate with in our daily life – our partners, parents, relatives, friends and so forth – our good feeling towards them would naturally increase because of our genuine sense of concern for them. Our connection with them will also become more joyous: our relationships with others will be happier. Our lives depend on the people around us; we all have to associate

with others, particularly in our immediate relationships – with our partner or companion, parents, relatives, children, and so on. All of these relationships will be happier, more harmonious and more joyous if we have a sense of concern for them.

We must recognise the value of these inner qualities of kindness, love and compassion – in short, genuine consideration for others – so that we will pay more attention to them and further develop them. If we don't recognise the importance of love and compassion as being essential for our wellbeing, it will be easy for us to be influenced by society's norms: thinking that external condition such as having a lavish house, expensive car and so forth are the causes of happiness.

We cannot deny that such things may make one feel happy, but just having those external good conditions is not the main cause for one's real happiness. If we enjoy these good external good conditions, but lack of genuine, good relationships with the people that surround us in one's life – in other words, if we lack a sense of love and compassion for others – we will not experience a happy and harmonious life. Whereas if, in addition to the good external conditions we enjoy, we cultivate a sense of love and compassion for others – particularly if we can establish a good relationship with our partner, then if one has children – this good connection will naturally have a positive effect upon one's children as well. Thus extending mutual concern for each other, and having a good relationship is really important for the family.

Once the good internal conditions of good-quality love and compassion are secured, good and harmonious relationships will be maintained, whatever the external conditions. These inner qualities are most important in relation to one's own wellbeing and happiness; in relation to the happiness of those whom we relate to every day, such as our companions, friends, relatives, children and so forth; and to the wider society. In all cases, we can recognise the main contributing factor for a genuinely happy relationship.

To emphasise the main points from this evening: initially, we talked about importance of applying meditation to developing our inner qualities, and that we can consider this practice as a really valuable inner asset. One of the most valuable possessions we could own is this technique of meditation, which we ourselves can adopt and can further develop. The next point was the importance of maintaining a genuinely happy mind, which is directly related to having a kind, loving and compassionate attitude. As a result of seeing that attitude as being extremely valuable, we then take the initiative to protect whatever level of love and compassion we have developed, and further develop and strengthen it. When we have a secured a genuine sense of love and compassion through our practice, we will readily think of benefitting others whenever we can, and at the very least, maintaining an attitude of not hurting them.

Those two sets of mind – wishing to benefit others as best one can, and at the very least not hurting them – becomes the means for one to really enjoy a life where which is free of anxiety and inner turmoil. One would naturally be at ease wherever one goes; whatever company one may

find oneself in, one will be naturally appreciated, liked and accepted by others. This is because of one's inner commitment to having genuine concern for others, only ever intending to help others, or at the very least, not causing them any harm. This is really valuable.

To summarise all of this into a practical approach: while the emphasis has been on developing inner qualities, it does not mean we neglect external conditions. Rather, while we are putting energy and time into acquiring good external conditions for ourselves, we can also spend some time and energy in seeing the value of inner qualities, and the need to develop them. Since we have been developing our inner qualities as well, the combination of having both inner and outer qualities will contribute to one's wellbeing. We can say we are living a happy and satisfied life, when that combination is in place.

I am sharing this on the basis of my own experience. In my early days, after I left my home, I travelled a long distance to go to central part of Tibet. Once I reached the central part of Tibet and entered a large monastery, my life then became dedicated to studying the Buddhist teachings. While I was dedicated to doing that, my external conditions were quite difficult, because my home was far away. In those days, you had to walk, and the journey would take over six months. Even supplies sent from home would take many months to reach me; at a certain point, my family stopped sending much support anyway so proper food was scarce. While the external conditions were severe, there were times when we got some provisions to make butter tea. When I had a nice cup of tea on my desk, I was very happy and satisfied and that encouraged me to sit down, relax and study the text. In my mind I thought: 'Now I have a good cup of tea, it will nourish me and help me pay attention and read my text'. That gave me a sense of ease, of real joy. So, it was my experience that when you have the good conditions externally, it helps one feel more encouraged to develop, to do study, to seize that opportunity.

This is an example of how when we are committed to developing our inner values, having external conditions can help one to further develop oneself.

Another example is when one makes a commitment to do a retreat. In the first month, when you have all your supplies intact, you feel everything is fine, all the conditions are good. Because you don't have many worries, it seems like you can be committed to focusing on your practice. But as your provisions start to get low, you start to worry. As the mind becomes a little obsessed with these worries, this weakens the internal energy that should be focusing on the good qualities. That's when one begins to feel uncomfortable and one can see one's energy deplete. When one is doing retreat and has committed to finishing a certain number of mantra recitations, for example, if provisions start to get low, one starts to worry. One thinks: 'If I don't end my retreat soon, I will be out of provisions, but if I end it too soon, I will not have completed my commitment of mantra recitations'. So one might start to have longer sessions, so one can finish more quickly. But then that becomes a little bit more hurried, and one become anxious.

I would like to thank you all for paying such good attention, listening so well. Before we conclude for the evening, let us again take an opportunity to spend a few minutes in meditation. As we sit in a comfortable physical posture, this time the object on which to focus is the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. We again make the commitment to withdrawing the mind from all other forms of distractions and placing our full attention and focus on the sound of the mantra, as we hear the chanting. Then, when the chanting subsides, we try to just maintain that awareness for a few moments. This suffices for a focused meditation, maintaining that good feeling within oneself.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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