
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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As usual we will spend some time in meditation. So, we need to adopt a comfortable and relaxed posture. Along with that, we need to ensure that we have a positive, good state of mind. When an individual is able to adopt a comfortable, physical posture and a positive state of mind, then that individual will naturally be quite relaxed and happy.

As I regularly emphasise, it is important to consider these points because whenever one claims to be happy, we need consider what this happiness is in relation to. There are no other aspects to us, other than our physical body and mind. It is in relation to our physical body or mental state that we consider ourselves to be happy. When one knows and acknowledges this from one's own experience, there is a great benefit to be gained.

The essential understanding that we can gain from this knowledge is that one's happiness is related to one's physical body and one's state of mind. If one acknowledges and understands this then one will naturally take the initiative to protect one's physical body and state of mind.

When one has gained that understanding based on one's own experience it is an insight that we call wisdom and is considered the highest level of intelligence. We can then apply that wisdom as a way to protect our wellbeing. To protect one's physical wellbeing one takes the initiative to avoid those things that are detrimental to our physical wellbeing such as foods or any other substances that might be harmful. One would naturally protect oneself knowing that they will harm one's physical wellbeing and consequently one's personal wellbeing.

Likewise one would naturally take the initiative to adopt measures to avoid those things that are harmful to our mental wellbeing such as negative attitudes, thoughts or emotions. There are various negative states of mind that disturb or harm our mental and psychological wellbeing. One will be able to recognise this and take measures to avoid that harm.

When one applies one's understanding and wisdom in this way to protect one's physical and mental state, it will ensure that one will continually maintain one's personal wellbeing. As the great Indian master Shantideva said, a truly wise and intelligent person is someone who applies this sense of awareness and mindfulness for the protection of their wellbeing.

So, once we gain this understanding and wisdom, we need to then apply it. At a practical level one can remind oneself that, 'I am a person who recognises what is harmful to my physical and mental wellbeing, and thus I

am a person who takes the initiative to avoid those things that are detrimental to my wellbeing. I am someone who knows what is useful for myself and what is harmful to myself. Thus I am going to take the initiative to avoid those things that are harmful and adopt those things that are beneficial for me.' If we can remind ourselves of this on a daily basis, each day applying the measure of always being cautious and mindful and not allowing ourselves to indulge in things that might be harmful, then that is what we call in Buddhism experiential practice, or the Dharma. On a daily basis we adopt the positive things and discard those that are harmful.

Normally we might be inclined to think that our wellbeing is related to external conditions and we might exert ourselves to try to create the best external conditions. But, in fact, the real conditions for our wellbeing actually lie within us. So we need to take the initiative to protect the inner conditions for our wellbeing. We cannot expect others to do it and we cannot expect it to come from external sources. We need to take the responsibility ourselves. We need to recognise and acknowledge that whatever harm we experience is something we initiated. Whenever we experience ill effects and our wellbeing is disturbed, this arises in relation to us not paying attention to our inner conditions or letting our protection or mindfulness lapse. When we experience good conditions it is because we are taking the initiative to acquire those good conditions ourselves.

The main point is that we have the full responsibility to take measures to protect and improve our own wellbeing. We have to take the initiative. This is something that I attempt to do myself on a regular daily basis. It is a practice that I have been doing throughout my life. As I find that this is beneficial for me I try to share this knowledge with you. I am sure we all are in the same and if it is helpful to one person then I am sure it will be helpful to others.

What one needs to recognise and understand about oneself are one's qualities and one's faults. These are something that we all possess. We all have a number of qualities as well as a number of faults. We need to recognise this and take the initiative to minimise and overcome those faults. That is the responsibility that we need to take.

As I have mentioned previously, it is good for us to remember the essential advice that the great masters of the past have given us. The great Indian master Atisha said that in relation to one's own faults, 'One needs to proclaim one's own faults, while hiding one's own qualities'. In relation to others, he says 'One needs to proclaim other's qualities and hide their faults'. This is indeed a very essential piece of advice; one should not boast about one's qualities whilst one needs to proclaim other's qualities and hide their faults. This is essential in our practice.

The main point to derive from Atisha's advice is the point about hiding one's own qualities so that one does not become proud of one's qualities. If one were to proclaim one's qualities then a sense of pride comes along with that. When pride is harboured within one's sense of self it will give rise to a sense of competition with others. When

others seem to be doing the same or better than oneself, one feels one has to compete with them. Pride may also cause a sense of jealousy. When one sees others doing better than oneself one's pride leads one to start to feel jealous of their wellbeing. All of these disturbing states of mind will arise because of pride in one's own qualities.

Hiding the faults of others, rather than proclaiming them, means that that one does not create a negative state of mind by being critical of others and harming their reputation. If one were to have a habit of proclaiming the other's faults it means that one is obsessed with looking for the other's faults. If one becomes obsessed with seeing the other's faults one eventually will come to a point where one only sees faults and does not see any good qualities. This would be contrary to the reality of the other person.

For example, if, in a relationship, one starts seeing or picking up on the faults of the other then eventually one might only see their faults. Seeing the other in an entirely negative light is, in fact, only our own mental projection. Because we have been acquainted with only seeing faults; eventually that is all that appears to us. It is actually a mental projection. This has even been scientifically proven. Some scientists have shown that when one becomes angry towards an object ninety per cent of the faults one sees arise from one's own projection. There might be only ten per cent that is true. Buddhist teachings say that the faults and negativities we see in others are our own mental projection.

If we practise focusing on others' qualities rather than their faults we will begin to see them in a good light and start to adopt some of the good qualities that they have. If one is in a relationship and can start to see and acknowledge the other's good qualities one will maintain a good harmonious relationship. If, for whatever reason, a separation has to take place this will not be happen in a bad way. There will still be a sense of having seen them in a good light. Their good qualities are something that will remain with us.

Otherwise, if one only focuses on the faults then, when a separation takes place, it will cause only more conflict and criticism. So this is something that we need to practise and adopt in our everyday life. As I mentioned earlier, I try to practise this myself. Whenever I go out or whatever situation I am in I try to see others in the light of compassion and with that attitude always try to smile and be friendly and this has made a difference. It actually makes me happier and is more enjoyable. I seem to be accepted wherever I go, people seem to appreciate this behaviour. This is something that could be true for all of us.

This practical approach of trying to focus on seeing the other's qualities is something that is essential for one's relationships as well. As I share with the younger generation and those that I associate with, you must be very careful if you are quite young because you need to make the right choices in life. If your obsession with someone is out of mere attachment then it is likely that you would only see the good things and exaggerate the qualities that they might have to the point where you may think, 'Oh, they are perfect, everything is fine'.

Attachment overwrites our perception and our ability to see reality. Even when there are faults, those faults are projected as qualities. Attachment nullifies the faults and exaggerates the qualities of the other. I think there's an English expression about seeing things through rose coloured glasses.

Later on, after some time in a relationship, the attachment starts to wear off a bit and one begins to see the faults and one can become really upset and angry, 'How dare they be like that, when they were supposed to be so good!' This arises from not taking the right measures to begin with. That is why I jokingly say to the younger generation, 'Please don't get into a relationship like someone with an empty stomach who finds some food'. The hungry person will grab the food and eat it immediately.

The main point I am trying to make is that one should try to be a little bit wary about the decisions one makes and not to base decisions on fleeting emotions but rather instead try to cultivate some deeper wisdom and understanding. That is essential for making the right decisions. Otherwise it is very easy to be deceived by others. One is vulnerable to being deceived and misled if one has not cultivated one's own inner wisdom. Not only the younger generation, but even mature adult people in the later part of their life can still be deceived out of their attachment for others. If one's fascination with another is mainly based on attachment then one can be easily be misled and deceived.

If one has developed one's own wisdom one will not easily fall for that. One will use one's own discriminating wisdom to make the right decision. I used the example of a relationship but this is true for every aspect of our life. This advice is based on my personal experience and my Buddhist study. I have always been very keen to try to understand and learn and put things into practice as a way to benefit my mind. There was no intention in my mind when I was studying as a young monk that I would gain knowledge just to impress others or become famous. That was never in the forefront of my thoughts. The only intention I had was that my studies would become something for me to put into practice. Now, at this stage in my life, I cannot claim that I have been able to do much practice. However, that good intention that I had when I was engaging in my studies when I was young seems to have had a good effect on my mind. I have derived some benefit from my studies and have a balanced approach in my life. So, based on that meagre experience that I have, I share with you what I can. It is essential, from the very early part of our life or at any stage in our life, that we familiarise ourselves with utilising our own wisdom based on our own insight and experiences.

I emphasise, particularly to the young generation, that we need to take heed of this and try to make it part of our everyday practice. We need to familiarise ourselves with using our own intelligence and wisdom, rather than being gullible and just following whatever someone else says. We need to get used to using our own discriminating wisdom and finding out whether what is being presented is true or not and validating it to through our own logic and reasoning. As one familiarises oneself

with approaching things with one's own discriminating wisdom that becomes part of our nature and it will assist us in being able to weigh up whatever is presented or taught to us. We will be able to screen what is said and determine whether it is false or true, and how much truth or falsity is there. We will be able to do that for ourselves.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama takes a great interest in science, neuroscience and psychology and meets with many scientists. His Holiness has said that, 'When I meet with these different scientists, and as they present their theories, I listen to them. Those things that I can understand and accept, I do. But if I feel those things which are on critical points don't have much logic then my mind immediately finds ways to challenge them and point out that what is being presented may not be credible or logical. That sort of mind immediately comes up.' His Holiness said, 'It must be because of my training from a very young age in logic and reasoning. That immediately assists me and comes to the forefront whenever I have discussions with scientists and others'.

The main point is that what we gain from cultivating our own wisdom is something that will go with us wherever we go. That is a good quality. Unfortunately our negative qualities also go with us wherever we go. So we need to be mindful to carry with us good positive qualities and wisdom and train our mind in expressing genuine love and kindness for others. The earlier we start training our mind the more natural it will become as we go through life. So these are points I share with you.

As mentioned previously, we need to take measures to protect our physical body and mind. Many of us might already be quite skilled in protecting the conditions for our physical wellbeing. What we need to focus on here is applying measures for protecting the conditions for our mental wellbeing and familiarising our mind with being in a positive frame. That is not achieved immediately but through acquaintance. It is achieved through a technique of adopting a positive state of mind and trying to attune one's mind to be in a positive frame. That is something we have to do. As we apply these measures again and again then, through familiarity, we will achieve this state of mind.

People talk a lot about familiarity and acquainting themselves with something. Acquaintance here is acquaintance with positiveness and adopting a positive attitude. The more we familiarise ourselves with positiveness the more it becomes a means to increase the good qualities within us. Once we have recognised what are good qualities and positive states of mind, we need to take measures to increase them. That is because this is beneficial for us. Whereas the faults we recognise within us are something that we need to minimise and eventually overcome. So our responsibility in relation to our own wellbeing is twofold: increasing the good, positive qualities and decreasing the negative qualities or faults within us.

This, in fact, is the essence of what from a Buddhist point of view we would call a Dharma practice, or in other traditions a spiritual practice. All religions basically present practices or ways to help a human being become a better person, by increasing their qualities and

decreasing their faults and negativities. This is the essence of spiritual practice and the point of it.

We have talked about the need to protect our good qualities. One of the best methods for protecting one's mind is with the meditation technique. Meditation entails overcoming the misconceptions that we have, even to the point of hallucination. Misconceptions are things that are not true but which we hold as being true. One is totally convinced that something exists in a certain way, when in fact this is not true. So these are basically hallucinations. Hallucination might be used here in the English context as meaning completely out of one's mind. A lot of the things that we hold onto are not true but we are completely convinced that they are true and our convictions are what cause pain and suffering in our mind.

There are certain Buddhist prayers where one prays that the suffering of hallucination ceases. There are prayers that seeking blessings for beings who are oppressed by a hallucinated mind and for their mistaken perceptions to cease, because they cause a lot of suffering in the mind. This prayer is specifically found in the practice called Offering To The Guru. In the Guru Puja there is a point where we make offerings first to the enlightened being, seeking their blessing, then by distributing an offering to other beings we pray that by partaking in this offering that they may they be free from the sufferings of the hallucinated mind.

A more literal translation of 'hallucinated mind' is 'mistaken appearance'. The mistaken appearances or misconceptions that one has are the cause for all our unwanted agony and suffering. So if there were a means to appease or overcome mistaken appearances, views and misconceptions it would be appropriate to apply that technique.

Meditation is that technique. Meditation involves withdrawing one's attention and focus from all distracting thoughts and so forth and placing it upon an inner object. Withdrawing from all other thoughts and temporarily placing one's focus on a chosen focal object is a means to overcome mistaken views or mistaken conceptions. This is also the main meaning of what we call Dharma. The literal meaning of Dharma is to hold that which is proper and true. It implies withdrawing from mistakes and unreality, and placing one's focus upon the truth or reality. Dharma means to hold onto the truth. Meditation has the similar connotation of focusing on an object that does not cause mistaken views. It is important to understand the significance of what meditation or a spiritual practice or Dharma entails.

Now, having adopted a comfortable physical posture we need to again ensure our mind is in the proper frame. To practice of meditation we need to make the decision that, 'For the next few minutes I will not allow my mind to be dispersed in every direction and focusing on all forms of different disturbing thoughts and so forth. Instead I will take the initiative of withdrawing from all other external and internal distractions and bring my focus inward and place it upon the object that I chose to focus on, which is my own breath'. So, using our breath as the object to focus on, we place our entire focus, hundred per cent

focus, on the breath itself for the next few minutes. This is the technique to adopt now. (*Pause for meditation*).

That should be sufficient for now. With the remaining few minutes left for this session we can address questions. If you have a question, you can raise your hand.

Question: Geshe-la, what advice would you have in dealing with difficult siblings; some who when you try to help them they don't accept it?

Answer: One indeed may have the best sort of intention for them but not be able to get through if they are not accepting what one is saying and so forth. That does happen. There are individuals who may really appreciate what one wants to share and give to them. But if that is not happening then the best solution is to temporarily leave it as it is. Don't get obsessed with it yourself and push to try to get through. If it is not working then it is best to let it go for a while and let them be.

The great Indian master Shantideva has given some very succinct and practical advice about our situation and trying to help other beings and associating with them. It is indeed very difficult to try to genuinely help someone, even with the good intentions, and share something meaningful with them if they don't accept it and get upset and very angry. If they do not accept the advice they may retaliate. If you listen to what they want to say it is all very meaningless, but if you don't listen to what they want to say they will get angry too. So if you try to help them and say something to them they get angry. If you listen to them they get angry. So it becomes very difficult to really help them.

Shantideva was referring to ordinary beings in cyclic existence who have that tendency to not be easily pleased. Shantideva's main point was that trying to please ordinary beings could be quite futile if one is not mindful. Shantideva goes on to explain that ordinary beings are engulfed in negative tendencies such as jealousy of those who have better qualities than themselves or being proud of being superior to others lesser than themselves or feeling a sense of competitiveness with those who appear to be equal to them. This is the state of being, the state of mind of ordinary beings and to please such beings is extremely difficult.

If a sibling is a little older than you then they will not listen to what you try to share with them. Many people have commented to me that their mother still treats them like a young child. For example, Damien has said, 'My mum seems to also treat me like I am still quite young'. There are many others who also seem to get quite upset and angry with their mum having them do something or be mindful of something. They say to me, 'I am not a child anymore, why is my mum doing this?'

This is again a matter of familiarity. In the mother's eye her children are always children. From the mother's perspective the child is always younger and always their child so that is how they relate to them. That is the familiarity they have and they always say what to do or not to do. It is due to familiarity that a mother naturally continues to do that. If one can think about it in that light

one might not take it too personally and see it is not their mum trying to ridicule or put them down. It is just that because of habit. If one thinks in that way it is easier to accept. This seems to also be a cause of conflict between a parent and child. This conflict seems quite futile when there are many more important things in life than to argue about what was said or not said. There are some mothers who claim that their child might have a big body, look grown up, but still have a childish mind.

The main thing, from one's own side, is not to lose that genuine sense of concern and kindness. If one does have a genuine sense of concern and kindness then the probability is that one is able to share that, which is fine. But if others are not going to listen and not going to accept what one shares then at least one has tried one's best. At the least, try not to lose one's good attitude towards them and try not to be hostile towards them. Remember what Shantideva said, when those to whom you try to say nice things only retaliate, it is because that is the nature of their being. Remembering that can also be helpful.

One needs to be quite mindful of extending one's help to others. Sometimes, even with a good intention, if we assume someone needs help and try to offer assistance they get offended. Just recently I saw an elderly person drop a chopstick when he was eating his meal. Someone nearby picked it up and gave it back to him but he got very annoyed and said, 'I can pick it up myself'. On another occasion I noticed that a person who was trying to open a door was struggling a bit. So I helped open the door for him and he seemed to appreciate it and said, 'Oh, thank you'. What we need to learn from this is that we need to be mindful in extending our help. This is another example of a situation where appreciation may be appropriate but instead of appreciation the response is getting upset and being scornful. This shows that they are beings who may not be appreciative.

Before we conclude the session for this evening we can spend a few more minutes in meditation. This time the object of our meditation will be the sound of the mantra. As we hear the sound of the recitation we try to focus on that sound and when it subsides we just maintain an awareness of the sound for a few minutes.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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