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# Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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As usual we can spend some time for meditation.

As explained regularly, one of the main purposes of meditation is to protect the actions of our body, speech and mind from the delusions or negativities. If we are able to protect our activities of body, speech and mind, so they are not influenced by negativities, and if we are able to ensure that our actions of body, speech and mind are more positive, then that contributes to us behaving in a good manner. When the person adopts good behaviour, they will naturally be known as a person of good character.

When we consider the factors that contribute to someone being called a good person, the criteria that we use to confirm this is none other than their behaviour and activity—the actions of their body, speech and mind, particularly their state of mind, that is whether they have a kind and considerate attitude towards others. We can definitely see that there is a relationship between a person's actions and their character. Since we all naturally would like to be considered a good person—there is no one who would not want to be appreciated and known as a good person—so we really need to pay attention to the criteria that make someone a good person. Having reflected on that, it is up to us to make the decision to engage in positive activities and conduct ourselves appropriately with good behaviour—and this is something we can manage.

If we want to be a good and kind person, then we need to ensure that our behaviour is in accordance with what we call good character. When we adopt good behaviour and engage in positive actions of our body, speech and mind, we reap the benefits from that good conduct. While we can help others as well, we are the direct beneficiaries of that good behaviour and conduct. It is really up to us, how we conduct ourselves—we need to understand, that we have that responsibility. We all understand the need for taking individual responsibility. I personally feel that the utmost responsibility we have is to ensure that we have good conduct.

When a child reaches their teenage years and begins to show that they are capable of taking responsibility, being more independent and able to manage by themselves, the parents feel overjoyed that the child has grown up and is able to be more responsible for their own life. Thus, the parents would gladly and willingly assist the child to develop further. Whereas if the child does not show any concern to take responsibility, whether it is for their studies or personal life, then the parents would feel uncomfortable and unhappy as there is not much the parents can do to help them.

When a mature child begins to take responsibility for their own life, that makes the parents feel much more confident that their children will be careful when managing their own affairs, so there will be less worry in the mind of the parents.

If the child is concerned about the parents' wellbeing, then it is much better that the child conducts themselves in a way

that brings happiness to the parents' mind, and will contribute to the parents' wellbeing. If they are acting in a way which brings more sorrow and worry to the parents' mind, then that would be inappropriate, and they would not be contributing to their own parents' wellbeing. If the child takes the parents' wellbeing into consideration, then it is worthwhile for them to take responsibility for their own life.

That is some advice that I share with the younger generation in particular. This is a way of thinking and training the mind in contributing to the parents' wellbeing. If a child wants to make their parents happy, it is far better to show that they are capable of taking responsibility for their own life, rather than buying their parents presents or giving monetary gifts. This is a practical way to bring much more happiness to the parent's mind.

In order to actually take responsibility, the child needs to have a good basis of training. This is where study becomes very important, because the manner of taking responsibility is by utilising knowledge. It is through knowledge gained from study, that the child develops the capacity to take care of their own affairs. Thus, I encourage the younger generation to spend significant time and energy in acquiring sufficient skills and not to neglect their studies; to really put their heart and focus into study. All of us need to ensure that the actions of our body, speech and mind are appropriate and thus we need to protect our body, speech and mind from inappropriate behaviour and actions. Within the threefold aspect of ourselves—body, speech and mind—the most important is protecting and training our mind to be in a positive state, to which we really need to pay attention.

One of the best techniques or methods for training the mind is what we call meditation.

## Physical posture

In order to adopt the meditation technique, it is good to know the conducive factors, beginning with the appropriate physical posture, which will be a good reminder for those who have already heard my explanation, but for others, it will be a good introduction.

1. The general advice or instruction is to sit either in a full *lotus* or half lotus position.

When one is capable of sitting without any strain with the right foot on the left thigh and the left foot on the right thigh, it actually becomes a very comfortable, conducive and stable position for meditation. In the half lotus position, the right leg is on top and the left leg is underneath the front of the body, which is a very comfortable position for those who can manage it.

For those who are able to comfortably engage in either the full lotus or the half lotus sitting posture, it is good to know that there is a significant reason why this posture has been presented. It is actually conducive, particularly in a long meditation session, in which it becomes a very stable position. The other significance is because this is how Buddha Shakyamuni meditated, and by following the example of Buddha Shakyamuni, we also receive the blessing by adopting a similar posture as well.

2. The next instruction is to sit upright with a *straight spine*. The significance of having a straight body and back is that it will help to prevent drowsiness and stupor. A further significance of having a straight spine is that it helps the veins and channels in our body to be straightened out, which then helps the air and wind energy within our body to flow freely. Thus a straight spine can help us to have a

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more clear state of mind, which helps the mind to be able to focus better on the chosen object .

3. With regard to the *hand* posture or *gesture*, it is traditional to have the right hand on top of the left palm, and the thumbs touching to form a triangle and to place it with the tips of the thumbs either touching or near the navel centre.

The significance of that gesture is that the tips of the thumbs are said to have the nerve endings of the particular subtle channels for inducing the enlightened mind, which is based on love and compassion. At the navel centre, there is the base for our inner heat, so by placing the tips of the thumbs there, because of that connection with the end of the nerve channels inducing love and compassion, it actually helps to generate that heat within, beginning at the base of our navel, and then helping love and compassion to be developed within our heart, particularly a loving and kind mind.

There are further explanations according to the tantric teachings, but we need not cover that here.

4. The placement of the *eyes* is said to be not completely wide open nor completely shut, just slightly opened, so that if you were to look at the tip of the nose, you would just barely be able to see it.

To lower your gaze at the tip of your nose doesn't mean to focus on the tip of the nose, but rather that the gaze is lowered. If you were to look, then you are barely able to see what is in front of you, but you are not to focus on anything external during your meditation.

If the eyes are completely shut, then it is said that that could bring an onset of darkness in our mind. Initially it may seem conducive for one's meditation because there is no distraction, but for a longer period of meditation, it can actually bring an onset of darkness arising in the mind, which is called stupor. If the eyes are too wide open, then there is a danger that excitement will occur during our meditation.

There is significance initially in having the gaze lowered at that level, which is conducive for our initial meditation practice. It is important to understand that when we choose an object to focus on in meditation, the focus is done by mental rather than visual consciousness, which means that we are not focusing on a chosen object through our eyesight, but rather through our inner or mental sight—we are observing the object with a mental image. Once we gain more stability in our meditation, and are able to focus more single-pointedly for a certain duration, then having the eyes open will not affect our meditation, because of the fact that the actual mind itself is focused on the object, so external things—sights and so forth—will not be able to distract us. Ultimately it is the mind which focuses on the chosen object, not the eyesight.

5. The placement of the *head* is to bend it slightly forward. The significance of this is that if we were to hold our head up high, then that could also induce distraction through excitement, particularly on a mental level, which would then be an obstacle or hindrance to our meditation practice.

6. The advice for the mouth is to leave our *teeth, lips and jaw* in a natural position. This is because if the mouth were wide open, that could cause it to become very dry during meditation, which would then be a physical obstruction to our meditation. If it were completely shut, with no ventilation or air going in or out, that could prevent our breathing and natural breath flow.

For the placement of our *tongue*, we are advised to place the tip of the tongue behind the upper front row of the teeth, touching the roof of the upper palate. This helps in two ways—so there is not too much saliva forming in the mouth, which prevents us from drooling and so forth, and it also helps the mouth to have the right moisture, so that it does not become too dry.

7. It is advised to have the *arms* slightly away from and not completely touching our body, because that would prevent ventilation and air, which could also cause drowsiness.

This instruction for the sitting posture is referred to as the seven point posture of Buddha Vairochana. That is because it is the most appropriate posture for developing concentration, as Buddha Vairochana symbolises complete concentration.

### Definition of concentration

Having adopted this posture, what we are attempting to do is to develop concentration, so it is appropriate to define concentration—a *state of mind which is single-pointedly focused on a chosen object for a significant period of time.*

### Obstructions

Excitement and laxity are the two main obstructions to single-pointed focus of the mind. *Excitement* prevents the mind from being single-pointedly focused on an object, whereas *laxity* prevents a clear and fresh state of mind while focusing on the object. These are the two main obstacles to developing concentration.

### Conducive factors

There are two particular conducive factors for developing single-pointed concentration, which are *mindfulness* and *introspection*. Mindfulness is mainly a mental state which constantly brings to mind the chosen object of meditation. It is a constant remembrance of recalling the object. Introspection is the state of mind which periodically checks whether our mind is actually focused on the object or not, whether the mind has become either excited or too relaxed. It detects the mind wavering away from the chosen object, and helps to refocus and bring back our attention.

The instruction to adopt the right posture for meditation as explained in the teachings of meditation manuals, is to adopt either the seven point sitting posture, or whatever comfortable posture for our meditation.

The significance of such advice is that in order to have a good meditation session, one needs to have not only a conducive environment, but a conducive physical posture which does not cause discomfort. In the instruction, it advises those who are capable and who are comfortable to adopt the seven point posture, but then particularly with the sitting posture, if that is not manageable, then to adopt any comfortable posture which will be conducive for the meditation.

This advice is practical because if we have to strain to adopt, for example, the crossed legged posture, and it is actually starting to give us some aches and pains, then we will not be able to focus on the meditation object, and from our experience we will notice that our mind immediately goes to where we start feeling discomfort. The Buddha was extremely kind in presenting his advice for us to adopt a technique which is most suitable for us, rather than enforcing a particular technique that he adopted.

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## Motivation

Having adopted the appropriate posture for meditation, the next important thing prior to engaging in meditation is to ensure that one has a good motivation. It is said that the first step of the meditation practice is to adopt a positive motivation.

## Object of focus

For the meditation practice, we need to choose an *appropriate object*, which in general can be anything that we choose. We need to take note that the advice about using any object as appropriate for developing concentration is a general presentation, taking into consideration those who, when they reach a certain advanced level of focus, may choose any object, and will be able to maintain single-pointed focus on that object without distraction.

However, we need to understand that for beginners, this instruction does not apply, because if we were to choose any given object, then it might be an object which may cause more distraction in the mind, such as an object of attachment. If we use an object of attachment for our meditation, rather than appeasing the mind and making the mind more settled and focused, it can actually start to excite the mind, thus it is not possible to develop a single-pointed focus on that object. So we need to take individual circumstances into account and thus for beginners there is a more appropriate object that we need to choose. The main thing is to ensure that it is an object which does not cause excitement or delusions to arise in the mind.

There is also a specific instruction as to *where to envision the object of focus*. The placement of the mental object is in front of us, at a distance where it is not too high nor too low. If we place the mental image too high up, focusing on it can cause excitement to rise in the mind. If it is too low, then it can cause the opposite, which is laxity to occur in the mind. So it has to be at the level of one's eyebrow or forehead, in front of oneself.

Then also in terms of the *distance*, the instruction is not to have it too close to the body and not too distant. We are advised to place it at the distance where the body would stretch out, if we were to lay straight on the floor in full body prostration.

It is also advised that initially it is good to try to have the object as a small image, which is more helpful to develop concentration, and also to imagine an object that is not too light, but rather having some weight and with radiance. The significance of the object being radiant is so that it can help to prevent laxity to occur in the mind, and having some weight in the object prevents excitement.

Another point to note is that there can easily be a little confusion in our mind in relation to the object, because if we were to choose an object, then it would be an external object, but the instructions say to focus on an inner object. So here we may question how we can focus internally upon an external object.

When instructions suggest choosing an external object, it is in relation to the object which we initially familiarise ourselves with. If it is a visual object, then it means that we actually familiarise ourselves with the features of that external object. Having seen that object first with our naked eyes, and looked at its characteristics—the shape and colour—and having really studied the details, when we use it as an object of meditation, it is actually the mental image that we are focusing on, not the external physical object. It defies the purpose if one focuses on the external object,

because the very definition of meditation—single-pointed concentration—is to be able to focus on an internal object for as long as one wishes. So how we internalise that visual object is by having studied the particular characteristics and features of that external object first, then we bring up a mental image of that object in our mind. Initially it might be a little bit difficult to get a clear mental image of the object, but as we familiarise our mind and as we adopt the technique further, we start to become more acquainted with focusing on this mental image. While initially it might not be very clear, gradually it becomes clearer to the point where we can see all the particular characteristics and features of that object, just as we would look at it visually with our eyes. Likewise in our meditation, we will be able to see it very vividly and clearly through the mental image. At that point we have developed a good concentration on that mental image.

The way to meditate on an internal object or mental image is to regard it as being inseparable from our own mind, as if the object and one's own mind were one.

## Using the breath as the focus

For our particular meditation sessions here, the object that we choose for our focus is our own breath. The meditation instruction advises that for those who have a very busy mind and a lot of discursive thoughts, choosing the breath as a meditation object is a most suitable object to settle down the mind. Perhaps we can safely assume that we all have quite distracted minds, as most of us are having discursive thoughts and a very busy mind, including the teacher. So from both sides the breath is a most appropriate object on which to focus.

The particular significance of choosing the breath as an object of focus is because the breath is colourless and shapeless, it is less likely to cause distractions in our mind, so it is an easy object on which to focus, in order to settle down our mind. Furthermore, it is not a complex object—amongst various meditation objects there are those which are quite complex, with many details in order to be able to adequately focus on a particular object. However, with the breath there is not so much detail, it is simply just using our own breath as a medium, and focusing on the breath, which naturally goes in and out.

The particular instructions for the manner of how the breath itself should be regulated, the actual breathing should be without labour and thus soundless and with an even breath. Without labour means that we do not exert ourselves too forcefully, not to breathe in and out forcefully. If we were to breathe in and out forcefully, then that would cause a sound when we breathe in and out through our nostrils, because the friction would be much more prominent. To have an even breath means equal measure of inhalation and exhalation, not where the inhalation might be long and the exhalation short, or the inhalation short and the exhalation long. The best way to ensure that one has the right measure of breath is to have very natural breathing, and not to exert any particular force.

Having explained the instructions, we can now adopt the meditation technique. So as mentioned previously, we try to adopt a most comfortable and relaxed posture. Also mentioned previously, prior to engaging in meditation, it is most appropriate to adopt a positive intention for our practice. The most appropriate, positive motivation would be to simply commit myself that, may this meditation practice become a cause for me to bring only benefit for other beings and no harm, and may I be able to bring

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happiness and remove all kinds of misery and discomfort in others.

This is a most conducive motivation because it also encompasses the attitude of love and kindness towards others. The actual manner of how to focus on our chosen object is that first of all we need to distance ourselves from all internal and external distractions, all forms of delusions, completely withdraw from that, and bringing our focus inward.

Initially it is good to try to maintain that inward focus, without allowing any other thoughts to preoccupy our mind. We place our full attention and focus on the breath itself, and try to maintain our focus on the breath. We maintain that for as long as we can and after a few moments, when we feel that our mind is starting to waver away and become distracted, at that point we remind ourselves that the object to focus on will be our own breath. Thus now for the next few minutes, we will adopt this technique.

*[Meditation]*

Just as we have attempted in our short session, if you can regularly adopt this technique, where we are intentionally spending some time and energy focusing inwardly and placing our mind and focus on an inner object, that actually becomes very helpful and conducive to settle down the mind.

The significance of applying regular training of our mind in meditation, in which we are adopting a technique to withdraw from the distractions and delusions so that they do not harm our mind, is that we definitely get the benefit during meditation. Now the question arises about how to deal with the situation when we are not in meditation, where we are prone to all sorts of circumstances and situations. For as long as we have the seeds of the delusions within us, it doesn't take much for the conditions of the delusions to arise again in our mind, for us beginners. However, the significance of having applied the meditation technique would be that even when delusions do arise, it will be easier for us to detect and avoid being completely immersed and overpowered by them. We will be able to have a better tool at hand to distance ourselves a bit from the delusions, so that we don't completely give in, which would be significantly different from prior to having meditated at all. Therefore we can definitely reap a benefit, even in our regular everyday life. There is definitely a notable difference between someone who has applied the meditation technique and someone who hasn't applied it.

A young lady last year shared about how applying the meditation technique has helped her. While she is out in the world, delusions such as anger and attachment may still arise, but having applied the meditation technique, it helped her to notice it and try not to be completely overwhelmed by that. This was a very significant experience, however there are many who have benefited from their practice, so we need to acknowledge this.

Many kinds of problems are resolved just through the fact of having applied the meditation technique. While I cannot claim that I have great experience and achievements from meditation practice myself, I personally feel that it has definitely helped my mind in being able to better deal with difficult situations. When things do not go too well externally, I am able to maintain a significant calmness in my mind. When we really consider what our problems are, they are actually not because we are lacking adequate external circumstances and conditions—food, clothing or shelter—

most of the problems that we experience and face are created by our own mind not being settled. Because most of our problems are mentally created, we need to find means and ways to appease those problems mentally, which is the training of the mind in meditation. We can see that we conjure up problems and difficulties and have lots of worries and anxieties in our mind without a really strong basis. If we can just adopt a different way of looking at things, we can see that a lot of the things we initially thought were a big problem, because we have taken a step back and looked at it from a different perspective, we can see that it is not as bad. Initially what seemed to be a difficult and impossible situation, was just mentally created. We were just stuck in a certain a way of thinking, so that it appeared to us in that way. There are many problems, even older problems that we will be able to see and detect that they are mentally created; most of them are indeed created by our mind and thus need to be solved from a mental aspect, by adopting and training our mind in appropriate ways. This is how the meditation technique helps us to solve problems.

In relation to problems that we face personally, we need to take responsibility to solve our own problems, particularly when they are created by ourselves. We cannot expect someone else to solve our own mentally created problems. The way to solve our mental problems is by adopting a positive way of thinking and outlook, and the appropriate attitudes. If we maintain a way of thinking which is completely wrong, then our problems escalate. When the wrong attitude and wrong way of thinking further escalates, that is when our problems become more prominent. The way to avoid that is by adopting the right way of thinking, and appropriate, positive attitudes, which will help us to uplift ourselves and overcome our mental limitations and problems. This is something that we really need to think about periodically in our life. This way of thinking and conducting ourselves would be the best means for a meaningful and good life; to uphold that throughout our life. What I pay utmost importance to is trying to maintain my positive, good and happy mind—that is what I hold as being my constant unfailing companion and best friend, wherever I go.

We may ask, how do we distinguish between a wrong way of thinking—a wrong way of conducting our mind and having a negative state of mind, from the positive way of thinking and a positive attitude? A simple way to make that distinction is in relation to our own experience, regardless of whatever the object may be. When we bring a certain object to mind, if our mind becomes anxious and distressed, then it is an inappropriate object to think about. Because it harms us, because it is not an appropriate way of thinking or an attitude to hold.

Before we conclude the session for the evening, let us again spend a few minutes in meditation, this time using the sound of the mantra to be recited as an object on which to focus, which is Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. As we hear the mantra being chanted, let us keep our full attention and focus on that sound, and then as the recitation ceases, we focus on the residue of the sound, and just maintain that in our mind for awhile.

*TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA*

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*Edited Version*

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