
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment



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19 February 2014

As usual, we can spend some time in meditation. I explained in the last session the appropriate posture for meditation. It is good to reflect on the reasons we engage in meditation and the kinds of benefit it will bring us. Indeed, it is really worthwhile to look into whatever actions we engage in and assess the purposes for engaging in them and the benefits we will derive. As the great Indian master Shantideva has mentioned, it is really important to investigate an action prior to engaging in it and evaluate whether it is beneficial or not, and adopt it when found to be of benefit.

Shantideva emphasised the need to evaluate actions properly before engaging in them because that will ensure that we carry out an activity after having seen the benefits. Having clearly seen the purpose of the action from the beginning will help us to be motivated to carry that action through to the end. Otherwise, if we are not very clear and sure from the beginning we may not be motivated to carry out the action and we might decide to leave it. Then, later, we might regret that and think, 'Oh, I should continue with that action' and adopt it again but then after a while we may lose our enthusiasm and just leave it aside. So, in this way, it will be hard to accomplish any activity thoroughly. This type of behaviour can become a habit. If we are inclined to behave in this way in this life, then that imprint will carry through to the next life where we habitually become unable to follow any action through.

As I regularly emphasise, it is important for us to use our intelligence or wisdom to analyse whatever we intend to do. Analysing the pros and cons of any activity will help us to avoid making too many mistakes. Because we have analysed the situation with our intelligence when we notice the shortcomings and failings of an action, we will not engage in it. That would be very beneficial. It might seem like I am getting a bit side-tracked from the main subject I intend to present, however I relate all these points because I feel that there will be a benefit.

When I share my insights here, I do so with the intention or motivation that they may be of benefit and useful for others. The thought that I will be known as a good teacher or speaker is not something that concerns me at all. I am not concerned about that. I just want to share something that may be useful and beneficial for others. So I present whatever I feel at that moment might be useful and beneficial. I just share that openly with you. This way of conducting myself is, of course, something I have been accustomed to from very early teens. My concern is always to try to do something that is useful.

I always try to work towards having a happy, joyous mind myself and then, based on that, being happy with whatever food or clothing I have got. I am never really concerned to have something grand. I am always contemplating how best I can utilise my situation to benefit others and myself. Because this is something I was accustomed to from a very young age I feel it has now become part of my life. The point that I am sharing here is that it is good to familiarise and accustom ourselves with good ways of conducting ourselves as early as possible in life.

Of course, what I have accustomed myself to from a very early age is mostly related to the Dharma, or what we call the spiritual path. Even though I am not claiming that I have acquired any high levels of understanding or realisations from that, nevertheless this is something that I have attempted to accustomise my mind with. This then has become part of me and how I conduct myself now. However, even in a worldly context you could learn from this and relate it to your study or work. When one sees something will benefit you take the initiative, particularly at a young age, to follow it through. I share this advice, particularly with the younger generation, so you can take a little bit of initiative to work out the things that are good for you in your life.

The future of Australia lies, of course, upon the shoulders of the younger generation, so the future of Australia depends on the younger generation's intentions or motivations now.

We can return now to the purpose of meditation. First of all it is good for us to acknowledge that our mental happiness is extremely precious and valuable for our overall wellbeing. This is something that we need to recognise and acknowledge for ourselves. When we acknowledge and accept that mental happiness is indeed extremely valuable for our wellbeing, we would then naturally take the initiative to protect whatever mental happiness we have acquired to date and further develop it to ensure that the self or the 'I' will always go together, hand in hand, with mental happiness.

We can take a particular example to demonstrate the value of mental happiness in relation to our wellbeing. If mental happiness does not accompany the self at all times then even when good fortune strikes, such as an individual winning a lottery or a million dollars, if that individual initially lacks mental happiness winning the lottery or a million dollars will not make them any happier. It will not really help them and make them any happier because they are not accustomed to having that mental happiness. Whereas someone who does have mental happiness as an integral part of their life and it accompanies them at all times was to become destitute and have to beg for their food would still be quite happy internally in their mind. They would still feel joy. This is how we can see the benefits.

We can further expand on that example. If someone who lacks mental happiness to begin with or hasn't taken the initiative to secure mental happiness, acquires a big financial benefit then rather than it bringing them more joy and happiness it becomes another cause to generate worries in their mind. Apparently this seems to be very

true. If someone has some training and some means to deal with money efficiently then it might be different. Otherwise someone who is not that mentally secure themselves gets really worried and frightened, when they obtain a large sum of money. Apparently they can start to think, 'What can I do? What should I do with it? How do I use it? How do I secure that?' In this way lot of extra worries arise in their mind.

The main point is that the large sum of money doesn't necessarily contribute to mental happiness. Any material gain is meant, of course, to make one happier but if it becomes a reason or cause to bring one more misery and more unhappiness then it actually defeats the purpose. Many people have confided in me that they were happier when they had less money and material things in their lives. When suddenly, because of a change of circumstances, they started getting a good flow of money coming in, it actually made them unhappier. Likewise others have confided to me that they seemed to be much happier before they were married but after getting married somehow they seem to have become less happy. I am sure you would have heard about instances where individuals who seemed to get along very well as happy, joyful, good companions started to have many problems when they got married. So there are actual cases of this.

Coming back to the main point about meditation again, we need to understand that meditation is first of all a means to ensure that one gains significant, stable mental happiness and then to secure and protect that happiness. Meditation practice should contribute to that end. To understand the relationship between the thoughts that occur in our mind and our mental happiness, let us just consider a situation where we might be feeling quite relaxed and calm. If we pay attention to our mind in that relaxed and calm atmosphere we would see that there are moments when sudden thoughts, what we call distracting thoughts or the delusions that are basically negative thoughts or emotions, start to arise. The moment that these thoughts arise in our mind we immediately feel ill at ease and unsettled. This is an experience we would have noticed.

What is happening in this situation is a clear sign that we have not been able to protect our mind. More specifically we have not been able to protect our mental happiness. Because we have failed to secure and protect our mental happiness we are prone to being influenced by negative states of mind that cause disturbance and unrest in our mind. What we are identifying are destructive states of mind, what are called superstitious conceptions. These completely distracting thoughts are also called the delusions. So what we need to do is train ourselves not to allow these disturbing thoughts to take hold of our mind and dominate and control us so that we are not affected by these disturbances.

A specific example of a disturbing thought that causes distress in our mind is anger, a very prevalent state of mind that we can all recognise as being disturbing. The moment anger takes hold in our mind it completely destroys our mental happiness. Any sense of mental happiness and calmness is destroyed as soon as anger arises in our mind. Likewise as soon as jealousy takes

hold in our mind we feel the consequences of a disturbed mind and any sense of happiness is completely gone. So once we recognise these specific states of mind as disturbing thoughts we need to apply a measure to protect ourselves from their influence.

Not being able to protect our mental happiness is directly related to allowing negative states of mind and attitudes to take hold within us and allowing our mind to be influenced by those disturbing thoughts. We can take the example of anger again. When we clearly identify and acknowledge that anger is a disturbing thought, then we can take the measures that we need to take to prevent anger from taking hold within us. As soon as the circumstances conducive for us to become agitated and angry occur we need to immediately recognise this and basically speak to ourselves, 'Anger is arising here and if I allow it to take hold it will completely destroy any sense of calmness and peace within my mind and my mental happiness will be disrupted.' Just recognising this will deflate the intensity of anger. As beginners we may not be able to completely stop anger arising, that is because we have not reached the level of complete cessation of anger. So, while that may not be possible right now, we can still recognise anger and remind ourselves of its ill-effects. That is something we can manage. The very acknowledgement of the ill-effects of anger, of disturbing thoughts, will help us to avoid being completely under their dominance and control and, to that extent, will help us to protect our mind.

So, we need to remind ourselves again and again that in order to secure mental happiness we need to protect our mind. Protection here specifically means protecting our mind from disturbing thoughts, or what we call the delusions, such as intense anger, attachment, jealousy and so forth. We must not allow our mind to be completely under the influence and dominance of anger, attachments and so forth. That is the measure that we need to take.

The way to protect our mind from these negative states is, initially, to choose an object that does not cause any disturbance in our mind, an appropriate object, and familiarise ourselves with applying our full attention and focus on that chosen object. That chosen object is what we call the object of meditation. So this is the way to train our mind.

If, from the very outset, we ensure that the purpose of our meditation practice is to protect our mind from disturbing thoughts and emotions then, when we apply the meditation technique with that intention in our mind, we will reap immediate benefits during the meditation practice. We will immediately experience relief from those disturbing thoughts because we are not allowing our mind to focus on them. Instead we are focusing on an appropriate object that does not cause delusions to arise.

While we reap an immediate benefit during the meditation practice itself, a further benefit arises when we come out of the meditation practice. Lingering positive effects can start to take hold of us and that is due to the initial intention and purpose that we set for ourselves in the meditation practice. If we just sit quietly and seemingly just focus on something we might

experience some sort of tranquillity and benefit during the meditation practice but as soon as we come out of meditation the slightest incident may cause us to flare up and become completely upset and angry again. We feel that we have a reason to get upset and angry and this occurs because we have not taken that initiative earlier to be clear about our purpose.

By contemplating the ill effects of anger we will become cautious of anger and not allow it to take hold of us. If we don't contemplate the ill effects of anger then, in our normal circumstances, we actually value anger as a measure of protection for ourselves. In fact when anger first arises we do get the impression that by becoming angry we are applying a measure to protect ourselves. Attachment arises as a means to gain some enjoyment, pleasure. That is how these disturbing thoughts are very mischievous. When they arise they seem to be a form of protection or means for our enjoyment and so we fail to recognise the destruction that anger and attachment cause.

So we need to reassess what is of real value for us. Is it the temporary pleasures of attachment or the adrenalin rush that we get from anger, or is it mental happiness? When we think about it more and more we begin to recognise and accept that the most valuable thing for our wellbeing is mental happiness, calmness and peace. We can then think, "If anger and attachment destroy that then rather than contributing to mental happiness I need to recognise and understand that anger is not a protection for myself. In fact it destroys my mental happiness. Likewise attachment doesn't protect my happiness, but rather destroys it." Recognising this we need to take the initiative to shun and overcome these disturbing states of mind by applying measures to further develop and strengthen the real causes for happiness within us.

Through this process of analysing and thinking about the proper technique of meditation and its purpose we develop a sound understanding of meditation based on some insight, what we call inner wisdom. As our wisdom and intelligence increases we become more and more capable of securing our mental happiness and we are not easily influenced by disturbing thoughts or what others may say about us.

We particularly need to protect ourselves from the disturbing thoughts of anger, strong attachment, jealousy and so forth. By contemplating the ill effects and the disadvantages of anger and so forth we begin to completely recognise them as disturbing thoughts and emotions. Therefore, as mentioned earlier, while we may not be able to completely prevent anger and other disturbing thoughts from arising, by recognising them immediately they begin to deflate and not to take as strong a hold within our own mind. So it is in this way that we need to understand the benefit.

We will now take some time for meditation practice. We again ensure that we have a comfortable and relaxed physical posture, also sitting upright and attentively. Then we need to have a relaxed state of mind. With this combination of a good physical posture and a calm and relaxed state of mind we can adopt the meditation technique adequately. We need to fully accept and

understand that disturbing emotions and thoughts and all forms of distractions that cause excitement in the mind are actually distracting us from a real inner sense of wellbeing. Therefore we need to intentionally engage in the meditation practice to withdraw our focus from all forms of distraction. This means intentionally not allowing our mind to wander off to every whimsical thought that arises but rather completely withdraw from all discursive thoughts, what we call superstitious conceptions, and bring our focus within.

Initially it is good to just try to bring our focus within and us and not focus on external distractions or thoughts. We just bring our mind in to settle it down calmly and peacefully and centralise it. If we can maintain that even for a few moments, that will be good. We will soon notice that our mind starts to have the tendency to wander off again following thoughts or objects that come to mind. Therefore, as the mind is very prone to being distracted again, it is at this stage that we bring to mind the object that we choose to focus on in our meditation, which is the natural rhythm of our breath. Thus, we place our full attention and focus on just on the breath itself. We will adopt this meditation technique for the next few minutes. (*Pause for meditation*).

That will be sufficient for now. As we don't have too much time left for this session we may use it for questions, if you have any questions.

Question: Can Geshe-la please explain briefly the difference between the Mind only School and the Prasangika Middle Way School's view on how things exist?

Answer: First of all we can briefly present the Mind Only School's view. The Mind Only School says that everything is actually generated by karma. When karma matures, one part of it manifests as the mind – which is the subject, and another part as the observed object. So subject and object, mind and the object that the mind focuses on, arise from the same karmic seed. That is how the Mind Only School explains everything as arising from mind only. Everything is basically in the nature of the mind. So the Mind Only School asserts that there is no external existence because everything arises from the mind. To give a specific example, the Mind Only School would assert that the mind perceiving blue does not arise from the colour blue.

However according to the Prasangika view, the highest Buddhist school, the mind perceiving blue does depend on the colour blue, i.e. the mind perceiving the colour blue can only arise because the colour blue exists as an object. However according to the Mind Only school if the consciousness perceiving blue arises from the colour blue then there would be a cause and effect relationship. Blue would be the cause for the mind perceiving the colour blue to arise, thus they could not be of the same entity. According to Mind Only school that would be absurd and could not be possible.

The Prasangika view explains that everything that exists is merely labelled either conceptually or nominally. Because everything is merely labelled, nothing exists inherently or truly from its own side. That is basically the difference.

Question: According to Buddhism, is it better for someone to reincarnate as one's own child or would it be better for them to reincarnate somewhere else with better conditions?

Answer: Of course there could be many better choices if we had a choice, but if we are under the control of karma then we don't really have much choice in terms of where we are reborn. If we have a choice it will be best for us to be born in a family who are very kind and loving and also rich and have all the perfect conditions. So if you have a choice that would be a very attractive situation to be reborn in. But, as explained in the Buddhist teachings, we are controlled by our own previous karma and the delusions that activate that karma, so we don't have a conscious choice.

It is because we want to have a good rebirth in the future that Buddhism and other traditions have guidelines for engaging in good conduct and creating good causes and conditions, what is referred to in Buddhism as creating good karma. Other traditions may not call it karma; however each religion has its own ethical code of good actions to engage in to secure a good future. All traditions have similar practices.

The fact that it depends on our own fate or karma means that it is something that depends on us. Even in religions that believe in God as the creator, God can't create everything beautifully with no suffering for anyone. If God had full control over our existence then God could create a pure place where everything goes well with no misery, but the fact is that it depends on us as well. Of course for those who believe in the creator God, having strong faith in God now creates the causes for good existence in the future. That is one of the key factors of having faith in God.

This is the general explanation that may help answer your question. Of course the explanation about karma and rebirth and where one would reincarnate, is actually quite subtle. It is not something easy for us to understand right away, because it is hard for us to conceive of karma.

Before we conclude this session for this evening, let us again take the opportunity to spend a few minutes in meditation. This time the object to focus on will be the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra being recited. As we hear the chanting we try to place our full attention and focus on the sound of the chant or the mantra. Then, when the chanting subsides or ceases, we try to just maintain an awareness of the residue of the sound and maintain our focus on that for a short while. That would suffice for our short meditation.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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