
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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As usual we can spend some time in meditation. So let us sit in a comfortable relaxed posture. As I have mentioned in the past, it is important to pay attention to the state of your mind. One factor of the mind is that it cannot exist without depending on an object to focus on. That is the cognitive function of the mind.

Since the function of the mind is to cognise, it relates to an object that it focuses on. Consequently the experiences in our mind are influenced by the kinds of objects that it focuses on.

When we focus on positive objects we feel a sense of ease and calmness in our mind, and we feel more relaxed. Whereas when we focus on other frivolous and non-virtuous objects, this immediately causes mental excitement or agitation to arise in the mind.

Which two states of mind—calm or agitated—would you rather choose? The objects we focus on do influence our state of mind. Some make the mind calm and restful and peaceful, while others make the mind agitated and restless. So which objects would you rather choose to focus on? This is a significant point for us to consider.

There's another aspect to the mind, where it is preoccupied with thoughts, some that can make us feel calm and others that make us feel agitated and restless, and at times even sad and annoyed. We can relate to how the state of our mind is very much related to our thoughts and attitudes from our own experiences. Depending on what kinds of thoughts and attitudes we hold on to, we have various kinds of experiences, either positive or negative.

Harbouring thoughts and attitudes that make us feel agitated and uncomfortable will eventually harm us. We need to recognise these faulty thought patterns and attitudes. There are some states of mind that can be classified as having good qualities, because they contribute to our wellbeing, and certain states of mind or attitudes that are categorised as faulty, because they harm us and harm our wellbeing. Of course it is much wiser to follow and nourish our good qualities, and minimise and avoid our negative states of mind or negative thoughts and attitudes. This is not something that is obscure or difficult. This is something that we can all recognise if we are honest with acknowledging our own states of mind. Acknowledging and understanding both positive and negative states of our own mind is really worthwhile.

We have two states of mind—positive and negative. When we harbour negative states of mind and follow them, it makes us feel unhappy, as well as making others around us feel unhappy. Whereas when we follow those positive states of mind, then we feel at ease and happy, and others around us also feel at ease; and we further contribute to their happiness and well being.

We need to assess our own state of mind so we know how it affects us and the people around us. Normally we spend so much time investigating other people to find out whether they are worthy of being our friends or not. We constantly spend so much time analysing and judging other people. Yet we spend hardly any time checking our own states of mind and attitudes, to see whether they are helpful or harmful, to ourselves and others. We need to pay more attention to our state of mind because it is the very factor in our life that causes either our happiness or unhappiness. Of course people around us also contribute to our happiness or unhappiness. But the key factor is our own state of mind, so it is important that we recognise and nourish the positive states of mind, so that we don't lose our positive states of mind. Whereas negative states of mind are something we need to overcome; this is the process of obtaining true happiness and well being.

When we adopt a positive way of thinking, this brings about a more peaceful and calm state of mind. But if we adopt negative attitudes or ways of thinking, then this brings us agitation and turmoil. Clearly, if we were to choose which states of mind we'd like to adopt, it would most likely be that we'd want a more peaceful and calm state of mind. We can analyse our regular, daily existence and further analyse as to which of these two states of mind we have been more familiar with; have we been more familiar with ways of thinking that bring about more peaceful and calm states of mind, or with attitudes and states of mind that cause agitation and turmoil within oneself?

If we are more familiar, more acquainted, with states of mind that cause turmoil and agitation, then this is what we will experience in our life. Whereas if we have made attempts to familiarise ourselves with positive ways of thinking, and positive attitudes that bring about a clear state of mind, then we'd have experienced a more peaceful and happy state of mind with less drama in our lives. So this is something that we need to clearly assess and check for ourselves—with which attitudes have we been more familiar? And then try to reverse the familiarity if we have been influenced on a more negative side.

The more we adopt a more positive way of thinking and positive attitudes, the more naturally our mind is happier and more settled. This is something that we can recognise and act upon. In contrast, if we allow our mind to develop a more negative way of thinking, then that brings about less happiness, and the mind will become more unsettled, agitated and in turmoil. Our mental happiness is very much dependent on our internal conditions rather than external ones, because our happiness is dependent on our ways of thinking and attitudes. For example, people who are excessively wealthy but who lack internal positive conditions for their happiness are miserable, unhappy, and seem to lack joy in their life. Whereas in contrast to that, there are others who may not have many external good conditions, yet they experience a more joyous and happy life. These are clear signs that our genuine inner sense of happiness is dependent on our internal conditions rather than external.

Of course we are not to blame for focusing on external conditions when we are brought up in a society where the very view, what we call the worldly view, is that the more money we have, the more we will be able to gain material possessions, and this is enough for our wellbeing. This kind of view entails believing that our wellbeing is very much related to the amount of money we have. So when this is the

general view that is presented, we are influenced by that, and then strive in our life to try to earn a lot of money. But in fact, when we completely focus externally and are completely driven to amass wealth, then this brings about many more problems for us, many more worries and anxieties.

Focussing on achieving excessively desirable external conditions, such as amassing great wealth, robs us of a genuine sense of happiness and peace. This is confirmed by people who are not spiritual practitioners or Buddhists. When I go out to places like cafes, people have come up to me and shared with me that they have had lots of success and lots of money in their life, but somehow they don't feel a sense of joy and happiness, somehow they feel empty inside. These are people who have no reason to lie to me; they were sharing their stories honestly with me.

Someone confided to me that he doesn't feel complete without a good job, yet while he does have a good job, he now feels trapped in the endless merry-go-round of work, which causes a sense of dissatisfaction. His story is an example, in the Buddhist tradition, of developing a sense of renunciation to worldly possessions. His story is a reminder that there is no real joy and happiness in worldly possessions, and thus we need to transcend that. This was a good reminder for me about the need to develop genuine renunciation.

Contrast the earlier example of someone who has a lot in terms of material wealth but may not have inner joy or happiness, with people who don't have that much money, but do have the inner conditions for their mental happiness. These inner conditions are their actual wealth, because they are a source of joy and happiness; not only for themselves but for others. They can use their positive inner conditions, such as a kind mind and a kind heart to benefit others and themselves. If they become wealthy, it won't become an obstruction for their mental happiness and joy; because of their well-developed inner qualities, they will be able to use their wealth to help others, and even increase their joy and happiness as well. There are some wealthy people who have the attitude that as far as they are concerned they have enough money and that's fine. Some of these people genuinely consider others' wellbeing, and how to use their wealth to benefit others. This is possible due to the influence of a kind mind within themselves. So we can see that our happiness is very much dependent on our state of mind. To summarise, our mind has great potential to work for the wellbeing of others and ourselves.

I regularly share this advice with the younger generation: you need to spend time initially in pursuing a good career by doing your studies well. Then the knowledge you gain will help you in the material world, for example, by securing a good job, with a good earning capacity. However, while engaged in working towards a good material life, it is important not to neglect working on your internal wellbeing and state of mind, to also work towards cultivating positive inner qualities as well. So focus on your studies to get a good job and a good career, then later it is important for your wellbeing to be careful with your earnings. Make sure that you don't squander the money, but save it in the bank. Where does your happiness come from in this life? Perhaps with the money you make in the external world coupled with a calm and happy mind on the inside. When you have money you can relax and go on a holiday, but if there is no money, a strong inner mind will make you more resilient to

the possible loneliness and unhappiness that can come from having no money.

I encourage the younger generation to keep the long view of their life in mind. In order to secure your long-term happiness, you need to prepare now in terms of thinking about how to get work in the future. However, as mentioned previously, it is not enough just to have good earnings or to be able to save well—you also need to use it in the right way, for example, to abstain from substances which alter your state of mind. As well as working towards success within the external world, also work on developing the internal conditions necessary for inner happiness within your mind. This is the combination—use your time and energy working in the external world to secure good material conditions, and also work on your internal world. This combination of both good external and internal conditions will provide the best long-term benefit for your life. You need to think about your future and your livelihood.

None of us can completely rely on others, especially for our happiness. We are responsible for our own happiness. This is the main point that we need to keep in mind. Being responsible for ourselves will lessen the worries in our life, and less worry means a happier state of mind.

I have not been too successful in amassing external wealth, but nevertheless I have spent a lot of time trying to invest in acquiring internal wealth, which provides the conditions for my happiness now, which is the result of having spent most of my life in contemplation. At this stage of my life, I can confidently say that I am a happy person, despite the fact that I don't have too many external things. Happiness is having a strong mind, based on loving kindness and compassion, with no anger, no attachment, no jealousy, no pride. I have been able to adopt some of these qualities, so I can confidently share with you that it is possible, if you make an attempt it is possible to achieve these qualities.

The main point is that our happiness depends on our way of thinking and our attitudes. Having a positive attitude in itself might not necessarily contribute directly to amassing a lot of wealth right away, however, a positive attitude definitely contributes to developing our inner qualities. When you think about it, acquiring inner qualities seems to be easier than acquiring external material comforts such as wealth. His Holiness the Dalai Lama once shared his story about meeting a Christian monk who was in retreat for six years. When His Holiness the Dalai Lama was visiting that area, he met this monk.

The Dalai Lama asked him what he survived on. He subsisted on meagre meals of dried bread. And then the Dalai Lama asked, 'what were you meditating on?' The monk answered, 'on love'. His Holiness said that the monk's facial expression was expressing that sense of love on which he had meditated. The monk was visibly in a calm and peaceful state. His Holiness said when someone meditates to develop inner qualities, there is a genuine transformation. This is true in any tradition. Anyone who sincerely develops positive inner qualities will achieve a positive transformation.

States of mind that cause us turmoil, agitation and anxiety within our minds are classified as negative states of mind. If we were to be honest with ourselves, we could all assume we are more familiar with those negative states of mind than with the positive states. Over our lifetime, we have familiarised ourselves with the more negative ways of

thinking. So it is not a surprise we are mostly in a state of inner turmoil.

We need to take measures to familiarise ourselves less and less with the negative states of mind and attitudes. The less familiarity we have with a negative state of mind, the happier we will become. If we don't start to reduce our familiarity and association with these negative states of mind, then our life will just become more and more unsettled, and more miserable.

It is at this point that we can relate to the significance of a meditation practice. Meditation is a technique to familiarise our mind with positive objects, which contribute to positive ways of thinking and promoting positive attitudes. This is why meditation techniques involves choosing an object to focus on that will help distance ourselves from negative states of mind and negative objects that influence our mind in a negative way. The more we distance ourselves from negative objects, the more we lessen our familiarity and association with negative states of mind, then the more there is room for positive states of mind to start to increase and to take root. So this is how meditation benefits us.

Let us now meditate. Again, reassessing our physical posture and being relaxed, we focus on our breath. It is not enough just to know the object but to also place our full attention and focus on it by deliberately withdrawing focus from any other objects. We particularly withdraw from the negative states of mind, and we deliberately withdraw from any other objects or thoughts or ideas that our mind might be preoccupied with. We bring our full attention and focus of our mind to our breath. This means being fully aware of the breath going in and coming out, as we breathe naturally.

(meditation)

Question: Do you recommend meditating outside in the park?

Answer: It depends on the individual. For some people it might be a pompous act, showing off, which is a worldly concern. There could be a danger of that, meditating in public view. Some people in public may assume a rigid, pompous sort of posture, but if they are affected by what others think, then that is not a true meditation, and not serving its true purpose. If we can be free from that, be in the moment and be focussed, then meditating anywhere should be fine. Adopting a walking meditation is also good. The practical benefit of a walking meditation is that we would not fall asleep in our meditation!

Further question: I walk in the park every day. Won't I be distracted by dogs, geese, children etc.?

Answer: It depends on your ability to focus. Someone with single-pointed focus could be meditating anywhere, as external things would not distract them. But if the mind is easily influenced by external sounds, then of course it is suggested to have a quiet environment. We need to understand that the actual meditation is done with mental consciousness, not a sense consciousness; that is not with the sensory level of awareness but rather a mental consciousness. When the focus of our mental consciousness is developed to a certain point, then the sensory stimulus will not affect our mind. Someone who has developed a significant amount of mental stability will be able to focus on an object even if there is a sound. They might hear the sound, but does not cause their mind to go towards that sound. In other words, the sound will not become a distraction for their mind.

Question: Focusing on the breath is problem for me, as it brings up a lot of anxiety. Do you have any advice?

Answer: The object to focus on for meditation is not limited to the breath. If focussing on the breath is a problem for you in your personal experience, it might be advisable that you don't use your breath but instead use another object to focus on. Even focusing on inanimate objects such as the glass is also okay to develop our concentration. First we look at the glass and get a good image of it. When focussing on an external object, we need to understand that it is not the actual physical object that we are focusing on to develop our concentration, but the mental image of that. We need to look carefully at the glass first, get a vivid clear, visual recognition of it, then conjure a mental image of that glass. Initially we may not have a clear mental image of the glass, but gradually we train our mind to focus on it and the image becomes clearer and clearer, to the point that we eventually have a very clear image of the glass in our mind.

Meditation advice typically explains to use whatever object is suitable for our mind, that is, an object that does not cause distress to the mind, or negative states of mind to arise, such as anger or strong attachment. A neutral object does not cause agitation to the mind. Thus in your particular case, even though the general instruction here is to focus on the breath, you can always remind yourself that for you this means focusing on whatever objects you choose to focus on. While the technique presented here involves using the breath as an object to focus on, it doesn't mean that everyone here is restricted to focussing on the breath. You can choose any object that is familiar and comfortable for your mind, but one that does not cause disturbance to your mind. The main thing is the technique, which is the same no matter what object you choose to focus on.

So before we end the session for the evening, let us again take an opportunity to spend a few minutes in meditation. This time we focus on the sound of the Buddha Shakyamuni mantra. Place your full attention on the sound of the mantra. When the recitation stops, meditate on the residue of that sound, and maintain that awareness for a few moments.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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Edited Version

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