
objects our minds focus on cause negativities to arise, but we can reverse that situation by focusing on more positive objects. This is what the meditation technique encompasses and, if we understand its purpose, meditating becomes very meaningful.

As beginners, it is worthwhile to identify one unfavourable situation and address it rather than attempt to overcome many different adverse circumstances all at once. Perhaps you could acknowledge a particular obsession you have that is distressing you and really investigate what the cause of your distress is. Each of us has different situations, thoughts and memories – what we can refer to as “objects” – that torment us when we focus on them. So recognise one of your own torments or obsessions and pay particular attention to overcoming it in your life. Your aim would be to reverse the situation in your mind so that it is peaceful instead of disturbed when it comes in contact with the object. This is a very important practice.

Unfortunately, there will always be external causes and conditions that have the potential to distress us, but we can remember that the reason why those circumstances affect us and cause us distress lies within us. If we permit our minds to be affected and led by afflictive states of mind, negative interpretations and adverse external conditions, we will always have mental suffering. Of course, some external factors may be very discouraging, but if we have not allowed our mind to be vulnerable to afflictive states, it will be protected and not prone to being easily disturbed by external conditions. At a certain point, after extensive practice, you will find that whatever negative external conditions that may surround you it will not affect your mind at all.

To illustrate this, you can think of someone who really irritates you and is intentionally trying to annoy you. The person may be deliberately saying or doing things to aggravate you but whether you are affected by what they say or do is in your hands. If you allow your mind to be affected by the annoyance because you interpret what they say or do as negative and take it personally, then you will become angry. However, the anger you feel will only arise if you let whatever the person is saying or doing affect you. The anger arising in your mind is the result of a combination of an external situation, in this example a person deliberately acting and speaking in a certain way to provoke you, and the negative interpretation your mind has given the situation. This is ultimately how we interpret all situations when they affect us.

Indeed, this combination of external conditions affecting our internal states of mind is a reflection of the interrelationship that the mind has with objects. The mind, as a subject, focuses on many different objects which can be external or internal, such as our own thoughts, emotions, memories and so forth, which either causes the mind distress or wellbeing. This shows an interdependence between the subject and the object. However, the mind we all possess has boundless potential and has the great power to develop fully to achieve incredible positive things. This observation in itself can be very intriguing and also very amusing when

we investigate how our mind works – how our minds relate to objects and how those objects affect our minds becomes quite apparent when we see this interrelationship.

We can now meditate since some of the benefits of the meditation technique have been outlined, and its purpose of securing and protecting our wellbeing has been discussed. The stabilising meditation we will adopt involves choosing an appropriate internal object to focus single pointedly on. In order to apply a single-pointed focus on the object, which in this meditation will be our individual breathing pattern, we need to intentionally withdraw our attention and focus from all other external and internal objects. This means we do not allow our minds to speculate by following any thoughts or be distracted by external objects that we may usually be preoccupied with. Instead, we will bring our entire focus within so that all our attention is solely on our own breath and nothing else. In this way we will focus completely on the natural rhythm of our breath for the next few minutes.

[Pause for stabilising meditation.]

That will be sufficient for now.

The text I use for the evening's session is very useful and has many profound topics in it, however the reason I spent a significant amount of time emphasising the benefits and purpose of meditating is because meditation can be a most practical way to assist you in your daily life. You can take this technique home and use it immediately to gain instant benefits. You are now familiar with meditating and know what to do, so I am sure you can manage to sit quietly and meditate for a few minutes each day. Remember, even a few minutes of meditation practice every day will help settle and calm your mind. You owe it to yourself to take this measure for your mental wellbeing. Otherwise your mind will be completely chaotic, troubled and wander in all kinds of directions that do not contribute to your happiness and wellbeing.

As explained earlier, the negativities that many of us experience, like sadness, anger and fear, cause our problems and are a consequence of something within us. If these afflictions were physical, like a goitre, we could have them surgically removed, but unfortunately our internal disturbances are not physical and cannot be pinpointed for removal. Instead, the afflictions are intangible states of mind and thought patterns – the only way to stop them sabotaging our happiness is to address our habitual attitudes and thought processes by meditating.

As a beginner of meditation, you will especially notice that your effort in applying this technique properly provides your mind with a much needed rest from otherwise hectic and chaotic states. From the beginning, you will need to ensure that you meditate appropriately and do not allow your mind to get side-tracked from its complete focus. Then, after you have experienced the genuinely relaxed and restful state of mind that meditation inevitably delivers, you can concentrate on maintaining that calmness and clarity.

Calmness and clarity will better enable you to investigate how your mind functions, how to address problems that arise, and how to change particular attitudes and ways of thinking that do not serve you. Your meditation practice will help develop your discriminating wisdom so that you can adopt more helpful attitudes and have a more positive outlook in life, which will help you in your everyday situations. This will benefit yourself and whoever you associate with – those who are close to you, like your partner and family, and those who you frequently see, like your friends and colleagues. We have to constantly deal with others in a work environment or when we are out and about – in fact, no matter what we do, we will encounter others – so if we can adopt a positive way of thinking based on a sound discriminating wisdom, we can be stable and assertive in even the most challenging of situations. After all, the harmony that is created through promoting your mental wellbeing has a positive effect on others so the benefits of your meditation practice can be shared by everyone.

The Buddhist teachings describe the greatest happiness humans can enjoy as the happiness of a harmonious relationship. Our relating to others through kindness, generosity and a positive attitude is what contributes to this harmony. We must remember that generosity is not limited to giving material things, but also includes spending quality time with others, sharing yourself and talking with them. In fact, real generosity is the generosity of kindness. Kindness is based on a genuine concern for others – when we are genuinely considerate of others, we naturally express our kindness to them. We may need to be patient with them at times, or else we may easily be affected by what they say and do, and the way they treat us. If we are vulnerable to their actions and words, and take slights personally and become upset, there is no way we can foster harmonious relationships with them. We must remember that a happy state of mind is much more conducive for us to be patient with others – when we are feeling unhappy and on edge, we are easily affected by other people and can quickly become agitated, so we need to remember that the practice of patience depends on the state of our minds and adjust our minds accordingly.

As a matter of fact, a happy state of mind is the basis to practise all other virtues. Since we have to live in a society, associating with others is unavoidable, therefore, we must take the initiative to train our minds to be stable so that we can practise genuine kindness, consideration and patience. This practice is the means for others to be naturally attracted to us; others always appreciate genuine concern and kindness, and practising these virtues is the way to gain true companions and best friends.

A lady once commented to me that her best friend was her cat who had lived with her for seventeen years. She told me that this cat was the best companion for her because it never harmed her, was always affectionate, and showed her great gratitude and love. Expressions of love can even be felt from animals, so there is no question that human beings, who are capable of expressing love in many more ways, have the ability to form genuinely good relationships too.

When others show us genuine fondness and show signs of liking us, we definitely appreciate it. However, when others show their irritation and dislike of us, we feel uncomfortable. We have all experienced these situations, and since we know these feelings for ourselves, we know how they are felt by anyone else. All individuals have experienced comfort or distress because of the way others have treated them, and we can use our experiences of how we felt when treated in certain ways as the basis of how to relate to others. If we show others genuine fondness, gratitude and kindness, they will appreciate it, but if we show ungracious or inappropriate gestures they will not. Our relationships with others are interdependent – how we treat another person can determine how they feel.

If you are not able to be generous, kind and patient with others, but instead hold on to and harbour negative, judgemental or hostile states of mind, others will want to distance themselves from you. This can lead to loneliness, which seems to be one of the greatest miseries in this society. This feeling of loneliness is created by afflictions in the mind. So, if you feel lonely, begin by looking after your mental wellbeing and this care will naturally extend itself to others.

The main point is that you can train your mind. This is possible because the very nature of the mind is changeable so it has the capacity to transform, expand and generate good qualities, and reduce its negative habits and traits. Adopting the meditation technique is a way of training your mind to help and benefit yourself, and through that effort, you can be useful and benefit others too.

This all ultimately boils down to two essential aims in a spiritual practice: the wish to benefit others and the wish to refrain from harming them. These two indispensable spiritual wishes are based on genuine consideration, kindness and gratitude towards others, which form the foundation of benefitting, helping and serving them. We can train our minds to acquire and adopt these positive qualities through our determination and through dedicating our time. At the very least, we can be determined not to intentionally hurt anyone. If we incorporate the resolution to not intentionally harm others into our psyche so that it becomes a habitual way of thinking, we will be practising Dharma. “Dharma” is the Buddhist term for spiritual practice and Buddhist teachings describe its practise as the basis of all happiness. So, if we relate to this summary of spiritual practice as benefitting others and not harming them, then we will see that it is the true basis for all our happiness. If we can adopt these aspirations in our life, our generation of genuine happiness is definite. We can begin to promote harmony with others by wishing to benefit and not harm those we are closest to. This will form a solid basis for genuinely good relationships, which we can then gradually extend to include all beings.

I often think about how and why meditation is worthwhile and in doing so I am able to establish its benefits and really incorporate a practice in my life. This is why I share my reflections with you. You, of course, need to assess and check what I say, even if what I have

said makes sense to you and you relate to it. If you thoroughly understand for yourself the purposes and benefits of meditation, you will always be able to use this understanding to develop a peaceful and happy state of mind.

Throughout my life I have endeavoured to use my practice to protect my happy and, more importantly, clear state of mind. I have not been able to protect my homeland, which I had to escape from, and I have not been able to protect my relatives, which as a refugee I had to leave behind. Nevertheless, the result of my practice is that my happy and clear state of mind has become my unfailing companion during my life, and I now reap the benefits of having it as an aid.

I would like to thank you all for paying such good attention. You have all listened very well to what I have shared.

Before we end the session, we can again spend a few minutes in meditation. This time the object of our meditation can be the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni's name. We can place our full attention and focus on the sound of this mantra's recitation and withdraw our minds from all other preoccupations. When the chanting subsides we can focus again on the sense of tranquillity or calmness in our minds which comes as a result of focusing on the mantra. Our meditation can rest on this peace for a few moments.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

*Transcribed by Kim Foon Looi
Edit 1 by Tanya Simmons
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
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