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## *Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*

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As usual we can spend some time in meditation.

We need to ensure that we are in a comfortable and relaxed posture. Likewise it is important that we set a good motivation for our meditation.

The main purpose of meditating is to train our mind to be in a positive frame and to have a positive state of mind—that is what it really involves.

As we adopt a meditation technique, specifically to familiarise our mind to be in a positive frame, it gradually subsides a chaotic and negative state of mind, which normally negatively influences us in our daily activities. Because the troubled state of mind subsides during our meditation practice, we experience a tranquil and calm state of mind.

This happy and peaceful state that we experience comes as a result of using our wisdom and insight. It is important to make the connection that we can have a happy and peaceful state of mind when we use our own intelligence and wisdom. We have an inborn wisdom that can be strengthened by our own insight and experiences. We have the capacity to develop our internal intelligence and wisdom. Unlike the happiness that we gain from external factors and material things, the happiness we gain from our own insight is much more stable and durable. The great Indian Master Asanga specifically mentioned that the happiness that we gain from external resources is not long lasting at all, as we cannot take all the material things with us wherever we go. Whereas the happiness that comes from inborn wisdom is something that we can maintain and take with us wherever we go. That is the significant difference.

It is important that we pay attention to this, and the reason why I emphasise it is because normally we don't give much attention to where our inner joy and happiness comes from. We are used to believing that it comes from external resources, and for as long as we believe in that, we will be extremely busy trying to acquire as many external possessions as possible, in the belief that it will secure our happiness. If we allow ourselves to follow our normal way of thinking, then we typically put most of our energy and time pursuing external conditions for our happiness, but we fail to gain genuine satisfaction and well-being. When we pay attention to our internal world and look within, we are able to recognise that there are causes for happiness that lie within our own mind. We need to protect and make sure we don't lose these inner causes of happiness. If we are constantly pursuing and running after external things, then we are neglecting the real causes and conditions for our own happiness that lie

within ourselves. We are not utilising what is within our reach but pursuing something external that is hard to reach.

The reason why we are addressing this significant discussion—the condition for our happiness and how to achieve that—is for the simple reason that we all want happiness. Since it is natural that we all wish for happiness, it is worthwhile that we consider how we gain that happiness and where it comes from. A spiritual seeker's life is mostly concerned in developing inner happiness. Because a spiritual seeker's main concern is developing inner happiness, they don't find much reason to pursue external resources to gain happiness. They of course still need to rely on external things such as food, a dwelling and simple clothing, however they do not place great importance on these external conditions. That is because they understand that those material things are not the real source of happiness. Thus a spiritual seeker is easily contented and happy with basic dwelling, clothing and food to sustain themselves.

The reason I relate this to you is to address what we all agree upon, which is that we all want happiness. The question we need to ask ourselves is, 'How do I go about seeking happiness?' As mentioned previously, because a spiritual seeker understands that the real source of happiness lies within rather than outside, they are all quite easily satisfied with basic sustenance. They don't go out and pursue more external things because they understand that is not the real lasting source of happiness. In contrast, if we don't understand that, and if we are left with the notion that the source of our happiness lies outside, then that will naturally cause us dissatisfaction. Because no matter how much we gain, we never seem to be satisfied – the more we get, the more we want. If you start a business and gain a thousand dollars, that will not be enough. You want a profit of two thousand dollars, a hundred thousand, a million and so on. There is no limit to how much profit we would like to make. Getting more and more money will bring no satisfaction because we are never satisfied with material gain, and that causes turmoil and unrest rather than bringing happiness to our mind. We need to understand this co-relationship between dissatisfaction and a lack of happiness.

In pursuing material wealth and gain, whether it's money, possessions, career, status and the like—if indeed it were to contribute to our mental satisfaction and happiness, then there's nothing wrong with that, it's fine. But if we find that no matter how much we gain it does not seem to contribute and produce a genuine sense of satisfaction and happiness in our mind, then it is at this point that we need to consider that maybe our pursuit of happiness has not been fruitful and we are not following the right path. This is where we need to use our inner wisdom to investigate the real source and conditions for our happiness, particularly our mental happiness. The main point that I am emphasising here is that meditation practice is the technique to help produce and protect our mental happiness.

We already have some mental happiness and tranquillity, and a meditation practice helps to protect and develop it

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further. We need to consider that if meditation can help us to maintain a sense of happiness within ourselves, then it is worthwhile to pursue and spend some time in the practice. Of course we still need to depend on some external material things for survival, but we don't need to rely completely on external matters for happiness. The main source of happiness lies within us and applying the techniques of meditation will protect our inner happiness. If we understand that happiness is found internally and we have material wealth, then this will only contribute and not hinder our mental happiness, and we will be able to use our material gain to contribute to our own and others' happiness. That is the main point.

The benefit gained from meditation practice is something we can definitely notice. When I look around I notice that people who earnestly practice and adopt a meditation technique seem to get some benefit from it.

There is a significant difference between someone who adopts a meditation practice versus someone who doesn't. When I was visiting Perth many years ago, I stayed with a very wealthy family. They ranked number seven in Australia in terms of wealthy families. As I came to know the family a bit better, the mother was interested in the Buddhist technique of meditation practice. She confided in me that the husband was not interested in spiritual practice. I definitely noticed that the mother was much more relaxed and genuinely calm, whereas the father seemed a little bit on edge and not settled. The mother herself told me that the blue rings under his eyes come from stress and he's not really a happy person.

They have many boats in Sydney and Tasmania, also in Singapore and Melbourne. They trade in boats, and that's where they get their wealth from. The father told me he didn't need any religious practice because he has work satisfaction. He was teasing me a bit, and I recalled the son saying, "Dad, you shouldn't make comments like that".

When His Holiness the Dalai Lama was visiting, they offered him transport. They have expensive cars and cleaned one well for the Dalai Lama's use. The mother also had a good car that cost a few hundred thousand dollars. She took me around in her car – it was nice and comfortable. They were a very nice and considerate family and they were very, very nice to me.

The main point is that for someone who adopts a meditation practice earnestly, it does definitely bring about a genuine calmer state of mind. The main thing is to check for yourself. If by adopting a meditation technique you find that it contributes to your mental well-being and happiness, then there's no need for other proofs. That is the best way—through your own experience.

The main point of this meditation technique is to be familiar with being in a positive frame of mind. The more we are familiar with our positive state of mind, the more natural our positive state of mind will be. It will affect our attitudes more positively, as well as our moods and happiness. We can be in a positive frame of mind without much effort, and that will contribute to our well-being. This is significant.

With the technique that I mention regularly, we use our breath as an object to focus on. Based on our natural breathing, be fully aware of our own breath coming in and going out. Before bringing our focus on our breath, we need to make a commitment to ourselves for the next few minutes to not allow our mind to be distracted with other thoughts and any kind of objects, and to withdraw from all forms of distractions. It is in making this commitment of withdrawing our mind from all distractions that we are able to bring our focus within, and then place our attention single pointedly on the natural rhythm of our breathing. In order to gain the most benefit from this practice, we need to adopt it sincerely with our full attention and focus. So for the next few minutes, we will adopt this technique of focusing on our breath. (*Pause for meditation*)

Geshe-la is noticing some new people, so he is wondering if you have any questions.

*Question:* A friend asked me a question about meditation which I'm not able to answer. She said that she had been meditating for over 10 years, and when she is in deep meditation she begins to hear a noise coming from inside. She said that noise has become more predominant and now she can hear it in the background even when she is not meditating. Apparently it is a bit uncomfortable for her and she wonders what is causing this?

*Answer:* It seems people have different kinds of experiences that may be hard to relate to immediately. From our tradition, particularly the Tibetan tradition, we talk a lot about the wind element and energy. If the wind energy is a little bit out of balance, which usually comes from pushing too much, then it can affect the wind energy. If the wind energy, or *lung* in Tibetan, is affected, then that can sometimes cause sounds to be heard, which is not related to an actual external source of sound but rather an imagination of hearing particular sounds.

Even in meditation, if we are stressing too much or focusing too hard on our meditation, it may seem like we are doing meditation, but there may be slightly too much stress there. If that is the case, then we may be affected in a negative way. So the main thing is to ensure that we are completely relaxed. If the meditation itself brings an onset of being too stressful, then it is a sign that we need to relax a bit more.

If our meditation is causing us stress, then it is necessary to let go a bit and not to pursue it too much. Don't force it. If, in pursuing our meditation and giving it too much emphasis, it becomes stressful, then it may cause a little damage to the mind rather than being helpful, which defeats the purpose of mediation.

There are many stories about individuals who had engaged in meditation practices, but because of their wind energy getting out of balance, they had strange kind of experiences, some even frightening. I recall someone mentioning that they saw snakes coming up onto their laps; that is not a pleasant experience during meditation.

There is a particular story about a meditator who commented that during his meditation a head always appeared in front of him. He was advised to mark a cross on the forehead of this head the next time it appeared in

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front of him. Later, when he came out of his meditation, he noticed that his stomach was actually marked with a cross. That was a clear sign that it was his imagination.

In our tradition, it is explained that a lot of appearances may occur due to the element of the wind energy being out of balance, such as seeing things that don't really exist or hearing things that have no basis for that sound.

In the early days of my study when my body was a weak and undernourished because of lack of substantial food, and I was putting a lot of effort into study, I started hearing sounds and feeling a bit light headed.

When one begins to hear sounds in one's head, then that is an indication of a weak body, being under nourished and under too much stress, which causes the wind energy to get out of balance. The advice given to us in Tibet was to have rich foods, such as dish which was made of cooked dough that is sweetened and with a lot of butter. This meal can also give you a good night's sleep.

Due to the wind energy being out of balance, we may also have the sensation of being lifted up and feeling a bit light headed.

So the advice is to take measures to relax so that our mind calms down and we get back to our normal self. Otherwise, as mentioned earlier, with too much stress in our mind, we can cause our wind energy to be blocked and not flow well in our body. When the wind energy is not flowing freely in our body, then that can cause all sorts of mental and physical problems.

When I was living in Nepal at Kopan Monastery, there was another geshe staying there as a teacher as well. The medication was not properly administered to him and it affected his mind, which started hallucinating. He later mentioned to me that he started seeing a head that was speaking to him. But because of his many years of study and knowing how the mind functions through his understanding of the scriptures, he was able to tell himself that it is not true, and that it was his mind that was making this up.

The scriptures explain, particularly in relation to the mind, that some states of mind are mistaken, and others are valid states of mind. There is an emphasis on the distinction between the different states of the mind. So having a good understanding and knowledge of that, he later commented to me that the head speaking to him did appear to him, but while appearing he knew it was a hallucination.

This was when we were all staying together and a bad cough was going around. There was an American doctor and apparently she was good in natural medicine. She suggested we had acupuncture. I declined but the other Geshe who was having the hallucination took the acupuncture. After the acupuncture treatment, he told me that there were a lot of needles put into his body and he had to lie down, but it didn't seem to have much effect. But then another day he told me that the doctor gave him some good medicine.

He said the medicine was very good because it made him feel very light as if he was floating and seeing many flowers around.

We don't know what the medication was, perhaps some sort of hallucinogenic effects in the medicine, a sort of hallucinogenic drug. Sometimes in some medication, there seem to be some drugs which affect the mind to see things like that.

*Question:* I recall in Shantideva's text, *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, there is a mention about hearing the Dharma in the form of sound of rustling trees and flowing water etc. how is that explained?

*Answer:* It is in the dedication chapter—is that what you are referring to? Or maybe it is in the third chapter where the offerings are indicated.

Definitely, that is of course indicated as an aspiration—that the sound of the trees may become the source of receiving the Dharma.

It is indeed mentioned that, through the Buddha's blessings, the sound of trees and water and so forth becomes a Dharma teaching for the one who is ready to receive that as Dharma teaching. There are also other ways of how the Buddha's blessings comes from sources other than his speech, such as when the Buddha was in a meditative equipoise, there were also teachings given through his crown protrusion. There are indications on how the Buddha can teach and give blessings in many different forms.

The significance of making strong aspirations will become a cause for achieving the goals of those aspirations in the future. Making strong aspirations now, in the form of positive good wishes and prayers, is significant and a good practice.

*Question:* When we are meditating on our breath, we are supposed to see the breath coming in and see the breath coming out. Is there further instruction on what the breath actually looks like? Or is it just our feeling?

*Answer:* This is more of a mental activity, taking notice of each breath coming in and going out, and being fully aware of the breath coming in and going out, rather than trying to see it. It is not a physical seeing, but basically being aware mentally of the breath coming in and going out. In order to maintain a good awareness, we may even count the breaths as a way to keep track of our mental awareness of the breath.

We need not be concerned with the physical breath at all. If we focus on the actual breath, then that becomes a preoccupation and distraction in itself. As suggested in the meditation technique, with our normal breathing, we breathe in and breathe out naturally anyway, so we do not need to do anything extra. Make sure that you do not have a laboured breath; don't inhale and exhale deeply and noisily, but rather breathe naturally. So we do not pay attention to the physical breath going in and out, but instead it is the mental awareness. Just as we can be mentally aware of someone coming in and going out of a room, without actually seeing them, similarly with our breath it is the mental awareness, imagining seeing the breath going in and out.

*Question:* When I have a hard time falling asleep, especially when I wake up in the middle of night sometimes, I tend to use the meditation technique to focus on my breath as a means to relax myself to go back

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to sleep. But I wonder if that is reinforcing my meditation practice just to become a method to fall asleep?

*Answer:* Even during one's usual meditation session, one may find oneself falling asleep, even though it was not one's intention to go to sleep, right! So, if you do a meditation that can help you to have a better sleep that should be fine. However when you do your regular meditation practice again, you need to ensure that you are doing it in a clear mind, which will prevent you from feeling drowsy and fall asleep.

Those were good questions. Thank you! I am not implying that I have given good answers but the questions were definitely good. I don't know if the answers that I gave 'hit the mark'.

The Tibetan expression is that when a question is asked, and when you give an answer that relates to the question, then you call it a direct answer. So, I am not sure if my answers were actually directed to answering your questions? However, the main point of discussion is to make sense to each other. And if it makes sense and relates to some queries, then our discussion tonight would have served its purpose. Nevertheless, I would like to excuse myself for having side-tracked a bit and talking off the subject.

Before we conclude the session for the evening let us again take the opportunity to spend a few minutes in meditation. This time, we can use the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra to be recited, as an object to focus on. As we hear the sound, we place our full attention and focus on the sound. When the recitation subsides, we can focus on the residue of the calm feeling and sensation. We will spend a few minutes in this way.

*TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA*

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