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# Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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Adopt a comfortable physical relaxed posture for meditation. Meditation is important in our lives because all the good or bad things that happen to us depend on our state of mind.

All our thoughts and experiences are preceded by our state of mind. Mind is part of our identity or existence, it cannot be separated from our individual self. That means, wherever we are or wherever we go, we are always accompanied by our mind. Ultimately we can separate from our physical body, but we will never be separated from our mind. Since we are always accompanied by our mind, also known as 'consciousness', 'awareness' or 'cognition', it is worthwhile for us to investigate what 'mind' or 'consciousness' is.

When we take the initiative to analyse and investigate our state of mind, the first thing we notice is that our thoughts can be sorted into two main categories i.e. positive thoughts and negative thoughts.

Having identified positive and negative states of mind, we then need to analyse and check how they affect us. When either a positive or negative state of mind is dominant, how does that affect us? We need to look into this.

Depending our state of mind, whether it is positive or negative, it influences our verbal (speech) and physical actions. So the actions of our body and our speech are the consequences of our state of mind.

Our state of mind is like an intention. When our positive state of mind dominates, then our intentions are more positive, which in turn influence our actions, both verbal and physical. As a consequence, we have a more calm, restful and peaceful state of mind. Conversely, negative thoughts, attitudes and states of mind influence our actions negatively. We find that our actions, whether mental, verbal or physical, become more agitated and in turmoil. That is the consequence we experience—feeling unsettled.

To summarise, our state of mind is always with us. We classify the state of mind into two main categories—the positive and negative states of mind. When we take careful consideration and analyse our state of mind, we will notice that when we are influenced by a negative state of mind, we feel agitated and unsettled. Whereas when our thoughts are influenced by a positive state of mind, we experience wellbeing and we feel calm. When these consequences become clear, then the question is, how do we ensure that we maintain positive states of mind while being free from the influence of negative states of mind? How do we do that? It does require some

training and initiative from our own side. We need to become familiar with positive states of mind and cultivate positive attitudes, so there is less room for the negative states of mind to exist. When we notice a negative state of mind, try not to follow it. If we don't want to be dominated by a negative state of mind, then we need to lessen our familiarity with a negative state of mind. We are responsible for our own wellbeing.

If we summarise our activities, basically they are thoughts and actions. If we think about it, in a twenty-four hour period we are involved in either of these two. Either we are dwelling in our thoughts, or we are engaging in an activity that is influenced by those thoughts. That really sums up our being and our existence—constantly engaged in thoughts or actions. As mentioned earlier, our thoughts influence our physical and verbal actions, which in turn influence our state of being. We often say 'I feel good' or 'I feel bad'. So what makes us feel good or feel bad? How we feel depends on our thoughts. We can use a scale as an example. When good thoughts dominate and weigh more on the scale, then as a consequence we feel more energised, have more self-confidence and feel quite bright. Whereas if the negative thoughts dominate and the positive thoughts are weaker, then that's when we feel weighed down, with low self esteem and not much drive and energy to do things.

If we notice that for ourselves, then we have made a discovery on how our well being and our state of being is very much dependent on our thoughts and our state of mind. To give a further analogy or example – in the morning we may feel quite well and upbeat and it seems like a good day, but then by noon we start feeling weighed down and quite 'dark'. If you have noticed that there have been days like that for yourself, you may habitually start blaming it on external situations. But if you look inside yourself and see if there are any conditions within that may have triggered that change, then you may find it is our attitude and mind set that have changed. In the morning we may be in a more positive frame of mind and attitude whereas by noon, due to whatever reasons or circumstances, our mind starts to feel a little bit more negative. That's when our whole state of being starts to change and we start to feel mentally weak, low in energy and feel 'dark'. So the question we ask ourselves is, "is there any way to ensure that a positive state of mind that becomes more prevalent? Is there any training we can do"? This is where meditation is presented and tested out as one of the techniques to bring about a positive state of mind. The meditation familiarises our mind with positivity by focusing on positive objects. Because the meditation technique itself is a technique of familiarising ourselves again and again with a positive state of being, then that state of being starts to dominate. We are responsible for our own wellbeing. We need to take the initiative to clear our own mind, to clear out the turmoil and problems. That is something that we have control over. If we go around and try to solve all our external problems, this is something we are not capable of doing anyway. If we have not worked on clearing the problems within our own mind, then no matter how much we may try to solve

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external problems, the real turmoil is within ourselves and in our own mind, so we will experience these problems again and again. Solving our inner problems is equivalent to solving all our external problems, which will naturally subside. External problems will not affect us so much because we have achieved inner wellbeing. Furthermore, as meditation techniques help us achieve inner wellbeing, as a consequence of applying a meditation technique properly, we will begin to notice that our mind becomes clearer, sharper and more focused, particularly our intelligence. This intelligence is known in Buddhist terms as wisdom.

Wisdom is being able to analyse and differentiate between positive and negative states of mind. It is not an easy task to distinguish our positive and negative states of mind. But when we apply the methods of proper meditation techniques, we can develop our innate wisdom to differentiate between the positive and negative states of mind within ourselves. When we meditate like this, then we have taken responsibility for our own wellbeing. Another point that I also emphasise regularly is that, with this practice we need to take more initiative in looking within rather than falling into our normal habit of immediately pointing our finger outwards and looking for faults externally, and saying 'everything around me is causing me problems'. If we fall into that habit of always blaming external situations, then we will never be able to deal with the real cause of our problems. Rather if we take the initiative to look within, then we will begin to see how our own thought patterns and attitudes are at the core of our wellbeing or otherwise.

To give one example, the negative state of mind that affects our wellbeing and destroys our sense of calmness and peacefulness is called anger. In moments of intense anger, we need to look at our actions, what kind of actions come about because of our anger? In moments of strong anger, whatever you say does not come out nicely. You will say things that you will later regret. You realise later that it was inappropriate. But the harm is already done because it has already been said or done. You may have already done something destructive. Inappropriate speech or destructive physical actions are influenced by an angry state of mind. What can we do? When intense anger dominates at that moment, it is hard to take the initiative to try to identify it immediately. So we need to be prepared beforehand.

When anger is about to arise and we see that we are about to get upset, take a moment to analyse and check it out. What is anger? What is the nature of this emotion? Why and how does it arise? If I were to give in to this anger, how will it manifest? What consequences will it bring to myself? What kind of effects will I feel within my own mind? Even if we do not express our feelings publicly, how do we feel inside? We can feel and see that it is indeed destructive. Analysing and looking at anger and facing it will diffuse our anger, rather than hiding from it. Analysing anger makes it go down and subside a bit. Analysing anger also makes us begin to see the positive effects of abandoning anger. By acknowledging and looking at a disturbing concept or thought and analysing it will make it subside. It's as if it shies away.

So having explained a bit about the practical benefits and methods of the practice of meditation, we can now adopt the meditation technique for a few minutes. Just to remind you again, sit in a comfortable but upright posture for the meditation practice. Furthermore, we need to have a positive and clear state of mind and be mindful by remembering the object that we are focusing on, which normally is our breath. For those who don't find that suitable, you can use another neutral or positive object to focus on.

Again to recap some of the particular points to consider and to reflect upon, as a means to apply the meditation technique fully, we need to ensure that we have a clear state of mind and we need to make the determination during the meditation to not allow our mind to be influenced by negative thoughts or any kinds of distractions, because our state of being is very much influenced by our thoughts. So if we have experienced turmoil and unsettling feelings in our lives, it is related to our negative state of mind, and our negative thoughts or distractions. Since we know that our state of mind influences our speech and actions, then why would we want to let our mind be influenced by negative thoughts? If we did, we would be compromising our own wellbeing.

In meditation, we take control of our own mind and we don't allow it to follow those negative, distracting thoughts, what we call disturbing conceptions. This means that we take the initiative and make the commitment to ourselves that, for the next few moments, we will bring our entire 100% focus on the chosen object. First we bring our attention inwards and distance ourselves from all other preoccupations and any disturbing thoughts, and then focus our mind inwards and place it upon the breath. Be fully aware of each inhalation and exhalation, and the breath coming in and going out and placing our mind 100% on that. This is how we adopt this meditation practice. When we adopt this technique sincerely, during the few minutes we spend here focusing on the breath, we will experience a sense of wellbeing. Because we distance and separate ourselves from negative thoughts and distractions, we will experience a sense of calm and tranquillity within ourselves. It is this experience and familiarity that will, if we apply the meditation technique regularly, on a daily basis, gradually increase our sense of wellbeing, and our mental state will be affected positively.

*(meditation)*

*Question:* I find myself often getting angry with my teenage children; can Geshe-la give some suggestions of how to better deal with them without getting angry?

*Answer:* This is an exceptional situation where the anger does not stem from dislike or hostility and wishing to hurt others, but anger arises out of a concern. The motivating force is out of concern for your children. You want them to do something that you feel is in their best interests. However, anger arises when they don't follow your advice. The real motivation here, if you check it out, is not hostility or harmfulness, but a genuine concern for them.

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However, anger is a state of mind and it is uncomfortable. Analyse further on why you get angry. On one hand it is for their wellbeing, on the other, in relation to yourself, it makes you feel happy if they follow what you want them to do, but if they don't follow your advice, then it makes you feel uncomfortable. In most situations when anger arises, it is because something is not satisfactory for us. That is when we start to rationalise and justify our anger. While your intention is good because it is for their interest, your emotions are also related to your sensory feelings of either feeling glad when they follow your advice and feeling unhappy when they don't. So in relation to the earlier comments about being upset when someone does not follow your wishes and being glad when they do, these are normal issues in a relationship with anyone.

However, going back to the particular case of bringing up children, my understanding and feeling about bringing up children so they have a healthy relationship with the parents, is to take the initiative to look into their needs rather than telling them to follow your advice. Even young children have their own wishes and needs. Everyone wants their freedom. If children are brought up thinking there is no room for freedom, then later when they become teenagers and are getting their independence, they may totally feel like rebelling against the dominance of their parents. So tune in to their needs from an early age.

Of course we don't give them 100% leeway to do whatever they want. That won't work. It's better to ask them to do something in a reasonable way and let them know why, as well as giving them some say, and allowing them to express their wishes and needs. Bringing up children in that manner, even when they become teenagers, means that they will not feel restricted and want to rebel, because they know they can express themselves. They know they have parents to whom they can express their needs and wishes. The key point here is, whatever you want children to do, present it in a way in which they can accept it willingly. If it is presented to them but initially they are hesitant, then as a parent, it is good to find other ways to convince them that your advice is reasonable, rather than just saying 'because I say so'. Children will not see those words as reasonable and will not accept them. When they reach a point where they feel they can do whatever they want, especially as teenagers, that's when parents feel desperate, because the children are not listening anymore. The main point I am emphasising here is the key way on how to make your advice reasonable for them to follow, so that it is not a chore but something they are happy to do, whatever it is.

It is a human trait to accept things when you are on good terms with the person giving advice. Advice is more willingly and happily accepted. Otherwise you reach a point where you are head on with each other and when you say something they refuse to comply. This will lead to conflicts and arguments between parents and children that can be unpleasant.

There are parents who say to me that their children don't want to go to school, especially the teenagers. They don't want to go to school and don't want to work. They do not

take the initiative to do anything constructive in life. So what can the parents do?

If children who don't want to take the initiative to study or work, then that is an indication that they are not feeling settled and something is troubling their mind. If you add more pressure by insisting they listen to you, then that will just make them even more unhappy. To begin with, there is already something troubling them, and if you put more pressure on them it will not be helpful, and will not solve the problem for them.

Rather than putting pressure on them, parents can take the initiative to tune in to them a bit. It is good to look into what is troubling the children. Even if parents do not understand and children cannot talk to them about what is troubling them, at least the parent can acknowledge their troubles and take the initiative not to put any more pressure on them, which can make the situation worse. Parents can let their children take things a little bit easier, and support them on what they want to do. Also ensure that children have good meals, and take them out once in while, or maybe take them for a vacation. That will make them more appreciative of you as a parent. They will think that, rather than pressuring them, their parents are taking the initiative to make them feel comfortable.

Once their mind is more positive or happy, it is more likely they will resolve whatever is troubling them. Once they have found a solution to what is troubling them, then, they themselves will take the initiative to take responsibility for their own lives. Having shared this advice with some parents in the past, some have said that my advice was really good because now their children have grown up, they got married, have a good job and now becoming parents themselves. So it is in this way, there is a turning around. Otherwise the situation could be much more drastic, especially in the teenage years. If you start pressuring them too much and they feel something is troubling their mind, and on top of that their parents are nagging them, and giving them extra problems and difficulties, then when they reach the age of seventeen or eighteen and because of the cultural norms here, they will start feeling independent, and want to leave home as soon as they can and find their own place. But sometimes they don't leave on good terms with their parents, because there were conflicts, arguments and bickering. If they leave without any money and as they are not really adults and not matured yet, they will not have a real understanding of the world. Initially, they will not have any skills. And even the parents think their children have grown up enough to live by themselves. But this is the point where children can become homeless.

That's the time when children need real support and when parents need to take the initiative to look after them. This is the junction in their lives when they are not completely adults yet, and still need support, but something is troubling them. So if they are sent out into the world, and if they don't take the initiative to look after themselves well and if anything were to happen, then that will cause much more agony and angst in the family. This is not productive. So my conclusion here is to really support and look into your children's needs. This is the time that they need guidance from you, as their parents, to support them more than ever.

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When your children become teenagers, there will come a time when naturally your son will start having a girlfriend. If you have a daughter, then naturally it is time for them to become interested in having a boyfriend. Why not? It is reasonable. If dad wants to have a girlfriend or mum wants to have a boyfriend, why not the children? So if heavy restrictions are placed upon teenagers during that time, then they may take drastic measures of finding their own way. But the healthier approach is to invite them to bring their girlfriend or boyfriend home. Get to know their girlfriend or boyfriend and in that way, even as a parent, you are genuinely concerned about how the other partner may be. The only way is by meeting them and speaking to them regularly. That's why I have been saying to parents to support them in having a girlfriend or boyfriend and invite them to your home, and share the goodness in your home with them. That will foster a good and healthy relationship.

If you have plenty of tea, plenty of food and nice biscuits, you don't need to have take alcohol or smoke. This can be related to your children by your son's girlfriend or daughter's girlfriend when they come home, to allow them to feel at home and to provide them with whatever they want. Make them feel at home, and feel free to have drinks or tea or meals. By default, you are fostering good habits in them, making them feel comfortable and at home and also putting a positive influence in their life as well. This is the healthier approach.

In any case, the reality is that children with at that age, there are no parents who find it easy. There is no straight forward method and it is quite natural for children to be like that in their teenage years.

Of course it's in the interests of the children, but in relation to your sanity, and your state of mind, you need to also reflect upon why and how their actions affect you. Where is the borderline between genuine concern for them and your own wishes? How much if it is your own ideal and how much is the practicality for them? These things have to be weighed out.

We also need to take into consideration that because there is an age gap, there are also different mentalities and different world-views. Our ideals may not be ideal for them. Our world-views may not be similar to their world views. Taking that into consideration, we cannot enforce our ideals and world-views upon them when they are not ready to accept them, and particularly when they don't see things the same way as you. In other words, it is good to consider that there's an age gap, an education gap and an experience gap, and take that into consideration when we are dealing with others on that level.

Before we conclude the session for the evening let us again take this opportunity to spend a few minutes in meditation. This time, we can use the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra, and when the chanting is finished, we place our full attention and focus on the sound. When the recitation subsides, we can focus on the residue of the good feeling that we have and the nice sensation. Focus on that for a few moments.

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