
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

ལྷན་སྐྱེས་ཀྱི་ལམ་རིམ་འགྲིང་བ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

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As usual we can spend some time in meditation.

I assume we gather here to find a means to gain peace in our minds. If this is so, we first need to recognise that a peaceful state of mind is possible and that we all have the potential to be genuinely happy.

However a peaceful state of mind does not depend on external factors. It is generated within yourself. Your peaceful state of mind is dependent on you, so you cannot expect someone else to provide you with inner peace. Understanding this will give you the initiative to take personal responsibility for your state of mind.

As a human being you are entitled to achieve the full extent of happiness possible for a human. An animal cannot achieve a human's happiness, but you can develop and experience this level of happiness because you are human. You are appropriately qualified to experience the scope of a human being's happiness, and you are empowered to develop and achieve that happiness for yourself. This wider perspective gives you a deeper understanding and appreciation of what you can personally accomplish as a human being.

If you do a thorough inner investigation and analyse your state of mind, you will notice that your happiness indeed depends on your own mind and not on external factors. You will find that positive attitudes, which are states of mind, such as genuine concern and kindness towards others, contribute to a genuine sense of personal wellbeing. Whereas negative attitudes, such as anger and hostility, disturb your wellbeing and cause you discomfort. There is an observable contrast between positive and negative attitudes, and how they affect the state of your mind. If you see that your happiness depends on a positive state of mind and recognise that only you can control your attitudes, you will realise that you have all the tools necessary to establish a peaceful state of mind. You can then acknowledge and develop the potential you have. Indeed, the ability to create your own happiness and alleviate your own suffering lies completely in your own hands. Understanding and acknowledging this situation is essential and very useful.

A personal investigation of your mind will also enable you to recognise the positive states of mind you have already developed. Further, you will be able to recognise the importance of ensuring your positive inner qualities increase rather than decline. You may find yourself wondering how you can preserve your positive mindsets and question whether there is a method to do this. At this point of your investigation the significance of adopting a meditation practice will become apparent to you, since

the purposes of meditating is to protect positive states of mind.

If you consider how turmoil and disturbance is experienced in your mind, you will see that the trouble is caused by your mind being distracted by external objects. The moment your mind becomes influenced by these kinds of sensual diversions, you feel agitated and your peaceful state of mind is disturbed—your mind would otherwise be quite peaceful. This shows you that there is an interrelationship between your mind and the object it focuses on.

The interrelationship between your mind and the objects it focuses on, determines whether your individual experience is pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. In other words, certain objects give us pleasant or peaceful experiences, other kinds of objects bring our minds turmoil and disturbance, and still other objects provide us with dispassionate experiences. The function of the mind is to perceive objects, so its very nature is to interact and cognise them. As this is the case, we cannot avoid the mind interacting with objects but we can decide what kinds of objects it interacts with. Distinguishing which objects cause us harmful, beneficial or neutral experiences is important in developing and maintaining a peaceful state of mind. Your mind will naturally be affected differently by different types of objects, so recognising this reality will enable you to take measures to protect your state of mind.

We all would be able to identify specific objects that cause our minds distress as soon as we think about them—if we do not think about them, they do not disturb us, but if we remember them or they are in our immediate vicinity, they bother our minds. When you identify an external object that agitates your mind, you will need to apply a method that severs the relationship. Your mind will be free from the influence of the object causing it distress if the connection is stopped. If your mind is not focused on an object that causes it turmoil, it will naturally experience a more tranquil and peaceful state.

Meditation can be used to distance your mind from disturbing objects. The technique involves choosing an internal object to focus on which does not upset your mind. An 'internal object' is a mental image and is akin to a mental recollection you may have of a person that leaves an impression on you—what you see in your mind is not the actual person, but a mental image of that person. Similarly, the internal object used in meditation is a mental image. You need to initially familiarise yourself with an external object to create a mental image, but when you meditate, the object must be internalised and entirely mental. As you practise meditating, you will familiarise yourself more and more with the internal object, and its clarity will increase to become more vivid.

The internal object that you choose to give your mind a rest from its disturbances, can either be neutral or positive. These kinds of objects are appropriate meditational objects because they do not trouble your mind. Your focus on an internal object requires you to disassociate yourself intentionally from all other thoughts and memories for the duration of your meditation session. The period you spend on your focus will depend

on what is possible for you—some people may be able to focus for long periods and others may only be able to focus for a short time, but no matter what level you are at, you can manage a full minute of concentrated attention. Do not be concerned if the amount of time you spend meditating is brief—the quality of your focus is what is important rather than the length of your session. Practising a complete focus is what the meditation technique entails. If you have a complete focus on your chosen meditation object, you will be freeing your mind from turmoil for the length of the meditation, and your mind will naturally become tranquil and calm. Meditating reaps immediate benefits, because your mind is forced to let go of everything but the meditation object, and that enables your mind to rest.

For our meditation practice now, our chosen internal object will be our natural breathing pattern. You can adopt a comfortable, relaxed and upright posture, and commit to yourself that you will not allow your mind to be distracted by any memories, thoughts or other objects for the next few minutes, because you will place your full attention single-pointedly on your breath. This means you will be fully aware of each inhale and exhale that you take. We will adopt this technique for the next few minutes to the best of our ability.

[Pause for single-pointed meditation.]

That will be sufficient for now.

If you incorporated a meditation practice in your daily life, and regularly practised what we just did, it would be highly beneficial for you. As I have explained, you will have an instant relief from disturbing thoughts and a sense of inner peace while you meditate, but the real benefit of your practice will be seen in your daily life. Often we are completely distracted when we are not formally meditating and we let our minds become agitated because we forget the real purpose of our meditation practice. The real purpose of our meditation practice is to familiarise ourselves with developing and maintaining peaceful states of mind during our everyday activities so that we can lead peaceful, meaningful and happy lives.

There are two mental tools we apply to our minds during our meditation sessions: mindfulness and introspection. 'Mindfulness' refers to constantly remembering the internal meditation object and 'introspection' refers to vigilantly guarding the mind against distractions by returning its focus to the meditation object. We apply mindfulness and introspection during our meditation sessions, and our familiarity with their application gradually enables us to be aware and mindful of our thoughts, speech and actions when we are not meditating. In this way we are able to really protect ourselves at all times by making sure our minds remain positive. This makes our lives meaningful because our activities are governed by clear and peaceful states of mind, so that many disasters and mishaps caused by negative attitudes are avoided.

Your mind accompanies you wherever you go, so taking measures to ensure your mind is in a peaceful, clear and happy state will increase your wellbeing and protect you from engaging in negative actions that cause you distress.

The Buddhist teachings describe a happy mind as one that is controlled. The way to gain control over your mind is by practising mindfulness and introspection. Each day you apply mindfulness and introspection to your daily actions which is worthwhile, because your day will be spent having a clearer, and more vigilant state of mind. A day conducted in this way will influence the next day and the day after that so you can gradually cultivate a peaceful mind day by day, month by month and year by year. A happy and peaceful state of mind is something you bring forward into each new day so that you can benefit in the future as well as in the present moment.

So, although the immediate positive experience we gain when meditating is beneficial, the real benefit is not a temporary break and fleeting relaxation from our problems. Of course, these transitory benefits can initially inspire and encourage us to meditate more, but the real benefit of a regular meditation practice is long lasting and carried into the future—the meditation technique enables us to gain control over our minds so that we can lead more peaceful, happy and meaningful lives.

Meditating helps us to lead peaceful, happy and meaningful lives, ultimately by promoting and further developing our positive states of mind. One of the most positive attitudes we can develop is a genuinely kind and considerate mind. A person who is kind and considerate is naturally liked and appreciated by others because he or she makes everyone they come in contact with feel joyful and happy. We all have the potential to develop positive qualities like this within ourselves, and benefit from their effects. However, we also have the potential to develop negative qualities and suffer the results. For example, a person with a negative attitude is usually avoided by others, because they bring an unpleasant atmosphere wherever they go, and make others feel uncomfortable. We all have both negative and positive potentials, and we can investigate the effects these various attitudes have. If we did this, we would see the great gains we would reap by developing our positive potential.

So how can you differentiate between what is positive and benefits you, and what is negative and harms you? The answer is by using your analytical wisdom, which all of us can develop. 'Analytical wisdom' refers to a basic and innate intelligence that is cultivated through personal analysis and insight. Your analytical wisdom enables you to clearly identify negative states of mind that harm you and positive states of mind that benefit you. You are then able to adopt what is positive and works well, and shun what is negative and causes you harm. Of course you may have some external factors that help guide you in your choices, but ultimately it is your own wisdom that distinguishes between beneficial and faulty ways of thinking, and accordingly governs your actions. Thus your own analytical wisdom is an invaluable asset in your life. I regularly emphasise, especially to the younger generation, the importance of using your intelligence to make good judgements for yourself.

Using your analytical wisdom to recognise the qualities and faults in your attitudes and patterns of thinking will enable you to develop your positive traits and know

when to correct negative characteristics. Investigating and analysing your qualities and faults is essential and important to do for yourself because otherwise you may get annoyed or upset if someone else points out your faults to you. If you use your analytical wisdom to detect the faults you have, you will readily accept and acknowledge them, and agree when others draw them to your attention. Alternatively, you may not be sure if a person is being genuine when they describe your qualities, but if you have used your analytical wisdom to know for yourself what your personal qualities and faults are, then you will be able to accept or disregard what you are told by other people. You will also be in the position to recognise and correct yourself when you follow negativities instead of counteracting them. The best way to refrain from negativities is to know them for yourself and to use your understanding to apply the measures necessary to restrain and protect yourself. Acknowledging your own state of mind, and your personal qualities and faults, is essential to developing your analytical wisdom.

Doing simple internal investigations to check whether your thoughts are positive in nature is thus very useful. You could ask yourself questions like, does this thought contribute to my or other people's wellbeing? Is it positive or negative in nature? Does it have elements of destructiveness? These kinds of quick examinations throughout your day are invaluable.

Another topic that is very worthwhile to investigate when you are in a clear state of mind is the nature of the self. We tend to place so much importance on our individual self, so what is it? What is the nature of this 'I' or 'me'? Where do my preferences and needs come from? We naturally have specific likes and dislikes, and wish for certain things and do not wish to experience other situations. But why? Where do all my inclinations and distastes come from? When we investigate ourselves in this way, we reach a point of recognising that it is the notion of 'self' or 'I' that initiates these preferences.

The 'I' is a deep, core identity that we believe is very important, and the strength of the notion that it is solid causes our various likes and dislikes to arise. The more we hold on to what we wish for, the more misery and suffering we have when we do not get what we want. Similarly, if something happens that we do not like, we feel uncomfortable and miserable because we are getting what we do not want. So, the stronger our individual sense of self is, the more we strive to gain what we like and avoid what we dislike, and the more we are adversely affected when the 'I' does not get its preferences.

There is nothing wrong with having likes and dislikes in itself – we all naturally have likes and dislikes. However, we can utilise our desires in ways where we can gain and achieve greater and more worthwhile goals for ourselves. Essentially, what all our dislikes come down to is not wanting to experience suffering. Since we have this strong desire not to suffer, we can seriously look into ways of preventing our suffering. If there were methods to end your suffering, you would take the initiative to apply those methods and end your suffering. Likewise,

all the many different likes we have, which provide us with all kinds of different experiences, are ultimately because we wish for happiness. As this is so, looking for means to gain optimum happiness and adopting those methods is ideal.

There are different approaches to how we achieve happiness. There are faulty means and objects that give us momentary pleasure, and there are more substantial approaches that can provide real and lasting happiness. Where we fall short in achieving what we want is by not clearly understanding the proper means to achieve happiness and to alleviate suffering. We follow faulty means and desire objects that do not provide us with true happiness. The fault is in trying to acquire objects that we desire and are attached to which do not produce real happiness. These objects do not provide us with the happiness we wish for. Similarly, we apply faulty means to remove our suffering, but we are not successful in eliminating it and instead produce more suffering for ourselves.

In my own investigation I have come to understand that focusing on not suffering and eliminating it is a stronger incentive to practise Dharma than focusing on achieving happiness. Striving for what we like and want is a very grey area, and can easily mislead us. Distinguishing what the best method is for our happiness is hard to do if we allow ourselves to focus on our mundane desires because what we want can become unclear. An earnest Dharma practitioner is someone who seeks the truth so they do not desire what non-spiritual people want.

[Geshe-la says in English that a good Dharma practitioner does not want what non-spiritual people usually desire. A true Dharma practitioner is not influenced by what ordinary people want because they know that these people do not understand what harms them. A good Dharma practitioner avoids harm by concentrating on his or her ultimate happiness.]

There is no real satisfaction to be gained from what non-spiritual people desire. A serious Dharma practitioner will not seek what ordinary people want because he or she understands that it does not bring about true satisfaction. Sincere truth seekers will develop themselves to the point where they do not pursue worldly pleasures anymore. At this point a Dharma practitioner's mind will become very settled and a good platform for spiritual development.

The great Indian master Nagarjuna has given an excellent analogy to illustrate this point. He says that the worldly pleasures are like a rash and scratching them makes the rash worse.

[Geshe-la explains in English that scratching a rash may provide some temporary relief and pleasure, but ultimately the scratching irritates the rash and brings more suffering.]

The conclusion of Nagarjuna's point is that it is better to be without a rash than to experience the pleasure gained from scratching it. This is particularly in relation to states of mind like lust or activities like sexual pleasure. Nagarjuna's analogy is a poignant illustration and shows he experienced this dilemma himself, but concluded that brief satisfaction can cause a greater problem and more

dissatisfaction. This is something you can relate to your personal experience.

I spend a lot of time thinking about these points, but if I related all my views to you we would never finish the session. Sometimes our sessions are longer because I want to share some of the thoughts I have had in my own investigation. I spend about half an hour thinking about the points I want to present to you before we meet. Although we have not been able to go through the text today because I have shared my contemplations with you, reflecting on what the texts teach us can bring a lot of solace to our minds. My only intention in sharing my thoughts with you is give you some useful tools to use in your lives. I have no other motivation than to wish to benefit you in some way. So thank you for listening attentively to what I share. I appreciate that.

Before we end the session for the evening, let us again take the opportunity to spend a few moments in meditation. This time we can focus on the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni's name mantra. When you hear recitation, try to keep your mind focused on the sound and maintain your focus when it finishes for a few moments. That will suffice as our meditation.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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