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# Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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We can spend some time in meditation.

I regularly emphasise that the main purpose of meditating is to protect your mental happiness. To do this, you must first ensure your mind is in a positive state because otherwise your mental happiness cannot be safeguarded.

A positive state of mind encompasses numerous constructive mindsets, and these can be developed and further cultivated, but I consider its most essential aspect to be the wish to benefit others. This attitude is crucial in fostering a positive state of mind. If you familiarise yourself with the wish to benefit others and make certain that it is in the forefront of your mind, your mind will always be in a positive state. This is because making the wish to benefit others your primary concern ensures you will not be weighed down by despondency or sadness, as this positive attitude accompanies you wherever you and go and whoever you are with. Even if you did become sad, which may periodically occur because of circumstances you may find yourself in, the wish to benefit others can immediately overpower your sadness. Simply put, the wish to benefit others is a means to quickly restore a happy state of mind even during times of hardship.

So, to secure your mental happiness, you need to cultivate positive states of mind, and the best state of mind to have is the wish to benefit others. If this wish is your mind's constant companion, you will derive many benefits. Some natural benefits include having a sense of fulfilment and contentment, and never being deprived of true friendships. If you have a steady mindset of benefitting others, you will feel comfortable and at ease wherever you go because you will not see others as threatening. You will also maintain friendships and easily gain more friends. Having said this though, you should remind yourself that the benefits you derive from having friendships is not related to the extent others appreciate, like or show close affinity to you, but instead results from your own attitude. In fact, the solace you gain from your friends is dependent on your being fond of and appreciating others with an unbiased attitude and warm heart, because how you connect and view others contributes to true friendships, not how others' view or treat you. I recommend thinking about and developing a deep conviction in the great value of the attitude of benefitting others, so that you come to see it as your unfailing friend and companion. Indeed, I consider the realisation of the invaluable nature of this positive state of mind to be the foundation of real faith and conviction in the Dharma.

The main point I am relating is that cultivating a positive attitude, particularly the mindset of wishing to benefit others, is extremely important in establishing your mental happiness. For ordinary beings like us, the best we can manage for our personal mental wellbeing is to develop a mind that views others in a fond and heart-warming light. Developing this state of mind also contributes to other people's happiness, and the more we develop the wish to benefit others, the closer we get to generating a strong affinity with whoever we encounter. This can reach the extent that we feel as close to anyone as we do to our parents, relatives and significant others, who we naturally feel a sense of warmth towards. If this familiar and affectionate attitude can be developed to include all others, irrespective of their relationship to us, our minds will be peaceful and we will experience personal inner wellbeing.

A simple and effective Buddhist technique to help you develop a real fondness for others is to train your mind in recognising all beings as having once been your mother. This technique relies on an understanding and conviction of rebirth, but the point is that it is possible to train your mind to develop the same feelings towards others that you have for your mother in this life. If you develop this type of affection and appreciation towards all other beings, I would say it is equivalent to the recognition that all other beings were once your mother and have shown you great kindnesses in the past. Indeed, Buddha Shakyamuni saw all beings as close relatives and taught that those who have faith in him and wish to follow his teachings, need to be respectful and kind towards other living beings, because this equates to being respectful and kind towards him. Similarly, the Buddha taught that harming other living beings equates to harming him. We can reflect on the truth and practicality of this teaching from the Buddha, because we know that parents usually and naturally have a very strong love and concern for their children; they are pleased with anyone who is nice to their children and do not appreciate anyone being unkind to them. When the Buddha showed his closeness and fondness for all beings, we can see that this is the same as the closeness and fondness that parents have for their children.

I regularly emphasise the importance of being nice to those who are close or related to you. If you have a natural love for your own children, you need to consider not hurting the other parent who is also close to your child. If you hurt the mother or father of the child, you are also hurting the child. So if you do not wish to hurt your child, you must refrain from hurting the child's other parent. In this way you can protect yourself against hurting someone who is close to your own children. This is a very important practice to keep in mind. You will definitely benefit if you consider these points.

In relation to your own parents, you must think about how you can really serve and benefit them and not think too much about what occurred in the past. Rather, think about what you can do now to assist your aged parent who is in need of help. Does not helping them fall on you as their child? Who will take that responsibility if you do not? It is a very real practice to have that intention in your mind, leave aside all past hurts and agendas, and instead

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focus on the present time to willingly help them because they need you. I have shared this advice with others in the past and they have later confided to me that it has helped them in their relationships with their parents.

Why would it be your responsibility to care for your parents? As a baby, you were totally incapable of taking care of yourself; you would not have been clothed, feed or protect without the aid of your parents. The ones who looked after you were your parents. You would not have been able to consume food if they had not fed you. If you reflect on the time when you were helpless, and were nurtured and brought up by your parents, you will come to realise that they are very dear and it is befitting to repay their kindness now. I think it might be OK to mention Damien's late mother who he took very great care of. I remember once encouraging him to serve her when his mother needed help tying her shoelaces after she had taken them off to visit me. I said to Damien, "You should help your mum with her laces. When you were a young child, who tied the laces on your shoes? It was your mum. Now you need to help your mum tie her shoe laces." This way of thinking is a very good way to take the initiative to willingly and joyfully help your parents, especially when they are elderly. Without considering these points, you may not readily think of reasons why you should help them, but the moment you remember and say, "Yes, it's true, this person cared, dressed and fed me when I was helpless and could not do those things myself", the wish to do something in return and repay their kindness naturally comes about. If it does not, then that is an indication that you should consider the matter further.

I regularly mention that what we experience is related to our ways of thinking and attitudes. Sometimes just changing your attitude enables you to do tasks more readily, even joyfully and willingly. Otherwise, if we hold on to a particular mindset it can prevent us from doing something beneficial for ourselves and others. Really, our experience in life comes down to our attitude.

People sometimes say to me, "My mum and dad were not nice to me in many ways, so there is no reason why I should be nice to them." To these people I outline what their parents must have done for them when they were babies. I sometimes tell them this forcefully because it is the truth.

*[Geshe-la says in English: "You forget! You forget! You should think that this is my mother and she is sick. You should think of your mother and father and how they benefited you. You should think. Just think. Forget all the stories about what was bad. If you have daughters or sons, think of them. When your mother and father die you will cry and regret not doing more for them, so look after your father and mother now while you can, if you can. I have told others to forget what happened in the past between them and their parents, and to look after their parents. They have been very thankful because of the meaningful time with their parents that resulted. You should look after your parents."]*

This all ties into generating the wish to benefit others. So, if you acknowledge that the wish to benefit others is a noble attitude to develop, then, you must first practice with those who are close to you. This includes your

parents, and is instrumental in the practice of benefiting others. It is practical because when a parent really cares for and loves a child, the child naturally develops the keen wish to repay the kindness of the parent, and will also be more naturally inclined to love and be kind to their own children. In this way, a good lineage carries forward through the generations. This cycle has been prevalent in Tibet for centuries and can be seen in the unspoken custom of children caring for parents when they are older because of the kindness the parents originally showed them. In Australia there are also many examples of kind and loving parents caring for their children, and their children caring for them later on, which continues a good system. If you adopt such a genuine practice yourself, it can be carried on through your life, so that the tradition and good practice of wishing to benefit others is prevalent through your lifetime, and sows the seeds for others to follow in your example. Approaching life in this way is a worthwhile investment of your time and energy. In fact, every religion has a specific lineage that is carried forward from the past and this is comparable to a lineage of a parents' kindness to their offspring.

In Tibet, great importance is given to ancient objects that have been passed down from one generation to the next. If you saw them you may wonder why the object is so treasured! *[Geshe-la laughs.]* Really, the objects are of sentimental value because they have remained in the same family for many generations. The practice of cherishing heirlooms is nothing mystical and doesn't only happen in places like Tibet. I have noticed in Australia that the belongings of famous people are revered *[Geshe-la laughs]* and the older these objects become the greater their value – all kinds of belongings, like clothes (and walking sticks!) are honoured and given great importance because they belonged to someone well-known.

Some query the significance of Buddhist relics. Are Buddhist relics valuable? The relics of the Buddha, and the relics and clothing of the ancient and more contemporary masters that followed him, are valuable because they belonged to noble beings who benefited so many. The Buddha and these masters have benefited so many beings and continue to benefit so many beings, which is why their relics can definitely be considered to be very sacred and very valuable.

The main point is that everything can be narrowed down to the noble wish of wanting to benefit others. I place tremendous value on the state of mind that wishes to benefit others and, in whatever practice I do, I spend a great deal of time trying to develop and further promote this attitude. If you periodically think about why benefitting others is beneficial, you will see the importance of this mindset. You can see that I cannot contain myself and want to express it to you again and again because it is so important. Please do not misinterpret what I am saying though. I am not saying that I have had any great experiences or realisations, however I do think about benefitting others a lot and place significant emphasis on this good and noble thought.

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So, if you can appreciate the great and underestimated value of the wish to benefit others, you may also appreciate that there are many obstacles to developing this wish and putting it into practice. These hindrances take the form of opposing negative states of mind which counteract and thwart this noble mindset's development. The more you familiarise yourself with the mindset to benefit others though, the less likely negative states of mind will take root and influence you in counterproductive ways. Without a doubt, your negative states of mind will also lessen because of your mind's familiarity with more positive states. If you find stopping your negative attitudes completely too difficult, you can initially take responsibility for the direction your mind takes by at least minimising your negative mindsets. You can do this by working on reducing the manifest levels of strong and intense negativities in your mind. There are many methods and techniques to decrease and overcome intense negativities so that they do not oppose the noble state of mind of wishing to benefit others. One of the best techniques to help develop positive states of mind and minimise negative ones is to meditate.

The purpose of meditating is to completely withdraw from all preoccupations, whether they are external distractions or internal thoughts, and focus entirely on a neutral or positive object instead. The technique is to bring your entire focus within and place your attention entirely on the object of your meditation. To do this you will first need to adjust your physical posture so that you are upright, comfortable and relaxed. Then, you can commit to not allowing your mind to be distracted with disturbing states of mind, or what Buddhist teachings call afflicted distractions. Afflicted distractions manifest as whimsical thoughts that you allow your mind to follow so that it wanders off the focus of the meditation. The object of your meditation now can be your own breath, but if you have another object to focus on, that's fine too. The important point is to not waver from your chosen object but use it to anchor your mind. So, for the next few minutes, you can place your entire focus on the natural rhythm of your breathing pattern.

*[Pause for single-pointed breathing meditation.]*

That will be sufficient for now.

We can use the few minutes we have left for questions if you have any. Of course, I was intending to read a bit about the text, but I think we have already covered some essential parts of what it presents and we can go over those topics in the next sessions.

*Student:* Geshe-la, the conflict between Palestine and Israel causes many people great distress and grief. If you were asked to give advice to the warring parties what would it be? What possible advice could you give in a situation that perpetuates itself and to people who have so much hatred inculcated in their relationship? Also, what sort of advice would you give us to help those who have intense grief and sadness caused by the conflict?

*Geshe-la:* If I had the opportunity to give advice to the warring parties I would definitely take the opportunity to do that, but it might not be effective. I do not understand the situation fully, of course, but from what I understand, there seems to be a very deep resentment inside, which

has been carried forward from the past for a very long time. Since this deep resentment is so strong and takes the form of revenge in the mind, it seems like nothing can be said to immediately appease and relax their minds. Their mindsets are such that they feel empowered to continue their actions.

Since the situation is intense and there is a very deep-rooted resentment, it is hard to try and reason with either side. The way to resolve any dispute is to look at what the causes are. If, however, each side just narrates their reasons for fighting, there will be no end to what they say because each side feels that what they are doing is just and the other side is in the wrong. But if both sides looked into the real cause of the conflict and then tried to overcome it, then, the conflict would be closer to being resolved. Unfortunately, both sides do not seem willing to put the problem on the table to seriously discuss and resolve. Apparently many skilled mediators and peacekeeping forces have tried to forge negotiations, but if neither side is willing to find a solution, then, no matter how skilled the negotiators are, there will not be much success.

I am not too sure of facts, but I think that when the past Prime Minister of Israel, Ehud Olmert, was in power there was conflict and there are predictions that if he comes back into power, it might cause further conflict. Again, I have to confess I do not know the entire story. I believe there was great hope for peace when Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres and Yasser Arafat were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994. However, when Rabin passed away, many heads of state went to his funeral, including Paul Keating from Australia, but Arafat, who was still alive at the time, apparently did not go. Many thought that if he had taken the initiative to go to the funeral then it would have shown great support for a resolution. I believe that Arafat not going to Rabin's funeral indicates a very deep-rooted sentiment.

From your own side, if you understand the situation with a sense of love and compassion, you will not feel despondent or overwhelmed by the suffering even though you may feel discomfort from observing it. This is because your love and compassion will help you understand that this situation is the consequence of the negative afflictions in the mind – what the Buddhist teachings refer to as the three poisons: hatred, attachment and ignorance. In fact, the situation is a heightened example of the ill-effects of the three poisons. When you consider that the reason why there is conflict and great suffering is because the three poisons have taken root in the minds of the people on both sides, you can have great compassion for them all and wish them to be free from their grief and distress. This approach would also help protect you from feeling hostile towards one side because both sides would be objects for your compassion.

Aryadeva's text *Four Hundred Verses* on the Middle Way outlines that the Buddha sees the afflictions as the fault and not the person themselves. This is a very profound point and one to remember when someone is hostile or negative – if you can immediately relate the hostility or negative attitude of that person being caused by the afflictions or delusions in their mind, it will protect you

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from feeling upset or hostile towards the person. So, in this way, you can understand the conflict between Palestine and Israel. It is a very pitiful situation and the only thing you can do is send your love to them by wishing them to be happy, and your compassion to them by wishing them to be free from their suffering. The situation is very sad because there does not seem to be room on either side for love and compassion. Since there is a complete lack of compassion, the wish to harm the other side arises, and instead of feeling sad when the other side suffers, there is joy and happiness. Similarly, when one side is joyful and happy, it causes the other side to suffer. This is the complete opposite of love and compassion.

A different example of the great destruction a lack of love and compassion can cause would be the massacre in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Apparently the person who ordered those massacres gave an instruction to the army to not feel any compassion for the people. That is how and why assault rifles and tanks were used against the unarmed protestors. If there was compassion, the massacre would not have taken place, which is why the soldiers were specifically ordered not to feel compassion.

This shows you the great value love and compassion has. Your love and compassion is an invaluable state of mind and if you can practise these attitudes in relation to others, then, if you cannot benefit them in some way, you will at the very least not hurt them. This is most applicable to you in your immediate surroundings than for distant objects. Therefore, for your personal practice, you must have love and compassion for those close and dear to you because not having love and compassion for them would neglect their right for happiness and wish not to suffer.

The moment we lose the sense of love and compassion for those we are close to, tragedy can occur. There are awful instances where people have killed their partners, children and parents because of their lack of love and compassion in the moment. Afterwards, they feel great regret about what they have done. An example of this occurred while I was in India, studying at the Sanskrit University in Varanasi. There were two very kind brothers there and the older brother, who had a short temper, had an argument with his younger brother and poked his fingers in his brother's face. Luckily, he did not hit his brother's eyes, but there was blood. When the older brother realised what he had done, he cried and was very upset. The younger brother told me what had happened in class the next day when I noticed his wounds. He was quite close and fond of me so he confided in me what had happened. This, of course, was the fault of anger. When it manifests strongly, it makes the person feel very courageous and that is why, in a worldly sense, people who are angry appear to be brave and could be considered noteworthy. On one level anger appears to bring about courage, but really it brings about great stupidity.

I recall an incident back in Tibet when the Chinese Red Guards surrounded the monastery and I saw my classmate carrying a long knife. I asked him what he was doing and he said to me that he was going to fight the

Chinese. I said, "They are carrying rifles! What do you think you can manage?!" [*Everyone laughs.*] He was really convinced that he would be able to do something and did not think that I was being sensible in showing him that he was no match against the Chinese soldiers who had guns. [*Geshe-la laughs.*] This is a clear example of a person being completely dominated and influenced by a strong negative emotion and having his rationality completely obscured. Another example, from the same time, was a classmate approaching the Chinese gunfire armed with stones – apparently he retreated when a bullet hit his leg, which helped him to reconsider his actions. These examples show how intense anger can make you completely lose your rational mind so that you perform acts of stupidity. You could say that the delusions obscure your logic and make you stupid.

You must be very careful with the emotion of anger. It definitely does not help you. Your anger will not even be so effective that it will hurt people in the distance, but it will be effective in hurting those who are close to you, so that is why you need to be careful. Of course, in regards to Palestine and Israel, there is not much we can do on a practical level to change the situation except make strong prayers, develop love and compassion for people on both sides of the conflict, and wish for genuine peace to come about soon. That is really the best and all we can do, but it is significant.

Before we conclude the session, let us again spend a few minutes in meditation. This time we can use the sound of the mantra to be recited as an object to focus on. When the recitation subsides, we can try to maintain a focus on its residue and the positive feeling it has generated. We can spend the next few minutes meditating in this way.

*TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA*

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*Edited Version*

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