
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

འཇུག་ཀྱི་ལམ་རིམ་འབྲིང་བ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

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As usual, let us spend some time in meditation, adopting a comfortable and relaxed posture. Meditation can be understood as training our mind to be in a positive state.

One may ask, 'what kind of training for the mind is meditation?' Meditation allows us to acquire a focused, steady and clear state of mind, that is, to overcome a mind which is not steady, not stable and not clear—a confused state of mind. We meditate to overcome our confused and unstable mind, and to bring it to a focused, stable, steady and clear state. Our mind can be transformed from a disturbed state to a genuinely relaxed and comfortable state.

Through meditation, it is possible to train the mind to acquire these positive states. In order to use the meditation training effectively, we need to be able to distinguish between positive and negative states of mind. I have emphasised this point numerous times in the past, particularly last week where we also covered this point. The ability to distinguish between positive and negative states of mind is important.

The more our mind is familiar with negative states, the more likely our mind will lose its sense of happiness, wellbeing, clarity and stability. The more we are familiar with positive states of mind, the more likely we will have a joyous, clear, stable and focused mind. Indeed, for our own wellbeing, it is crucial that we develop and maintain a positive and peaceful state of mind. We need to think about this again and again, and how important it is. If we do not take the initiative to contemplate and acknowledge this positive and peaceful state of mind, it is very likely we will lose whatever mental peace we already have. What we need to understand here is, to contemplate whether we have a positive or negative state of mind. This depends very much on our thoughts and attitudes. We need to understand how our sense of wellbeing and peace of mind is directly related to the kind of thoughts and attitudes we are harbouring in our mind.

Thus we need to understand that the meditation technique is the optimum way to protect our peace of mind. We need to, at all cost, protect our peace of mind, which is an indicator of our wellbeing. As mentioned earlier, we need to acknowledge that a happy and peaceful state of mind relies and is dependent on the attitudes we have, rather than on external factors. We can see it clearly, and it is very obvious when we look around, that there are many people who have abundant external resources and great wealth, but don't seem to experience a happy and peaceful state of mind, or happiness in their lives. This observation also applies to

us. The main point is that a true sense of peace in our mind does not depend on external factors. Rather, it depends on something internal, that is, our positive state of mind. When we consider what causes our mind to be in either a positive or negative state, it is very much dependent and related to the kind of objects we focus on. Depending on the object we have contact with, the object that we are focusing on can influence either a positive or negative state of mind to arise, and manifest within us. When we focus on a particular kind of object, then due to our interaction with it, it can cause a lot of distraction or agitation or excitement in our minds. Whereas focusing on other more positive kinds of objects can cause our mind to be peaceful, calm and settled. Recognising this relationship between our minds and the object that it focus on is important, because, if we are not able to identify that, we may be carried away in focusing on certain kinds of objects that influence our mind to become more and more agitated. Our mind becomes obsessed with the object that causes us turmoil.

The significance of recognising this is that, in order to prevent the influence of an object that causes negativity to arise in our mind, we need to stop the contact with it. This requires training. Thus, we train our mind, by meditating, to gradually sever all contact with any object that causes negativity to arise in our mind. If we don't apply this technique and take the initiative to train ourselves in this way, then, when we become completely obsessed with the object, it will reach a point when it will be almost impossible for us to sever contact with the object that is causing us so much misery. Our mind will then be in a perpetual state of turmoil and disturbance.

As I mentioned recently in my teachings at a centre near Geelong, many of you seem to be holding on to something negative in your mind, which is like a stain in your mind, causing you turmoil and unwanted agony and suffering. You need to take initiative to identify what you are so obsessed with, what is this thing that causes so much agony, and why are you holding on to it so tightly. If you can recognise what causes you distress and agony, then you will develop the initiative to remove and let go of the negative attitude or state of mind that is like a black stain.

Having identified a particular thought pattern or attitude that causes us agony and distress, we need to sever and cease our familiarity with that. We need to train our mind to let go of that negative stain, so that it does not cause us distress. Of course, because we are so familiar with these negative thought patterns and attitudes, it will be hard to completely cut them off right way. Even after many attempts, we may find that these negative thought patterns re-occur again and again, and we will experience the distress that state of mind brings us. But if we can clearly recognise and identify a negative state of mind, then that in itself will help us to understand and be prepared that this is causing us distress. If we have identified the real trouble-maker within ourselves, then we will not be completely under the control of the negative state of mind, by the sheer fact of having identified it. The negative mind loses its grip and power over us.

We are talking about familiarity with a negative mind that causes us habitually to be in a negative state of mind, which influences our habits. Bad habits are not appreciated by others. If we can identify what good and bad habits are, then we can take the initiative to adopt good habits, and try to overcome bad habits. We may find that with certain habits, even if we have identified them as being bad, are difficult to overcome, because we have become so familiar with them. This is all pointing to meditation as a technique to help us overcome our general bad habits, particularly in relation to the negative states of mind and holding on to negative attitudes. Meditation is a technique that helps us to become more and more familiar with positive states of mind, as well as directly opposing and withdrawing from negative states of mind, and intentionally placing our focus and mindfulness on positive objects. Due to that familiarity, our mind will become more and more habituated to a more positive frame of mind. This is how the transformation takes place, slowly and gradually within us.

Having mentioned the benefits of the meditation technique, we will adopt the technique now and just remember to adopt a comfortable and relaxed posture.

To adopt the meditation technique, we need to first of all develop an inner determination, 'for the next few minutes to not allow my mind to be distracted with any form of distraction'. With that commitment, we take the initiative to withdraw our mind from all other forms of mental activities and bring our focus inwards. Having distanced ourselves from all forms of distractions and thoughts and memories, we bring our focus within, and place it on the object of our meditation. If someone is already familiar and has adopted this meditation technique and has a particular object that they are familiar with, then that is fine, you can use that object. Typically, we use the breath. If we choose the breath to focus on, then we place our full attention and focus on the breath itself and nothing else. So we maintain our focus in this way.

When we sincerely adopt this practice of meditation and make a full commitment to just focus on our breath, not to be concerned with anything else, and bring our focus inwards, then as a consequence, while we are already adopting a relaxed physical posture, we will gain a genuinely relaxed and calm mind. This mental practice of focussing on our breath and not allowing our mind to be influenced by so many different kinds of thoughts and distractions relaxes the mind. When the body and mind are naturally relaxed, then the individual self or the 'I' who owns the body and mind, will also experience the positive effect of relaxation, because the self is related to the body and mind. This is how we need to understand the interrelationship between our body, mind and individual self.

Thus a relaxed mind and a relaxed body bring about inner relaxation. (*Pause for meditation*)

Question: I've experienced some mental illness in the past. I have conversations in my head and hear voices and think people are following me. Do you think it will stop in half a year or how long will it take to stop it?

Answer: It is hard for me to tell how long it will take for it to go away. If you recognise that it is mentally created, and if you don't give it much importance and don't think about it too much, then maybe slowly it will not overpower you or take control over you.

The main thing is not to believe in it. If you don't believe in it, and don't think that the voices and the feelings of someone is following you are true, then it will not have control over your mind.

I know it can be a little bit complex and it is not easy to solve right away.

According to our tradition, it is explained that when the elements in the body are disturbed, particularly the wind energy within our body, it can cause things to either appear, or you hear sounds. This is caused by the unbalance of the wind energy.

There can be an unbalance of our wind element, or the energy within us. This can be caused either through a mental process or a natural imbalance in the body, or sometimes it can be caused by some substances, such as drugs or medicine, which when not used properly can be poisonous, and cause the mind to hallucinate. If someone uses these substances regularly, this will cause the condition to become more permanent. When some types of medication are administered improperly, they can cause hallucinations. There was an incident many years ago when I was living in Kopan monastery in Nepal. I was one of the teachers there along with another geshe, a close friend of mine. A lady was offering us acupuncture. I declined, but my geshe friend accepted the acupuncture treatment. Finally the acupuncture treatment didn't go too well for him and he was given some other medication. He liked the medicine, which gave him a nice feeling and experience. When I asked him 'what kind of experience, he said he felt like he was being lifted up and floating in the sky and seeing flowers. However, later I was told that if this type of medication is not administered properly, it can cause hallucinations.

However, even if there may be some pleasurable experience, it does not last long and it can have a counter effect. Apparently this is like the same situation where people take drugs such as marijuana—they can have nice experience at the beginning, but it can turn into a negative experience.

Relating back to my geshe friend, it went further. First he had a prolonged episode of hallucination where he felt good and saw flowers in the sky, but then later he saw a head outside a window talking to him. But he had some sense of recognition that even though he could see a head and hear voices inside his own head, he knew it was not real, that this cannot be real. He was able to tell himself that even though it appeared as if the head was there and there were voices in his head, he knew it was not real and not true.

There is a distinction between what is real and what is not real, and for the geshe to be able to apply that comes from our training and studies. In particular, the great section on the distinction between the different kinds of states of mind. Within a state of mind there is a wrong consciousness and a valid consciousness. The wrong

consciousness is where things may appear but they are not true and are not real. Even though they appear to be real they are not, because there is no basis in reality. A valid consciousness is true because it appears in accordance with reality. This kind of distinction is discussed in our studies, so once we recognise and understand this, we, just as the geshe did, will be able to make the distinction between reality and hallucination.

Question: Apparently animals have a different perception to what humans have, so is this change of perception related to the change of chemistry in the brain?

Answer: In relation to animals having a different perception to humans, they do have their own perception, which is valid within their own limited state of mind. I wonder, due to the limited capacity and dullness of an animal's mind (or consciousness), if something appears to them, they wouldn't have the capacity to make the necessary discriminative awareness to distinguish particular characteristics. Their brains are not as sharp and intelligent as the human mind, so even as things appear, animals are not able to make subtle distinctions within an object's appearance.

Apparently animals are able to distinguish and recognise each of their babies through their unique smells. Maybe when the babies become bigger, the particular smell will fade away, and then they won't recognise their own child anymore.

This is also how animals such as dogs and horses relate to human contact. For example, in Tibet there are certain kinds of horses and dogs who are loyal, gentle and nice around their owners, but when someone new comes, the horse will sometimes become agitated because they can detect the different smell of a new person. It takes a while for them to get familiar with the new smell, and if it is not threatening, then they become more acquainted with the new person. It is the same with dogs; when there is a new smell, they immediately detect the new smell, and can become agitated.

So in terms of perception affecting animals, we definitely can see that animals have a different kind of reaction than we do, depending on what kind of object they have contact with. Some objects make animals agitated and angry, whereas they are gentle, calm and nice when encountering other objects. We can also see that animals have jealousy, a sense of pride, anger and attachment. All these emotions that we humans feel, we can see that animals feel that too. Their emotions towards different kinds of objects is related to their perceptions.

I heard that when someone has a pet cat, and if they bring another young cat into the home, then the older cat is very jealous. It is not happy at all. But animals do have intelligence. When I was living in Varanasi in India, we used to feed a dog our leftovers. Every year we have two months vacation and just prior to that, the dog starts to dig the ground and bury any scrap food given. He seemed to know that we were going away soon and he will not be getting food, so took the initiative to bury the food given to him to eat later. He seemed to spend more time gathering food than eating the food! But then this particular dog was not seen for a while. Then, after about three years, I was at the train station and there was a dog

nearby who came and started wagging his tail. When I looked closely, it was the dog that we used to feed in the past. Even after three years, he recognised me.

There are animals who definitely seem to remember kindness, and the people who are kind to them—they really appreciate it. We may also have seen the story about the lion cub that was raised by people in London, who released it in Africa when it grew up. When they went to Africa, the lion came out of the forest, immediately recognised them, ran over, jumped and hugged one of them. So we can see that the lion definitely appreciated the past kindness shown by these people.

I have also been told about a movie about a dog who was very sad and showed strong emotions even ten years after the owner passed away. The person who was relating the story about the movie was a cheery person, and it must have been a sad story because the person was in tears while relating the story.

Thank you for your questions. Before we conclude the session for the evening let us again take this opportunity to apply some meditation practice. As we adopt appropriate relaxed posture and a clear state of mind, we focus on the sound of the recitation of Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. As we hear the chanting, place our entire focus and attention on the sound, and when the recitation subsides, focus on the residue of the peaceful feeling generated.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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