
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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3 September 2014

As usual, we will spend some time for meditation. To do that we adopt a comfortable, relaxed posture and generate a positive motivation.

Prior to adopting the meditation technique it is good to reflect on the advantages of adopting meditation techniques, versus the disadvantages of not adopting them, by considering one's state of mind. In a normal, everyday, busy life what state of mind do we have? Do you find that you have a very busy, hyperactive state of mind that causes turmoil and chaos? If that is the case, then maintaining such a state of mind is detrimental to one's well-being. In contrast, if we can maintain a calmer and more peaceful state of mind it can contribute to our overall well-being. We should contemplate the benefits of a calm state of mind versus a chaotic state of mind. Then, when we develop a keen wish to develop a calm state of mind, we will get the benefits of meditation practice.

When we seriously adopt the meditation technique we will begin to notice that we do have a very intelligent state of mind within us that can give us advice, always ensuring that we are following the correct way of leading our life. It's like finding an inner teacher, an adviser within us. This is something that we will definitely come to notice when we take the meditation technique seriously. I am not saying this lightly, just as mere words, but something that is based on factual experience. This will be your experience when you adopt the technique yourself.

When we consider how we achieve our purposes in life, we see we all have goals that we set out for ourselves. When we ask, 'What kind of conditions do we require to achieve those goals?' we will come to acknowledge to ourselves that we need inner strength, and a positive state of mind, to achieve our purposes. Whether our purpose is to meet our own needs or to help others, we definitely require an inner, positive state of mind. Of course, to help others we also need to develop a genuinely kind of state of mind within us.

Thus meditation becomes an optimum technique to correctly engage in all our activities and achieve a fruitful, good result. Achieving our goals also requires engaging in activities to acquire the conditions that are necessary for those goals. There are certain things that we need to adopt, and certain things that are detrimental to achieving our goals that we need to discard. So the intelligence of identifying and distinguishing between what is to be adopted, and what is to be discarded, needs to become part of our meditation practice.

Another way we can understand the significance of the meditation technique is that when we apply the meditation technique it will awaken our own inner wisdom, which is a deeper sense of intelligence within us. This is an intelligence that we all may naturally have, but which might be otherwise dormant. We might not even recognise it because it is sleeping, dormant. Through meditation practice we awaken it within us.

When one is not fully utilising one's intelligence, more specifically the wisdom within us, we tend to become a little bit overwhelmed and may find that we are always a little bit on edge, easily irritated. Or you may experience what you call depression, feeling despondent, not able to do things and very weighed down. All of these feelings are the negative consequences of not fully utilising one's intelligence or wisdom.

To summarise the point about how the meditation technique benefits us, as I regularly mention, when one adopts the meditation technique correctly it will prevent a faulty state of mind that seeks objects which cause turmoil to arise in our mind. This faulty state of mind goes out and intentionally grasps onto objects that actually cause us distress. There is an interrelationship between following a faulty, erroneous state of mind that seeks out objects that cause one excitement, and personal distress. By recognising that interrelationship one can also recognise its opposite; the valid state of mind that seeks out and interacts with positive objects and causes one to feel a genuine sense of well-being and peace within oneself. This is how the meditation technique will assist one to avoid following a faulty state of mind, and adopt and follow a valid mind, and benefit from that.

The real significance of the practice of meditation will be particularly experienced when one is facing some hardship and difficulty in life. This is something that many of you who have adopted the meditation technique for some time and done some practice have confided in me. Many of you mention this and it is indeed true. When things are going well we may not see the benefits or significance of meditation practice. However, when one understands the real purpose and significance of the meditation practice the true benefit that we derive comes when we start facing hardships and difficulties in life, in whatever form.

To give some examples, when someone who has had training in meditation practice faces hardships and difficulties they will be able to immediately recall the methods and means to deal with the problem—how to maintain the more a positive attitude, and how not to allow these hardships and difficulties to completely overwhelm them. Because one has practised previously, one will be able, in such situations, to resort to those techniques one has adopted previously and apply them. Therefore, someone who has had some training in meditation will not be affected to a great degree and will not become completely distraught. Whereas someone who has had no mental training such as meditation will not be able to cope when such difficulties arise, and will be completely overwhelmed. They may, as mentioned previously, experience the symptoms of getting easily

irritated or being on edge. Or in even worse cases, a deep depression may take over.

One needs to remember that as ordinary humans we will all be victims of negative states of mind such as anger and so forth at certain times. Even when we have attempted to engage in a regular meditation practice we do not become completely immune to negative minds such as anger right away. It's not as if it will all suddenly go away. Anger may still arise. However, the difference would be that when anger arises, one will be immediately able to remember the disadvantages of anger, and will not completely give in to the mind of anger. One will be able to distance oneself and the sheer virtue of recognising anger as a fault and its disadvantages, will help one to not be completely overwhelmed and dominated by anger. It is in this way that it protects one's mind. Someone who has the training will be able to resort to this understanding, and protect themselves from being completely overwhelmed by anger, and destroying their own happiness. So with this example, we can see the significance of the mind training of meditation and how it can be very beneficial.

So our intelligence becomes a real inner resource showing us the proper way to conduct ourselves—a good, inner adviser.

The meditation practice that we adopt regularly here is a focused meditation. We need to first of all recall the importance of adopting this focused meditation. To analyse that, we just need to consider a mind that lacks focus. We will realise that in those times when our mind is extremely busy, completely scattered and unfocused, we are most vulnerable to making lots of different kinds of mistakes. If we honestly look into ourselves and our lives so far we would be able to see that most of our faults have happened because of a scattered and unfocused mind. So if that is the case, then the reverse would be true. If we had a more contained and focused mind we would be able to achieve whatever purpose we wish to accomplish. We would have much better energy, and our potential to achieve things would be greater. When we reflect upon the need to have a focused mind, even in simple ways, it will remind us of the purpose of focused meditation, and give us a great aspiration to actually adopt this technique.

The technique involves withdrawing our mind from being completely scattered, being obsessed with external objects, many different kinds of thoughts, memories and so forth, and to bring our focus within. Bringing our focus within requires, of course, discipline and commitment. We need to discipline our mind, or it will naturally, out of habituation, tend to get distracted and try to hold on to some sort of thought or memory again. However we need to remind ourselves that, 'For the purpose of my meditation now I will not allow my mind to just wander off and become completely distracted. I will intentionally withdraw from all other intentions and bring my focus within.'

Of course the mind is not able to just remain in limbo without focusing on anything. The very nature of the mind is to cognise, which means that it has to focus on something to be able to maintain itself. Therefore, as a

way to anchor our mind and develop a single-pointed focus, we choose an appropriate object to focus on, which for the purpose of our meditation now can be our own breath. When we bring our focus within and place it upon the breath, we will notice that initially we will be able to do that. We will be able to withdraw our attention and focus from other preoccupations, other thoughts and ideas and so forth, and place it upon our chosen object, which is our breath. In those few moments when we are able to focus on the breath we will immediately feel a sort of relief and feel the positive benefit.

What may happen then is that even though we have been able to withdraw our focus from external distractions and bring it within, we will not be able to maintain that for too long. As beginners that is, however, quite natural too. But the attempt here is not to try to have a very long focus, which we are not able to achieve anyway, but rather the quality. We need to emphasise that, even for a few moments, we need to bring our full attention, what we call 100% focus, onto the breath itself. When we make that determination and really try to maintain that focus, we will then be able to gradually increase the length of our focus. That is something that will happen gradually as we become more accustomed to this technique. So, from the very beginning, we need to ensure that we are applying the technique properly. So for the next few minutes we will bring our attention and focus within and then we will place our entire focus on the breath itself and try to maintain that for as long as we can. (*Pause for meditation*)

Just as we have attempted in our short session now, it would be really worthwhile to adopt a regular meditation practice in one's life. Meditation can definitely benefit one.

The benefit of the practice of meditation is that it ultimately leads to gaining genuine peace in one's mind. That is a thing that we naturally wish for. We all naturally have this instinctive wish to feel peaceful and calm within us. No-one likes to intentionally have a chaotic and troubled state of mind. So we should consider, 'How does this peace of mind come about? Where does it come from? How does one achieve that?' The answer to that is definitely by developing one's mind. It comes from within oneself rather than from external sources. If peace can be obtained from external material sources then the more things you have the more peaceful you would become. But that clearly doesn't seem to be the case, does it?

A clear illustration of how our happiness and the health of our physical body depends on our state of mind is clearly indicated when you ask someone, 'How are you feeling today?' If they are feeling physically well and mentally well they can give a positive response of 'I am feeling well'. It is not dependent on how much money they have. They don't say, 'I am feeling perfectly great because of all the wealth I've got'. That's not usually the indication is it? In fact there are many people who have a significant amount of wealth yet complain they are not really content and happy inside, and not really fulfilled. This is a clear indication that external wealth is not the ultimate source of one's happiness.

These points are something that we need to consider. As mentioned previously, when we really look into the source of one's well-being and happiness, where does it lie? It does not primarily depend upon external conditions such as wealth and money, and so forth. Rather it depends on our inner conditions, our physical health, and our mental health. These are the two main sources of our well-being. Therefore one recognises that one needs to protect one's mental and physical well-being. How does one do that? As mentioned many times previously, the main protection has to be mental tools.

The mental tools that help to protect our inner mental well-being are what are called mindfulness and introspection. These are the two main specific tools which help to maintain and protect our good inner conditions for our mental well-being. To protect our physical well-being we need to ensure that we are avoiding those things that harm our health, and adopt those that are conducive to good health. It is by these means that we protect both our physical and psychological state of well-being.

Whenever I get an opportunity I remind the younger generation that it is important while you're young and fit to do your studies well to be able to secure a good job. And once you've secured a good job, it is important that you try to save some money, put it in the bank for your future well-being. We all need to depend on these sorts of external sources for our well-being. While doing so, you should also try not to forget about acquiring and securing the inner conditions of a positive state of mind and so forth, for your inner well-being. No matter how much money you might have in the bank, that will not ultimately make you happy. That is not going to make your mind happy. You need to also think about how to acquire and maintain those positive, inner conditions. I share this with the younger generation as a means for them to take the initiative to have a more meaningful life. If they have the proper attitude to their life from a very early stage, it is more likely that they will be able to adopt that for the rest of their life.

Likewise, for all of us, whatever age we may have reached, our happiness and well-being depend on our physical and mental well-being. Therefore, if external conditions do not immediately contribute to a direct cause for our physical and mental well-being, then where does it come from? It comes from our inner resources, by developing it ourselves. This is where we need to take the responsibility of our own well-being. We cannot completely rely upon external conditions or others, but must take responsibility for ourselves to begin with. As we become skilled in taking care of our own physical and mental well-being we can then share that with others and take care of others as well. So it is in this way that we can see the need to understand the significance of this practice.

What we need to be primarily concerned with is our mental happiness. This is something that I emphasise again and again because I find through my interaction with others, and what I have observed, that when mental happiness declines it is very difficult to restore. Physical health is relatively easier to restore by applying some treatment and so forth. It seems that even quite bad

physical conditions can be healed. Physical health can be restored.

The emphasis is about taking care of one's mental well-being, one's mental health, because once that gets affected it seems it can be very difficult to restore. Once mental well-being has been affected whatever activity one may be engaged in doesn't seem to be fruitful. It seems like sometimes we are a little bit in a daze, lost. Even when trying to rest we will not be able to rest well and we can't even sleep well. There are instances where people try to go to sleep, but cannot sleep because of the mental unrest and unhappiness in their mind. Whereas if someone is quite mentally sound, even if they have exerted themselves physically quite a lot by going to a job and being quite busy, they come back home and are able to rest and sleep well. They find the next day they can go back to work. This goes to show that physical tiredness is much easier to restore than mental tiredness, or being unwell mentally, and having lost that sense of happiness within one's mind. To relieve our physical shortcomings or difficulties is relatively easy. If you find food when you're hungry, then the difficulty of hunger will be, relieved. When you are thirsty, if you get a drink your thirst will be relieved. Whereas with mental states, if one is not careful from the beginning, recovery can be very difficult. Even dogs and cats can be very satisfied when they've got their meal and had a good drink. They can sleep well. (*Geshe-la laughs*)

I am not saying this out of clairvoyance and suggesting that I can read people's mind, and know what is going on in their mind. Rather this advice comes from what I have observed in the many years that I have been here, and what people have told me. I have seen that the suffering that people go through here is mental agony, and what we call depression, and so forth. Prior to that happening, when there are signs of feeling unwell, one should take that as warning signs to be careful, and not to allow oneself to go down that path.

The emphasis here is that when we are unwell we resort to medicines. The Tibetan term for medicine has a connotation of 'that which benefits, that which helps one'. If other substances such as hallucinogens and so forth were actually able to help one to restore one's sense of well-being then it might be viable to say that they are something good. But that doesn't seem to be the case. They don't seem to benefit one. Even if there is some temporary relief and benefit, it actually seems to worsen the situation. I am relating this particularly to the younger generation as a warning to be very careful, very mindful, about relying on such substances and so forth. The main thing is to resort to more natural conditions. There are all the techniques mentioned earlier. Mind training techniques are a means to really restore and establish a genuine sense of mental well-being and can contribute to our physical well-being as well. This is something one really needs to take to heart and one should always cherish one's mental and physical well-being, and see that it is the primary source of happiness.

This is a personal responsibility, because we cannot rely upon someone else's happiness for us to be happy. Just as we cannot share our own happiness with others, we cannot share our misery. It's not as if we can distribute

our happiness and share a portion with others so that they would feel happy as well. Likewise, if we are suffering there might be many others who are willing to relieve our suffering, but it is not as if we can take out our suffering and share it, make it lighter. We have to experience it ourselves. Whether it's happiness and well-being, or misery and being distraught, it is something that we have to experience ourselves. Likewise others cannot share with us. When one acknowledges that and accepts it as a reality, it dawns upon one that, 'Indeed I have to take responsibility. It is something I have to develop under these conditions'.

Earlier we mentioned that we are bound to feel unhappy or sad at times. There is no one who would not go through that. As ordinary people we all have situations where sometimes we feel a little bit sad or unhappy or down. But we can treat that as something that is part of life, and occasionally happens. The main point here is not to be completely overwhelmed by that, and be in a perpetual state of despair, and lose a sense of hope and direction in life. That would be something that would really be unfortunate. That is what we need to protect ourselves from.

We can remind ourselves of the fact that everyone goes through these difficulties of despair and so forth. It is good to remind oneself of this so that one does not feel completely alone. There are times when one feels quite overwhelmed and might feel, 'I might be the only one who is suffering in this way.' But the truth and reality is that 'Others are also suffering, so I'm not alone'.

I have heard that when someone shares a certain difficulty or problem they are facing with someone else, and that other person can immediately acknowledge and understand that by saying, 'Well, I have gone through exactly the same problem' it actually helps them, too. They feel that someone understands the problem, and it helps them to accept it more.

Of course, in sympathising with someone else's difficulties, if one has actually faced those difficulties or problems oneself and found a good means to overcome that hardship, those means can be shared with the other as well. It can be accepted by the other when you talk from your own experience and that can be valuable for them as well. With that in mind, when His Holiness the Dalai Lama shares advice and so forth he has mentioned that it seems to be helpful to first of all acknowledge they are suffering by telling them, 'I've gone through that myself.' Of course His Holiness the Dalai Lama is someone who can deal with it if he is faced with problems and difficulties (*Geshe-la laughs*). He might be the best example of being completely immune to being harmed to the point of being in despair. I feel that His Holiness would be saying, 'Oh I had this same problem, same difficulty.' as a way to encourage others. Then, when he shares methods and techniques to overcome problems, they will be more readily accepted.

As His Holiness the Dalai Lama has shared regularly, 'I got incredible lessons in my life through the hardships and difficulties that I faced. It is not in spite of, but because of, facing these difficulties and problems that I have gained so much understanding of these situations.'

What he is relating is that enduring and accepting those difficulties became the means for him to find ways to overcome those problems. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is sharing with us the truth and reality for all of us in the same situation.

The summary of this point is that willingly enduring and accepting hardships is the best means and way to overcome those hardships. The contrast to that would be that if one does not willingly accept and endure those hardships one becomes completely overwhelmed by them and there is no way we can find a solution to those hardships.

The points that we have shared this evening might be significant. With that in mind, before we end the session for the evening let us again take an opportunity to spend a few minutes in meditation. This time, as we again withdraw our mind from the distractions and bring our focus inward, we place our focus on the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra being recited. We bring our full attention and focus to that. Then, when the recitation subsides, we just maintain our focus on the residue of a nice feeling inside. So we can spend a few minutes in meditation

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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Edited Version

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