
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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As usual, let us spend some time in meditation, and for that purpose we sit in a comfortable and relaxed posture. To understand the purpose of meditation, or how it benefits us, we need to understand how, most of the time; our mind is completely engrossed and preoccupied in a lot of discursive thoughts.

An analogy for how our mind being captured in discursive thoughts causes us distress is imagining our body being trapped in a cage of thorns. If there are thorns surrounding us we will not be able to move. If we move, we get pricked. So, it is like that when the mind gets trapped in discursive thoughts. To further elaborate on this analogy, if our body is trapped in a cage of thorns and we try to move, it will cause a lot of discomfort as we will be pricked by the thorns. Similarly, when our mind is trapped in discursive or distracting thoughts, it will disturb our mind, making it very tight.

Unless and until we are released from the cage of thorns, there will not be a moment of physical ease. We will not experience well-being as we are not free of discomfort. Therefore, the way to be free of that discomfort is to release oneself from that cage. When our body is freed from the cage of thorns we will experience freedom and a sense of ease. It is the same with our mind. When the mind is released from disturbing thoughts, we will experience genuine ease and well-being.

With this analogy we can see that when our mind is entrapped by discursive and disturbing thoughts it causes us mental agony; just like when thorns prick our body it causes physical pain. When we recognise and understand that this is causing distress in our mind, we should check to find out if there is a possibility to release our mind from such entrapment. As explained in the meditation techniques, there is a method and way to release the mind. So, it is worthwhile to put some effort into releasing our mind from discursive and disturbing thoughts.

Part of the process is to investigate and check how the mind becomes entrapped in these discursive and disturbing thoughts and what the consequences are. We get entrapped when we allow our mind to follow, and be completely influenced by, every random, distracting thought that arises. This occurs when the mind completely goes into a day-dreaming state and we don't have good focus or clarity in our mind. This also causes a lack of intelligence and wisdom and the mind becomes weighed down— heavy—due to this lack of clarity.

The reason why our mind gets distracted by discursive thoughts is because we focus on many different random

objects. Because of the different kinds of appearances of these objects the mind readily follows them, and that is when the discursive and disturbing thoughts arise in the mind. The way to release oneself from this situation is through the use of the meditation technique. In the meditation technique we focus on an object that does not cause disturbing thoughts to arise in the mind. Choosing an object and then placing our entire focus on that object and maintaining that focus, releases us from focusing on disturbing and distracting objects. In this way we can see that the mind can be released from discursive thoughts.

When we understand how the meditation technique works we have found a good method to release ourselves from the entrapment of disturbing thoughts. Periodically we are all victims of this situation. At times our minds are completely entrapped and overwhelmed by disturbing thoughts. If we have noticed and realised for ourselves that we are affected negatively by these disturbing thoughts then, when we are introduced to the meditation technique of focusing on an appropriate object, we have found a proper technique to release ourselves from the entrapment of discursive thoughts.

Since we all are victims of being entrapped in discursive and disturbing thoughts that are detrimental to our mental well-being, if the question is asked, 'Who needs the meditation technique?' the answer will be, 'We all need it because we all are affected negatively by this situation'. Of course very young children may not be aware enough to be able to apply this technique well, but everyone over the age of 8 and up to 100, who has some capacity to discern things clearly and to think for themselves, definitely can benefit from this technique.

There is a saying in the teachings that as one ages the delusions do not age, but the antidote for overcoming the delusions does start to age. These are significant points to consider. If one wonders whether the delusions will naturally age and weaken, this is not the case. If we do not apply the antidote they will not age and weaken naturally. So, if one familiarises oneself with the meditation technique and takes it up as a regular practice then, as one ages, one will notice that the delusions will age and weaken as well. Even if the delusions do not weaken to a great degree, one will at least have the antidote to combat them, so that one is not completely overwhelmed by the delusions.

Thus, in simple terms, this is how the meditation technique works and why it is crucial and important for one. As far as the technique is concerned, it is quite simple, so it is a matter of one applying it. As mentioned previously, since we want to experience well-being and happiness, it is appropriate that we apply and familiarise ourselves with the meditation technique.

We can now adopt the meditation technique for the next few minutes. Let us readjust our physical posture and sit up straight but relaxed. I regularly mention that we can use our own breath as an object to focus on. The meditation technique involves withdrawing our mind from all preoccupation with any objects, thoughts and memories, and placing our full attention and focus upon our natural breathing. We place our full attention on our breath as we breathe in and breathe out and become fully

aware of each inhalation and exhalation. We have one hundred percent focus on the breath itself. So, in this way, we will spend the next few minutes in meditation (*Pause for meditation*).

That will be sufficient for now. Just as we have attempted in our short session now, it is highly beneficial if we can apply the meditation technique regularly in our daily lives. The session does not need to be of a long duration. For beginners, it is advised that it is better to initially have a short meditation session, but to do it with full attention. Basically, when it comes to meditation practice, it is the quality rather than the quantity that is important. So even if we can only spend a few moments or a few minutes in an attentive and focused state of mind and try to maintain our attention on the object, that will establish the basis to slowly become more and more familiar with the practice of meditation. We will then slowly see a transformation taking place in our mind and our lives. The important thing, which I emphasise regularly, is that the meditation technique is one of the most supreme techniques that helps protect our mental happiness. This is something we need to always pay attention to and protect at all times.

In our daily life there can be good times and difficult times. Sometimes we all face some hardships and difficulties in our life. Those hardships and difficulties, and even good times, come and go. But what is important for us is to maintain a sense of mental joy and happiness. If the mental joy and happiness in the mind declines then the real problems and troubles in life begin. That is when we get stuck in life. But if we can maintain that sense of joy and happiness, we can manage the ups and downs in life.

When we apply the meditation technique, we need to be mindful to apply an internal investigation and check our state of mind: what are our thoughts, attitudes and so forth? The combination of checking our mind periodically whilst we are engaging in meditation practice is the best method.

4.2.2.1.2.3. The way to train the mind in the stages of the path of beings of the great scope

4.2.2.1.2.3.2. The actual paths

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2. How to develop an awakening mind

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1. The stages of training the awakening mind

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.2. The way to train the mind in equalizing and exchanging self and other

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.2.1. Reflecting on the benefits and shortcomings of exchanging and not exchanging self and other

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We can now study a bit of the text that we have been reading from. We are up to a point about considering the advantages and disadvantages practising, or not practising, exchanging self with others.

There are two verses in *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life*.

Whatever worldly joy there is,
Arises from wishing for others happiness,

Whatever worldly suffering there is
Arises from wishing for your own happiness.

What need is there to say more?
Look at the difference between these two,
Ordinary persons act for their own welfare,
The Sage acts for others' welfare.

The earlier explanations in the text presented the way to consider others' well-being and happiness with the reasoning that because oneself and others are equal in wanting happiness and not wanting to experience any kind of suffering, it is therefore worthwhile to consider others' happiness as well, rather than focusing just on our own happiness and our own need to remove suffering. Others are exactly the same as us. So it is most appropriate to consider the welfare of others, specifically thinking of how others can be happy and be rid of suffering.

Having presented that earlier, what is being presented now in these verses is how one's own happiness is dependent on making others happy.

Whatever worldly joy there is
Arises from wishing for others to have happiness.

These two lines present the idea that basically there must be a cause for one's happiness. We all are interested to know how we can gain happiness. In fact every religion has its own explanations and means of finding the causes for happiness. What is explained here is that the cause of happiness, as seen by the Buddha, is making others happy. When one wishes for others to be happy, then that is the cause for one's own happiness.

What is presented here is quite easy for us to grasp and not something too obscure. The reasoning is quite simple. The main emphasis is that one needs to consider others' well-being and happiness. If one wishes for joy and happiness for oneself, then the best way to gain that is by intentionally taking others' happiness and well-being into consideration. This is really practical advice. Whilst there are many long term benefits, which are explained extensively further on in the teachings, we can relate this to our immediate well-being and benefit and see the practicality of these explanations.

For example, if we consider the happiness of two individuals who have a relationship as companions or partners, and who are living together, their happiness will depend on wishing for the other to be happy. If one wishes for the other to be happy and does not wish the other to experience any kind of suffering, then that will mean that one has taken the initiative to make the other happy in every possible way and will not intentionally hurt or harm them in any way. When these measures are taken, it definitely contributes to the other's well-being and happiness and, in return, it will contribute to one's own sense of well-being as well. Beginning with those we are immediately related to, if we can genuinely practice taking others' well-being and happiness into consideration and don't wish them to experience any suffering, then that will contribute to the our well-being and happiness.

The next lines of verse read::

Whatever worldly suffering there is,
Arises from wishing for your own happiness

What this is saying is that when one focuses entirely on one's own happiness, then, rather than contributing to one's own happiness this actually contributes to one's own misery and suffering.

If we look into this further we can see from our own experience, and commonly in the worldly sense, that people who think only of themselves are not considered as sociable people. They are regarded as self-centred and selfish as they only think about their own needs. If there are two companions and one is always thinking about their own interest and needs, he or she will not get along with the other person. If there's a group of people, and someone is always thinking of their own needs and concerns, they actually 'stand out' and don't really fit into that group. Thus we can see that it creates a distance with others. By focusing only on one's own needs, one becomes obsessed with one's own interests, and doesn't feel any concern for others' needs and interests. This focus on oneself, rather than benefitting others, will start to harm one.

The suffering of loneliness seems to be quite prevalent in society, and this is because if one distances oneself from others, one will experience situations where one seemingly has no companions or friends that one can relate to. As a result one will start to feel the suffering of agony and loneliness. These are significant points and if one pays attention and thinks about them it becomes apparent that there is truth in what is being presented here.

As mentioned previously, more extensive explanations are presented later in the text. There it talks about the specific disadvantages of cherishing and focusing on oneself, and the advantages of cherishing and focusing on others. However, we can understand the relevance just in our every-day life.

One of the main points that is presented here is that if one intentionally thinks about the purpose of benefitting others then one's own needs will naturally be fulfilled. One does not need to intentionally work for one's own benefit and purpose because it will be fulfilled naturally. Whereas if one just focuses on one's own needs and completely disregards others needs one will not be able to help and benefit others and then one will not be able to benefit oneself either.

The next verse explains this point, which is

What need is there to say more?
Look at the difference between these two,
Ordinary persons act for their own welfare,
The Sage [or the Buddha] acts for others' welfare.

The main point being presented in this verse, leaving aside elaborate explanations and putting it briefly in very simple terms, *what need is there to say more?*, is that we can see the difference between ordinary people will act only for their own welfare, whilst the enlightened Buddha will act for the welfare of others. What is presented is that someone who works only for their own welfare will be an individual who neglects other's needs and only focus on

their own needs. When an ordinary person only focuses on their own needs and neglects others' needs this keeps them imprisoned in cyclic existence, and they repeatedly experience many problems, difficulties, turmoil and so forth. Whereas the Sage, now famously known as the Buddha or the Enlightened Being, has reached that state as a result of having neglected his own needs and focusing on the needs of others and benefitting them. We can all relate to this incredible example of a noble, pure being such as the Buddha who obtained the state of enlightenment 2,500 years ago. From that time, even after 2500 years, he is still known as someone who presents only the methods and means to benefit and help others. His sayings and words are revered now as being very pure and having sound advice, and that reverence and high esteem is the result of having cherished others and neglected his own needs. By doing so the Buddha achieved the ultimate goal, and fulfilled the ultimate purpose, of becoming an enlightened buddha. As explained here, this is what we can understand to be the benefits.

If, in our previous lifetimes, we had also followed the example of the Buddha's life by neglecting ourselves and cherishing others then, most likely, by now we would have become buddhas too. Indeed we will find this is also true in the secular sense, If a ruler is just and kind, and rules their subjects with fairness and consideration for their well-being, then that ruler will be held in high esteem. People will naturally like and appreciate them because of the benefits they experience. There will be a lot of praise offered to the ruler. Whereas if a ruler rules unjustly, without fairness, and takes advantage of the subjects, thinking only of their own interest, they will not be held in high esteem at all. In fact their subjects will start to rebel and will reject them.

If a ruler tries to control their subjects thinking of their own welfare and needs, then they will not be a happy ruler. We can see that sometimes after someone is appointed as head of a nation or country, they either become bald or their hair becomes white very quickly. That is a sign of not being happy and they are not in a happy state of mind. They have a lot of stress and worries. There is definitely a difference in the demeanour of someone who thinks of others' welfare and takes them into consideration whilst neglecting their own personal needs, versus someone who only focuses on themselves.

We can notice that when a ruler is first elected they usually come out smiling and feeling happy and excited. They are actually happy, excited and joyful, because the people have given him or her their trust. But after some time when the trust of the people begins to wane, they start to decline and you can see they start crying (*laughter*).

You can see how these examples of the highs and lows of rulers are very much dependent on how they are regarded by their subjects and people. What affects one's well being is very much dependent on taking others' welfare and purpose into consideration. This is the main point being emphasised here. When we see this on a personal level as an instruction for ourselves, what is being advised here and what we need to derive from this,

is that we need to take others' welfare into consideration, beginning with those we associate and live with. Starting with them, we need to apply a genuine sort of consideration.

When we have consideration for others, we have the capacity to help them. There is no question or need to determine if we can do that, because as humans we have the capacity. Even animals have the capacity to help others to a certain extent. As I am explaining this I recall in one of my earlier sessions on a Wednesday night explaining how even animals can give protection and care. I was using the example of a dog and I also questioned if a cat can really protect their owners or someone else if there is a need. After I raised that doubt, the very next morning the news had a story of a young boy who was attacked by a dog and a cat came to protect him. So my doubt was cleared the next day (*laughter*).

What can be derived from the explanations here is how worthwhile it is to consider the happiness and well-being of others. When we take a genuine interest and concern for someone else's happiness, it will definitely help our own mind. We will derive solace from that. We will gain a sense of well-being within us. This is something mutually beneficial. As mentioned previously, in a committed relationship between two people if both can take a genuine responsibility for each other's welfare and well-being it will be the basis and foundation for a harmonious, good relationship between them. That's what a committed relationship is meant to be, a commitment to look after each other and to take each other's welfare into consideration and that would have been the promise you have made if you have been married in church and in front of God. Basically the main point is, taking others' welfare and well-being into consideration is something worthwhile.

When you genuinely take others well-being into consideration it is the means to protect your own happiness. As mentioned at the beginning, protecting one's happiness and joy is of the utmost importance for one's own well-being and it is worthwhile to pay attention to that. There may be extensive ways that one can apply the instructions here to benefit many others but, in practical terms, it is best to start from one's roots with those who we are closely associated with.

I appreciate your attention and all of you listened very well. Before we conclude the session for the evening, we will again take a few moments to apply the meditation technique. This time the object that we will focus on will be the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra being recited. As we hear the chanting we place our full attention on the sound and then, when the recitation subsides, we will focus on the residue of the blissful feeling and have a sense that there is nothing to hang on to; a sense of letting go and a feeling of emptiness in one's mind.

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