
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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As usual we can spend some time in meditation. To do this we adopt a comfortable, relaxed posture. As I regularly explain, the meditation technique involves choosing an inner object which is used as the meditation object. We familiarise our mind again and again with the inner object by placing our full attention upon it. So that means that when we engage in meditation practice we do not allow other thoughts and objects to distract us but instead constantly focus just on that object itself.

When we abide single-pointedly, focused on the inner object, all other thoughts and external distractions naturally cease. When our focus on external objects ceases, then naturally the mind becomes tranquil and calm. The reason we don't experience tranquillity usually is because we are normally focused on the various external objects which cause the mind to be agitated, disturbed and troubled. Allowing our mind to focus on every external object and go off in every direction is what causes the mind the distress that we experience. So we can see that through this meditation technique we can protect our mind and, as a consequence of protecting our mind, we derive the benefit of settled and calm mind.

For our meditation practice here we adopt the breath as our inner object. The main thing is being fully aware of the breath, the natural 'in breath' and 'out breath', and keeping our mind 100% focused just on the breath itself, and not allowing it to wander off after every distraction. When we, even for a few minutes, bring our full attention and focus inside and place it on our breath we will derive the benefit of this practice. So, we can adopt this technique for the next few minutes. (*pause for meditation*).

That is sufficient for now. To apply this meditation technique in one's regular, daily life would be highly meaningful and worthwhile. One can also adopt this meditation technique with some visualisations, which can also be very beneficial. When one breathes in one imagines breathing in white light, which represents the qualities of the enlightened beings, the buddhas and bodhisattvas. As we breathe in through our nostrils the light enters our body and fills it with white light. Then, as we breathe out, we imagine that we are exhaling a black light through our nostrils that represents all the defects and the negativities within us, as well as all the imprints of the negative actions that we have committed in the past. All of that leaves our system and comes out in a form of black light and completely dissipates. We then imagine that our body becomes very pure and clean, like crystal, without any defects or dirt. That visualisation can be combined with the breath. If one is going to do this visualisation it is advised to breathe in and out a little bit more forcefully.

Then after visualising for a while the purification of sending out one's black negativity in the form of black light one can just imagine all the white light coming in and filling one's

entire body and feeling a sense of bliss within one's mind. Just focus on that for a while. This meditation is really a worthwhile practice.

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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

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.2.1.3. The difficulty of accomplishing buddhahood if one does not exchange self and other

In the text we are now studying the current topic is, 'The difficulty of accomplishing Buddhahood if one does not exchange self and other'. The verse under this heading in the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* reads:

If one does not genuinely exchange one's own happiness for others' suffering,

You will not achieve buddhahood and even have no joy cyclic existence.

What is being presented in this topic are the means and methods to engage in this practice of exchanging self with other, along with the great advantages and benefits of it and the disadvantages if we do not adopt these practices.

One needs to understand that what is being presented here about the disadvantages of cherishing oneself relates to the faults of focusing just on oneself, one's own interest and basically neglecting others' needs. Maintaining an attitude of focusing just one's own needs, and one's own self-interest, causes us a lot of distress and problems rather than benefiting us. Rather than helping to protect one's wellbeing it serves to destroy one's wellbeing. Therefore such an attitude is not beneficial—even though it has an intention of promoting one's own needs, it actually destroys one's wellbeing. One needs to understand this in its proper context otherwise some may misinterpret what is being said here as one should neglect oneself and not care for oneself. That is not what is being presented.

The disadvantages of cherishing just oneself and the advantages of cherishing others were presented earlier in the text. It emphasises that cherishing others and not cherishing oneself does not mean to neglect one's needs, and not to look after oneself. The perfect example is the Buddha himself who, because of having taken care of himself in a proper way, was able to fulfil the ultimate goal of reaching enlightenment. That can only become possible by adequately looking after one's own needs in a proper way. Therefore it does not mean to neglect oneself and not to look after oneself, but doing that in the most proper way. So that is how we need to understand it.

The first line of this verse indicates that if one does not genuinely exchange one's own happiness with others' suffering one will have no joy. It is that exchange that is being explained here. The line reads, 'If one does not genuinely exchange one's happiness for others suffering'. What this means is, 'if one does not exchange this attitude where previously one's entire time and energy was spent focusing merely on one's own happiness and removing suffering just from oneself'. If one does not change that attitude to one where one concentrates on others

happiness—for others to gain happiness and remove suffering from others—then there is no possibility that one can achieve the state of buddhahood or becoming enlightened. Without this practice it is not possible.

Now one may think, 'Well, it is fine if I don't reach buddhahood. What is the big deal if I remain in cyclic existence, That should be okay.' But it is then explained further that even in cyclic existence you will have no joy. So if we are not able to achieve the result of buddhahood, or becoming a buddha, there will be no sense of joy or happiness while we remain in cyclic existence. While the translation here does not have that specific word, it means supreme happiness. So there will be no supreme happiness.

A question may be raised about the possibility of exchanging this attitude where one cherishes, looks after or cares only for one's own happiness and removing one's own suffering, to one of focusing on others' happiness and removing their suffering. To show this is possible we can take the example of a mother's care for her child. We can see how a mother would go to every length and extent to care for her child, while neglecting some of her own temporary pleasures and joy. We can definitely use this illustration to see the extent to which a mother, particularly when her child is very young, will forsake sleep, and even the time for her own meals and so forth, as a way to care for her child. We can see this is true in every instance of a mother caring for her child. She does so joyfully, with a sense of happiness, rather than as a task or burden, but really takes responsibility and shows great care and love for her child.

From this we can see that it is possible to forsake one's own immediate needs when it comes to caring for others and when we take others' happiness into consideration and want to remove suffering from others. We can see that this is not something that is impossible and unachievable but something that can be achieved.

When mothers care for their child to the extent of seemingly neglecting their own immediate needs they actually, as a result, benefit from that themselves. They take that responsibility with a sense of pride and joy and this helps the mother and definitely helps the child. It protects and nurtures the child but also helps the mother in return. So we can see that there is a benefit in this practice. It is not as if one will be completely deprived of any sense of joy and happiness from this practice.

We can take another obvious example into consideration here. We know that when someone else pays attention and exhibits true care by cherishing us, we feel happy and really appreciate that. This could be either in an intimate relationship with someone else or a close companionship. When the other person neglects us, doesn't seem to care and appreciate but rather only thinks about their own needs all the time, we will not really appreciate that. We will start to feel, 'Oh, they are being very selfish. They are not taking my needs into consideration at all, but are always obsessed with their own needs. So we can see that, just as we would not appreciate the experience of being treated like that by others, it will be exactly the same when we behave in that way from our side towards to others. When we relate towards others with contempt, and don't really care about their needs and don't show any degree of cherishing them, they will not appreciate it. Someone who is always thinking about their own needs is called 'a selfish person'. So we can see that this is not just related to spiritual practice but is applicable in our everyday normal lives.

In order to apply these practices in our personal life and see some immediate relevance in our daily life, we need to think of this in practical terms. While the teachings give detailed explanations and it might sound like a higher form of practice we can, in fact, relate it to our daily life. We can definitely see its relevance in relation to our acquaintances and relationships. We need to relate this to our own experiences. As mentioned previously, when we are in a relationship with someone who genuinely cares for and cherishes us, it gives us a sense of security and joy in our mind, and we will naturally develop trust in the other. If we experience this, then it is exactly the same for the other. They will also experience a sense of security, wellbeing and happiness when we show that we care for and cherish them. A mutual sense of care and cherishing for the other helps to strengthen the relationship and makes it much more stable and harmonious. A natural trust develops between each other. So this practice needs to be applied to our immediate life situation. When two people have committed to live with each other and there is real care and cherishing for each other then this really contributes to the wellbeing in your everyday life. We can then extend this further on to other relationships.

Developing that intention or wish to benefit others is something that is highly valuable and worthwhile. It is not just a wishful thought to benefit others, but it actually brings about a sense of real self-worth and joy within our own mind. So that is how genuinely and altruistically thinking about others' wellbeing leads to a by-product of naturally getting a sense of joy and happiness within one's own mind.

We can see definitely examples of individuals who have a natural inclination of being kind and helpful towards others and always trying to assist others in any way possible. When we see how such an individual interacts with others, always so kind and nice, they naturally become a likeable person, which means that people are happy to be with them. Such a person will definitely not be deprived of friends, companions and well-wishers. There will be many who will be close to that person. So if one is wondering how to get genuine friends and companions, this is the best way to do so.

In contrast, someone who thinks only about their own needs, even in the worldly sense, would be considered someone who is quite selfish. No one wants to be around someone who is constantly selfish and only thinks about themselves. So others will naturally try to keep a distance from them. Such an individual will then start feeling that they are being neglected by others, no one wants to be around them and they start to experience a sense of real loneliness. The consequence of having just focused on oneself and one's own interests, is that one is deprived of a sense of joy and happiness and companionship with others and so forth. One is left alone.

The way one develops the attitude of considering the need to benefit others, and extending one's genuine concern and benefit for others, is by remembering the kindness of others and this is explained in more detail later on in the teachings. When we think about the kindness of others, there will be a natural tendency to want to repay that kindness and do whatever possible to help others. We can see this is true in the relationship between parents and the children. The more children remember the kindness of their parents the more they are naturally inclined to want to help and benefit their parents in any possible way.

The teachings go into great detail to explain how others have indeed been extremely kind to us. From the past, in the present, throughout the future we are completely dependent on others' care. In so many different ways others provide us with our very basic needs and everything that we have comes from the kindness of others. It is when we go through different logical ways of thinking of how whatever we have now comes from the kindness of others that we develop within our mind the natural wish to repay the kindness of others and the wish to cherish others will develop from that.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said that even Christians have a practice of seeing self-cherishing as a fault. His Holiness explained the way Christians practice reducing the self-cherishing mind, which basically stems from self-interest, like self-obsession, and focuses on oneself. It is reduced in the practice of generating strong faith in God. His Holiness explained that it definitely seems to be the case that when someone has strong faith and a complete reliance on God then, to that extent, whatever good or bad times one experiences is considered as the grace of God and the bad is a way to test or purify oneself. When one thinks in that way with complete reliance, faith, in God then the obsession of thinking just about oneself is naturally reduced. That sense of self-importance, like being the centre of the universe, which is an egotistical notion of the 'I', is definitely reduced, isn't it?

In Buddhist terms all one's good or bad experiences come from karma. Whatever we experience now is a result of the karma that we had created in the past. So developing that strong conviction and faith in karma is equivalent to a Christian having strong faith in God. When we think how everything we experience is the result of karma, then the strong sense of 'I' and 'me' is also reduced. In this way the practices that are presented are a real means to overcome the obsession of focusing just on oneself.

When His Holiness praises the Christian faith in this way he explains how it serves the highest spiritual purpose. His Holiness was not addressing a Christian gathering but rather he was addressing about 20-25 thousands monks and was using this praise for the Christian faith as a way to show the great significance and the value of another tradition such as the Christian tradition.

We wouldn't find many religious leaders other than the Dalai Lama praising other traditions as highly significant. It really helped my mind as well. One religious leader in fact confided in me that it is rare to find a religious leader who praises other traditions. They usually spend most of their time showing the qualities of their own tradition. He said, 'Your leader, the Dalai Lama, having those qualities is really significant and very praiseworthy'.

To again summarise, the main point being presented is that what is referred to here as exchanging the self-cherishing attitude to cherishing others needs to be understood in its proper context. What needs to be exchanged is an attitude where previously all one's intention and focus would have been merely to fulfil one's own needs, and gain happiness just for oneself, and removing suffering just from oneself, while neglecting others needs for happiness and the removal of their suffering. We need to change that attitude to one that cherishes others and is focused on others' needs for happiness and the removal of suffering. When that attitude is changed, then a real sense of transformation of concern for others' wellbeing and others' needs is developed within one's mind, and that becomes the basis for a genuine

practice of benefiting others. So this is really what is being presented here.

Far from being deprived of one's own wellbeing and needs, when one genuinely practices cherishing others, others will naturally come to our aid whenever we need help, and we will have more friends and companions. and that number will only increase. Therefore one need not worry about one's own needs not being met, because there will be others to help us at the time when we are in need. This would be the result when we genuinely care for others. When one genuinely practices benefiting others then the direct beneficiary would be the other, and indirectly we are benefiting ourselves as well, and fulfilling our own needs and wishes as well. So this is a highly beneficial practice.

The terminology used here is 'equalising and exchanging self with other'. So the 'equalising' here is not referring to others and oneself being equal in wanting happiness and not wanting suffering. 'Equalising' here refers to equalising the attitude that one had previously where one only had a thought for cherishing oneself with the thought of cherishing others. When that thought of cherishing oneself is replaced with the thought of cherishing others then that is what is actually equalised, one's thought has been equalised to the point of developing this attitude of exchanging self with others. This, of course, is equalising in relation to this context and when it is presented in other contexts it will refer to different points. So, one needs to understand that.

Before we conclude the session for the evening if there are a few questions we may address them, otherwise we can finish with the meditation.

Question: As a doctor I encounter patients who have suffered traumatic experiences in the past, such as severe tortures or physical and sexual abuse in their childhood. What is Geshe-la's advice on the best way to treat them?

Answer: It is very unfortunate when such things occur. If the person is suffering from brain damage, where they are not capable of functioning properly mentally and emotionally, then it is a little bit hard to teach them to look after themselves. In such situations, as a community we need to, of course, care and help them in whatever way we can, to provide them with basic needs. If someone does not have brain damage and they have the capacity to think and reason for themselves, then it is important to understand that a lot of suffering that is experienced may be due to recalling earlier incidents. Remembering the past again and again can cause a lot of mental agony. According to the explanations in the teachings, it could be a case where one is lacking the patience of willingly enduring hardships. When there is a lack of patience, one can constantly feel bitter and angry towards the perpetrators, and thus feel unhappy and depressed.

Many Tibetans had a lot of traumatic experiences such as torture and so forth when they were in Tibet, but as soon as they were able to escape from Tibet and come to India they experienced a great sense of relief and joy. It is like being released, where they are not oppressed any more. So, being in a land of freedom, they actually feel very glad and joyful rather depressed.

I have story I can relate about this. A Tibetan from my province in Tibet was imprisoned for many, many years, then later escaped to Nepal. His story shows how one's experience seems to depend on one's way of thinking or attitude. This person was imprisoned for many years, but he later said that, 'Actually, it was a like a great privilege to be

in prison because I got the opportunity to do many hundreds of thousands of prostrations and recited many, many mantras, like the Tara mantras, many hundreds of thousands of times. Also the *Twenty-one Tara Praises* were recited many hundreds of thousands of times'. He was saying, that he had the greatest of opportunity to practise. So you can see that because of his attitude of utilising prison as a way to practise Dharma, he actually saw it as a benefit, rather than a hard time. We can see here that when someone has some real, spiritual grounding or basis, then even hardships can be turned into something beneficial and worthwhile.

If there is any way for an individual who has experienced trauma to change their attitudes, it would be beneficial. That wouldn't allow their mind to dwell too much on past issues and keep thinking, 'Oh, others have been bad to me, others have abused me and so forth'. When they are obsessed with that way of thinking then, of course, the mind gets into a pattern where they are always bitter and angry and so forth. So if there is a way they can try to come out of that, where they don't dwell too much on the past, thus preventing them from constantly bringing to mind those incidents, it may help to lighten their mind.

We can see in this story that the person saw the time in prison as an advantage for him and a way to practise Dharma. Of course that is not to say that he would not have experienced some hardship such as being interrogated, beaten and tortured in prison, but nevertheless he took the initiative to turn it into a means for his own spiritual development and practice. The reason he doesn't have a negative mind about it is because he can see it as something that was worthwhile, it gave him an opportunity to practice. This is just an example of how, depending on one's attitudes and way of thinking, previous hardships and difficulties can either seen as a way to further develop and strengthen oneself, or could be a cause for one to become bitter, angry and self-destructive. The main thing is the attitudes that one holds.

So, the main point is the way the mind interprets things, and then how we take that as our own experience. In my own past there are many instances where I have gone through difficulties and hardships. However that doesn't affect my joy and happiness now. I can confidently say that no incident of hardship in the past disturbs my mind and causes my mind to feel weighed down, despondent and lack joy and happiness now. There is nothing, not one incident. Even though the Communist Chinese came in and destroyed many things and brought a lot of hardship I honestly don't have any sense of anger and bitterness towards the Chinese now. I feel I have reached that state by developing and training my mind that.

So, as mentioned previously, if there is some physical damage, particularly to the brain, then education and ways of thinking might be hard to teach to someone whose logical and reasoning processes may not really work. If that is the case it may be really hard to communicate with them. Of course we need to give them practical help such as making sure that they have adequate food, clothing and shelter, and some sort of comfort and companionship. If that is the extent to which we can help them, then of course whenever we can we should do that.

Another example in relation to your own family would be your father taking care of your younger brother, right? It really amazed me to see the extent to which your dad cared

and looked after your younger brother in troubled times, buying him a house and providing everything for him.

What really amazes me are the kind acts of people such as your dad. When someone acts out of great kindness and concern for someone else I find it praiseworthy and I am amazed. I am not necessarily impressed by someone who is able to sit rigidly for a long time and do some prayers rigidly (*laughter*). That does not necessarily impress me—it is something anyone could do, just sitting upright in a meditation posture and doing some prayers. But for someone to take the initiative to care for someone else who is disadvantaged, who is in need of help and care, is something that I find a genuine act of loving kindness.

These comments concern Toby. When I met Toby some while ago. I asked him, 'How is your mum?' and he replied, 'Oh, growing quite old. Of course she is aging and frail, and finds it a little bit hard to get around, but my sister is really helping her.' To that I immediately responded, 'Oh, that is really good, that is a real practice of Dharma', and I went on to explain that I am not too sure about your meditation practice, 'I don't know, I can't say for sure that your meditation practice is Dharma but your sister helping your mum is definitely a real practice of Dharma.' He was a little bit startled and said, 'Are you sure? Really, you mean that?' And I said, 'I am saying this with great confidence. Someone who cares for others and shows genuine care, regardless of whether they have a good motivation or not, is practising the Dharma by virtue of the fact that they are helping others and caring for the other. That, in itself, is the practice of Dharma. I went on to explain that that is exactly what the Buddha said. Anyone who helps the destitute, the really impoverished or those in need of help, such as one's parents who are either aged or sick, is offering a real act of genuine loving kindness and compassion, and this is a real practice. That is what I told him.

So, just relate back again to those who because of traumatic experiences in the childhood have some sort of physical or mental disability and are not able to care for themselves, looking after them properly or getting help to care for them would be real practice.

When I see very young ones who are affected by diseases, or certain kinds of intellectual disabilities and so forth, I feel very sad for them. There is, of course, nothing I, or anyone else, can do to change that situation. So from my side there is nothing much I can do other than to pray for them, and hope that they have a better future. Besides that there is really not much one can do. I feel tears come to my eyes when I think about the great disadvantages they have, and the difficulties they go through. They become a great source of love and compassion being generated within one's mind.

Thanks for that question. Whatever we discussed here this evening are all means and ways to think about others and others' concerns. So these are worthwhile for us to consider and contemplate.

So before we conclude the session this evening, let us spend a few minutes in meditation. This time we can use the sound of the mantra as object to focus on. So when the name mantra of Buddha Shakyamuni is recited we keep our full attention and focus on that, and when the recitation subsides we just focus on the residue of that nice feeling. We can spend a few minutes in that way.