
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment



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You can adopt a comfortable posture for our meditation practise. The meditation practice, as presented regularly, is a technique which involves choosing an appropriate object to focus on, and familiarising one's mind by focusing on the object again and again. That activity, the practise of familiarising the mind with the chosen object, is basically what is called meditation.

However, when we don't have control over our mind, it might have the tendency to go after many distractions, and that is what causes agitation and a troubled mind. It is a distracted mind which allows negativities to manifest, and it is when those negativities occur in the mind that, as a consequence, one suffers from anxiety. Because what causes the mind to be troubled is distraction, familiarity with the meditation technique is what allows the mind to naturally settle down, becoming more focused and clearer. Then naturally one experiences the tranquillity and calmness in one's mind.

A consequence of having an overly agitated and troubled mind is that one would not even get a good night's sleep. There are many who have confided in me that they can't sleep well because the mind is troubled with many worries and anxieties. If we can acknowledge and fully understand that having an uncontrolled mind leads to all of these uncomfortable consequences, then we would begin to see the real significance of gaining some control over our own mind.

While it is relatively easy to adopt a comfortable and relaxed physical posture, what is most important is to ensure that we have a really settled mind for the practice of meditation. Once the mind is somewhat settled, then we can make the commitment not to allow our mind to wander off during the practise of meditation, following every whimsical thought, past memories and so forth. Instead we commit to placing our entire focus on our own breath, which is the chosen object for our meditation now. So we place our full attention on the breath itself, and for the next few minutes not allow the mind to wander off in every direction. Constantly remember to keep your focus and attention on the breath, imagining seeing the breath naturally coming in and going out. So for the next few minutes we will adopt this meditation technique. (*Pause for meditation*).

Just as we have attempted in our short session, it would be really worthwhile to adopt a regular meditation practice in our daily lives, as it is a very practical means to settle down what might otherwise be a mind full of turmoil and trouble. Instead of allowing our mind to dwell in that troubled state, if we adopt this technique, it will definitely help us settle down. It is through these small steps that we will begin to gain control over our mind.

It is good for us to take the personal responsibility and initiative to really check for ourselves what kinds of objects

cause a troubled mind. If we were to take that initiative it would become quite clear to us that when we focus on certain objects, it causes our mind to immediately become agitated and uncomfortable. When we notice that, then we have identified and actually realise what is causing the mind to become troubled. It requires us to distance ourselves from that object, and not to dwell or focus on that which causes troubles in our mind. We do have a certain level of intelligence that enables us to detect that, and recognise it for ourselves. So we need to utilise our intelligence, which on a deeper level is called wisdom.

Taking that responsibility for one's own wellbeing and state of mind involves making a commitment, taking the initiative to not dwell on objects that cause a troubled mind. There is a means to keep the mind settled, so it does not become agitated or troubled. If we neglect or ignore that and allow our mind to focus on things which cause distractions, agitation and negativities to arise, then we are doing ourselves a disservice. Anyone who is in their right mind would not want to cause trouble for themselves, right? So why not use a technique that helps our mind when it is readily available?

When we sincerely adopt the meditation technique to its full extent of being focused and free from distraction, then through familiarity with that, combined with seeing the significance of this practice, it would slowly start to help us outside of the meditation session as well. When we are not engaged in formal meditation it will help us to continuously be mindful of our state of mind. We need to see the correlation between a formal meditation session as a means and way to help us in our ordinary everyday lives.

The main point here is to apply vigilance and protection of our mind, and it is most essential that we do that. Just as a mother would take great initiative and care to protect their young child from getting into danger, we can use this analogy as a reason to protect our own state of mind.

The meditation technique is actually a form of discipline, when we apply it fully we are disciplining our mind so that it does not become influenced by objects of distraction. We are actually holding back our mind, which is otherwise habituated to following every kind of distraction. So holding back or restraining our mind from following distractions is the actual discipline applied here. When we apply the discipline in our meditation practice we will derive the practical benefit in our ordinary everyday life—we all know that whatever work we are engaged in requires some discipline; a focused mind. When we are focused on whatever activity we are engaged in we know that it becomes much more fruitful. Even when writing something, when our mind is distracted our writing will not come out very well, whereas when we keep our full focus and attention on it, having a clear mind will definitely make sure the writing is good. This is how we need to understand that the meditation is basically a form of disciplining the mind, where we recognise that if we allow our mind to engage with certain objects it will be harmful, and when we are engaged with other appropriate objects it will benefit the mind.

When there is a really strong interest in something, even watching television, then that requires focus. I have witnessed some saying, "Please don't disturb me now, I am watching the show". Whether the show has good values or not I am not sure, but nevertheless those who are watching certain shows seem to be committed in watching with full

attention and focus. The only time you are allowed to speak seems to be during the ad breaks, otherwise you have to remain quiet so as not to disturb them. That goes to show that when the mind has an interest in something, it wants to be fully engaged and focused on the subject. So we can see that this is how the mind works normally.

Furthermore, a focused mind seems to be essential for fully engaging and experiencing whatever one is doing. When engaging in virtue, it is said that the benefits we derive from positive deeds are to the extent we have a focused mind. Even with normal mundane enjoyment it seems to be exactly the same, in that when the mind is distracted one doesn't seem to fully enjoy it, such as with the example of food. During a meal when we are really focused and present in the moment we seem to enjoy the meal much more—we have time to taste and enjoy the food. Whereas when one is quite distracted we might end up wondering what was the meal? So that goes to show that being present, focused and fully committed to whatever we are doing is essential, if we are to derive the full benefit of our experiences.

Just as it is true on the positive side, it is also true on the negative. Of course the negative side is something to decrease, by understanding that we have to lessen the focus on the negative.

What this goes to show, and what I am attempting to make clear, is that our minds naturally have this great potential to do good, but also have the potential to engage in negativity. Naturally within our minds we have both qualities, good and negative. What that shows is that by understanding and recognising that we have the capacity to fully utilise the good qualities, the good potential, we can start to overcome the faults that our minds carry as well.

As mentioned earlier, we have the intelligence or wisdom to be able to know what is best, and what is harmful for ourselves, and we need to fully utilise the wisdom that we actually have. Anyone in their right mind would acknowledge that the good qualities are useful for oneself, and that the faults are something which are not beneficial. Of course when we relate to others we can immediately recognise when someone has good qualities, and identify and acknowledge that as being something good. Whereas when someone has negativities or faults that is something we scorn. We don't like to be around people who are negative, judgemental or sarcastic and so forth. So if that is true for others, it must be exactly the same for oneself as well. Just as we can readily acknowledge and see value in the good qualities of others, it will be exactly the same for oneself, in that we would also like to have those qualities.

The faults that we readily see in others are the same exact faults that wouldn't be good for ourselves. So we take the initiative to tell ourselves, "I need to have qualities, but the qualities don't spontaneously come about. I need to work towards them. I need to adopt them, to identify with the good qualities, and slowly work towards developing them, making them strong in my mind. And the faults that I recognise within myself, are the negative states of mind which I need to get rid of and overcome. I have to try to distance myself from them, just as I would distance myself from others who seem to exhibit negativities". That is the extent to which we need to take personal responsibility.

To give an example of the qualities of the mind, it is indisputable that a genuinely kind mind that takes others needs and interests into consideration is a pure, good and positive mind. That is something that is acknowledged by

everyone. The more we associate ourselves with genuine kindness and consideration towards others, then to that extent our mind becomes more positive. Some examples of the negative states of mind would include anger, jealousy and pride. These are definitely minds that have no good qualities, but rather obstruct the wellbeing, peace and happiness in the minds of oneself and others. Therefore, when we identify such negative minds within ourselves we need to work on trying to slowly minimise and overcome them, which means that we need to begin to work on adopting the good qualities within ourselves. To assume that we can find friends or companions who are free from faults is too much to ask for. In order to find a companion or friend without any faults, one would have to be free from all faults oneself. So if one does carry some faults, it would be unrealistic to expect to find a friend who doesn't. However one can develop one's own mind.

The main point here is that we need to use ourselves as an example to really understand others. We can see that our actions and behaviours are definitely influenced by our state of mind and attitudes. When we have a positive mind it is more likely that we engage in good and kind behaviours, gestures and actions which are appealing to others. Whereas when our mind is influenced by negativities, such as anger or jealousy and so forth, then it actually taints our actions. Our physical and verbal actions become harmful and unpleasant as a consequence of the negativities in our mind. When we understand that in relation to ourselves, then we can relate that to others. Then when others are seemingly engaging in inappropriate or unpleasant behaviours, gestures or remarks, then we can immediately understand that they must be influenced by a negative mind. When they engage in positive, good behaviour then we can identify and recognise that they are being influenced by a positive state of mind.

So this way of identifying and interpreting the gestures and behaviours of others as the consequence of the state of mind, will help us make a distinction between the person themselves, versus their state of mind. When we understand that they are actually at the mercy of their negative state of mind, and that negativity is influencing them to engage in inappropriate actions, then we will not get upset or angry with them. Because we have made the distinction between the individual person and the actual negativities within their mind, we will be able to identify the negativity as the main culprit, as the one to be blamed, not the person themselves. In this way we can protect our own mind from being too judgemental, or even from becoming angry or upset with the person, and we will have more compassion. As I regularly share, this is a really important practice to maintain good relationships with others. Especially when you are in a committed relationship, adopting this attitude would be really meaningful.

When we use wisdom derived from our own personal insight and experience to have a broader understanding of the actions of others, then, as mentioned earlier, we will not be affected to a great extent by those actions. Even when they are inappropriate gestures, in understanding where they are coming from, we will be able to maintain our stability, not allowing it to disturb our own mind. When we have a stable and firm mind on our own side, then we will be able to remain joyful and smile, regardless of their gestures. That will definitely defuse any kind of negativity the other might be going through. Otherwise, if we get upset

and angry that adds more fuel to the fire and it will cause more trouble and problems.

If we can practise in this way, then to a certain extent it would be similar to the profound practice mentioned in the teachings about transforming all hardship and difficulties into the path. Not allowing inappropriate gestures to disturb our mind would be similar to this, because we would actually be doing something by remaining positive ourselves.

In contrast, if we allow our mind to become disturbed, then as the great master Shantideva has mentioned: Just as when the physical body withered with sickness becomes very weak and is not able to do much physically, likewise when the mind is affected by discursive thoughts and distractions, it is as if it becomes crippled, not able to be utilised to its full potential in order to achieve something meaningful. The main point here is that having a stable and focused mind is to our benefit—the greater the focus the better the result will be in whatever we do.

In summary the qualities of mind which are indispensable for us to secure a meaningful life are to ensure we have a focused, stable and clear mind, which is able to utilise intelligence or wisdom, this is very important.

So with the remaining time that we address any questions.

Question: I am facing a dilemma and would like Geshe-la's advice. My aged mother is very ill and may be passing on soon. I have a very strong connection with my mum and I know she would like me to be near her at this time. However in my job I counsel people who work at a very high level, and I feel my work is also very important and beneficial. So, I am wondering if I should give my brother and sister the opportunity to care for my mother, and I maintain my job?

Response: Couldn't there be some kind of compromise in which you don't have to completely give up your work, but could still serve your mother as well. Such as when you need to work, then maybe that's when your brothers or sisters can help her. Maybe it could be a joint effort with everyone contributing to caring for your mum. If that is an option then that could be an idea you could look into.

However what I regularly share in terms of caring for one's parents, is that being one hundred percent dedicated to their care would be the best thing that one could do, because when one's parent is most in need, giving up your self-interest and caring for them will leave you with a sense of fulfilment, such that even when the parent passes away there will be no feeling of remorse or regret. There are many who lament that saying, "Oh my mum or dad passed away and I couldn't really do much for them". They feel great regret. So that can be prevented when one seizes the opportunity and is fully dedicated. To take the initiative to care for one's parents would be appreciated much more than if there were a hundred strangers caring for them. There is a completely different sort of appreciation from one's parent if their own child takes care of them, and that is something which I definitely praise.

We can also see this is true from the great pride that parents take even in small gestures such as when we give them a gift. You can see that is how the mind works because of the strong bond and love that parents have for their children. It seems obvious that you have a good connection with your mum and that is something to rejoice in and to feel happy about.

I also share with others that, in order to have a good relationship with your parents, it is important to leave aside issues from the past. Some bring up issues, saying, "They didn't look after me when I was young" and so forth, but those are old times. Leave that aside for the time being and just really focus on now. When we were babies and toddlers it was our parents who spent a lot of time and energy caring for us. Now it is befitting that we return that kindness and take care of our aged parents. Even in the Buddhist tradition there are many great masters, such as Nagarjuna, who have explained at length the great benefit of caring for your parents.

If your brothers and sisters are in agreement, and you can find a way in which you can all contribute so that you don't have to give up your work, that would be ideal. I consider you to be really fortunate to have this opportunity to care for your mother, because I didn't have that opportunity myself. So as I shared in the last session I consider caring for one's parents as a real Dharma practice. One simple definition of Dharma is to benefit others, so if you can benefit your parents then of course there is no question that it will be a Dharma practise.

Before we end the session I would like to thank you all for listening very attentively. Let us again spend a few minutes in meditation, this time using the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni's name. Focus on that sound when it is being recited, and as the recitation subsides to just maintain that awareness on the residue of the sound.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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