
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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As usual, let us spend some time in meditation. So we can adopt a comfortable and relaxed posture for this purpose.

It is possible for us to notice that when we adopt a relaxed physical posture, it does contribute to the wellbeing of the person, the individual 'I' that owns that physical body. Likewise when the body is agitated, the 'I' also becomes agitated, and is affected in a negative way. Thus, adopting a relaxed and calm physical posture does have a significant benefit for the self, or the 'I'.

If, within a comfortable physical posture we can also adopt a genuinely relaxed and calm state of mind then it definitely helps the 'I' or the individual self to be completely relaxed and peaceful. This is because there is also a mind that is involved in our wellbeing. Even when the physical body is relaxed, if the mind is however still in turmoil, then the individual self who owns that mind is affected negatively. The main point that I am emphasising here, is that there is an interconnected relationship between the individual self or 'I', the physical body and our mind.

So while we adopt a comfortable relaxed posture physically, we need to also make an attempt to have a clear, calm state of mind. That combination of a calm and relaxed physical posture along with a calm and clear state of mind will definitely contribute to our wellbeing. Otherwise, as mentioned earlier, even if the physical body is relaxed, if the mind is still in turmoil and agitated, then we will not experience a genuinely happy and calm state of being.

I talk about this regularly, because it is important for us to have a clear understanding and recognition of what contributes to our wellbeing. What I attempt to address, again and again, is that our wellbeing, which encompasses happiness and calmness, is mostly related to our state of mind. Our happiness is not related so much with external things, but more with the state of our own mind. That is something we need to clearly understand.

A positive state of mind contributes to our genuine sense of happiness and wellbeing. This mind is steeped in virtue. Such a virtuous mind is what directly contributes to any happiness we experience. Whereas negative states of mind are causes for any unwanted discomfort or suffering that we experience. It's essential to clearly distinguish between positive virtuous states of mind and negative states of mind. And then we can apply measures to overcome any of our negative states of mind. Even overcoming just one negative state of mind at a time is incredibly meaningful, contributing to our wellbeing and

happiness. To sum up, we recognise and then we apply the measures to overcome our negative states of mind.

It is extremely important for us to recognise the causes for our wellbeing and happiness. The reason we address this again and again is because most of us rely on external factors for our wellbeing and happiness. Of course, to a certain extent good external conditions do contribute to our wellbeing and a certain amount of happiness. But it is all temporary. Favourable external conditions do not completely fulfil all our needs, in particular they don't contribute to an inner sense of wellbeing and happiness. If we only pay attention to and completely rely on external factors, then we fall short in finding the genuine causes and conditions for our wellbeing, which are the inner conditions.

We need to apply careful awareness and understanding of our states of mind, particularly the distinction between the positive and negative states of mind. The reason we need to thoroughly investigate and identify the negative states of mind is because many negative states of mind deceive us. They manifest within us in disguise, seemingly bringing us happiness or pleasure; they disguise themselves as something that will help us. But in fact they are deceiving us. Some of these negative states of mind are clever and cunning. If we don't pay careful attention, we will fall for their deception, and be victims of our own negative states of mind.

To give one example, attachment. The definition of attachment is a state of mind that doesn't see the faults of an object, and only sees its good qualities. Attachment has a tendency to deceive us by obscuring the imperfections of an object we desire. When we relate to an object with attachment we tend to believe the object is entirely faultless, completely perfect in every aspect. When we engage with the object, with that complete expectation or belief that the object is perfect, then we will experience the pangs of the suffering of disappointment later on. Particularly with relationships this is true. Thus as I relate to the youngsters, you need to be very careful when you get into a relationship, because initially if the relationship is based on strong attachment, then you will tend to see only good qualities, and see the other person as being perfect in every aspect. That is initially how they would appear, because attachment taints our perception. However, when we get to know them further, and we spend more time with them, then we begin to slowly see their faults. The imperfections of the person slowly begin to arise, and then you may want to distance yourself from them.

We have the intelligence and wisdom to see through the deceptions of attachment—we actually have that inborn wisdom. Therefore, it is a matter of applying it, to utilise our wisdom to scrutinise, check, and evaluate our states of mind.

At the other end of the spectrum of our state of mind is anger. Anger also deceives us, but does the exactly opposite of attachment. Anger initially arises in a way that helps us to overcome an object that we perceive as something harmful to us, and having faults. So anger appears to arise in a way to protect us. Even though there is no verbal communication from the afflictions, it is as if

attachment and anger are saying, 'We are here to help and protect you'. So we react out of anger with the belief that it will help us. We are being deceived by anger, in the belief that if we act out of anger, it will help and protect us. But in fact we engage in much more harm.

We begin to recognise and understand these factors when we do a thorough investigation and really think about it. But if we don't pay attention to these facts, and don't remind ourselves again and again of the faults of anger and attachment and other afflictions, then when they do arise we completely fall for them again. We fail to recognise them as being states of mind that deceive us, that cause us more harm than benefit. We need to recognise that they arise strongly because of our habit of succumbing to them. The very moment afflictions such as attachment and anger arise, they arise very, very strongly, and we are completely under their influence and dominance. In the moment that anger arises, it will be hard to recognise its deception. This is also true for attachment. This is why we need to pay regular attention to these points. Another main point I want to emphasise is that our mental happiness requires inner mental stability and calmness. We need to train our mind to become more familiar with virtue, and being positive. This is where meditation comes in. The meditation technique is a method to start familiarising our mind to be in a positive state of mind and maintaining it.

To summarise the benefits of meditation, it brings about a positive state of mind and increases the positive qualities. However, this is based on overcoming the negativities in our mind. As the negativities decrease, the positive qualities in our mind will naturally increase. For every negative state of mind there is an opposing positive state of mind. When the positive state of mind has the upper hand, then we experience the benefit of wellbeing.

If we could adopt a state of mind that is opposite to anger, then anger decreases. Just imagine how much wellbeing and happiness we could experience by adopting a less agitated and calm state of mind. Likewise, attachment is another negative state of mind that causes us and our family so much distress and agony. We can see that due to attachment there are many faults. It may not be immediately obvious, but when we think about it there are so many situations that lead to someone suffering due to attachment. There are ways to overcome afflictions such as anger and attachment. For example, there is a specific antidote for overcoming attachment as presented in the meditation technique, which is to meditate on the imperfections of the object of attachment.

One object many people become most obsessed with is our body or someone else's body. A lustful attachment to a body causes the attachment to increase, and causes so much of the earlier mentioned distress and suffering. The way to overcome a strong attachment to someone else's body, or our own, is to reflect on the natural imperfections of the body. As mentioned previously, attachment deceives us so that we see only perfection in the object. While attachment is saying the body is perfect, we can counteract that deception by examining the body. Is it so perfect? Where is the beauty on the body? Is it in the skin? When we examine the skin with discriminating

wisdom and reasoning, we use logic to look into finding the beauty within the skin. Then we go beyond the skin, and ask whether the beauty is in the flesh, or in the bones. When we start to investigate in this way, we realise we are unable to find or to pinpoint exactly where the beauty lies. Instead of beauty, we become more familiar with the natural imperfections of the body. This is how the strong mind of attachment is reduced. What initially appears to be something perfect, without any faults or imperfections, is really an exaggerated state of mind. It is not based on truth and reality. By using logic and reasoning, we can appease an agitated state of mind, and bring about a more genuinely calm, relaxed and peaceful state of mind. Our intelligence has great potential, and a great ability to help us.

We all experience unhappiness at certain times. Rather than just giving into unhappiness, we can take the initiative to look into what could be causing it, looking within ourselves rather than immediately trying to find blame elsewhere. If we have a positive attitude, then we have a happy state of mind. Whereas when we are feeling unhappy and sad, we notice that the kinds of thoughts we are preoccupied with are negative. In that moment of feeling unhappy, our mind is in a negative state. In summary, by recognising this for ourselves we realise that we need to embrace positive states of mind because they contribute to a happy mind. Likewise, we can apply the antidotes to oppose negative states of mind, which are the cause of our unhappiness.

The essential point here is to recognise that these strategies protect us. Since we all want to protect our happiness and wellbeing, these are the real measures and methods to protect our wellbeing.

To summarise earlier points, in order to genuinely achieve a relaxed body and mind we need to ensure that the mind in particular becomes genuinely relaxed and calm. With this combination of a genuinely relaxed body and mind we will experience positive benefit. The main thing we need to pay attention to is our state of mind, because when we observe how our mind functions in a normal setting, we might find the mind being distracted, easily following so many different thoughts. If we don't do anything about it, and we just let our mind go in every direction following every thought, then it is no wonder that after a while it becomes overwhelming, as we become more and more immersed in our own thoughts. Unfortunately, we're mostly preoccupied with negative thoughts. Dwelling in our negative thoughts becomes more and more oppressive to the point where we might experience depression.

A distracted mind is a mind that has gone completely amok. When the mind becomes like that, then basically it is unrestrained, following every kind of whimsical plot. This is what causes mental distress, leading up to depression and anxiety. The way to counteract that is by training our mind to not go off in every direction, to not follow every whimsical thought that comes up in the mind, and not to let it run amok. We train our mind in that way through meditation. First of all the meditation technique involves choosing an appropriate object to focus on. An appropriate object does not cause the mind

to experience anxiety, agitation or excitement. It is best of course to choose a positive object, otherwise a neutral object will do. For our meditation purpose we use the breath. The meditation object serves as an anchoring point during the meditation, helping the mind to not go off in every direction. Instead, we make a commitment to place our entire focus, our full attention on our chosen object.

We can now adopt this meditation technique, where we recognise that we need to overcome whatever is causing distress for our mind. We need to change the pattern of our mind from how it normally functions. We adopt this meditation technique of placing our entire focus on a chosen object, in this case, on the breath itself.

[breathing meditation]

Question:

How do you know if someone has a fault, or if your mind is making it up? And how do we deal with them while we are working that out?

Answer:

First of all, to be able to reach a level where you don't see a fault in another person is difficult. Even if you think it's your own projection, deep inside you still think, 'There is a fault there!' It is hard to reach that. But if you can reach that, that is great. First of all it's a reality that not seeing faults in others is very difficult.

The very definition of an ordinary being means they have faults. They are bound to have faults, because they are ordinary beings. Now the only being who would have no faults at all, would be an enlightened being. But even with an enlightened being we tend to see faults.

The way to protect our own mind from negativities is to practice training our mind through meditation. As the Kadampa master Lama Atisha mentions, the practice of training our mind is not to deny that others have faults, but rather not to focus on their faults. Try to see their good qualities. If we only focus on the faults, then we feel antagonistic or judgemental. All these other negative feelings arise in relation to the other person, which then cause us distress. Lama Atisha specifically advises us to hide our qualities and proclaim our faults. But in relation to others, we should praise their qualities, and hide their faults. This is one way to train our mind to be unaffected by negativities and to be more a virtuous.

Training our mind it is not just some trick we are playing on ourselves—it does have great benefit. There is some truth and reality in the way to train ourselves in how we perceive things. For example, when we take the initiative to focus on someone's good qualities, then we can actually see those qualities. Likewise, if we only think about their faults, that is what will appear to us. We will become more and more acquainted with their faults if we always look for them. Eventually, they will appear as being completely riddled with faults, and having no redeeming qualities. It is a matter of where we put our attention and focus. Naturally, when we focus on the good qualities, then that is what will appear and we will start to appreciate the person, rather than being affected

by some faults they may have. Because we are focusing more on a person's good qualities, they will appear to us in a better light.

On that note, it is important in relationships with others to try to focus on their good qualities, so that they can rub off on us. Now if we practice the opposite, that is, we now focus on their faults, then we are opening ourselves to be influenced by their negative qualities, and we might turn out to be like them. For example, if your companion or friend or partner has a lot of anger, then we might end up becoming a short tempered, angry person ourselves. Or if they have strong attachments, then we might end up also being influenced by that. If we instead focus on the good qualities of others, and not allow their negativities to be an influence, then later even if we separate we will still have that warm feeling of remembering them in a good light, because we embraced their good qualities. The relationship with the other person would not have been in vain. We would have learned some good things, and adopted some good behaviour.

On another note, even in the event someone does have a fault, they will not accept that if you bring it up bluntly, and your comments will hurt them. Even if it is the truth, better not to mention it because it hurts them.

The examples given in the teachings include encountering a person who is blind, and yelling at them, telling them they are blind. This would affect them and be hurtful. Even if it is the truth it is not helpful to the situation. It is only going to be harmful to the other person, even if these are the words of truth. So it's better not to say it.

So, how do you deal with someone who may have faults? If you just bluntly mention their faults, that's going to be hurtful and harmful to them, and they're not going to accept it anyway. So you need to have a little bit of patience, and deal with them slowly. And then, maybe gradually in a light mannered way, it can be addressed, and they will accept it. It will help to change them.

I'll share a personal story. An old friend of mine was fond of me, and very good to me. But even though he was good natured, he did have a bit of a temper. There are certain individuals who are kind at heart, but are also a little bit blunt. When we were young, he was younger than me and better built. He might have had the upper hand if we got into a fight. Actually, he did hit me once and I was really upset and I wanted to get back at him. We agreed to fight it out where there was no one around. In the Tibetan tradition, when two people agree to have a fight they fight in a place where no one is around. That was considered to be a mark of bravery, because it meant there would be no-one to interfere, and no-one to separate you if you really got into a fight. We were adamant that we are going to have a fight, but on the way there I started to think that maybe there is no point in fighting, and then my anger started to reduce. And then at a certain point he turned around too. I don't know who initiated it, but we came to an agreement to not fight. After that, we became quite close to each other, and later became good friends. His short temper still remained, not so much with me, but generally he was still short tempered. But as the way to help him come out of that, I

used to tease him purposely. He would even sometimes hit me, just out of frustration, but I wouldn't pay attention to that. I would continue to tease him. And in fact, later on, he became much more easy-going. He was not so easily irritated. It is quite peculiar when we think about it, that sometimes if you tease someone who is short tempered even more, it helps them get out of it, to deal with it.

To end the story, we started to escape from Tibet together. When the Chinese Red Guards came into Tibet and took over, we were in the same escape party. On the escape route we came to a high mountain pass. I was a little bit further ahead and he was a little bit behind me with another group. It was at night and we didn't have any flashlights, there were no lights around so it was completely dark. I was further ahead as we passed over the mountain but he never caught up with me. I heard later that his group was captured by the Chinese guards. He was imprisoned, I think he spent about eighteen years in prison. After he was released from prison, I heard that two days after he was released he passed away.

The point is that if a close acquaintance, a relative, or friend is short tempered and angry, and if you retaliate with anger, then that is only going to worsen the situation. But if you can have a light heartedness and help them out with humour, even by gently teasing them, then it is possible to help them to change and transform. If you use anger to oppose anger it will never work. If you use light heartedness and kindness to oppose anger then it can work.

The great master Aryadeva mentioned this succinctly. The very nature of anger is that when expressed it causes immediate disruption and distances us from others. Because of the disruption, and distance it causes, it is thus much easier to see people's faults. Whereas attachment has a tendency of seemingly bringing you together, and making you seemingly feel closer to others. And because you feel close to them, it is very difficult to see attachment as a fault. Some pleasure is derived from attachment as well, which makes it more difficult to see the faults and disadvantages of attachment. The main point here is that anger is the affliction that causes disruption and disturbance. We need to work on the obvious levels of the afflictions or the negativities, try to deal with them, and work with that. Now it would be too hard to say that you shouldn't have any anger to someone who hurts you. It might be hard for us to immediately practice not becoming angry with an enemy. But with people who are closer, we definitely need to try to take the initiative to not be angry with them. We can try to develop a little bit more patience and tolerance and understanding with those who we consider close and dear.

Before we end the session for the evening, I would like to really thank you all for paying such great attention. I really appreciate that. That is not because I feel I have something worthwhile, and really profound to share with you, but rather whatever I share with you in a practical way is done in the light of seeing you as a family, considering you like a family. And so with family, you want the best for them, and do whatever you feel

would help them or benefit them. So it is in that light that I share my stories. Even on a practical level if it can help your daily life become a little bit more meaningful, to be able to cope with your everyday life situations, to become calmer and peaceful within yourselves then that is all I wish for. I have no other intention, or ulterior motives whatsoever. If you find any of the words that I have shared useful and meaningful, then try to keep that to use in your own life.

As I have mentioned regularly in the past, if you find something I've said useful and beneficial, then embrace that, and use it. But if you find anything that is not useful or not relevant to you, then don't dwell on it too much, just throw it away. Before we end the session for the evening, let us again spend a few minutes in meditation, this time focusing on the sound of the Buddha Shakyamuni mantra. And as we hear that chant, try to place your full attention and focus on that sound. When the recitation subsides, just maintain that focus and awareness and just hold that for a few moments.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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Edited Version

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