
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment



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As usual we can spend some time in meditation, so please adjust your physical posture so you are comfortable and relaxed.

The Buddhist teachings explain that having a good motivation for doing a practice is essential. Even having a good motivation for our spiritual gathering together here is important. We have already initiated a positive intention for our gathering by completing a prayer to go for refuge and to generate bodhicitta.

To go for refuge is to acknowledge the Buddha as a teacher who has acquired all positive qualities and is perfect in all aspects. Since the Buddha has reached this state, he is the perfect teacher to guide us on an unmistakable path to achieve happiness. The spiritual path the Buddha taught is significant because engaging in the path's practices will lead a person to be completely free from all faults and endowed with all positive qualities. This is the perfect state of enlightenment that the Buddha himself reached. If we follow the path the Buddha taught, we will reach this ultimate state as well.

You can set your positive motivation at any time by generating the state of mind that all your virtues and good deeds become causes to benefit and serve other sentient beings. This intention encompasses a most positive state of mind. I regularly familiarise myself with this mindset. In is in fact a good practice to generate a positive motivation before any activity you engage in. It is also a good practice to dedicate your past, present and future virtues to be solely for the benefit of others, so that you may serve them in the best possible ways. Thus dedicating one's virtues to others' wellbeing is not limited only to present virtues. If you dedicate all your virtues in this way, bringing to mind the positive deeds of the past, present and future to benefit others, your own purpose will be fulfilled on the side. In other words, even if you are not specifically thinking about your own wishes, and instead intend to always benefit others, your wishes however will naturally be fulfilled. Generating this altruistic thought in your mind can encourage you, and also make you feel at ease and relaxed because you will not be doggedly fixed on a narrow outcome that only serves yourself and causes you discomfort when it is not achieved.

When you cultivate a strong motivation to benefit others, you will naturally refrain from intentionally harming them. A genuine wish to benefit others logically entails this because your motivation naturally prevents ill-will. Conversely, if you do not have genuine concern, love or compassion for others, you will hurt them. Right now you may not have the ability to benefit others extensively, however by generating this wish, you can at least refrain from harming them - and this is beneficial for them as well. Your actions of not harming others is an immediate and

effective result from generating kind intentions towards them.

Of course, for the purpose of the practice, we cultivate the intention to benefit others on a grand scale. However, we also need to be practical and begin with those that surround us, particularly our loved ones who we regularly associate with. By simply practising a kind attitude that wishes to benefit them, we are able to refrain from intentionally harming them, and then we may be in the position to help them too.

This positive state of mind is something we need to acquaint our minds with throughout the day. We can periodically recall our intention to benefit others, and through refraining from harming them, we may possibly be able to help them as well. This can be extended to the time you spend asleep. When you go to bed at night, you can generate a beneficial intention in your mind so that your entire night's sleep becomes a cause to serve others. The more you acquaint yourself with this attitude, the more it will help you to put it into practice.

As mentioned, the beginning practice is to not harm others because of your intentional good will towards them. If you adopt this mindset, you will see from your own experience the benefits that others reap. The people who immediately surround you will be confident in knowing that you will not harm them. You know for yourself how you feel at ease around certain people that you are confident will not hurt you, and other people experience exactly the same feeling around people they know will not cause them harm. We are all comfortable and at ease with individuals who care about us because we are confident they will not hurt us. This means that when you intentionally practise having the genuine intention of not hurting others and helping them when you can, your surroundings and interactions with others are affected in positive ways. You automatically gain from having this kind of attitude.

Essentially the practice of setting your motivation is to familiarise your mind again and again with the positive intention of benefitting others. The activity of familiarising yourself with this positive mindset is a form of meditation. The Tibetan word for meditation is "gom", which means to "become familiar". When we meditate we are becoming familiar with positive states of mind. Since we are interested in meditation, we need to understand that the practice implies familiarising ourselves with positive states of mind, specifically states of mind that intentionally refrain from hurting others, and then how to best help them.

This is my personal practice. I cannot claim to have had great achievements in this area, but I do familiarise my mind throughout the day with this intention, and I generate this attitude before I sleep as well. The benefits I have seen by acquainting myself with this state of mind are that when I meet others, they seem fond of me and comfortable in my presence. I see this as a benefit to them because they are not harmed by me.

The practice of generating a positive attitude by familiarising ourselves with intending to benefit and refrain from hurting others begins in your family home, and then gradually it can extend to other communities and even countries.

We can see that countries known to be peaceful generally are those where the majority of people live with an attitude of not intentionally hurting or causing trouble for others. The intention of hurting others is minimised because this mindset is prevalent amongst the population so a natural

peace is experienced in the country. In contrast, we see countries in turmoil and constantly in conflict with other nations because there are mutual feelings of hostility and the wish to harm in the minds of the inhabitants. This collective attitude is what causes large-scale chaos and conflict. When individuals or collective mindsets in nations do not adopt a positive and kind attitude, small harms increase and escalate into far-reaching retaliations. This is how hostilities in the mind can spiral exponentially to the point that some countries are always at war.

The Buddhist teachings are well known to have a basis of non-violence. The structure of Buddhism rests on refraining from hurting others and expanding on that foundation to develop intentional benefits for others.

In our personal lives when two or three individuals live together or are a family, mutual respect and wishing not to harm the others is what makes the relationships harmonious. We can see this logic and so recognise the great benefit of this attitude and put it into practise.

The full breadth of meditation needs to be understood. We are familiarising ourselves with the positive state of mind of wishing to benefit and not harm others because it prevents us from feeling ill-will towards them which could otherwise escalate. This attitude benefits you personally because generating the genuine wish to benefit others and not hurt them prevents negative states of mind such as jealousy arising. The experience of jealousy is an uncomfortable state of mind, but if you wish others well and genuinely want the best for them and for their situations to turn out pleasantly, you can rejoice and feel happy for them, which prevents the pangs of jealousy occurring. If you think about the benefits of familiarising yourself with positive attitudes you can help yourself in practical ways to not experience mindsets that cause you pain.

The true purpose of meditation is to familiarise yourself with and increase your positive states of mind to benefit others because ultimately the results are of great value to them but also to yourself. We are intelligent enough to see what is valuable to ourselves and others by applying this kind of common sense.

We often comment on the need to be befriend those who are trustworthy, which is a trait we value highly. How do we gauge whether someone is trustworthy? The simple measure is to see if they have a genuine sense of love and compassion towards you and others. This is the basis we use to decide whether we can trust them. As previously explained, a person's love and compassion towards others naturally encompasses the attitude of benefiting and not harming them. So anyone who has the qualities of love and compassion and acts on these values is trustworthy. If you were travelling to a region where thieves were known to be rampant and you were carrying a large sum of money, you would naturally be cautious and apprehensive until you left that area and were out of danger of being robbed. You would feel more relaxed and comfortable in places known to have little theft and would not be overly worried about your valuables and belongings when you are there.

Often we wonder whether a person is honest. If they are, we hold them in high regard and others do too. If we travelled with a large sum of money in an area known for thievery, we may trust our valuables with an honest and trustworthy person while we went to the toilet. We would have no hesitation in leaving our valuables with an honest person.

The value of honesty and trustworthiness is something we all appreciate. For this reason, we need to relate the purpose of our meditation practice to achieving positive qualities like this. Why else would we meditate but to increase and stabilise the positive virtues we have in our minds. This is what a meditation practice really entails.

So, the positive qualities that need to be increased are the genuine wish to benefit others and refrain from harming them. When you can take this practice to a higher level, you can specifically focus on developing love and compassion. The purpose of having a meditation practice is to achieve positive states of mind. This process does not happen overnight, but the more we familiarise ourselves with cultivating positive states of mind, the less negative states of mind occur. Gradually, through the intention of benefitting and not harming others, the mindset of hurting others diminishes. Of course, the opposite is also true: the more we generate the intention of hurting others, the more we harm them and our wish to be of aid decreases so that our positive states of mind are overridden. Negative and positive states of mind directly oppose each other, so the practice becomes a matter of familiarising ourselves more with positive attitudes and not allowing ourselves to be influenced and dominated by negative ones. This steady process is incremental and how we train our minds.

The practice of meditation is one where you increase your positive states of mind so that you have a mind imbued with genuine kindness because it is based on love and compassion. Love and compassion are the most important values you can have in your life. These states of mind are essential because they provide you with a meaningful existence that brings joy to others and yourself. The more we are inclined to develop love and compassion the less difficulties and problems we will face in our lives. Our relationships will be genuine and harmonious because our intention to hurt others will decrease and eventually cease. What would be left is the fostering of long-lasting, affectionate and sincere connections with others. If you have genuinely good relationships in your life, you will always have good support. Your mutual love and compassion with your companions is something which will sustain you and ensure your life is meaningful.

We need to understand that meditating is the means to create the causes for our own happiness, and the method to also protect whatever level of happiness we already have. As such, a meditation practice is crucial for your wellbeing. I often recommend to the younger generation that they keep these important points in mind, so that they have spent time reflecting and evaluating what is truly important in their lives. If you familiarise yourself with the proper means for your wellbeing early in life, you will grow up appreciating these essentials while you learn skills to acquire the material things necessary to sustain yourself.

We all need material comfort to a certain degree, but if we put our entire time and energy into acquiring possessions, we will lose touch with developing the internal conditions essential for our wellbeing. Some people have commented to me that while they enjoy and appreciate improving their external lifestyle, they often have felt internally empty and alone as a result because their lives do not have a meaningful direction. Sometimes these feelings have reached a point where they feel depressed, anxious and unhappy. This is a very unfortunate state to be in—to have your external circumstances improve while your internal wellbeing decreases. If your internal happiness declines to

the point where you feel lost and unhappy, you would be in a very unfortunate state. However, working to improve your external conditions while maintaining and increasing your internal happiness is the right way to achieve your wellbeing.

If your external conditions improve and your internal wellbeing also improves that is a very good sign that you have not missed the point of how to achieve happiness in your life. In contrast, if you spend all your time and energy acquiring material possessions but fail to acquire appropriate internal conditions to be happy, you will end up feeling unhappy and unsettled inside. So, the best approach in life is to improve your external and internal conditions at the same time. You can exert yourself in making your external surroundings more comfortable and simultaneously work on improving the state of your mind. This is something we can all do, and is especially important to recognise earlier on in your life.

Your body and your mind is inseparable from your individual self. Wherever the "self" or "I" goes, the physical body and mind goes too. You cannot leave your body and mind aside and go somewhere by yourself; your body and mind must go wherever you go. Since this is the case, your body and your mind are the most important assets you have. If you took care of and maintained both of them well, their optimal condition is what will contribute to the wellness of the "self".

There is no other way to experience wellbeing, other than through your physical and mental attributes. We always relate to being well and happy in relation to our physical health and our mental wellbeing, so, if your body and your mind are in your possession and you have control over them, you can utilise your time in taking care of them in the best ways for yourself. This is imperative for you to do because your body and mind are the essential elements that determine your personal wellbeing. If you want to experience personal wellbeing, you will need to look after your body and your mind. There is no other way to experience wellbeing and happiness than through your body and your mind. This is not an obscure point, and looking after your body and mind is something you can manage. We all have the potential and natural inclination to be happy, so the practical approach is to practise looking after your body and your mind so that your wellbeing can be maximised.

We can now spend some time practising meditation with the time we have remaining. So, for that purpose, we can adjust our posture to be upright, but comfortable and relaxed. This is important for meditating, but the most important aspect is to have an attentive mind which is free from discursive thoughts. This is because your mind is what meditates and not your body. If your mind is in a chaotic state and you allow it to continue in this way, you will miss the purpose of this practice and you would not be meditating. You need to see the connection between a very busy mind that is burdened by many distracting thoughts and a mind that is troubled by worries and fears. Often we have thoughts, daydream, speculate and plan, and these ideas expand until we are thinking about situations that we might not be able to achieve or manage right now. We can then become so fixated on these thoughts that they completely consume us and our minds become overpowered and obsessed. Therefore, we need to recognise that a distracted mind full of discursive thoughts is what causes us inner turmoil, and that the purpose of meditating is to intentionally distant ourselves from them.

Meditating entails leaving all thoughts and agendas aside so that you can bring your entire focus and attention on the meditation object. The meditation object we will focus on now will be the breath. So, for the next few minutes, you can commit to yourself that you will not allow your mind to follow any whimsical thoughts that may arise and that you will instead bring your entire attention to focus solely on your breathing pattern. In this way you will place one-hundred per cent focus only on your breath. If you make a commitment like this, you can utilise your mind to derive the prime benefit of this practise. [*Pause for single-pointed meditation.*]

That will be sufficient for now. We can derive from the experience we have just had that adopting a relaxed posture alongside a focused and attentive mind enables us to genuinely become relaxed. This process of meditating is profound because we can use the reasoning in our everyday life – the consequence of intentionally adopting a meditative approach is to experience some mental ease and relaxation. If you were to relax physically but your mind was completely distracted, you would not experience a sense of mental wellbeing. You would have not done anything to calm your mind down from its normally chaotic state. However, our experience of meditating now shows you that the combination of a relaxed physical body and a calm focused mind will cause one to become genuinely relaxed and feel at ease.

We can end our session for the evening now. Let us again take a few moments to meditate. This time, we can focus on the sound of the mantra to be recited which is Buddha Shakyamuni's name. We can place our entire focus on the sound of the chant and, when the recitation subsides, we can focus on the absence of the sound. Focusing for a few moments on this sense of calmness and ease can be experienced as a sense of wellbeing and a blissful state of mind. This will suffice as our second meditation for the evening.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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