
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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4 March 2015

Let us adopt a comfortable, relaxed body, along with a relaxed and calm mind. When one is relaxed physically as well as mentally, then whatever we discuss in a gathering such as this, will become worthwhile and meaningful.

As we know, if we are physically and mentally agitated then whatever discussion or encounter we have with others does not proceed well. It is good to take this factor into account in our everyday lives, when we are relating to others or in whatever endeavour we may be engaging in, spiritual or otherwise. Even materialistically, with work, agendas, discussions and meetings, and so forth, it will be good to keep in mind that these proceed best when one is feeling physically and mentally relaxed. Otherwise if we are restless and agitated then the discussion we have with someone else, whether individually or in a group, will not be fruitful.

This is particularly the case with our gathering here. We all have the intention of coming here to learn and cultivate a positive and peaceful state of mind. Therefore, as our endeavour is a meaningful one, engaging in it in an appropriate way is most significant.

We are also engaging in a discussion to distinguish between what is positive and conducive for our wellbeing, and what is negative and destructive to our wellbeing. So the distinction and the analysis of the positive and negative is also what we are learning here.

The distinction between the positive and negative, particularly in relation to our state of mind, is what we are primarily interested in. Briefly, a positive state of mind is a mind that is genuinely kind and happy, whereas a negative state of mind is the opposite. It is an unhappy state of mind, a mind which is troubled and in turmoil. This is one of the worst states of mind that one can be in. To be able to distinguish between positive and negative states of mind will help us to further develop our inborn wisdom and intelligence—the understanding that lies within us.

This wisdom that we are specifically referring to here is analytical wisdom. One of the most supreme methods for developing this analytical wisdom within one is the practice of meditation. When one is introduced to a proper technique of meditation, and applies that in one's life, it will definitely help to generate that wisdom within one.

The primary purpose of the practice of meditation is to help reduce states of mind that harm oneself. There are certain states of mind that are classified as either delusions, afflictions, or negative states of mind. The very moment they take hold, or manifest within us, they cause

us turmoil and distress. Meditation helps to reduce these negative states of mind, or hold them at bay. Through the practice of meditation one gains some control over one's mind, and is able to secure a level of wellbeing for oneself, regardless of external conditions. Even when there are external conditions that might cause one difficulties, if one's internal state of mind is in a controlled state, and does not allow a negative state of mind to arise, one will be able to remain undisturbed and not affected.

It is definitely important to recognise that within our mind we have both states of minds—those that contribute to our wellbeing and some that are detrimental and cause us turmoil and a troubled state of mind. On the positive side, we are able to protect and control our mind so that we can maintain a happy state of mind. We all know the elated feeling that we can have, which makes us feel more self-confident and bolder. We will notice that we are more confident and are able to face whatever situation arises, and it gives us a sense of self-worth and dignity. Whereas if the mind is unhappy, the opposite occurs and one will feel a bit hopeless and worthless and not able to face others and one's self-esteem is weak. We can definitely see that that state of mind has an effect on the individual self.

When one has adequate external conditions and everything to sustain one, but finds that internally one is not feeling all that well and happy, and still feels distress within then, at that juncture, it is good to investigate why one is feeling that way. When there is no obvious cause, one is not deprived of the essentials for one's livelihood and there is no disturbance from anyone, but there is a feeling of distress and unhappiness inside, what could be causing that? If there are no obvious conditions or reasons and one cannot find anything external to blame one's unhappiness on, then, if at that point we look within, pay attention and are honest with ourselves, we will begin to notice that there is something wrong within our mind. It is either an attitude problem or something that is causing us distress internally within our own state of mind. Identifying that is a significant achievement. The next thing is to apply an antidote to overcome that disturbing state of mind. The antidote is the practice of meditation, and with familiarity with meditation practice we can apply the proper antidotes to overcome the internal states of mind that cause us disturbance and distress. When we have noticed these disturbing states of mind through our own experience then we can take steps to find ways to overcome them.

If we were to ask ourselves, 'What are we attempting to achieve through meditation? What does the training of meditation involve?' the simple answer is that meditation is a technique to understand one's own mind. Knowing one's own state of mind is essential for one's wellbeing. As a great line of past masters, called the Kadampa masters, have said, *if we don't know our own mind, we will not be happy in whatever we do, whereas once we know our own mind, even difficulties can be transformed into the path.* As the great Kadampa masters have advised, it is indeed a personal instruction for us to get to know our own mind. If we recognise anger for what it is, something destructive with no redeeming qualities, we will protect

ourselves from the state of mind of anger. Because we recognise it is harmful, we will not allow ourselves to be influenced by anger. This is one example of how knowing one's own state of mind can help prevent distress, difficulties and turmoil in one's mind.

Once we learn the technique of meditation, and it starts to become a part of one's life, then when one practices regularly and becomes more familiar with the technique, one will experience an immediate benefit during the meditation session. Further, due to our familiarity with the practice we will start to reap the benefits of meditation outside of the meditation session, in our everyday lives, when we are out and about engaging in our daily activities.

How will the meditation practice benefit one? We will be able to maintain some sort of vigilance over our state of mind. Even though we may be busy engaging in some activities or work we will develop one part of the mind that will always be checking the state of mind we are in. Is one's mind in a positive or negative state? Are there negative or positive thoughts occurring? If we notice a negative state of mind then, by the virtue of noticing it, we will be better equipped to reduce it, and not let it escalate. Whereas, when it is a positive state of mind we will feel it is a good state of mind to be in, and just leave it as it is. So this is how we maintain vigilance within ourselves, by developing the analytical wisdom.

What we also need to understand is that when we come out of a meditation session, we are more likely to be influenced by our negative states of mind, because we will encounter more distractions. We need to understand that there is a connection between the external objects that we see, and how these external objects influence our mind. What we experience with our senses is an effect of making contact with external objects. Therefore the feelings of either joy or anger are influenced by external objects. We need to be able to interact properly with external objects, and not allow them to influence our mind to a great extent.

In relation to the negative states of mind that disturb us, we all experience the ill effects of intense anger, intense attachment and jealousy, to name a few. When intense anger arises we experience its ill effects, our mind is disturbed and in turmoil, and is not happy. We need to look into how this intense anger formed within us. If we were to check, we would notice that it came about in relation to focusing on a particular object. Focusing on and remembering that particular object causes one to experience that intense anger. It may be someone who harmed us or someone with whom one completely disagrees. Whether an individual or a situation, we will notice that it is because we interact with it, that it causes one to be in a state of intense anger.

Because it is an uncomfortable state, intense anger does not contribute to our peaceful state of mind. So we need to try to overcome and relieve ourselves of that anger. How do we do that? A very simple technique and method is through the practice of meditation, by focusing on a positive or neutral object. When we apply the meditation technique we don't allow our mind to interact with the object of intense anger, and temporarily forget

about the object. Of course, to do that we have to occupy our mind with something else. In meditation practice we focus on a positive or neutral object. That, in itself, will give us immediate relief. We will be released from the pangs of intense anger. For example, focusing on our breath is helpful, because it removes our attention away from the object that causes us intense anger.

Intense attachment also causes one distress and agitation. One is not in a calm state of mind when there is intense attachment. Attachment also arises in relation to an object. Knowing that, one understands that one's connection to an object, with any intense emotion such as strong attachment, is not going to be worthwhile and useful for yourself and the other person. Meditating on the breath releases one from this intense attachment. Because attachment arises in relation to seeing an object as being appealing and beautiful, if we were to focus on an object and see that it is not as appealing, and has natural defects, then the earlier mind of attachment will start to reduce, and one will be released from the pangs of strong attachment.

Likewise jealousy arises in relation to an object. In the case of jealousy we feel uncomfortable with the good conditions and good experiences of another. Because we are not able to bear the good conditions of others, we start feeling jealous and when jealousy arises to an intense level it will definitely cause one to feel very uncomfortable, and internally one will be in turmoil. Therefore the direct antidote to release one's mind from intense jealousy is to start feeling happy, and to rejoice in others' good conditions. If one starts to think, 'Oh it's good for them. Things are going well for them. They have good conditions, I wish them well.' then the earlier mind of feeling unhappy with their success will change and transform, and one will be released from that jealousy. One can be inspired to become like them too, 'It's a great that they are having success, I might as well follow the same measures to achieve the same conditions myself'. So it can also be a benefit for one.

While we cannot expect to immediately remove anger, attachment and jealousy from our system completely, it is within our capacity and ability to reduce the intensity of these delusions within us. All of what I am relating to you is something manageable and in line with the saying of the Kadampa masters mentioned earlier, *knowing the state of one's mind will definitely help one to overcome problems and even turn difficulties into the path*. An unfavourable situation can be made into a favourable situation. That is all about knowing how to change the attitudes within one's mind. This, in simple terms, is the point the Kadampa masters made previously. I emphasise all of this to you because I know all of you are capable, and it is within your means. It is not something beyond your reach. Therefore it is worthwhile to adopt.

So, it is in this way that we can see the significance of the practice of meditation, and how it can help our mind to become more aware of the positive states of mind, and the distinction between the positive and negative states of mind. Furthermore, having recognised the positive states of mind, it helps to further promote and increase positivity within us. Having recognised and identified

the negativities within our mind meditation practice helps one to initially reduce their strength and then to overcome them. If one applies this technique, even if one says, 'I don't really want to be happy', you have no choice, you will be happy.

Though I don't want to sound as if I am boasting, I can say that I have some experiences with this. I would have been no different to most people in my younger days. I also had an agitated mind. However through diligence, continuous efforts and practice I can now safely say that in my older age I don't think I am as grumpy as some others, and I have a quite happy state of mind. Therefore it is with this level of personal experience that I share with you these techniques of working with one's own mind that are essential for one's wellbeing in life.

More specifically, the practice of meditation can be understood as a means to protect the good qualities, and to reduce the defects or faults within one's own mind.

Having explained all of that, we can now spend a few minutes in the practice of meditation. Whilst all of you are now familiar with the physical posture that is to be comfortable and relaxed, one also has to be alert and needs to understand that meditation is done by the mind by focusing on an appropriate object. It is all in relation to what the mind is focusing on. If the mind is focusing on something that, by its very nature, is causing turmoil and distress within one, then the natural consequence is that one experiences a troubled state of mind. Whereas, if one chooses an appropriate object that does not cause distress, then one will not experience that consequence and instead will feel a genuine sense of calmness and tranquillity. Therefore, from the very outset of meditation practice one needs to know the appropriate object to focus on.

To apply the meditation technique we need to withdraw from all external objects and preoccupations in our mind, whether they are good or bad objects. Temporarily, we withdraw from all preoccupation and bring our entire focus within. Having brought it within ourselves we then place our focus on our breath, the object that we choose to focus on in our meditation practice now. When we place 100% focus on our breath, the natural rhythm of breathing, and are fully aware of each breath coming in and going out, then the consequence will be that our mind will begin to settle down. This then contributes to our wellbeing for whatever duration we are able to focus on our breath, whether it is for five or ten minutes. Of course, later on when one progresses in meditation one may be able to focus longer, for an hour or so. To that extent, one will be experiencing a genuine sense of tranquillity and calmness, which then will definitely contribute to our wellbeing. When our mind is genuinely relaxed and calm, it definitely will have a positive effect on our physical body. Meditation contributes to our physical health because when the mind is calm and settled the body functions in a better way. So, for the next few minutes, we will focus on our breath. (*Pause for meditation*)

We have just experienced the immediate positive effects of meditation practice in our short session. If we were to pay a little attention to this practice and technique, and

try to adopt it in our daily lives we would definitely experience a longer lasting, positive effect. One's relations, partners, and those we are living with will also experience the positive effects. In other words, it will benefit oneself as well as those around us.

Further, it will also help one's relationship with others, particularly someone with whom we are sharing our lives. Having a harmonious relationship with them is essential, and that is dependent on us having a happy mind. If one has a happy state of mind, then small remarks and certain gestures will not affect and upset one so much. One will not be easily irritated, and when one doesn't get upset and angry that will definitely contribute to a good relationship with others. When we start getting upset and angry we may return inappropriate gestures which will harm the relationship. I personally feel that one of the factors for a happy life for oneself is to have a good relationship with others. This is indeed very true. We can see a lot of suffering and problems and the agony basically comes from, unhealthy relationships, that causes a lot of distress.

Before we conclude for the evening, are there any good questions? You can raise your hands if you have a good question.

Question: In the Heart Sutra, Avalokiteshvara is referred to as mahasattva, a bodhisattva. He is not referred to as a buddha. I thought Vajrapani, Maitreya and Manjushri were buddhas. They were referred to in certain texts as mahasattvas. Can you explain why?

You are actually referring to the six close disciples of the Buddha. These include Avalokiteshvara, Vajrapani and Manjushri. The general understanding is that whilst they are enlightened they manifest as bodhisattvas and as disciples of the Buddha to basically show the greatness of the Buddha. Whilst they are enlightened they have not manifested their enlightened qualities at that time, but rather manifest themselves like a bodhisattva. That is how it is generally explained.

Then, in the manifestation of bodhisattvas and on behalf of the other disciples, they would ask questions of the Buddha, which prompted the Buddha to give a teaching. In fact the tantric teachings are mostly in relation to questions or requests from Vajrapani. For example, there is a quote in the teachings that says, *There are enlightened beings who don't necessarily show all their enlightened qualities*, and the eight close disciples of the Buddha are given as examples.

There is a great significance to this. Whilst, as mentioned previously, Manjushri, Avalokiteshvara, and so forth are in fact enlightened beings, when they manifest in the form of bodhisattvas and come as disciples of the Buddha we can say, 'Oh, if they are enlightened themselves, they may hold equal status and say to the Buddha, "Well, if you are enlightened, so am I"'. But that is not the case at all, they manifest as bodhisattvas for the purpose of helping and benefitting other sentient beings. Buddha Shakyamuni came in the form known as a supreme emanation. There is only one buddha at a time who comes in a Supreme emanation form to help sentient beings on this planet earth. When a buddha comes in that aspect of a supreme emanation the other buddhas

manifest only as bodhisattvas, otherwise normal sentient beings are not capable of really seeing and relating to enlightened beings and their actual aspect.

As ordinary beings we are not able to recognise an enlightened being. All we can relate to is an enlightened being in ordinary human form. The perfect contemporary example we can use of this is His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Whilst the Dalai Lama is regarded as the actual manifestation of Avalokiteshvara, an enlightened being, he appears to others as another human being. Of course, he is quite extraordinary, but nevertheless is a human being in body and flesh. This is how we can relate to him. There is apparently a nun who has seen His Holiness in the actual aspect of Avalokiteshvara.

Question: I have also read in a text a reference to the five dhyani buddhas as bodhisattvas?

That could also be the manifestation of the five dhyani buddhas as bodhisattvas too. It is to be understood that in order to benefit sentient beings, the buddhas will come in whatever manifestation is most useful and beneficial to sentient beings.

It is, in fact, considered to be an incredible act of kindness of the enlightened beings to come in an ordinary form, as it is the only way we can see and relate to them. For sentient beings whose karma is not yet completely cleared, the obscuration of negative karma prevents one from seeing an enlightened being as an enlightened being.

So it is for the purpose of benefitting sentient beings that they come in that aspect. Besides Buddhists saying this, I understand that in Christianity they regard Jesus as the actual son of God. According to the tradition, as I understand it, it is believed that Jesus was sent down in a human form so that other humans can see and relate to Him and receive teachings.

Maybe it is a way to avoid a contradiction in a monotheistic religion like Christianity that says, 'We believe in only one God'. So if Jesus is God, then they may have to acknowledge two Gods. So that's why they have to say that Jesus is the son of God. However there is some similarity here.

Before we end the session for the evening, let us again take the opportunity to spend a few minutes in meditation. This time as we sit in a comfortable, relaxed posture and withdraw our mind from all distractions, we place our focus on the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra being recited. When the recitation subsides we can maintain an awareness of the vacuity of the sound and the blissful feeling that we have and focus on that for a few moments.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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Edited Version*

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