
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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As usual we can reflect on some points concerning meditation. We are a gathering of meditators so it's natural we will be discussing something to do with meditation. When business people gather together they naturally will be talking about business.

Those who are acquainted with argumentative discussions, in our case monastic debates or those who are acquainted with other debates, will naturally have a little debate when they gather together. For example, when I meet with other geshes it's natural that we immediately get into debates or discussions on points of the teachings.

There's a story in Tibet showing how cautious people were of debating monks. Once a monk was travelling and asked to stay overnight in someone's home. The landlord said, 'Oh, are you one of those debating monks who will start debating in any conversation? If so I'm afraid I can't let you stay here!'. The monk promised, 'I will not debate or argue with you'. The landlord then replied, 'Okay, you can stay here for the night'. But at one point the monk noticed that the landlord's daughter was checking her mother's head for lice and found some. The mother said to the daughter, 'Take this louse and put it somewhere where it won't die'. The monk couldn't control himself and immediately commented, 'If there's any place where you could put a louse where it wouldn't die, I would like to be put in that place too'. The landlord then said, 'You see, he has started debating with me'. So he was kicked out.

There seem to be heated arguments in parliament and I don't know what they are arguing about, but it seems like whenever they are together, they are always seem to be getting angry with each other. I often feel quite appalled by the situation where people working in the parliament, who have significantly high wages and earn hundreds or even thousand dollars an hour—which of course is tax payers' money—seem to be spending most of their time arguing amongst themselves. Whatever questions they were asked, or whatever discussions they were having in relation to specific topics, they seem to bring up all kinds of stuff and start arguing about things of the past.

However, going back to the purpose of our gathering, you can say that this is a significant, noble gathering of meditators. The discussion here is based on the topic of meditation and its significance. The main point I am emphasising here is that, whatever activity we engage in, it is good to keep our mind focused and attentive to that activity. Whatever activity that one is engaged in, worldly and specifically a spiritual activity, if one's mind is not attentive or focused on that activity it will not be

accomplished well. Therefore, the purpose of meditation is to develop a more focused and attentive mind.

When good sportsmen, who may be very skilled, lose their match I often hear them say, 'I lost my concentration'. They admit that is why they did not perform well. This shows that concentration is the key factor for accomplishing whatever activity we engage in.

Primarily, meditation is concerned with focusing on a virtuous object. Whilst engaging in formal meditation, focusing on a virtuous object brings about positive benefits for one's mind. Familiarity with meditation practice can also help us with our normal or mundane activities too. One can perform well in all areas, when one has developed good concentration, and a focused mind.

A concentrated mind, or mindfulness, is necessary in all activities that we engage in. For example, when we are having a meal with others we have conversations and often we get carried away and are not mindful of how much we are eating. After a while we start feeling quite uncomfortable, and realise that we have eaten too much.

I am presenting some significant advice here. We really need to be mindful of how much is appropriate for us to consume for our health. If our mindfulness lapses and we overeat too often, it will be detrimental to our health. Food is meant for nourishment and not just to fill your stomach. We can take that further to include the consumption of alcohol. There are definitely many who have destroyed their health and perished, because they drank too much. Some seem to just gulp down their drink and I am not sure if they are actually enjoying it! These are not just trivial remarks, but significant points that one can take advice from.

Going back to the significance of meditation, it is a practice and technique that will help to gain control over, and further subdue one's mind. Through control of one's mind, one is able to protect oneself from adversities. In that way one can gain a peaceful state of mind.

We can take the analogy of driving a car, and the need to be mindful of the dangers whilst driving. Anyone who drives is aware of how important and crucial it is to be always mindful, looking around and on the sides of the road, so that if you see something dangerous you will have time to avoid it and protect yourself. Whilst you need to be focused on the road in front of you, you also need to be looking around and making sure that there are no situations around you that may cause mishaps. To protect oneself from danger, one can't afford to allow one's concentration and mindfulness to lapse whilst driving a car. This is a good analogy to illustrate the purpose of meditation as a means to protect one's mind.

The protection of the mind requires protecting it from adversities or negative states of mind, such as strong afflictions or negative emotions that can arise. This is done with the aid of mindfulness and introspection. Applying the tools of mindfulness and introspection keeps our mind focused, and protects us from strong negative emotions and afflictions. When it's not affected by strong negative emotions, the mind will naturally subside and be at ease, and this gives rise to a peaceful and tranquil state of mind.

By protecting one's mind, one is not controlled or influenced by negative states of intense anger or hatred. Likewise, when we protect our mind we will not be under the influence of a jealous mind. In this way by recognising the faults and disadvantages of these states of mind one will be able to take the initiative to protect oneself from them. This is part of the training of meditation. We need to keep a part of our mind vigilant and check our state of mind in our daily lives and activities to be aware of the feelings and emotions that we are experiencing. This is a worthwhile analysis of one's own state of mind.

When we understand the significance of meditation practice, and what we are trying to achieve, it becomes easier to apply this instruction in our daily lives. When we find our mind becomes easily agitated and we experience an unhappy state of mind, such as anger, we will see that these situations arise in relation to recalling a specific object in one's mind. When we look into situations that cause mental distress, we will notice that in most cases it is not the actual contact with the object, but rather the memory or recalling of the object to one's mind that causes distress. Therefore we can see that, many times, the cause of the distress and turmoil that we experience is based on thinking of the object again and again, until we are completely obsessed with the object. When we recognise this, then we can apply means and ways to divert our attention and not to bring the object to our mind. When we don't think about the object, it will not cause us any distress and agony. What we pay our attention to is what affects our state of mind.

If we don't take the initiative to intentionally divert our attention and mind from recalling the object that cause us distress, then, because we become so acquainted with it we will be in a perpetual state of mind of feeling weighed down and depressed. We need to recognise what kind of thought patterns, focusing on particular objects and so forth cause us mental distress. When we identify that, we can then take the initiative to not allow our mind to go down that track, and divert our attention and focus. Initially it will be difficult to make the attempt to divert our attention, but gradually we will be able to release our focus and attention from these negative objects. In that way we can start to feel at ease within our mind. These are not complicated and difficult methods, but quite simple. It is a matter of putting it into practice and becoming acquainted with this positive way of thinking.

We have discussed the physical posture of meditation in the previous sessions so we will not go over it now, but just remind ourselves to be in a comfortable, relaxed posture. Most importantly we need to be in the right state of mind, which is to maintain a clear state of mind and within that clarity to recall the object that we are focusing on in our meditation, which is our own breath.

The objective of the meditation technique now is to develop a single-pointed focus on the breath. This requires a full commitment from our side to bring our full attention and focus to the breath itself, and not to let our mind to be swayed or persuaded by other distractions. If the mind is half focused on the breath and half distracted we will not achieve the single-pointed focus that we are

attempting to develop. Therefore the commitment requires us to intentionally and temporarily withdraw our focus from any external objects and other distracting thoughts, to bring our focus within and place it one hundred percent on the breath. When we do that we are able to maintain our focus on the breath itself. So for the next few minutes, by withdrawing our attention from external distractions and objects, we will bring a hundred percent of our focus within, and place it on the breath. *(Pause for meditation)*

Just as we have attempted in our short session now, it is really good to apply this method and technique in our daily lives, as a way to care for, and protect our mind. Meditation practice not only protects one's mind, it also helps to promote clarity, and most likely we can generate a positive state of mind and that will be a good attribute for one's well being. A clear and positive state of mind is definitely what one needs for good, sound mental health.

When we have secured these positive attributes of the mind, it will allow the good potential within us, which our love and compassion, to emerge. When these positive qualities of love and compassion emerge they will become the means to develop a genuine concern for others' well being. One will be able to genuinely assist others, and one's good qualities will become naturally apparent. What better way to be accepted by others? Therefore I emphasise to you again and again that these are important points to consider in one's life.

Showing good behaviour and gestures will be appreciated by others because it makes them happy. It will be welcomed by others. Expressing our love, compassion and genuine concern for others is the best means to make their mind genuinely happy. Contributing to the sense of well being and happiness of others will naturally bring others closer to one. One will also become the beneficiary of that because others are naturally drawn to you, and will appreciate your presence. If we are concerned about wanting others to like and favour us, the best and genuine way to achieve this is by expressing true concern, which is based on love and compassion, and showing good gestures to others. We can see that this is important for our own well being.

We all have a certain amount of intelligence or what we call wisdom and we need to use this wisdom. We are referring here to a particular type of wisdom that has the ability to analyse and check within us, without having to rely on others, and has the ability and potential to determine what is detrimental or beneficial to our well being. As we check within ourselves we will notice certain patterns of thinking and attitudes that are not really positive, and which influence our body, speech and mind, and lead us to making inappropriate gestures. All that stems from a negative state of mind.

At the same time we do have a positive potential within us, which are positive states of mind that contributes to positive actions of body, speech and mind. Particularly in our relationships, when our behaviour and gestures of our physical and verbal activities, are motivated by a positive state of mind they will naturally be conducive to help and benefit others. So it is important to scrutinise and check our own state of mind and see what kind of

thoughts or attitudes contribute to positive actions, gestures and behaviours, and what states of mind contribute to negative ones. This becomes very clear to us when we take the sincere initiative to look within and analyse. If we were to ask ourselves, 'Which one will we choose?', will we choose the attitudes and ways of thinking that are detrimental to our own well being and also harm others or will we choose the positive states of mind that are beneficial for ourselves and others? When we are concerned for our own and others' well being we will want to choose the positive states of mind. We will then take responsibility for developing these minds.

By using this method of investigation of looking inside and checking our own state of mind, it will become apparent what type of thoughts, and particularly behaviours, are not conducive to our own and others' well being, and what kind of thoughts are appropriate and good. We normally seem to express our inappropriate and sometimes rough behaviours and gestures to those who are close to us. We don't go out of our way to show inappropriate gestures and behaviours to complete strangers or to those people who are more powerful than us. We express inappropriate gestures and remarks to those who are close to us, which perhaps is because we don't fear them. We are not afraid and know how far we can go with them.

But if we were to honestly think about it later, we would realise that this is not appropriate. Making inappropriate remarks and gestures towards those who are close to us doesn't mean it is right and acceptable. When we are able to acknowledge this, then we are able to take responsibility for our own behaviour, and we can then genuinely apologise for the inappropriate remarks and gestures made. Until this becomes apparent to us, we will not take the initiative. When others try to show and point this out to us, we will not accept that. We usually have the notion that we are in the right, and we haven't done anything wrong. It is hard to acknowledge and see our own mistakes. Therefore it is much harder for others to point this out to us. When we take the initiative, and become sincere with our own state of mind, then a true transformation can take place.

Indeed, good gestures and behaviours are something that contributes to drawing others closer to us. We can easily see that those who are inclined to adopt good gestures and have kind remarks are those who are naturally liked by everyone. So someone who exhibits good gestures and behaviours will always be surrounded by admirers. Contrary to that, when we are not careful with our behaviour, gestures and remarks that can put a barrier between us and others. Others will become more distant, and that distance will cause a sense of alienation from others, and if we are not careful it will reach the stage where those who are meant to be closest, such as friends and relatives, will be seen as enemies. That is a dangerous state of mind to reach, where everyone appears to be against you. The reality is that this is actually created by your own mind, by behaviour and gestures that has caused others to distance themselves from you. Whereas when we adopt the initiative to engage in appropriate gestures and behaviours, not only do our close friends and relatives hold us dearly, but even new associates will

like and be drawn towards us. They will find it easy to communicate with us because of our positive demeanour. If we consider these points, it is a good to incorporate them into a meaningful way of living.

Thus, in summary, generating genuine, kind consideration for others' well being is really very valuable for one's own life. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama shares, 'Adopting a kind mind definitely brings in more and more friends'. And in relation to himself he says, 'I try to practise kindness and I get more and more friends, and even more gifts from others'.

Those personal comments by His Holiness are, of course, a bit in jest but the point he is making is really true. When one takes the initiative to exhibit kind gestures, it will naturally draw others closer to one, even in terms of receiving more gifts and so forth. These are signs of genuine appreciation from others. So the main point is that adopting a positive and kind mind is the most valuable asset one can have for one's well being in one's life.

This is irrespective of whether or not one makes a lot of money, and gains a lot of wealth. It is fine for one to do so, but if one's mind is not in a positive state then wealth will not be beneficial to one's genuine well being and happiness. Whereas regardless of whether or not one is able to accumulate a lot of wealth, if one can secure and protect a positive and kind mind, this is an invaluable asset. We can say that it is our ultimate protector and refuge. Again, this all relates to the significance of meditation practice.

The real thing that we need to develop is a positive mental state and a kind mind. This is what we need to be focusing on, and the means and ways to improve our mind is through the practice of meditation.

I don't feel I am being unreasonable to suggest that we need to improve, because we already have the basics. If I were to suggest improving something that we don't have, then that would be a bit unreasonable and hard to comprehend. How can we improve something that we don't have access to? But we do have access to a positive state of mind. We have the good qualities and potential within us. Therefore, improving means tapping into the resources we have within us, and further developing and increasing them.

Before we conclude the session for the evening, let us again take a few minutes to engage in meditation. This time the object we will focus on is the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's name mantra being recited. As we hear the recitation we will keep our focus on the mantra and when the recitation subsides we can maintain for a few minutes an awareness of the blissful feeling that we have.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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