
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment



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As usual, we can spend some time in meditation. When we think about what we wish for ourselves, one thing is clear. We would definitely like to have peaceful and subdued mind. That is something that we naturally wish for. So if that is what we wish for, we need to consider why we don't have a peaceful and subdued mind most of the time.

Without proper investigation and scrutiny we generally might relate one's mind lacking peace and being unsubdued to external conditions and causes. Now while external conditions do contribute to a certain degree to a lack of peace in our mind, what we begin to understand when we do an internal investigation is that the real causes and conditions for an inner lack of peace and turmoil lie within our mind, the afflictions. So it is the afflictions within one's mind that cause the lack of peace in one's mind.

There are various types of afflictions within one's mind. When one recognises an affliction within one's mind, one needs to find the means, the antidote, for overcoming that particular affliction. The process of applying the antidote to overcome afflictions is the real purpose of meditation. When one understands the meditation technique as a means to overcome the afflictions in one's mind, and then applies antidotes to the afflictions, and they are actually overcome, one experiences a genuine sense of peace and a subdued state of mind.

Sometimes, without any apparent reason, we find that we are feeling a little bit unsettled, and there is some agitation within our mind. When there are no apparent external reasons or any kind of immediate cause that one can detect, this is a clear indication that it is an affliction that is causing the unrest and agitation within one's mind. We can definitely identify some of the afflictions immediately. As I regularly mention, we can immediately identify anger as being a cause of agitation and distress within us. The moment anger arises, the mind feels unsettled. It is the same with attachment. Attachment is another affliction in one's mind that causes distress and agitation. One needs to see this connection whenever one's mind is not settled.

Anger and attachment are the core afflictions that disturb our mind. Then behind anger and attachment is another affliction that is more obscure, ignorance. One might not immediately identify ignorance, or the stupidity of not knowing. Ignorance, or this mind of stupidity, is basically a mind of being obscured. It is because of ignorance that we are obscured from knowing the reality of a particular situation, or knowing reality in general. It is the mind of ignorance that serves as the basis for anger and attachment to arise.

Now, of course, ignorance or stupidity is something that can exist on a subtle level. However, even in a general worldly context when someone makes a mistake it is often related to the fact they didn't know any better. We often say, 'I made a

mistake because I didn't know.' So we can see that whenever there is a mishap it can be related to not fully knowing the situation.

It is said that the afflicted mind of stupidity or ignorance is the main cause of anger and attachment. So, as presented in the Buddhist teachings, when one applies an antidote for overcoming ignorance then, by default, all other afflictions will naturally subside. Therefore the teachings say that the utmost antidote that serves as the antidote for overcoming ignorance is the realisation of emptiness, which is the ultimate understanding of reality. So that is why in the Buddhist teachings the wisdom that realises emptiness is said to be one of the highest forms of wisdom, as it can completely overcome ignorance in one's mind. When ignorance subsides, then the anger and attachment that act like servants of the ignorant mind, will also naturally subside.

We can use this illustration: ignorance is like the master and it has two servants, or companions, to do its work for it. Ignorance sends out attachment and anger to do the dirty work, and a lot of mishaps and harm is done. We can also understand with this illustration that as long as something is done out of the influence of anger or attachment, then it is going to be a mishap and cause harm. Then, when we understand this, because we possess our mind we need to take control of it and take the initiative to not follow anger and attachment and say, 'I am not bowing my head to anger and attachment'.

I mentioned earlier that the ultimate antidote for overcoming the afflictions is the wisdom understanding emptiness but we may not have achieved that level of understanding and realisation yet. While we may not be totally equipped at our level right now with the means to overcome anger and attachment completely, we can still, with awareness and determination, not allow anger and attachment to become fully blown, and completely give in to them.

It is when anger is fully blown and intense that it causes harm. It is also intense attachment, what we might call in English an obsession, where we desperately want to obtain an object that we are attached to, which causes us harm. Our obsession might be unrealistic and we might not be able to obtain the object but the obsession causes a lot of pain. The object of our obsession is something that either we are not able to achieve, or even if we were to obtain it, causes us more harm than benefit.

People have confided in me that when there is obsession, such as an obsession with another person, it can be so strong that one loses sleep and feels pain in one's heart. They have confided that they shed a lot of tears of sorrow. All of that agony is the result of being a victim of strong attachment in one's mind,

When we recognise that being a victim of such strong obsessive attachment is not useful and just causes one more distress and agony, we need to make a decision not to give in and be completely influenced by strong attachment. If we give in to strong attachment, indulge in that obsession and don't do anything to divert it, one can reach a state where it becomes very difficult to overcome, even if one wishes to. It is like being addicted to something that is very difficult to overcome. So it is good to recognise the pitfalls from the very outset.

A way to protect oneself from being completely dominated by, or under the control of, afflictions such as strong attachment, is from the very beginning to prevent ourselves

from being completely under their influence. This might initially be very hard but when we get acquainted with the technique it becomes more manageable.

Let's look at some illustrations of how strong attachment to objects can cause great distress and agony in one's mind. When attachment arises in the mind it can be attachment to either animate objects or inanimate objects. Animate objects are other living beings, other individuals. Inanimate objects are wealth and so forth. It seems that it is attachment to another person, which cause the greatest agony and pain in the mind. Of course we can see that there are individuals who are obsessed with material things, and attached to wealth, and if they lose any of their wealth or cannot obtain what they want, it causes them a lot of agony. Apparently they also lose sleep, appetite and so forth out of their strong attachment to material things.

Attachment to another person can cause great distress in the mind, particularly when the individual you are strongly attached to, and obsessed with, starts to lose interest in you and move away. Apparently this is a time when great agony can be felt. When a situation like this occurs, one needs to be immediately able to assess the situation, and to use one's intelligence. If the other starts to give you up, then the problem that arises here is not being able to give up your object of attachment—the other person. Here there is an unreasonable situation where they are giving you up, but you are not able to give them up, and that can cause much pain and agony in the mind—what you call heartache. When this situation occurs one needs to be able to reason with oneself and think, 'Well, if they have given me up, why am I so attached to them, why can't I give them up, just let them go?' That would be a realistic approach. If they have given you up it is clear that they are not interested in you and you should also apply that same attitude yourself, 'OK, then I am giving them up too. I let go of them'. That will prevent strong agony and heartache arising. One has certain amount of wisdom that one can use here. If they give you up and you don't give them up it is a great loss for you. They get a gain and you are getting a loss, but there is nothing that you are actually losing. If they are giving you up, then if you give them up yourself, there is nothing to be lost, and instead you gain peace of mind, and are saved from agony.

So we can see here that what it takes is to shift our attitude from having strong obsession and being very narrow-minded, to being more expansive and having a more positive attitude. When one adopts that positive attitude one will then be able to assess the situation in a better light. One is then able to recognise what is the best way for one to act.

A positive attitude can come from a different perspective. I have related in the past a story where someone I was closely associated with came to me once and was really sobbing and very unhappy. She said that her husband had left her. My immediate response to her was, 'Oh well, that's good then.' (*Laughter*). I then explained further that, 'You haven't really lost anything, what has left is like rubbish and you are now left with your freedom. You now have freedom, and can think about what is best in your life. What has left is equivalent to rubbish.' She started thinking about that point and acknowledged, 'Oh, that's true', and then she said 'But I am not too sure about my husband being like rubbish, I am not sure about that.' If her husband left for his own selfish reasons, then that is what I described as like losing rubbish.

After that conversation she left in a much lighter mind. She came sobbing, but then she left smiling, and thinking that

things are OK now. This is just one story of how changing our attitude helps us to lighten a situation that otherwise might seem very dark. In another incident an individual came to me and again was very upset that their friend (apparently they were not married or engaged) had left them, and they were unhappy about that. I consoled her saying, 'Oh, that's OK. Why would you want to chase someone who is leaving you, and be upset about that? You are just seeing one person in front of you and as they move away you try to chase them. But maybe, if you turn around you will see many other friends and companions, waiting for you.' This individual's reply was, 'Oh really, is that true?' Indeed there may be others that one had not paid attention to before. I've heard some say that focusing just on one person is really boring!

Going back to the main point, one needs to protect oneself from strong afflictions such as intense anger, strong attachment. Using a practical approach to overcome strong obsession would contribute to one's mind being calmer, more settled and not completely overwhelmed with sorrow. These are really important points one needs to keep in mind.

I can relate another instance when an Indian person asked me, 'You seem to be always smiling, happy and joyful. What makes you so joyful and happy?' My immediate response to this was, 'Well, it is because I have lost everything in life. I have lost my parents; I left them behind and haven't seen them again. I have lost my relatives, possessions, my whole country. I had to leave everything behind.' He looked at me a little bewildered, and took a while to think about what I had said. Then he said, 'Oh, so what you are saying is because you have lost your attachment to these things, you are feeling happy now. Is that correct?' He definitely seemed to have got the point.

To fully embrace the meditation technique, to help one deal with the problems in one's life, one needs to use it as a means to do an honest scrutiny within oneself and try to detect the particular states of mind, afflictions, that might be causing one distress at any time. At any given time we might be affected by a particular affliction that is causing us distress. If we don't look within, and do this scrutiny, we might easily fall into the usual way of blaming others and everything around us. But when we look within, and detect the main cause of this internal turmoil, we need to start to apply antidote to overcome that. If we don't do that and try other things to solve our problems, we will always be missing the mark. I think the Australian expression may 'beating around the bush'. It will not be targeting the real problem, so it is important to recognise the real problem.

There are particular antidotes to overcome particular afflictions in one's mind. In the teachings it is advised that the meditation that serves as an antidote to overcome attachment is to focus on the imperfections or natural defects of the object. The best antidote for someone who is obsessed with strong anger is to meditate on love. For someone who is affected by strong pride the best antidote is to contemplate the numerous categories of phenomena. There are many categories of phenomena that one is not yet aware of and to think about that will help one to overcome pride. The means to overcome stupidity and ignorance in one's mind is said to be thinking about the interdependent nature of all things. The best meditation for someone who is affected by a lot of discursive and distracting thoughts, also known as the superstitious mind, with a lot of fears, doubts and so forth, is to focus on one's breath. This definitely is the means.

As suggested in the teachings, using the breath as an object to focus on, is the optimum means to settle down a mind that is extremely distracted. Therefore in our meditation sessions here we use this technique to help settle our mind.

To apply this technique we need to first, as mentioned in the texts, adopt a comfortable, relaxed posture with a straight back. More important is one's state of mind. We need to have a positive motivation for doing the practice, and to achieve that we have to remind ourselves of the value of doing this practice wholeheartedly.

The technique involves withdrawing our focus from all other objects. We temporarily just put everything aside and try not to engage with any thoughts or memories. Initially we completely withdraw our attention from all other objects and bring our focus within. The focus of our mind is normally scattered in every direction, so when we bring our focus within it is as if we are looking inside and we try, even for just a few moments, to let our mind to be in a settled state where we are not engaged with anything, not observing any object at all. This is, of course, hard to maintain for too long. But we just remain in that state of not focusing on anything, even if it is just for a few moments. Then, within that state, we bring our focus upon the chosen object for meditation, which is our breath. We use the natural rhythm of our breathing as a medium. We imagine seeing our breath going in and going out and we just focusing on that and nothing else. So we place one hundred percent focus on the breath itself and maintain that for the next few minutes. This is the method we will adopt now. *(Pause for meditation)*

What I have attempted to share with you earlier is means and ways of thinking in the right way and adopting the right attitude to dealing with difficulties and problems in one's life. We can adopt right attitudes because we have the intelligence, what we call the wisdom, to do that. It is to our benefit that we utilise our intelligence and wisdom for our own betterment.

Another significant point that I shared with you was that the whole purpose of meditation is a means to identify the afflictions within one's mind. At any time particular afflictions cause lots of distress and turmoil and we need to identify that, and try to apply the correct antidote. Of course this is a gradual process, but slowly, slowly, one finds means and ways to overcome the afflictions that are disturbing one's mind. The first thing, of course, is to identify the affliction and then to apply the antidote gradually.

An easy way to explain in simple terms how the meditation practice works is that whenever when we are in distress, it is mostly in relation to a particular object coming to mind, and paying attention to that particular situation. When we use the terminology 'object' here, it encompasses either animate objects, or inanimate objects, what we call situations or memories. So, whenever one is in distress one should look within oneself, and see what one's distress is in relation to, what one is focusing on in one's mind. When we divert our attention and don't focus on the object that is causing us distress then, naturally, the mind of distress will subside. So to understand the meditation technique and how it works, in simple terms, is that we are replacing objects that otherwise cause us distress, with objects that do not cause distress. As with our earlier practice of meditation, focusing on the breath, which is a neutral object does not cause distress, when we are completely, single-pointedly, focused on that it

does not allow our mind to wonder off to other objects that cause us distress and therefore our mind settles down.

We can illustrate a further, simple way of understanding how meditation practice works. What we call Dharma practice is a term for spiritual practise in Buddhism. The word Dharma has the connotation 'to withhold or to uphold'. So in the context of spiritual practise it has the meaning of withholding oneself from going in the wrong direction and engaging in faulty behaviour. Meditation has basically the same meaning, which is to stop one's mind from going in a wrong, or faulty direction, and engaging with faulty objects.

We can't blame others or ourselves for falling victim to afflictions, occasionally or repeatedly. That happens because we are not too familiar with engaging in the practice of meditation. However it is good to not give in completely to the afflictions, but try to apply this technique and gradually, when we take the initiative, we will see that it becomes easier, more manageable. We become more capable of managing our thoughts and mind and not following those distractions.

The earlier great masters have mentioned that if you don't know the state of your mind, then no matter what you do you will not have a happy mind. This is a very profound advice and an instruction for one. So what is being said here is that if you don't know your state of mind, if you don't know what is causing turmoil in your mind, positive as well as negative states of mind, then no matter what one does one will not have a truly satisfied and happy mind.

These masters have further mentioned that when you know the right method, then even adverse conditions can become the path. This is another significant piece of advice. When one knows the right method and means, then what otherwise are considered as difficult situations and adverse problems can become part of the path. This is indeed very true. When one has the right attitude, then one does not allow situations to disturb one's mind. When one protects one's mind then even ordinary difficulties and challenges can all be taken as a means to further progress oneself. So this is what it is being explained.

I have tried to share whatever points that I think maybe useful in your life, in an *ad hoc* way, so it is here and there. However my attempt is to try to share something significant that you can take with you. These, of course, are points that I regularly contemplate and think about, and I find great significance in adopting the right ways of thinking or attitudes myself. I find thinking about ways and means to settle one's mind is very conducive to having a calm mind. This is a much healthier, more meaningful way to conduct oneself, rather than giving into so many different kinds of discursive thoughts, worries and problems. These have no essence, and no real meaning, but we just keep thinking and dwelling on them and making them further escalate in our mind and cause many worries. So there is no point, I don't spend my time in that way, I find it useless. There is no point in dwelling on worries, problems and so forth, trying to settle down the mind is far better.

To give a personal account of how I conduct myself, some years ago I was invited to go back to Tibet, my home country. The invitation was made repeatedly but I said, 'No, I am sorry. I prefer not to go back. There is no point.' I won't gain anything by going back. I will just hear all the problems and difficulties which Tibet has faced for the last forty to fifty years since I left. I cannot do anything about it, and it

would cause distress to my mind. So there is no point, no purpose. That is why I decline the offers and have not taken the initiative to go back.

Many who escaped Tibet in 1959, when we escaped together, have gone back to visit relatives and families. Now some monks are asking why Geshe Doga is not coming back to visit us, and so forth. Even though there may have been remarks and so forth, I don't listen to that. I am adamant that it is of no use and benefit to go back. When I left my home I was seventeen years old, now I have reached the age of eighty. That was not a good time back in Tibet, a lot of problems happened. To go back to re-live that and to hear about all the difficulties again would serve no purpose. I normally adopt a demeanour where I try not to engage in too much idle talk. When you start listening and talk about many different things, it just causes distress in the mind. So I try to avoid engaging in idle gossip and not listening too much as well. I find it is of no use. It seems to be quite prevalent, but it can cause all sorts of distress in the mind.

About twenty years ago a niece of mine came from Tibet to visit me with her son. Her son is now in a monastery in South India. When she come to visit she started talking about things back at home, and as she went along there came a point where it became quite apparent that she was starting to talk about how she had cared for my mother, while other nieces and sisters had not really paid much attention and so forth. I started to feel, 'OK, this is discriminating within the family'. I felt she wanted me to favour some and not others within the family. So I immediately said, 'OK, that is enough. It may be better to leave our conversation.' I didn't allow her to engage further in that sort of conversation. Even though I don't have much financially, I did whatever I could to help her. I helped her son to enter the monastery, helped her to find work and have found a benefactor for her son to continue his studies in India. That is as much as I could do, but in terms of her talk about family issues, I declined to listen or engage in that.

Discriminating between people is, of course, not good in general. We all can relate to that. But to discriminate within one's own family between some as good and others bad is not a healthy approach at all. It does not help to create harmony and goodwill within the family. The reason why it causes stress within the family is because that sort of discrimination and gossip causes disunity and disharmony. When there is disharmony, the happiness to be gained within a harmonious family has been lost. When the harmonious feeling within a family is lost, then even if you were together it just feels like you have to be there. You don't really enjoy even having a meal together, it almost feels like you are walking on edge, and something could be said that would upset them. That kind of feeling within a family or relationship is not comfortable.

Before we conclude, the summary of the main point that I have been making is that by seeing the benefit of practice of meditation, and relating to the practice as a means to adopt a more positive attitude within oneself, one can be motivated to try to adopt it in one's life. That can then help and assist one. One may not be able to change everyone else and make them have a positive attitude, that is something that we may not have the complete capacity to do, but we do have the capacity to start with ourselves, to start the positive attitude within us.

The most positive attitude to generate is a mind of loving kindness and compassion for others. When one has that attitude of love and compassion towards others it will contribute to a good harmonious feeling with others. And this is something that has no cost. The more we extend our attitude of loving kindness the more it will increase. We will not lose, it is not going to wear out. Love and compassion is not like a material thing where we can only give to a certain extent and then think, 'Oh, I can't give more because I will run out'. The positive mind of love and kindness cannot be exhausted. The more you extend loving kindness, the more it increases within your mind. Since there is nothing to lose but so much to gain, it is best to adopt this.

Finally, before we conclude I would just like to thank you all for listening so attentively, I appreciate that. What we are attempting to do here is to share some goodwill, good ways to conduct ourselves, good minds and attitudes and so forth. It is a way of benefiting each other. I definitely benefit from you, and if I share something that might help you, then there is that benefit too. As true friends we can share goodwill and benefits with each other.

The benefit to me is that when I encourage you to adopt a positive way of thinking, positive attitudes and so forth I need to take initiative to practise it myself, otherwise it would just be meaningless. If I suggested to you to do something because it is worthwhile, but I completely ignore that and don't apply it myself, then they would be empty words for you, with no essence in them. There is a Tibetan expression about empty words that refers to an 'empty mouth'.

So these sessions become a reminder to me to apply this practice myself, which I do regularly. But every time I share this with you, it is a reminder to me. That is how I benefit as well, and this is how we get a mutual benefit. I remind myself that before you suggest to someone else to do something positive and good, you must do it first yourself. I point the finger at myself and remind myself. Children can see hypocrisy in their parents and say, 'Mum you tell me to do something, but you don't do it yourself', or tell the dad, 'You asked me to do certain things, but you don't do it yourself'. Even a small child recognised that hypocrisy. Just recently I was teaching in Geelong, and someone asked how to care for their child and if meditation would be good for them. My response was first you have to practise yourself, and then the children might follow. They can follow your example, and what you suggest becomes meaningful. So it is best to start with oneself.

Before we conclude this session for the evening we can just spend a few moments in meditation again. This time we focus on the sound of the name mantra of Buddha Shakyamuni being recited. As you hear the sound, place your entire focus on that, and when the recitation stops maintain your focus on the empty space and the residue of that sound.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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Edited Version

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