

Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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Meditation is a technique that enables you to gain control over your mind. It can also be understood as a way to protect your happy state of mind.

Specifically, meditating will help you to protect and maintain the level of happiness you already have so that it does not decrease. In addition, the practice will increase this level of happiness so that it grows.

This is a very important point for you to understand and remember because the more you increase the happiness in your mind, the more likely you will have a happy, positive and meaningful life. We all need to understand the correlation between having a happy state of mind, and having a happy and purposeful existence.

Loneliness seems to be a prevalent disease here in the western culture. It is often felt as the sense of lacking companionship or a friend. However, if you secure a genuinely happy mindset, there will be no room for loneliness to occur in your mind. I can personally vouch for this.

The reason why it is impossible to experience pangs of loneliness when you have established a happy state of mind is because securing a happy state of mind equates to securing a real and unfailing inner friend. This inner friend is a true companion that is present at all times. So, naturally, loneliness or feeling deprived of companionship cannot occur. Some people tell me that their cat is their best friend. They say things like, "My cat always shows me love and has been with me for seventeen years so she has never failed to be my friend...." [Laughter.] However, the inner friendship of a happy mind is ever present throughout your life.

Loneliness doesn't necessarily seem to be a result of lacking external friends either. Once a lady told me that she felt very lonely, so I asked her if she had any companions. She said that she did, so I responded that perhaps she could find some more people to be friends with. She said, "Oh, Geshe-la, you don't really understand my loneliness." Of course, I knew exactly why she was experiencing loneliness, but nevertheless I suggested she find more external friends so that she could look a bit deeper into why she felt alone.

When it becomes clear to you that having external friends does not relieve you of loneliness, you are in the position to see that there is something missing inside yourself. You are then able to recognise that you are lacking the true inner companionship of a happy mind. If you can secure the inner friend of a happy state of mind, you will be able to maintain a sense of joy and not suffer from feeling lonely, and you will be happy regardless of whether you have external friends or not.

To relate another instance, many years ago when I was doing a course at Chenrezig Institute in Queensland, a lady approached me in a lunch break and expressed her feelings

of loneliness. I asked her if she had been married. She said, "Yes, I have been married four times." [Laughter.] Having had a partner on four different occasions and still feeling lonely is a clear indication that something must be lacking inside her. That may have been a modest number in her case, whilst there may be many others who have had several more partners. In fact, people often tell me that they have had twenty or thirty different relationships in their lives. It seems to be quite normal in this culture to have had many relationships.

Perhaps this is a reflection of our typical assumption. Usually, we think that having an external companion will relieve us from pangs of loneliness and give us joy. The reality however is that while we may experience some joy, our external companions can also sometimes cause us to become very agitated and angry, and thus be a source of great distress to us. Also, there is no guarantee that an external friend will always be there to make us happy. In contrast, the inner friend of a happy state of mind will never cause distress or fail us, and will only contribute to our personal wellbeing.

When you have secured a happy state of mind it will always be there to aid you. It is an unfailing friend because it helps you no matter what situation you are in, especially in difficult times and when you experience problems.

At the very least your inner friend will ensure you have a good night's sleep that is relaxing and, most importantly, rejuvenating. Sleep is meant to rejuvenate you. However some people complain that even after going to bed, when they wake up the next morning they feel tired and have low energy. This indicates they are not having a relaxing and sound sleep. So, if one were to fall asleep in a happy state of mind that would definitely assure a good night's sleep.

Protecting the happiness in your mind so that it is stable and can be increased, having a true and constant inner friend that safeguards your mind from unhelpful states like loneliness and aids you in times of need, and getting a truly rejuvenating sleep are just some of the practical benefits of meditation. If you relate these practical benefits to your practice, you will be encouraged to continue meditating because you will understand its value. After all, we all seek happiness and have a natural inclination to pursue and experience it for ourselves. Since this is the case, following a proven method that achieves happiness is logical.

The main point is that a happy state of mind is what contributes to a real sense of fulfilment and inner satisfaction. Therefore, recognising that your inner happiness is crucial to leading a satisfying life enables you to be inclined to adopt methods and techniques to help secure and promote this inner friend. A meditation practice is the prime method to adopt in order to cultivate and increase your happiness.

Now, as mentioned previously, the meditation technique can also be described as being a means to control your mind. "Control" here refers to controlling the afflictions in your mind. As you apply the antidotes for overcoming the afflictions, your mind naturally becomes more "controlled" and consequently subdued. This then enables you to increase the happiness in your mind.

A happy state of mind is really the absence of having any afflictions in your mind. This can be understood by observing your own experience. You may have noticed that as soon as an affliction manifests in your mind, your mind is disturbed in that moment. Indeed, "affliction" means to

cause disturbance. So when, for example, a negative emotion like anger arises, you can notice for yourself that the moment you feel angry, your mind is unsettled and not in a peaceful state. The same is true with other negative emotions, such as jealousy, pride and attachment, which afflict your mind. However, an intense level of anger probably shows you the most clearly that your mind is not settled or peaceful when it arises.

If your mind is not in a peaceful or happy state, the reason is because your mind has been disturbed—and since your mind is disturbed, it is in the opposite state to being peaceful or happy. When you recognise and understand this co-relation, you will take the initiative to protect yourself from afflictions that destroy your inner peace.

One way to protect yourself is to have an internal dialogue where you caution yourself against being overpowered by an afflictive state of mind. I have shared in the past that recalling the destruction that an affliction causes you at the time you are triggered enables you to exert some restraint from succumbing to it. When, for example, anger arises in your mind, you can immediately recognise the affliction and its disadvantages and say to yourself: *I am not going to allow anger to rob me of my peaceful and happy state, and completely dominate me.*

This type of internal dialogue enables you to face the enemy of affliction directly so that you can be determined to not be overpowered and controlled by it. I do this myself. I take the initiative to caution myself to be very careful when an affliction arises in my mind, and point the finger at myself rather than the situation I find myself in. Many people have told me that they have adopted this technique in their everyday lives and it has been very helpful in reminding them of the destruction that the afflictions cause their peace of mind.

Meditating helps you to protect yourself because the practice involves not focusing on an object that causes you distress. If you focus on an object that causes you distress, afflictions will arise, but if you focus on positive objects, your mind is able to settle. You will experience a calmer and more peaceful state of mind when you are removed from objects that prompt your anguish. This is the basic mechanics of how the meditation practice works to help your mind maintain and increase its happiness.

However, you will only be able to see the validity of protecting your mind from the afflictions when you notice how they disturb your mind and experience the application of not allowing yourself to be controlled by them. You can only recognise the co-relation between the afflictions and an unhappy state of mind when you experience it for yourself. Similarly, only your own experience will vouch for having a peaceful mind when you apply your focus to a positive or a virtuous object rather than following the afflictions.

Your mind will have a genuine sense of ease and tranquillity when it is focused on a virtuous object. If you do not pay attention to your mind and take the initiative to look within, you may not notice why you are in the state of mind that you are in. But if you take a sincere look at your mind and investigate what is causing it to be in a peaceful or disturbed state, you can recognise through your own experience what the helpful and unhelpful contributions are to your happiness. You are then in a position to really acquaint yourself with more and more virtuous and positive states of mind, and to be determined to keep a positive mindset to the best of your ability.

Taking this initiative does not mean you have to be sitting rigidly in a meditative posture—just keeping your mind diligently focused on virtue, and redirecting it when you notice your mind straying, is a form of meditation that you can maintain wherever you go and whatever you do. You could be sitting, walking or interacting with others, and be completely aware of your state of mind to ensure it is in a virtuous frame. That would be a real Dharma practice.

When we take the initiative to honestly investigate and scrutinise our own minds, we can begin to recognise the afflictions for ourselves. The afflictions are not restricted to one or two disturbances, but come in numerous forms. The more genuine and close your examination of your mind is, the more levels of afflictions you will discover that may otherwise remain undetected by you. Likewise, you will discover the numerous positive states of mind that you may fail to recognise for yourself if you did not take the initiative to investigate your mind.

The great potential we all have in our minds is something that we usually do not know about or recognise. Therefore, through examining and understanding our inner life, our minds can become expansive so that we are not limited to just one or two states of mind or ways of thinking. The scope of our minds becomes vast so there is more room for us to evolve and transform.

Since we have reflected on the benefits of meditation and what can be achieved by having a practice, we can now spend a few minutes in formal meditation.

We first adopt an appropriate physical posture, which is relaxed but sitting upright, and we then set our minds to not become distracted by engaging in various thoughts or objects that may occur to our minds. This second aspect of preparing for our meditation practice is the most important: intentionally withdrawing ourselves from all forms of distraction and temporarily leaving everything aside to hold our minds for a few moments in the space that is left. Usually our attention is dispersed externally and internally in many directions, but, prior to meditating, we can rest for a few moments in that gap of having no objects to focus on. We can remain there for a few moments, or for as long as is comfortable, and then bring our entire attention to the chosen object for our meditation, which will be the breath. We need to place one-hundred per cent focus on the breath and nothing else so that we are fully aware of each intake and outtake. We can then maintain the awareness of our individual breathing pattern for a few minutes. [Pause for single-pointed meditation.]

That will be sufficient for now.

So, with the minutes remaining, we can have some time for questions.

Question: This is more of a comment than a question, but I wanted to say that I found tonight's teaching very interesting because of the idea of the happy mind being the best friend. I think you also described how the mind can be your worst enemy too if you don't control it. I just wanted to say I found that very interesting because sometimes, after a long day at work, I find myself not really paying attention, but tonight I was right there with you as you talked! [Laughter.] The topic of loneliness is something I've often thought about and it resonated with me when you expanded on the idea of feeling alone being thought of as external, but really felt internally, like an emptiness.

Geshe-la: You have understood and paid attention well. The particular point about being your own worst enemy was reflected in our session last week as well.

The fact that you can identify the inner feeling of lack is very significant. It is an indication that all of us possess the intelligence to gain insights. This kind of intelligence is called "wisdom" in Buddhist teachings and can only be gained through experiential knowledge. Wisdom is significant and very powerful so thank you for sharing your insight.

Question: Someone gave me a mala and it has 108 beads portioned into four lots of twenty-seven. What is the significance of this numbering?

There are different explanations about the significance of various numbers in Buddhism.

One-hundred beads can represent the hundred beings who overcame the negative states of mind; we refer to these beings as the "arhats" or "foe destroyers". There are also two beads at the top of the mala which represent the two bodies of an enlightened being: the truth (wisdom) body; and the form body. This has a profound significance in itself. The portioning into twenty-seven is an easy way to keep count of your mantras.

There is a significance to the number twenty-one, which is often used to count mantras in various different practices. In relation to the breathing meditation we just did, the teachings explain that if you were to seriously meditate and maintain your focus on the breath for at least twenty-one rounds without distraction—one inhalation and one exhalation is one round—your mind will definitely settle, and become calm and clear. For a Dharma practitioner this would be a preliminary practice, or a warm-up, for other practices.

The aim is to reach a state of mind that becomes very clear. The description in Buddhist teachings is "like a crystal-clear glass". The significance of a crystal glass is that when it is very clean, any dye can be used on the glass to make it any colour wanted. However, in order for the colours to be bright and true, the glass must start from the basis of being clean and clear. This is an analogy used to describe the state of mind necessary to do further meditation techniques, which are practised to generate and maintain positive states of mind. Therefore, focusing on your breath is the preliminary practice of reaching a state of mind that is very clean and clear so that you can familiarise and adopt positive states of mind in more extensive practices. Of course, some use focusing on the breath as a meditation practice in itself, but many skilled meditators use it as a preliminary practice to advance to more intricate techniques.

Another significance of the number twenty-one in our Buddhist tradition relates to one of the most powerful practices that you can engage in: Vajrasattva purification practice. This practice concentrates on purifying specific negativities you have performed in your past by focusing on the enlightened being Vajrasattva and sincerely reciting the Vajrasattva mantra twenty-one times. To understand this clearly, you can use the analogy of putting money in a bank to gain interest. The longer you leave the money in the bank, the more interest you will gradually gain. Unfortunately, the same is true for the negative actions we have committed with body, speech and mind. Unless we purify these past negativities, they will increase and intensity their ultimate results. So, by reciting the Vajrasattva mantra for at least 21

times, it is said to stop the increase of the specific negativity you had created.

The practice of confession and purification is not restricted to the Buddhist tradition. Many religious traditions seem to have this kind of practice.

On a more practical note, if you commit to doing some sort of recitation, you at least are not engaged in idle gossip with others during your practice time! [Laughter.] In other words, you will be spared from the negativities that you may have created if you were not doing the practice. If you further pay attention to the words you are reciting and remember their significance, your mind will also reap the positive benefits. People who have taken on the Vajrasattva practice have told me how useful and beneficial they find it.

Others have told me that when they have taken on the practice of focusing on an enlightened deity, such as Tara, the feminine form of an enlightened being, they receive great benefits. If you imagine Tara on the crown of your head, focus on her and believe she is there while you recite the Tara mantra, you will receive her blessings. This is a practice that definitely helps to subdue a mind that is agitated and troubled. People who do this practice have said that it really helps them to settle their minds.

We can end with a short meditation. This time the object of our focus can be the sound of the mantra to be recited, which will be the name of Buddha Shakyamuni. As we hear this mantra, we can use the sound as an object to focus on. We can keep our attention on the mantra's sound for a few moments and when the recitation ceases, we can maintain our awareness on the sense of space or vacuity that is left behind. So, we can focus on Buddha Shakyamuni's name mantra and then the feeling that arises when the recitation subsides.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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