
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

འཇམ་དཔལ་ལྷན་པའི་འགྲུབ་པའི་བཀའ་ལན་།།

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As usual we can spend some time in meditation. I have explained the significance and purpose of meditation a number of times, so it must be quite clear by now.

The process to follow when one doesn't know how the meditation technique works, and what it involves, is to get an explanation of how to practice meditation. Once one has learnt how to do the practice, then it is up to one to put it into practice.

This is indeed true for any kind of knowledge that we wish to gain and use. First one gains the knowledge and understanding of what is involved to bring about a desired result. Then, once we have that knowledge, we put it into practice. The reason for gaining any knowledge is to get a positive outcome, and in order to get a good result one first gains the knowledge, and then one needs to apply it.

Likewise the meditation practice involves training the mind in order to gain a genuinely happy state of mind. Our attitude and thoughts are the key factor that determines whether or not we have a happy state of mind. When we apply the meditation practice and gain the results of having more positive thoughts, we will then gain a happier, more tranquil and peaceful state of mind. This quality of the mind is what I consider one's real inner wealth, an asset for one's well being.

We all have the potential for having a happy state of mind. In fact we have all come into the world with a certain amount of happiness and clarity in our mind, and this can be further developed. We need to recognise that we have this clarity and happiness, and we need to make an attempt to protect that state of mind. It is when we fail to protect these positive qualities of the mind, and immerse ourselves completely in distractions that we lose the clarity and happiness we have, and our positive qualities begin to wane and weaken. When we understand this situation, there's no one else to blame for our unhappiness. No one is destroying our happiness, but it is our own negative state of mind that is allowing us to be influenced by the distractions that lead to unhappiness.

When we fail to protect the well being of our mind, which consists of clarity and a happy state, and allow the quality of the mind to wane for a period of time. Over days, months and then years, it will then become very difficult to restore the earlier sense of clarity and happiness in our mind.

For the sake of one's own well being, one needs to take notice of the early signs of decline, which are one's mind starting to become more and more agitated and

distracted. These are the early signs and when they start to occur we need to be cautious and remind ourselves that if we were to lose the clarity and a happy state of mind it would be a great loss, and very difficult to restore. It is unfortunate when we see people who have lost their sense of joy and clarity, and are feeling depressed. Therefore we need to apply the measures for protecting the mind at the earlier stages.

Thus, to summarise, in practical terms we need to understand the purpose of meditation as a technique to protect the happiness and clarity, and also the wisdom and intelligence, in one's mind. When we look around and clearly see others who are deprived of that clarity and happiness in their minds and who seem to have lost their common sense to discern what is right or wrong, it is a very unfortunate state to be in. We can see that such a person or individual is very disturbed and troubled. We would not want to be in that situation ourselves. Thus we need to apply the protection for oneself.

When we take measures to put meditation into practice, amongst the various positive qualities that increase in our mind, we will also gain the wisdom to be able to discern what is right from wrong, and what is harmful versus what is beneficial for us. This discriminative wisdom is something that I consider a truly unfailing companion who will help one in all circumstances. It is this intelligence, discriminative wisdom, which will help relieve us of many unwanted problems. In fact when we look into the problems that people experience what I have particularly noticed is that in wealthy nations there are not as many problems relating to external good conditions, but there seems to be a lot of mental problems and difficulties. This seems quite prevalent. If there is a method and way to overcome and relieve one of that, then it is worthwhile to apply that technique.

In summary, the qualities of clarity, wisdom, joy and happiness in one's mind are the true protectors for oneself. We can call them our real guide or teacher that assists us at all times. In relation to my own experiences, of course I have had external teachers to help guide me along the way, but at most times and particularly later in my life, that which has assisted me at all times and was always there for me, are these qualities that I have attempted to develop. This is what helps to guide me to make the right decisions. So, this would be true for every individual.

This asset that I have, of relying on my own wisdom and intelligence, and the sense of joy and happiness that I have developed, comes from the training that I have received based on the Buddha's teachings and advice. In particular, I am able to utilise for myself all the essential advice that Buddha gave to his followers. There is a famous quote from the Buddha's teachings where, after giving a certain amount of teaching he told his listeners, *Don't follow my advice out of admiration and faith in me, but rather check it out for yourself, analyse it, and when you find that it is true from your own experience, analysis and reasoning, then you may accept it.* This is the most essential advice that the Buddha himself gave. Thus, it is in the spirit of the Buddha's advice that we take the initiative to

really investigate and analyse a teaching, and then accept it when we find it to be of sound reasoning.

We can take this as very essential advice for our well being, particularly to protect us from being misled, deceived or fooled by others. Often there are cases where one may be easily influenced by what others say or suggest if we have not taken the initiative to check it out for ourselves. So it is commonplace that people are deceived and misled by others who are just taking advantage of them. If we were to apply this advice, it will be useful and meaningful for us in all circumstances, in a religious context and also in worldly affairs.

Having explained some of the real significance of the need and purpose of meditation practice, we can now explain the meditation practice itself. The ultimate goal of meditation is to bring about a more tranquil and peaceful state of mind—this is what it will lead us to. In order to understand how the meditation practice works, we need to first of all fully recognise and acknowledge the state of mind that lacks tranquillity and peace. What is causing the disturbed state? It occurs when the mind follows every distraction and discursive thought that arise in various different forms. That is when the mind becomes agitated and disturbed. The mind cannot be tranquil and remain in a peaceful state when it is agitated and disturbed. Having recognised and fully acknowledged the distractions as being the factor that opposes a peaceful and tranquil state of mind, one makes the commitment that when one applies the meditation technique one will intentionally and completely withdraw from focusing on any form of distraction, whether they are thoughts or memories.

One identifies the object that one is focusing on and then, having intentionally withdrawn one's focus from all other distractions, one brings to mind a vivid image of the object that one is going to be focusing on in one's meditation. During the meditation one applies one's full attention and single-pointed focus to the object itself and is constantly mindful of that object, not allowing the mind to go anywhere else. Whether the chosen meditation object is a neutral or a positive object it will not allow the mind to become agitated and disturbed. So, by the twofold virtue of withdrawing from the distractions that cause agitation and disturbance and placing our mind on an object that does not cause disturbance or agitation to arise, the mind will naturally reach a state of tranquillity and peace. This is how we train our mind to focus on an appropriate object for a period of time. As mentioned previously, if we allow our mind to follow all the distractions, such as doubt and all the different disturbing thoughts that arise in our mind, our sense of tranquillity and peace will be lost. Therefore we need to understand the technique properly.

Meditation practice is also understood as an acquaintance with positivity. Acquainting ourselves with positivity is really what the meditation practice is all about. This acquaintance with positivity is something that happens gradually. We cannot immediately and spontaneously come into a completely positive state of mind, but by applying this technique and then gradually lengthening the time the mind meditates on a positive object, it will gradually increase.

As also explained regularly, formal meditation practice involves sitting in a comfortable relaxed posture. The specifics of the posture have been explained previously, so we do not have to go into those details again. We also need to remind ourselves to have a positive motivation.

With the technique that we adopt here for our meditation practice, we first of all recognise the object of meditation that we will be focusing on and the significance of choosing a particular object. The function of the mind is to cognise, or interact with, the object. It is not possible for the mind to just be by itself without any object that it relates to. At all times the functioning of the mind is in relation to cognising or focusing on an object. So, here we are intentionally placing the focus of our mind on a particular object, and in our meditation sessions here we usually choose our breath as that object. However those of you who may already be familiar with an object from your own meditation practice can focus on that object. The main thing is to apply the proper technique and to withdraw from all other distractions and to apply single-pointed focus to the chosen object. So, for the next few minutes we will apply this technique of being completely absorbed into the meditation object that we choose to focus on. (*Pause for meditation.*)

Just as we have attempted in our short session now, it would be really worthwhile to consider taking on this practice on a regular basis, and keep in mind that this is a supreme method and technique to bring about a genuine peaceful state of mind. We need to take the initiative to ensure that we are in a peaceful state of mind because if we don't take the responsibility ourselves, no one else can do that for us.

Generating a peaceful state of mind which, consequently, is also a positive state of mind and fostering these positive attitudes within oneself is beneficial. The direct beneficiary is oneself and one's own well being. However even those who surround us, beginning with those we have close connections with, will also experience the positive effects, because when we are in a positive state of mind and fostering positive attitudes, we are more inclined to extend our gratitude and help to others. The sense of concern for others' well being is dependent on our own positive state, and having a calm, peaceful, happy state of mind within us. What influences one to have a good relationship and companionship with others is one's positive state of mind.

We need to understand the positive effects of taking the initiative to develop a more peaceful and happy state of mind as it will benefit others around us. In contrast to that, when we harbour negative feelings and attitudes within us it will start to disturb those around us, beginning with those who are close to us and extending further to others. It is these negative attitudes, feelings and thoughts within us that cause us to disturb others.

As the great Master Lama Tsong Khapa mentioned in one of his works, when one's mind is positive then, consequently, the paths that one wishes to obtain also become positive. However if one has a negative state of mind then even the paths in relation to one's practice and development will also become negative. Thus, all is related to one's state of mind. This is concisely what

Lama Tsong Khapa was saying—whatever activities we engage in arise from the mind. When we have a positive state of mind, whatever we do in terms of spiritual practices and engaging with others will have a positive outcome. Whereas if the mind is in a negative state with negative intentions within us then our spiritual practices and endeavours will not be good, but in fact can be harmful.

When we reflect on all our activities and whether they have a positive or negative outcome, we will see this is dependent on our state of mind, which includes our attitudes and intentions. When we recognise and acknowledge that truth for ourselves we will realise that there are times when we don't have much control over our own mind and thus it can be easily influenced by negative thoughts and intentions. We may only recognise the failings and short comings of those negative intentions when we engage in a negative action that becomes harmful. But when we recognise that we realise that negative outcomes arise from the influences of the negativities of our mind.

This recognition and acknowledgement within oneself is incredibly valuable, not only as a way to fully discern and understand that one needs to work on positive intentions and to try to get rid of the negative attitudes and intentions within one, it is also very valuable to help one to understand others actions. This understanding begins with those who are close to us, particularly one's companion, partner or relatives. At times when they may be acting inappropriately or exhibiting inappropriate gestures we can see that this is because they are influenced by negative attitudes within their mind. There may be times when they say or do things which are inappropriate, but this is not who they are as they are being influenced by their negative intentions. Therefore they don't have control during those moments. They lack control over their positive state of mind and their true potential within themselves and thus their actions are being tainted by their negative attitudes and state of mind. They are not themselves in that moment.

When we apply that understanding to the actions of others, such as companions, partners and those around us, we will not take their inappropriate gestures and actions personally and they will not affect one too much. We will be able to understand instead of getting upset or annoyed and then retaliating. We will be able to have some compassion and understanding, which is more acceptable and further protects us from their inappropriate gestures or remarks, rather than retaliating and escalating the conflict.

On a small scale, when those who we relate to are acting negatively with inappropriate gestures or remarks directed at us, we may normally get annoyed or upset, but this is a time we can apply this understanding. Also, on a larger scale we often refer to others as being evil or negative and doing very bad things and we may find reasons to rationalise why we feel upset and angry with these people. But again we can apply the understanding that their being is not evil but they are influenced by their negativities and state of mind and therefore engage in such immeasurable, negative actions. When one thinks about it in this way and knowing the consequences of

their negative deeds that they will have to experience themselves we feel great compassion for them rather than finding reason to get angry with them.

On the positive side, when one sees others engaging in positive deeds that are beneficial to others we can relate to this and feel inspired by how such wonderful individuals are engaging in selfless good deeds to help and benefit others. By protecting oneself from the state of mind of jealousy, and feeling joyful and inspired by their good works it becomes useful for oneself. It inspires us in a way such as, 'May I also follow their example. Just as they are engaging in their good deeds, may I also be able to do that myself'.

When we have this understanding, and someone who is close to us is acting in an inappropriate way, then rather than getting upset and annoyed ourselves we will understand that they have a disturbance in their mind that is causing them to act in this way and we will find reasons to help them at that time. When someone close to us is disturbed and having difficulties, for whatever reasons, that is the time to help them rather than showing annoyance. If we take the initiative at that time, while it may not be apparent right away, they will appreciate the help. They will know it when they overcome the disturbance and understand that you have been assisting them in their troubled times and time of difficulty. This will foster a deeper trust and understanding with the other person.

I can relate an example of this from the acquaintance I have with a couple. The husband told me, *You know my wife is really good, she is a good person. I may have said many things but she just smiles and doesn't respond to me but takes it all in her stride.* He also said, *I am really bad, I keep nagging and telling her off, but she doesn't respond but just smiles and doesn't take it badly at all.* He was confiding in me that he recognises the value of their companionship and even at times of difficulties when he may have said things that may be inappropriate, she doesn't respond negatively. He was acknowledging the value of the person. This is just one example of how a relationship having that understanding works.

These are significant points to bear in mind, particularly when dealing with relationships. There will be times, for one reason or another, where one will be a bit upset or unhappy, but if we can maintain our composure, and not retaliate, and show some understanding, it will help to maintain and strengthen the relationship, and to have a good and more harmonious relationship. This is a significant point.

To summarise the main points being presented this evening. I would like to encourage all of us to maintain the main qualities for our well being, which are a positive, clear and happy state of mind, and to hold intelligence and wisdom as the most valuable assets for ourselves. This is something I regularly contemplate, and by seeing the value of this I try in every way to promote and develop it within myself. Because I find the benefits of this I share it with you. The best method to protect these qualities within one is through the practice of meditation.

As the great Indian Master Shantideva said in one verse of his famous work, *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life*,

*Those of you who wish to protect your mind,
With my hands folded at my heart,
I implore you to please apply
Mindfulness and introspection.*

What Shantideva is saying is that the best means to protect one's mind is by applying mindfulness and what is called "introspection" –vigilance over one's state of mind. These two, being mindful and applying vigilance, are the best way to protect one's mind from adversities. Shantideva said, with great humility himself says, *I put my palms together and I implore you to please apply these methods*. He is saying this out of great concern and love for us who wish to heed that advice.

We should remember and recollect this quote from Shantideva's text, with the recognition that Shantideva was not just a great scholar and master, but in fact a great bodhisattva. That means he was someone who was endowed with great love and compassion, and an altruistic mind in his mental continuum. Out of great humility he was imploring and encouraging us to apply this method and to protect ourselves and our mind. If we can remember that verse and Shantideva himself, it can help us to pay heed to this instruction.

With mindfulness one constantly remembers the positive actions and deeds that we need to engage in through our body, speech and mind, and ensure that our mind is in a positive state. Introspection is to constantly investigate our deeds and actions of our body, speech and mind, whether they are going in a positive or negative direction. If they are going in a negative direction, it reverses the mind to ensure that they are in a positive state again.

Before we conclude the session for the evening we can take a few minutes to spend in meditation. This time we use the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's name mantra being recited as our focal object. When we hear that sound, we will place our full attention and focus on the sound. When the recitation subsides, we will maintain that awareness for a few moments.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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