
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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As usual we can spend some time in meditation. Of course prior to engaging in meditation, it would be good to think about the kind of mindset one needs, and have a good understanding on the proper way to engage in meditation.

We can definitely acknowledge that we have a mind that encompasses all our thoughts and thinking processes. This entity called 'mind' is an integral part of us. We can come to truly understand our mind, particularly in relation to states of mind that induce attitudes which we can categorise as positive, and other states of mind that contribute to negative attitudes within us which we can categorise as negative. This basic distinction between positive and negative, or constructive and destructive, states of mind is something that we can begin to recognise and understand, if we apply an internal investigation and look within us using our profound intelligence called wisdom.

We need to understand that the thoughts and attitudes in our mind are very much related to the external objects that we engage with. We will notice that when the mind focuses on certain objects it can cause a sense of joy, well being and happiness within us, whereas when the mind comes into contact with other kinds of objects it can cause distress in our mind, and we feel unsettled and upset.

When the mind comes into contact with, and focuses on an object that causes distress within us, then the individual person who experiences that distress is a disturbed person. The difference between a happy and an unhappy person is very much related to their state of mind, which is influenced by the particular object that the mind is focused on. When certain objects appear, and come to the attention of our mind, we immediately feel distressed or unhappy.

We might question whether there is a method to alter this state of mind and choose not to focus on the object that causes us distress. When one chooses to intentionally focus on a positive or neutral object that does not cause distress to the mind, and because of this one temporarily forgets the object that causes one distress, then during that time one will feel the release of unease and disturbance within one's mind. In other words, the mind becomes genuinely relaxed and calm. Therefore, there is definitely a method where one intentionally chooses to focus on a positive object.

Thus there are possible and practical ways and means to induce a natural, calm state of mind, in which we are not distressed and disturbed. If the disturbance which occurs in one's mind is not dealt with as soon as possible, then

the disturbance will further strengthen and increase. We can see the value of a method and practice which reduces the disturbance and distress within us, and that it would definitely be to one's benefit to apply it.

We need to identify the objects that cause great distress to our mind. When the mind is preoccupied and obsessed with such objects it can reach a state where it is so obsessed with that object, that one will not be able to eat properly, rest and feel settled, and even sleep will elude one. This will happen as long as one is preoccupied and completely obsessed with the object.

Some people have confided in me that the agony and pain in their heart or mind is so great that when they finally go to sleep, their pillows are wet with tears. Whether one is able to fall asleep or not after that, I am not really sure.

These illustrations that I am presenting have been confided in me, and particularly relate to the mind being distressed and in agony due to separation from objects that one has great fascination with or from a partner in a relationship. For this distress to occur there has to be a belief prior to separation that the other person will make one really happy. When the separation takes place, then the whole expectation that one has of happiness is, basically, shattered. When that expectation is shattered, it causes great pain. In instances like this, the more one thinks of the object one is separated from, the more it brings about agony and pain in the mind.

According to the way others have conveyed their states of mind to me, it seems that it starts with one occurrence, but then the mind conjures up many more fantasies and worries. The fantasies that the mind goes into seem to be quite extensive, and that only causes more distress within one. Using these instances as an example, there are many cases where one may feel distress because of certain occurrences and situations. The best way to be released from that pain and agony and to have a clear state of mind, is not to focus on and forget the object that is causing the pain. One needs to choose a particular object to focus on that can help one to temporarily forget the object that is causing distress, and slowly train the mind to become calmer and more settled.

When someone confided in me that they were experiencing agony and pain because of a separation I encouraged them to try this meditation technique to help them to forget about the object. They said to me, 'Yes, if I could forget the object then the other individual may not cause me pain, but I can't. It is in my mind'. The obsession is so great at that time that it seems like it is impossible to forget. Some others have also shared with me that although it is very painful initially, when the meditation practice is adopted the pain and agony slowly and gradually reduces. I have mentioned to some who were feeling very distressed from a broken relationship, that within two to three years they will get back to their normal self again. So I encourage such persons to try to get back to their normal self, be strong and have integrity within themselves. After two to three years they confide in me again and said, 'Geshe-la, because of your advice and suggestion I am completely released and I don't feel any more pain and agony'.

If one does not make a genuine attempt to overcome a situation that is causing distress, then it can become a life long agenda where the slightest instance may cause one to remember and the whole feeling of distress and unhappiness within one reoccurs. It would be a pity to lead one's whole life with this sort of pain. Making a genuine attempt to address this can definitely bring about positive results.

Of course the pain that one feels may be due to the separation from the object, and one assumes that if one is in contact with the object one will have a nice, good feeling. But if one were to further investigate and look into whether the good feeling experienced is genuine happiness and joy, one might find that because it arises from an object of attachment it is most likely that it is not genuine happiness, which in itself can cause more distress later on. So one has to really analyse and check how we engage with the object, what kind of feeling it induces and whether it is valid or not for one's happiness.

The main point emphasised here is to try to be a little bit more wary about the pleasure that one experiences from objects of attachment. If one places one's entire focus on that that as a source of real happiness for oneself, and if one has the strong belief that that is what makes one happy, then when separation takes place at some time or another, the pain and agony one experiences will be extremely great. One will keep longing for the feeling one experienced before, and will see that as happiness and believe that one has lost the source of happiness. This can occur when one has not really taken the time to investigate if it is a real source of happiness or not, and how real happiness is experienced. When the object is separated from you, it is as if you have lost every sense of joy and happiness, and that will be a dangerous place to be in.

No matter how pleasant coming into contact with an object of attachment may be, it is natural that it will change. and sooner or later separation will take place. If one can apply that understanding from the beginning, whilst enjoying and maintaining a good relationship with the other, it will reduce the obsession and strong belief that without the physical closeness and relationship there will be no joy and happiness. This wrong conception or idea will be reduced, and if a separation takes place it will not cause great agony in one's mind. These are points to consider.

I can share my own experience of the pain of separation. When I was very young I was placed in a monastery. Whenever my mum came to visit me I would have a good time. I was very happy and enjoyed her company and had a pleasant and an enjoyable feeling when she was around. Perhaps it is also because the discipline in the monastery was very strict, and when mum came to visit I would be exempted from going to studies for a while and I had some free time. So maybe my happiness was also due to that.

However I did have a very close and affectionate feeling for my mum and I enjoyed her visits and company. But when she left the monastery, and had to go back home, I would really miss her and feel unhappy inside. I remember that as uncomfortable and painful. My teacher

would notice and he was very kind and would give me some free time to play and allowed me to get a bit distracted with playing. Eventually, after some time, I would forget the strong feeling and agony of separating from my mum. Then my teacher would put me back to my studies and I didn't mind that. It took some time, but it is possible to forget.

From my own experience of that time, I can say that when children are very young it seems we can easily negotiate and teach them to relate to things in a way that they can understand, and their mind can accept. When they get older it can be difficult to get through to them. So there is an opportunity when they are young to point them in the right direction, and reasoning with them can be very helpful to develop their mind.

Perhaps this is because when children are quite young, their intelligence is still very fresh. So they can adapt quite easily. Whereas when they get older their level of intelligence and personality has developed, and any new ideas is harder to accept. They have their own agenda and way of thinking.

Just to give a contemporary example, if when children are very young we say, 'you look very nice if you wear this', they will say, 'Oh, okay' and they will put it on. They will have no hesitation in trying on any type of clothes. But when they reach a certain age and mum or dad says, 'You will look good if you wear this', they will say, 'Oh no'. They want to choose their own clothes.

I really admire and I am fond of the fresh young mind which can easily learn and adapt. I find that a good state to be in. When children are very young they have a very strong bond and good connection with their mothers.

I can share an account of this. When I go down to the St. Kilda sea baths I meet different individuals there. Once there was a family, a mother with two children and their grandmother that I met a few times. I noticed that when the grandmother tried to hold and console the six month old baby she was not very settled. But as soon as her mum held her she immediately became calm and quiet. I noticed the immediate bond, a positive and trusting effect from the child being in her mother's arms. When I witnessed this it reinforced the fact that there is a very strong bond between a mother and her child, especially when the child is very young, there is a profound bond.

When I see parents caring for their children, and the special bond they have and how the parents go to great lengths to care for their young ones, it is a good reminder to me of the kindness of my own parents. Again and again, I think of the great kindness parents are showing their children. It reminds me of my own parents and the kindness they showed to me. I feel these are good examples and ways to learn to feel grateful for the care that one has received. It would be useful for you to also consider these points.

To summarise the points mentioned earlier, the mere contact with certain objects can cause a lot of agony, distress and disturbance to our mind. By recognising and acknowledging that this is due to the interaction, contact and perception, that one has with the object, one can see one has to apply a method to release oneself from the

agony, distress and disturbance within oneself. The method that we adopt here in meditation is to choose an inner object to focus on. We choose a positive or neutral object, basically an object that does not cause disturbances, delusions or afflictions to arise in our mind. Having chosen the inner object that does not cause distress to the mind, through familiarity and training in applying our full focus and attention to it one will gain more control over one's mind. When there is no disturbance or distress in one's mind it naturally becomes calm and settled and a more peaceful feeling emerges. So this is what we call the meditation technique.

The more we familiarise ourselves with the meditation object and focus on it, the more our mind becomes attuned to adopting a more focused and clear state and becomes a mind that does not experience distress. Due to this familiarity with applying the meditation technique one will reach a point where, even if one were to come into contact with the object which has previously caused one distress, the same object will not cause distress now. One will not be affected. This will definitely occur through practice.

The object that causes us distress does not have to be something that we come into physical contact with. Even remembering an object can cause distress in one's mind. Others have confided in me that even remembering some individuals who have passed away quite long ago can still cause distress in one's mind. If we don't train our mind to maintain its own integrity and not to be affected, and leave it in its natural course, this seems to happen again and again. Therefore this training of meditation is beneficial.

Some people have said to me that they don't have any individuals who could cause them distress when they think about them. I don't know to what extent this may be true. But I feel that this sentiment is something most people naturally have. Even if it hasn't occurred yet, it may occur later, so it is good to prepare oneself.

So the main point to consider here is that the object that causes distress to one's mind can be any distracting object. An object that we normally allow our mind to become distracted by is an object that can cause us distress. Therefore the main thing in meditation practice is to distance ourselves and our focus from any distracting objects, by completely withdrawing our mind from them and then place our focus upon the chosen object.

The pain and agony experienced when a separation takes place can only be fully understood by someone who has had the experience. Someone who has not gone through the experience may not be able to fully understand the kind of distress and agony it can cause. Someone who has had the experience can definitely relate to it.

This reminds me of an incident when one of my late teachers, Geshe Ngawang Dhargye, was giving teachings here in Bendigo, and a German lady attended his teachings. When I saw her later she told me that she really enjoyed the teachings and found them really helpful and useful. However there were a lot of explanations of the kinds of suffering and she didn't relate to them as she did not believe in all those

sufferings. However about two years later I met with this lady again. She had moved, and her family owned a restaurant in St. Kilda that had burnt down recently, and had to be rebuilt. She recalled those explanations of suffering that Geshe Ngawang Dhargye had taught and that she now totally understands them.

What I have attempted to share is how these feelings of agony and distress are something that can occur any time. Some already have had the experience. Some may feel that this may not relate to them, but it may happen sooner or later. So to understand and to get the knowledge of how to deal with this, and to be prepared for such situations, can definitely help one. When we talk about distress and agony within us, it is like a psychological illness that causes one pain. Therefore there are ways and means on how to deal with this illness and to overcome, which is a significant practice for one to undertake.

Thus, with an understanding of the significance of meditation practice, we can now adopt this meditation practice. We readjust our physical posture to be in a comfortable position. For the next few minutes we mentally make a decision to not allow our mind to be distracted and follow any kind of thoughts or objects that may come to mind. Instead we intentionally bring our focus inwards so that our mind is stopped from going out in every direction. Bringing our focus inwards, we then place it upon, and are fully aware of, the inflow and outflow of our natural breathing. The breath itself needs to be relaxed, in its natural state, so that it is not too laboured or too shallow. The focus on the breath is also not too tight or too loose, we just find the right measure where one is naturally focused on the breath itself. In this way, we will for the next few minutes adopt this technique (*pause for meditation*).

For the remaining few minutes you are welcome to ask any questions you may have.

Question: What would the karma be for putting down an animal if it is suffering?

This is one of those karmas that are a little bit complicated, because it is the life of another being that has been shortened or taken. There is karma involved. However, for it to be a complete karma of killing there are certain factors such as 'intention or wanting to kill it' that have to be present. The intention here, we can say, is to release it from pain and suffering, and not to actually kill it. So, on the motivation level, one will say the motivation to kill the animal may not be present.

The delusion would be killing it out of attachment, anger or ignorance. So the strong delusion which needs to be present for it to be a complete karma of killing is also not present. In fact one has the intention of concern and the desire to release them from pain and suffering. Whilst an act of taking a life has been done, and there is some karma involved there, I would not consider it as heavy negative karma. The animal in question is now nearing or quite close to death anyway, and since the animal is to die anyway one's intention is for it to have the least suffering, isn't it?

For example, if the animal were to have only two more days to live, but was intensively suffering, one may argue that one is lessening the suffering by two days. One can take this into consideration. The Dalai Lama has made some comments along the same line in a public talk. This is a common question. I recall at one time, the Dalai Lama was asked the same question when he was invited to the Press Club in Canberra.

If there are means and ways to prolong the life of another being, but one neglects to help prolong the life in a healthy way that would be depriving the other being of the privilege of life. In the case of this animal, if it is certain to die and nothing can be done to revive it or to help prolong its life, and one doesn't want it to suffer for too long, one can take into consideration that ending its life is not such a bad or negative act.

I recall someone who related to me their feelings after doing a course I was giving in Brisbane at the Chenrezig Institute. This individual told me that prior to coming to the course he was going up some stairs, and he had a vision or dream of a monk. Then he heard of the course, came and saw me as the teacher. He said that reminded him of the vision he had, and that was a significant coincidence.

After the course he said that he has learned two things about his life; a bad act and a good act that he had done. He said the bad act happened when his friend's horse broke its leg and he shot the horse and ended its life. He felt that was a bad thing that he had done. The good thing was that he had worked very hard throughout his life and never failed to pay his taxes. Paying his taxes on time, he felt, was a good act.

I felt that he was confiding truthfully about how he felt about events in his own life. He thought a lot about it and was really keen to follow the Buddhist path. He even took refuge and I gave him a name, Sanghe Jampa.

Before we conclude the session for the evening, we can take a few minutes in meditation again. This time we focus on the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's name mantra as it is recited. When we hear that sound we will keep our entire focus on the sound. When the recitation subsides, we will maintain an awareness of the residue and the good feeling that arises. In that way it will suffice for a focused meditation.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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