
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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As usual we can spend some time in meditation. For that purpose we sit in a comfortable relaxed posture. Since we have been talking about it quite regularly, I may not need to explain too much about the specifics of how to engage in the meditation practice. However it is good to bring to mind again the main purpose of meditation practice. In summary, the purpose of meditation practice is to bring about a clear and peaceful state of mind and also to further develop the innate potential that one has.

It is good to see the advantages of having a clear mind and strengthening one's mental strength. In order to acknowledge and recognise these advantages we can, first of all, consider the ill effects of not having a clear state of mind, and not being able to use one's mental strength if it has weakened. So what causes one's mind to be unclear? Our mental strength is weakened when we are following disturbing and discursive thoughts. When we are carried away with disturbing thoughts, it causes the turmoil within us.

As the great Indian Master Shantideva said, a body that is affected by illnesses is a weak body. When one's body is physically weak and has low energy, one will not be able to accomplish physical activities. Whatever one does, it does not carry much strength. He explained that likewise, when the mind is riddled with disturbing thoughts, it weakens the strength of mind. When one has an unclear state of mind it also affects our intelligence, what we call wisdom, and our capacity to utilise this intelligence. And when we lack wisdom we are bound to make a lot of mistakes in our life.

When our mind is carried away by disturbing and discursive thoughts that arise from focusing on distracting objects, the mind becomes unsettled and disturbed, and one feels a sense of turmoil within one. Having recognised that, if one is able to withdraw one's mind from focusing on the distracting object, and doesn't allow the mind to follow discursive thoughts, but instead focuses on an appropriate single object that doesn't cause disturbing thoughts to arise, and maintains the focus of that object, then one will naturally experience the positive effect of the mind becoming settled and clear. As a result one will experience a peaceful and calm state of mind.

In contrast to a settled and focused state of mind, when the mind is distracted and influenced by disturbing thoughts, one loses the full potential, and strength of the mind and the ability to utilise it in a positive way. We end up in not being able to accomplish anything meaningful. When we adopt the technique of focusing on a particular object and withdrawing our mind from disturbing thoughts, the mind becomes settled and clear. When the

mind is clear then, within that clarity, one is able to utilise the strength of the mind to maintain the focus on a chosen object. This is how one engages in meditation practice. Focusing on a positive object further induces the mind to become clear, and one's intelligence or wisdom is strengthened. Experiencing such a peaceful state of mind with clarity, intelligence and wisdom, is the path that one needs to follow.

It is crucial and essential for our well being to adopt such a state of mind. With a clear, calm, peaceful and intelligent state of mind one will be able to accomplish whatever is meaningful. With the wisdom and intelligence that arises, we will be able to make the right decisions and assess whether a situation is beneficial for the future or not, and whether or not it is advisable to adopt a certain activity. All these decisions are for the betterment of one's life. All these potentials are within our reach, and if we apply meditation practice we will receive these benefits. In summary, this is the benefit of meditation practice.

I have used an analogy previously in which combating disturbing thoughts and applying methods so that these thoughts will not disturb and affect us, can be compared with combat between someone holding a sword, and another person holding a bow and arrow. When the person with the bow and arrow shoots an arrow a person who is skilled with the sword may be able to block all the arrows, thus not allowing the arrows to hurt them.

This analogy is taken further in a story. Two individuals were fighting in this way and because the swordsman was very skilful in wielding his sword he was cutting down all the arrows. Eventually the archer had just one arrow left and when he was about to shoot his girlfriend said, "Don't shoot that last arrow". She knew that as the swordsman had been able to ward off all the previous arrows the archer would not be able to hit his mark. So she said, "I will tell you when to use the arrow". She went over to the swordsman and started to show him beautiful gestures. At that moment the swordsman became distracted she indicated to the archer to shoot. The arrow hit the swordsman because he was momentarily distracted by the beautiful woman, and it lessened his skill. This is an illustration to show how distractions can be deadly.

The main point of this analogy is to illustrate that in our daily meditation practice objects of attachment are the worst kind of obstacles, as they cause one's mind to wander off from the object that one has chosen to meditate on. This causes the mind to become duller and duller and one may not be able to achieve a single-pointed focus. In fact, whatever activity we engage in, we will find that the moment we get distracted we are bound to make more mistakes and not do it well. This is also true for those who engage in sports. Whilst they normally may be very skilled in their sports, if they become a little bit distracted they may not perform as well. In fact some sportsmen have confessed when they have lost a match that it was because they were a little bit distracted.

It states in the earlier story that the swordsman, in the last few moments before he died, said, "It is not the archer

and the arrow that is killing me, but it is my lapse of mindfulness that is robbing me of my life”.

What we learn from these explanations, illustrations and the analogy is that having a clear state of mind is essential for one to be able to accomplish whatever meaningful activity one needs to accomplish. Therefore, to ensure that we have the full capacity and potential to accomplish meaningful activities in our lives, it is essential that we develop and apply mindfulness to give us a clear state of mind. If we don't resort to having a clear state of mind and mindfulness, then we will easily fall victim to distractions that will be obstacles to our own well being.

In summary, the most essential tool to adopt is a clear and positive state of mind, and with that comes a happy mind that has intelligence and wisdom.

Achieving these qualities will definitely help clear away a lot of unwanted disturbances and problems in our mind. These are quite practical and reasonable qualities that we can identify with. They are not too obscure or difficult to understand but things that we can relate to and understand. The method itself is something that we can adopt, and is not beyond our reach, and we have the capacity to do this.

We need to protect ourselves from discursive and disturbing thoughts. These thoughts cause the most angst and turmoil within one, and bring about unnecessary worries, fears, anxieties and a lot of doubts in one's mind. There may not be any immediate real cause or conditions for worry, but going round and round these disturbing thoughts will cause one to be weighed down. One will keep thinking, “Is it likely that I will face a terrible situation?” or “Should I be doing this or try something else in my life?” These pointless thoughts will keep escalating in one's mind. If one succumbs to these discursive thoughts then that is when we end up feeling quite weighed down, unsettled and a little bit on edge, no matter what we are doing, and wherever we may be. It is an uncomfortable state to be in. Why should we allow that to happen to us when there is an alternative, and the means to overcome that state of being weighed down? The alternative is adopting a positive state of mind with positive thoughts, and recognising discursive thoughts to be the cause of disturbance and angst within one. If one applies and uses the correct technique, it becomes easier to overcome such negative states of mind. This helps one's mind to become clearer and to have more wisdom, and that is our best friend or companion.

Assessing one's state of mind, and checking it periodically to ensure that one is not succumbing to discursive, disturbing thoughts, is the means to apply this analysis to oneself. This is how we use our intelligence and wisdom to benefit us and it becomes an aid for the protection of our mind. The great master Atisha gave some very profound advice when he succinctly said, “When alone check one's state of mind, and when one is amongst others, check one's speech”. This is very profound advice, because it is when we are alone that we tend to be carried away by our own disturbing thoughts and, if we are not careful, that is when we will succumb to them. Whereas if we are not careful when we are with others we may be carried away and utter hurtful and

slanderous words or gossip. This is very practical advice, even for ordinary people in their daily lives.

The practical benefit of checking and analysing one's own mind is that this will help to contain the mind, rather than allowing it to go off in every direction. If one allows it to follow every thought, it then gets caught up with disturbing thoughts and unnecessary worries. So just checking one's own mind is a form of meditation practice that helps to contain the mind within one.

One practical method that has been presented previously is to look at the discursive thought itself. The mere fact of acknowledging discursive thoughts actually dissipates their power. When we don't recognise them, they tend to have power over us and the mind goes off on its own tangent. But if we recognise and see them for what they are, this dissipates their power and the mind becomes more settled and calmer. These are practical methods and if we don't know the technique, that's unfortunate. But if we understand that there is a way, and method to help contain our minds, then it is a matter of applying it.

There is a very good illustration of this fact and how this technique works in the text called the *Great Seal of Mahamudra*. According to that text in ancient times ships went out to search for treasure and land. On the ships they would have some birds, possibly pigeons, which they would periodically let go to search for land or treasure. When the birds were put into their cage they naturally felt restrained and wanted to be let out and fly away. So when they were let out of their cage their natural instinct was to fly away. They would fly off, but after a while if there was no land nearby they would come back to the ship. This story was given as an analogy of how disturbing thoughts may bubble and want to go in every direction, but when you check and look at them, they settle down, just as the birds when released come back to the ship again and settle down. Likewise when we look at these thoughts and analyse them, they will settle down from whence they arose.

This may sound like a simple method or instruction but it can be very useful and meaningful. These are simple antidotes that I am trying to present, which can help you to have a more settled mind. Rather than allowing your mind to become chaotic and disturbed you can find means and ways to settle it down and you can utilise your real potential. Resorting to these techniques and methods can help settle one's mind, so that it becomes calmer and more peaceful.

Another piece of practical advice that I am sharing with you is the instructions on how to be contented when you find yourself alone, so that you don't feel lonely. This is how I spend most of my time when I am alone and I resort to these ways of thinking and conducting my thoughts. It helps to bring about a more settled, contented and happy state of mind. For example, recently I have spent most of my time focusing on the enlightened deity, Tara, reciting the mantra and receiving her blessings. Reciting the mantra seems to give me a sense of joy and happiness in my mind. There is definitely some benefit in doing this.

Some have commented to me that the advice I have shared on practical ways of focusing on a deity, or

enlightened being, and receiving their blessings can be very helpful, especially when one is not able to have elaborate visualisation of a particular aspect of the deity, such as the different colours, the number of arms and shapes, and so forth. If that is not possible for one, the main thing is to feel the presence of the deity, and to develop a conviction that an enlightened being is present. As a result of receiving the blessings of the enlightened being, and the enlightened body into one's own, the impurities of one's body become purified and one receives a real lightness from within. Receiving the blessings of speech occurs when one imagines receiving their speech in the form of light entering one, and that purifies all the impurities and negativities of one's own speech. Likewise when one receives blessings of the mind from the enlightened mind, it will purify the negativities of one's mind. So, in this way, one feels the sense of all the negativities of one's body, speech and mind being purified, and one can definitely feel lighter and happier.

What I have been relating is, of course, practice in the Buddhist tradition, particularly in our tradition where meditation practice uses this visualisation. When we know the technique we can apply it in whatever tradition we belong to. I am not sure how God is described if one adheres to the Christian tradition. Maybe there is no real image of God, or maybe there is no form that God is presented in, but you can feel the presence of God and receive blessings.

Jesus is depicted in the human form and that is something you can imagine, however I don't know how Christians imagine God, whether it is by His qualities, or something else. I wonder what actually occurs in the mind of Christians when they refer to God and how they depict and understand God.

His Holiness, The Dalai Lama, has mentioned in his teachings that meditation practice can apply to Christians, and their object of focus can be the cross, because the cross has specific significance for the Christian faith. With an understanding of what it represents, one can receive blessings in that way. So, whatever embodies the purest quality will be the object to focus on. By focusing, imagining and receiving their blessings, one can definitely benefit from it.

For our meditation purpose now, the object we adopt to focus on, and be aware of, is our own breath. The method or technique is to first of all to withdraw from all forms of distractions, particularly the discursive and disturbing thoughts, and acknowledge the short comings and faults of following the disturbing thoughts, knowing that it is the distracted mind that is causing all our turmoil and unwanted mental agony. Acknowledging and recognising that we intentionally withdraw from all forms of distracting objects, and don't allow any kind of thoughts to dominate our mind. One then brings one's focus within, and using the detached mind, a mind distanced from all disturbing thoughts and distractions, one applies that focus to the chosen object, which is our breath. For the next few minutes we will put one hundred percent focus just on the breath itself and nothing else.

(Pause for meditation)

While maintaining a more settled mind, we can now use the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's name mantra as our object of focus. As we hear the chant, we try to maintain the focus just on the sound itself and when the recitation subsides, we will maintain that awareness and keep the mind focused within for a few moments. That will conclude our meditation.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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