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meditation practice. When we gain a fuller knowledge, we gain more wisdom. This is analytical wisdom, the wisdom to be able to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong.

Everyone has moments of having unwanted disturbing thoughts. When we find that these negative thoughts take an upper hand, and we find ourselves not being able to come out of that or change our attitude, then at this point we could apply the meditation technique which can make us feel a bit calmer and more peaceful. But it doesn't take much to go back again to our neurotic state of mind, which keeps going over and over the negative scenarios that cause negative emotions to arise. This backward slide is the result of familiarity with our negative state of mind, and we further feed it with negative attitudes, rather than trying to defuse the situation by finding a method that helps us to come out of that.

If we are not careful, then we are perpetuating our negative, neurotic state of mind, and further escalating it by dwelling on it, and going further and further into it. This is why I often emphasise this point about being cautious, and careful that we don't not fall victim to a negative, neurotic state of mind where it goes in circles. Try to apply the meditation practice so that we catch ourselves whenever we go into this negative spiral. We can find ourselves in a negative rut, going over and over again with the same negative thoughts. Recognise that, and try to come out of that negative spiral. Try to make every effort to be in a more positive frame of mind, with a positive attitude. Otherwise, if we allow that negative spiral to continue unchecked, then it may reach a state where it may seem impossible to come out of that state. We may become overwhelmed with a negative mind.

We need to take the initiative to recognise our own state of mind, as there is no one else to point it out to us. If we are not careful, then we may reach a point in our state of mind where we become so neurotic and unhappy, being stuck in a negative pattern. This can cause us to lose the normal enjoyments in life, such as enjoying a nice meal. Even when a delicious meal is presented, it is not enjoyable anymore, and even if we were to go out somewhere that is normally considered to be a nice place, we don't seem to enjoy that environment anymore. And even if we are with nice people, such as friends and companions, somehow we don't seem to enjoy their company. When they speak, their words don't register in our mind as we aren't able to pay attention to what they are saying. And at home, we may have a nice plasma television, a comfortable lounge, but even with all that, somehow staying at home is not enjoyable. This is a pitiful state, where we have lost all sense of normal enjoyment. This is clearly a situation where external conditions are not lacking, but it is because we have not paid attention to our state of mind, not maintained a positive frame of mind, which has caused us to be in this state. If we don't pay attention to our state of mind and apply the protection strategies, then we can get stuck in a negative state of mind.

These are essential points that we need to regularly reflect upon to better our lifestyle and wellbeing. When I talk about our better life, I am referring to our immediate circumstances. I am not talking about any long-term

goals, such as the benefits of meditation for our future lives, but rather the benefits in this very life. We need to understand what conditions are needed for our wellbeing. Conditions are not restricted to our external conditions, but to the inner conditions that contribute to our state of mind. When our external conditions are adequate, when there are no immediate worries to our livelihood, then we need to pay even more attention to maintaining a positive, happy state of mind. We need to develop a contented state of mind, and try to induce a state of mind where we can feel genuinely relaxed and calm within ourselves, within our mind. This leads back again to our meditation practice as being the most useful technique to achieve a calm and positive state of mind.

When our own state of mind is calm and peaceful, then we can definitely help others be calm, relaxed and peaceful. Adopting a frame of mind where people can easily see we have a sense of ease and joy definitely contributes to a harmonious relationship with our immediate relatives, our companions and friends. They will all definitely enjoy our company, and just being with them will contribute to their wellbeing as well.

When we begin to understand and recognise the positive effects of a positive state of mind, then we begin to want to achieve that. Being in a positive frame of mind will not only help to secure the inner conditions for our happiness and wellbeing, but this will also help us to enjoy our external conditions more, which will further contribute to our wellbeing. It is a great achievement when we have both inner conditions as well as external conditions for our wellbeing, which will ensure that we have a good happy life. What more can we ask for than that? It is important that we don't lose these inner conditions while we are striving for good external conditions. The most important thing here is to try to develop inner conditions for our wellbeing and happiness. The inner conditions are a positive state of mind, specifically developing the sentiment of unconditional love and compassion. The more we develop this unconditional love and compassion towards others, the more we benefit. Unconditional love and compassion develops from a genuine sense of concern for others' wellbeing. This is the utmost positive state of mind, bringing only benefit to ourselves and others. These are the points that we need to be reflecting upon as an outcome of our practice of meditation.

The point of engaging in meditation is to cultivate this positive state of mind. A meditation practice is primarily about acquiring a positive internal condition. We don't need much training to recognise good external conditions, such as a delicious meal. No-one has to say much to us about how to eat it or how to enjoy it, but meditation is specifically about how to acquire positive internal conditions. Meditation practices are a means to develop the internal conditions for our happiness, and the conditions for getting a deeper rooted sense of contentment and happiness within, which then helps us to enjoy our external good conditions. If we haven't developed any positive internal conditions, then even if we have abundant external conditions, we won't be happy. In contrast, if we have great inner conditions but poor external conditions, then we will still experience a sense of joy, happiness and contentment.

I can refer to an example that His Holiness the Dalai Lama often uses in his teachings. He spoke about some religious practitioners who may not have lavish external conditions but nevertheless have a sense of real joy in their mind. The Dalai Lama met a Spanish Christian hermit monk after he heard that the monk had been in retreat for the past six years. The Dalai Lama asked the Christian monk what he was meditating on in his retreat, and the monk replied, 'I was meditating on love'. The Dalai Lama noticed that as the monk was talking about meditating on love, his whole facial expression was one of joyful and peaceful radiance. The Dalai Lama remarked that this was astonishing. Then he asked what the retreat conditions were like. The monk said he lived in a small hut and he lived on dry bread and some water. So even with these poor external conditions, compared to our standards, having barely any good food, clearly did not deprive the monk from experiencing a great sense of joy, contentment and happiness in his mind. While there are many more examples we can use, such as from Tibet where people practise in austere conditions, this monk's example is significant as occurred in a developed country. So in this modern age, we can still find practitioners of this degree.

To summarise the main point, we need to embrace the practice of meditation, which is about developing enough positive internal conditions to experience a sense of peace, joy and happiness within ourselves. We can reflect upon these practices as a means to secure a better future, as well as contributing to good conditions in this life. So engaging in the practice of meditation right now in our everyday life as we live it, we will find that our internal conditions will improve, which in turn will improve our external conditions.

Just to re-emphasise the point about the meaning of meditation practice; the literal meaning is familiarising. The more we familiarise our mind with more positive objects, the more we are inclined to be in a positive frame of mind. For example, when someone uses love as a meditation object to focus on, i.e. when one meditates on love, then their mind will be inclined to have a loving attitude towards others.

Before our time for the session of this evening fades away, let us actually put some time into a practice of meditation. As usual, we will use our breath as the focus object for our meditation. As with any meditation, we need to be familiar with any object that we choose to focus on, then we make a commitment to place our full attention and focus on that chosen object. This requires a commitment and determination to not allow the mind to wander off or to become distracted. One of the two main obstacles for our meditation practice is being distracted. Distraction is one of the major obstacles to our meditation practice; the other one is lethargy. Here, distraction is called excitement in our mind. When our mind is distracted it is not able to focus on the chosen object, it goes off again in a tangent. If we don't fight the distractions, or our excitement, if we don't make an effort to overcome that, then while we might be able to focus on an object for a short time, we might also find that our mind will easily wander off again. And this situation may occur again and again, and we will never be able to

achieve any focus on the object of meditation. So therefore we need to recognise this obstacle, and make a special effort to keep our mind focussed on the object.

So now we bring our full attention and focus on our breath by distancing ourselves from all other distractions and thoughts. Maintain a focus on the breath, one hundred percent focus on the breath itself for the next few minutes.

*(meditation)*

This technique of focussing single-pointedly on our breath is a technique that helps us to gain more control over our mind. And gaining control over our own mind means containing our mind, having the ability to focus our mind within, rather than allowing our mind to be distracted in every direction. A mind that is completely distracted and immersed in so many different directions causes the anxieties and fears, and paranoia in our mind. It is the distracted mind that causes all that turmoil within us. If we have a lack of self-control over our own mind, then we need to apply a technique that develops a more focussed mind, and thus a more controlled mind. By the virtue of focusing within, and not being distracted externally, the mind naturally becomes more subdued. As well as gaining more control over our mind, the mind becomes more subdued. As the Buddha famously mentioned, 'A subdued mind is a happy mind'. This technique of developing a more focussed mind, a more contained mind, comes with familiarity. The more we engage in this meditation practice, the more likely we will gain more control over our mind.

Before we conclude the session this evening, let us again spend a few minutes in meditation. As we adopt the meditation with our straight back and relaxed posture, we can focus on the sound of the mantra, which can be our meditation object. As we hear the chant, we try to maintain a focus on the Buddha Shakyamuni mantra. When the recitation subsides, just maintain that awareness, and focus on the residual sound of the mantra, and maintain that focus.

*TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA*

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