
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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As usual we can spend some time for meditation. Engaging in the practice of meditation—to whatever extent one can, even just for a minute or five minutes, or for those with experience, up to an hour—is highly significant and beneficial for bringing about genuine calmness and peace in one's mind.

We could all relate to times when we may feel physically relaxed, yet still have a restless mind; while we may not lack external conditions for relaxation, we lack the inner conditions for feeling calm and peaceful.

So, lacking the inner conditions to feel genuinely relaxed causes us to feel restless and unsettled. We experience a sense of inner turmoil. As I regularly mention, rather than trying to relate to some external reason for feeling that way, we can take the initiative to look within and see what could be missing to feeling calm and peaceful, and what could be causing that distressed, agitated mind.

When one applies this inner investigation and looks within to find the reasons for one's distress, at a certain point it will become quite clear that it is a negative state of mind that is the cause. Noticing or acknowledging this for oneself is like a great revelation, because one has detected the real cause of one's problem, the lack of a happy state of mind. Then when we take the initiative to change our attitude or way of thinking to a more positive direction, cultivating more positive attitudes, the earlier experience of stress and turmoil starts to subside, and we can experience a calmer, more peaceful state of mind.

This inner analysis—taking the initiative to change our negative states of mind to more positive ones—is called mind training. Initially we may find it not so easy to apply this technique, because we are still prone to negative states of mind. Although we may take measures to direct our mind to a more positive way of thinking, negative states of mind seem to recur again and again, nevertheless we should never give up. Only with persistent application of this method can we reach the significant point where we experience more stable, calm, and happy states of mind. With persistence, we should practise continually, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. Then after a period of time, one will begin to notice a positive, steady transformation taking place.

When we begin to notice negative states of mind through this training, we will take the initiative to change our state of mind to a more positive one. We will start to notice that the benefits are far reaching and practical. Also it will help one to be less vulnerable to external harms. Normally when certain external situations cause

us to become upset and agitated, our habit is to immediately blame the external situation, and claim that to be the cause of one's problems. We are used to immediately finding fault with our external conditions, never really attempting to look within and asking how is our mind reacting to the situation? For as long as we believe the cause of our problems to be external, there will never be an end to the external harms we experience—we will always be vulnerable to every uncomfortable and difficult situation that may occur.

Whereas when we take the initiative to do some internal investigation and start changing our way of thinking, that will help one to actually protect oneself from external harm. Whenever we are affected by external conditions, it is really how we perceive the situation that can cause us harm and mental agitation. The mind can only be affected by external conditions depending on how one perceives that situation. When the mind is constantly seeing fault, or putting the blame upon external conditions as if there were nothing wrong within oneself, one will never really solve one's problems.

But if we take the initiative to really work on our state of mind then, gradually, we will notice that despite adverse conditions—such as others being critical, which normally would cause us to immediately become upset and angry—the time may come where it doesn't affect us so much anymore. We won't get upset or angry as easily as we used to. That shows a significant progress and transformation—while our external conditions may not have changed dramatically, because we have maintained a positive way of thinking, we will not be affected by the external conditions.

By relating to the benefits of mind training in such practical ways, we can then take the initiative to apply it. For someone who is earnestly seeking a spiritual path, their task is to do that internal investigation, and start working on and training the mind. If such a spiritual seeker does not to take the initiative, they will not benefit from their spiritual practice.

Even for ordinary people who work in their everyday life and who may not consider themselves to be religious, this sort of practice and training could bring about a significant change, and enable them to handle a difficult situation better. As one gains more control over one's own state of mind, external problems will not upset one too much. So there is definitely that benefit.

The great Indian master, Atisha, advises, 'The way to conduct oneself is to proclaim one's own faults and hide one's qualities. While in relation to others, proclaim their qualities and hide their faults'. Now this piece of advice is very significant for our everyday life. If we were to be honest with ourselves, we would find that we actually practise the opposite. We go around proclaiming our own qualities, talking highly about our achievements implying how great we are and so forth. And when it comes to others, we have no hesitation in proclaiming their faults. When we bring up others faults, we are implying that we don't have those faults; rather, it is others who have all the faults and we are free from them. When we adopt this sort of conduct, it causes much disruption in our communities, and even in our relationships with others.

It is quite common to hear people talking about the faults of their partner or companion. They go on and on about the faults of their partner and exaggerate the faults, putting them in a bad light, and continually proclaiming their negativities. This implies that one is free from these faults that one is accusing the other of having. Thus, one becomes puffed up with a sense of pride: one is above all of these faults that one is accusing others of having. This is how we practise the opposite of proclaiming our own qualities while hiding our own faults. When it comes to others, we proclaim even their tiny faults and exaggerate them as though they are great faults.

If we become habituated to finding faults in others, we start to taint our perceptions and actually begin to see only faults in others. The more we find faults in others and focus on it, the more it will obscure the natural good qualities they have. Through our own habituation, we have developed our perception to the point where we actually see mostly faults in others, rather than qualities.

If we can start to practise the opposite, where we make a habit of looking for and proclaiming the qualities of others, rather than their faults, through such positive habituation, we will start to really see the actual good qualities that everyone possesses. And when we begin to see the qualities of others, there is more gratitude and appreciation of them, which fosters positive attitudes towards them.

I have shared this advice with younger people in the past, and it still is relevant for today's younger generation, who are trying to make their life more meaningful. When it comes to relationships, one needs to be cautious and not just immediately jump into a commitment. When you start a relationship with someone else, if it is with a fascination and attraction to them, then it is likely that this attraction will have the upper hand. When strong attachment or desire is involved in a relationship, one of the natural faults of that attachment will be to exaggerate the qualities of the other. This is a tainted perception, where attachment exaggerates the qualities of the other. Meanwhile, while it is tainting our own perception of the other, because they are also attracted to you, perhaps they are trying their utmost to only show you their qualities and hide their faults. This combination escalates one's exaggerated view of the other as perfect: they seem to have no faults, and only good qualities that one admires.

In such a situation, there are two reasons why it is hard to see the faults in the other. Firstly, one is infatuated with desire and thus only sees their good qualities; one is not paying attention to their negative qualities and also because they are hiding their faults, it is hard to see them.

After a few months when the relationship develops further into a committed, and in a long-term relationship the two partners cannot keep on hiding their faults all the time. There will be certain situations where those faults become more apparent, more transparent. At that time, the person who thought they were only seeing only qualities and attractive attributes in the other, now start to become quite shocked when they see those faults. They think 'How could this be?'. They get quite shocked and at that point they might say 'Oh, this relationship has been a terrible mistake'. In fact people have confided in me

exactly this situation, saying 'Geshe la, I made a terrible mistake to choose such a person'. At such a time, I tell them 'Remember I told you not to be too hasty, to take your time'. If you intend your fascination to be only for a couple of months, there is not much for me to say here. But if you are intending to have a committed long-term relationship, it is worthwhile to investigate, to take the time to get to know the other before actually entering into that committed relationship.

This advice is not just for the younger generation as I mentioned earlier but for anyone in a situation where you want to have a meaningful relationship with someone else. Everyone wants rightly wants to have a partner—a husband or wife, or boyfriend or girlfriend; this is prevalent in the lay community. Along with that, everyone would agree upon the value of mutual trust as being intrinsic to the relationship. This makes one's relationship with others more meaningful.

It is worthwhile investigating this in relation to the earlier advice given here, and applying it. When one relates to others, it is better to be more forthcoming, more transparent. If one acknowledges one's faults right away, one will not be so affected when others point out those faults to oneself. For example, if someone who is short-tempered and easily irritated acknowledges it and is aware of it, then when someone points out that they are a little short-tempered, they would say, 'Okay yes I understand, I agree that is my problem. Maybe I need some anger management!'. However, if someone doesn't see this fault in themselves, they would not immediately admit to it. And if someone were to actually point it out to them, they immediately become defensive, and will be negatively affected by that criticism.

It is far better to acknowledge one's faults to oneself first and then, when the situation arises, to acknowledge them to others. Otherwise, if one keeps trying to hide one's faults, at a certain point, they will come out anyway, and then it can affect our relationship with others. Especially with one's companion, if one actually practises seeing the qualities in them and looking at the good side of others, this can overpower or override any small or minor sort of faults that they may have. In relation to oneself, hiding one's qualities helps one to remain cool-headed, with a more balanced state of mind; when one hides one's qualities, it helps prevent pride from arising. When pride overtakes our mind, that can affect one negatively as well. So there is great significance in hiding one's qualities while proclaiming one's faults; and, in relation to others, proclaiming their qualities and hide their faults.

In this way, we can lead a more meaningful, happier life and that is what we all strive for. Ultimately, we want to have a more meaningful and happy life in conjunction with our relationship with others.

The main point is that training our mind and readjusting our perspective and attitudes will help promote a deeper intelligence, what we call wisdom, within ourselves. When we can utilise this intelligence or wisdom to guide us, this will provide a good direction or path in our life. It will help us to withstand challenges and maintain the correct direction in one's life. In relation to the practice of being honest with oneself—there are times when others

may praise us, but the danger of being praised too much is that it can cause pride to arise, which can harm us. When others criticise us, if we have not trained our mind properly, it can cause us to become irritated and agitated, or despondent and discouraged. So regardless of how others treat us or how others relate to us, if we have developed a strong, more positive state of mind and attitude, then external praise, blame or criticism will not affect us.

Applying this mind training method in conjunction with our meditation practice, we can start to really transform our mind so that it becomes more positive. As the great master, Lama Tsong Khapa, said, 'When the mind is positive, then the grounds and the paths also become positive. Whereas when one has negative states of mind, even the grounds and the paths become negative'. Here, the grounds and paths refer to the spiritual practices in the Buddhist teachings. What is being said here is that what actually determines whether what we are doing—including our spiritual practices—to be positive or negative depends on our state of mind. When we have a positive state of mind, the actions that follow are more likely to be positive. Whereas when the mind is in a negative state, the actions that follow will likely be negative. This is how we need to understand that it is essential to try and maintain a positive state of mind, particularly happy, joyful states of mind.

As I regularly emphasise, our most valuable and unailing companion and friend is one's own positive states of mind, a happy state of mind. This happy state of mind, along with the deeper wisdom we talked about earlier, which helps us make a more better decisions in our life, together comprise this unailing, inner friend. It is called our most valuable inner friend because it contributes to our wellbeing and happiness. With these qualities intact, this inner friend also helps us to get even more external friends; others are more appreciative of our mannerisms, our ways of thinking, and our whole demeanour, and will gather around us. This is how we come to understand how meditation practice may seem like a simple technique but actually has far reaching values and benefit for one's life.

As mentioned earlier, I keep sharing these points again and again as a way to try to encourage you to make your life become more purposeful and meaningful, more joyful. It is with this intention that I share this advice again and again as something you can take away with you, something that you can periodically think about and try to adopt in your life.

Adopting the formal meditation practice, even a few minutes, with a sincere focus, can help bring genuine relaxation for oneself. Even if it is for a few minutes, if we can get some genuine relaxation internally within our mind, that is a significant achievement. It can definitely help one to relax, even physically. Even when the conditions to relax physically are present, that doesn't necessarily relax one's state of mind; whereas if one's mind is genuinely relaxed and calm, it will definitely help you feel physically relaxed and calm. So we need to understand that genuine relaxation begins from one's mind, and then it flows on to the physical level. With this

understanding, I have already previously mentioned many times about the sitting posture and so forth, so we don't have to go into those details again this evening. Now we will spend some time for meditation.

Adopting a relaxed, upright, comfortable posture, we can now make the commitment within ourselves that for the next few minutes 'I will not allow my mind to become distracted with all the usual distracting thoughts, following every external stimulus, but rather to withdraw from all of that.' So temporarily let go, forget about all those distracting thoughts and external stimuli and just bring our mind inward. Then, having brought our focus inward, try to maintain awareness of ourselves here, sitting on the cushion. Then we bring our attention to the actual object that we choose to focus on in our meditation which, here, is our breath. Make a commitment that 'For the next few minutes, I will not allow my mind to wander off in every direction but place my full attention to the natural in-flow and out-flow of my breath'. Just focus on that, and be fully aware of the breath coming in and going out. For the next few minutes, we will adopt this meditation technique. *(Pause for meditation)*

While maintaining our focus and posture, we will continue in our meditation, this time focusing on the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is the name of Buddha Shakyamuni. As we hear the recitation, maintain complete focus on that sound. Then, when the recitation subsides, don't allow the mind to wander off, but just maintain the focus within: when the sound subsides, we can just focus on the pleasant feeling we have inside, not allowing the mind to wander off, for a few more minutes. This will then suffice for our meditation.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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