
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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30 September 2015

Please adopt a comfortable, relaxed posture. Likewise, we need to ensure that we have a genuinely relaxed and calm state of mind.

When we have ensured a comfortable and genuinely relaxed body and mind, then the being who possesses that relaxed body and calm mind—which is the individual self—will naturally be happier and more peaceful.

We need to pay more attention to the relationship between one's physical body, one's mind and oneself. As an individual, one always strives for well-being. Over the course of our lives, we engage many activities and make many decisions. When one's physical body and mind are in a positive state, the actions we carry out will also be more positive, contributing to one's general well-being.

Most of you would have heard this many times before, but I am again emphasising the importance of protecting the happiness of one's mind. Mental happiness is essential for our well-being, so we must protect whatever level of mental happiness we might have.

We need to do this on a regular basis to ensure that our happiness does not decline. Otherwise, it may be difficult to restore our mental happiness, to the point where even external conditions won't contribute to our sense of well-being if we are not experiencing mental happiness inside. We need to pay attention to this.

We all naturally possess a certain level of mental happiness. We can protect it and ensure it doesn't decline by attending to one's state of mind, particularly positive states of mind. The conditions that protect our mental happiness are our positive thoughts and attitudes; our mental happiness is not protected by external material conditions.

Mental happiness can decline to the point where it can be difficult to appreciate even the good conditions we do have. We may reach a state where we are not able to acknowledge and appreciate the actual good conditions. A lack of mental happiness tends to be accompanied by a lack of gratitude. There are those who may ask: "What am I to do?" Despite having good external conditions, they seem to be unsettled and unsatisfied, complaining: "What shall I do? I am not happy with anything". They seem to be in a distressed situation, unable to appreciate or enjoy their good conditions. Whereas when one enjoys mental happiness, one can appreciate and accept the external conditions, even if they are not too good.

Now if we were to raise the question "How do I then protect my mental happiness? How do I secure my mind to be in a positive frame? What methods and techniques

are there?" In a simple word, it is the practice of meditation. It is the training in meditation.

Meditation practice helps protect one's mental happiness; it is the optimum technique to help one gain control of, and subdue, one's mind.

Now we need ask, why do we need to control and subdue our mind? To answer that question, we can look into the consequences of a lack of control over one's own state of mind. When the mind lacks self-control, an afflicted mind—a negative state of mind such as intense anger or jealousy—can take over. When our mind is taken over or controlled by intense anger or jealousy, we can see the destructive, negative consequences such as conflict with others. Many problems arise from a mind of intense anger, jealousy or other affliction.

How does one prevent one's mind from following intense anger or jealousy? The simple answer is to reduce our familiarity with these negative states of mind. When the mind of anger or jealousy arises, if we feed it—if we rationalise and find further reasons why we need to get angry or jealous and don't do anything to reverse it—then we are allowing ourselves to become more and more familiar with that mind. As we allow our mind to become more acquainted with the minds of anger, jealousy and so forth, we will reach a point where we lack control over our mind. The meditation technique we use here is to familiarise oneself with a positive object that does not cause anger or jealousy to arise. The more we familiarise ourselves with positive objects, the more our mind will naturally lose its acquaintance with anger, jealousy, and so forth. So it is a matter of basically reversing the pattern of our mind to be more in a positive state. When the mind is focusing on a positive object, it becomes happy. This is how we need to understand the process.

In meditation we intentionally familiarise our mind with a positive object that does not cause anger and jealousy and so forth to arise. By the virtue of focusing on a positive object, afflictions such as jealousy and anger are naturally reduced. Because we are not focusing on and feeding the affliction, we are not escalating it, and it naturally subsides. This is not too complicated, as it is something we can all manage. It is practical and we can all apply it. The more we engage in this practice of training the mind to focus on a positive object—which is the practice of meditation—the more likely it is that our mind will be naturally calm, peaceful and happy. This is how it benefits us.

We can relate to the words of the incomparably kind Buddha when he said: "One is one's own protector; and one can be one's own enemy". These are a few simple but profound words of advice. In presenting this advice, it is clear the Buddha is not claiming to be a great saviour or powerful being that can relieve us of all our problems. He is basically showing us that we are responsible for our own happiness. When we take the initiative to bring about a calmer, more peaceful state of mind, we are being our own protector, our own best friend. But if we foster negative attitudes, we become our own enemy. This is the point.

The Buddha's main point in presenting this instruction is to show that all of our happiness and problems are

related to our state of mind. Even without taking the 'big picture' view—such as past lives and future lives—we can relate to this advice in our everyday existence. Our suffering is dependent on our state of mind.

We can see that when we are familiar with more positive states of mind—particularly the state of mind of love and compassion towards others, which comes with a genuine sense of concern for others—we perceive everyone as being close, as a friend and companion. Our state of mind of love and compassion allows us to see all of our surroundings as appealing. But if the mind is affected by anger, this taints one's perception and we see our environment as hostile. Everything and everyone appears as an enemy. It is not that everyone is our enemy; rather, because one's state of mind is controlled by anger, that is how we perceive the external world.

So the Buddha is basically saying that if you have a positive state of mind, it will help you to be happier. That is how we can be our own best friend. However, if you harbour negative states of mind, you will start harming yourself. This is how we can understand his advice.

When we maintain a positive state of mind with qualities like loving compassion, the immediate beneficiary is oneself. However, this positive state of mind also contributes to our good relationship with others around us. In a relationship between two people, for example, that which contributes to their harmonious relationship is basically a true sense of love and compassion. As I have mentioned before, what brings two people together initially might be strong attachment. But that relationship can be nurtured and developed into a genuinely good relationship when the element of love and compassion is added. The more mutual love and compassion and concern you add to the relationship, the more harmonious and stronger will it become. However, if antagonistic feelings and anger start to arise in that relationship instead of love and compassion, then that conflict can ultimately destroy the relationship.

The main point is that a positive state of mind and the positive qualities within that mind really are essential for one's well-being and for our relationships with others.

The qualities of love and compassion are not something alien to us, or out of our reach; it's not as if we don't possess these qualities. Every individual has a certain degree of love and compassion. We can see this clearly between parents and children. The caring and nurturing the parent has for the child is definitely based on love and compassion. We all equally possess these qualities, so it is a matter of further developing and nurturing them.

We will have time for meditation, but these are also important points to keep in mind. Therefore, I emphasise again that if we are inclined to engage in meditation practice—or, in Buddhist terms, Dharma practice—we need to understand that the point of doing this practice is to bring some benefit for oneself and those immediately around us. The way we can relate to these practices is to observe the benefits, starting with oneself. When we experience the benefits, we can develop a certain level of conviction that this is definitely something worthwhile.

Of course, in the Dharma there is mention of long-term benefit for future lives and so forth. Future lives depend on past lives; however, at our level, we may not be able to fully understand the connection because it is still an obscure object of knowledge for us. We don't have a direct experience of past lives and future lives. Although we are not able to see the effects of these practices over the long-term, in future lives, at least now in our everyday lives we can begin to experience the positive effects as our minds transform from a negative to a more positive state. This enables us to relate to others in a more positive way and benefit them. Then we can develop some conviction of this practice from that experience. That is worthwhile.

If we can ensure a happy state of mind in the present moment, it can definitely help us secure a happy state of mind in the following moments. Within our immediate experience, if one goes to sleep with a happy state of mind, it is most likely one will be in a happy state of mind the next morning. If we accept this as being true and take it even further, then if we were happy from now up until the last stages of this life and were to die in a happy state of mind, it seems logical that we will enter our next life with a happy state of mind. This is how I would make sense of this understanding of the mind as a continuum.

This shows the necessity of having a strong, positive state of mind at the time of death, which will help us secure our future existence. The conditions for securing a peaceful death are not restricted to Buddhist explanations; other religious traditions seem to have similar explanations. My understanding is that the most essential element of the Christian tradition is to have strong faith in God. The stronger one's conviction and faith in God, the stronger the protection one will have from an unfortunate rebirth. Therefore, I'm quite certain that in Christianity, the explanation would be that having strong faith in God at the time of death would protect you from an unfortunate rebirth—so you would go to heaven where God resides. Even in the Christian tradition, while God is considered the creator of all, the individual still needs the element of faith from their side. It seems that without faith, God cannot help much. Therefore securing one's future existence seems to come down to having strong faith in one's mind. With Buddhism, what is most important in securing a good future life is having a virtuous state of mind at the time of death. This is the real protector that will help us secure a good rebirth. So there are similarities between Buddhism and Christianity.

Taking it back to the earlier example, we can also relate this point to our everyday life experience: if we go to sleep with a positive, virtuous, happy state of mind, we will most likely wake up with a happy state of mind. If our mind is in a happy state when we go to bed, the next morning we will experience a fresher and happier state of mind when we wake up. There is definitely a correlation between the state of mind at the time of going to bed and waking up the next morning. The essential point again is having a happy state of mind. If we lack a happy state of mind when we go to sleep, it is most likely we will wake

up in an unhappy or grumpy state of mind! [*Geshe-la laughs*]

What I am attempting to share with you here is advice on how to best conduct one's way of thinking. As mentioned earlier, our experience at any given moment depends on our state of mind. If we are in a happy state of mind, our experiences seem to be more pleasurable. But if we are in a negative state of mind, the immediate consequences of our experience will be unpleasant and unhappy. Thus if we develop a positive attitude, we will conduct ourselves in a positive way and this will naturally bring about more positive experiences. So this is my attempt to remind you and offer some direction on how to conduct your thinking.

Now we can engage in some meditation. For meditation practice, we need to most importantly direct the mind away from all other thoughts and preoccupations, and bring our focus within. Then, we place the mind on the specific object of our meditation, which now is our own breath. Having placed our attention and focus on the breath, try to be fully aware of the natural inflow and outflow of the breath. Be completely mindful, and try to maintain your focus on that. We adopt this practice to the best of our ability, with full commitment. Initially we might be only able to focus for a few minutes, but gradually through this practice we will begin to slowly improve. In fact, we need to approach our meditation practice as a gradual way of training the mind. We cannot think about getting quick results; that approach is misguided. Be content with just a few minutes' experience of a focused mind. Then from there we can gradually prolong our attention and focus. This is how we need to understand meditation practice. Now we can bring our attention and focus on our breath and maintain it there for the next few minutes. [*Pause for meditation*]

While maintaining our focus and our posture, we can now focus on the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is the name of Buddha Shakyamuni. As we hear the recitation, place our full focus on the sound. When the recitation subsides, just maintain our inward focus, and from within that vacuity, maintain your awareness for a few moments. That will suffice for our meditation.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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