
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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As usual we can spend some time in meditation. To do this we adopt a comfortable and relaxed posture. I have already covered quite extensively the ways in which we can engage in meditation. As mentioned previously, the real purpose of meditation is to help protect the positive qualities in one's mind, so that they don't decline and can be maintained and further increased. We need a method to do this, so that is why meditation is helpful.

More specifically, we need to subdue our mind to experience a genuinely calm and peaceful state. This is significant and the most essential point of meditation, and if one wishes to experience a happy and peaceful state of mind there is no other way to achieve that other than by subduing one's mind. And meditation is the technique which can help to subdue and gain control over one's own state of mind.

When one has a subdued mind one is able to protect one's mind. Having gone through the explanation quite extensively on many occasions, we can now engage in the meditation practice. In order to do that, we first of all need to readjust our physical posture so that it's upright and comfortable. Most importantly one must set the right motivation in a positive and clear state of mind. Having positive motivation and intention within a clear state of mind is most essential.

I have also previously explained that the two main tools needed for meditation are mindfulness and introspection, and I have explained in detail what mindfulness and introspection mean and how we use them. Mindfulness and introspection are tools to help overcome the two main obstructions to meditation. The two main obstructions to our meditation are excitement and laxity, or to use another term, dullness. In order to focus well we need to remove these two obstacles. We need to achieve this through using an appropriate object, an object that does not cause afflictions in the mind. Initially we need to have good recognition of the object and then bring the image of the object to our mind. It is the image of the chosen object that we need to focus on in meditation. For our meditation sessions now we can use our own breath as the focal object.

As presented earlier, there are some conducive and obstructive conditions for our meditation practice. Identifying what the conducive and obstructive conditions are, and contemplating them is, in itself, a great practice of training our mind.

Whatever we want to achieve in life, whatever goal we may have, it naturally encompasses certain conducive conditions that we need to adopt and certain obstructive conditions that we need to discard. Contemplating these facts gives us a lot of insight and helps our intelligence and wisdom to make the right decisions in our life.

Let us get back to meditation; otherwise we may get side-tracked. Having adopted a comfortable and relaxed posture

and sitting upright, the most important element we need to have in our mind is a commitment to withdraw our focus from all external distractions. Normally, we immediately pay attention to any kind of thoughts that arise or external stimulus. We need to withdraw from all these preoccupations and bring our focus within, and bring our attention and mind to the place where we are sitting. After a few moments of observing our posture and presence here, we will then place our attention on the chosen object for our meditation, which is our own breath. To withdraw our focus from external distractions and distracting thoughts, means to be one hundred percent focused on the meditation object. If our mind is partially focusing on the object of meditation and partially distracted, we will not hit the real mark of our meditation and put it into practice. For whatever duration and time that one is able to manage, our meditation requires a complete commitment to focusing on the breath. So, for the next few minutes we will adopt this technique to the best of our ability. *(Pause for meditation)*

It would be good if, on a regular basis, one could spend a few minutes in meditation in whatever time you may have. Whichever way one is familiar with adopting meditation practice is fine. The main point to remember is to recall the main purpose of why one is meditating and how to subdue one's mind. If one bears this in mind as the main purpose or objective then whatever one is familiar with and whichever way one wants to do meditation should be fine.

4.2.2.1.2.3. The way to train the mind in the stages of the path of beings of the great scope

4.2.2.1.2.3.2. The actual paths

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2. How to develop an awakening mind

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1. The stages of training the awakening mind

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.2. The way to train the mind in equalising and exchanging self and other

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.2.1. Reflecting on the benefits and shortcomings of exchanging and not exchanging self and other

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.2.1.3. The difficulty of accomplishing buddhahood if one does not exchange self and other

We have not been able to cover the passages from the text for a while. We will now go into the text that we are meant to be studying from where we left off the last time. We were on the topic of contemplating how self-centeredness, or what we call the self-cherishing attitude focusing on oneself, is the cause of all our unwanted problems and how focusing on others and developing the mind of cherishing and having concern for others is the cause of all happiness. We have covered some points on that topic.

In presenting this topic one has to be careful not to misinterpret or misunderstand the faults of cherishing oneself, because it is easy to misinterpret this. We all naturally hold ourselves as being important, our likes and dislikes and our concern for ourselves. If we take it literally, it may sound a bit strange when it is suggested that one should not be focusing on oneself and that self-cherishing and self-centeredness is a fault. However, when one takes the time, thinks about the reasons and goes into the explanations more deeply, one will understand what it actually means.

The room for misinterpretation is where one takes these words too literally and begins to interpret it as, 'Oh, what is

being suggested here is that one should not take care of oneself and disregard oneself'. That would be a completely wrong understanding and misinterpretation of what has been explained. What is explained is a way to overcome a specific, wrong, selfish attitude, rather than disregarding and not caring for oneself.

The faults of self-cherishing attitudes, as they are presented here in the text, will become quite apparent and clear as they are described further. What the text is referring to is a fault related to certain attitudes which, even in worldly context will be considered as not appropriate and will be shunned, as a selfish attitude. In the worldly context someone is considered as having a selfish attitude when they are only concerned about themselves and disregard others around them. Such a person will not be held in high regard or esteem, and will be considered selfish. In contrast to that, when someone exhibits concern for others they will be held in high esteem.

For example, in a family situation a mother will, of course, have equal concern for all her children. But if, amongst all the children, there is one child who takes more concern in looking after the welfare of the other children, then when the mother, thinks of the whole family she will naturally say, 'Yes, all our children are nice but this particular child is really good. He takes the initiative and is concerned for the others'. We can see that the parents hold that particular child in high esteem, because of the attitude of wanting to look after others.

We can take another example that we can relate to—a leader of a country. For example if the leader of Australia, the Prime Minister, takes a genuine interest in the welfare of the people and has policies that benefit the citizens, then such a Prime Minister will be held in high esteem. Everyone will praise them and say they are doing a good job. But if the Prime Minister is only concerned about the political agenda and their own seat and position so that they can get more votes, people will gradually not trust and appreciate such a Prime Minister. That is how I understand and interpret it.

We can take the example of the Prime Minister a little further. If a Prime Minister is only concerned with their position and power they will be in tears when they start to lose the position. They will break down if they lost their position. But if they are genuinely concerned for others, and it didn't work out, they won't seem to be too daunted because they are concerned for others and were trying their best.

Also people won't appreciate a Prime Minister when there are discrepancies between their promises and what is being delivered. People will say, 'The Prime Minister is a liar and doesn't keep their word'. Of course, before a Prime Minister gets into power they have to make promises in order to get more votes and support, and that is how it works. But when they get into the position and don't take the initiative to implement their promises, people will lose faith.

In contrast to that, there are certain Prime Ministers or leaders of the country who do take the initiative to serve the best interests of the people. That would come with an attitude acknowledging that reaching that position is the result of being cared for by the education system they had previously attended, and everything that they had gained has come from the collaboration of the common people. Now, reaching a position where they are able to serve the people, they will take the initiative to happily, with a sense of gratitude, repay what they have received so far. When

that is the main motivation they will be able to do a good job. This is one simple way that we can look into the difference between the faults of a self-cherishing mind, which focuses on one's own interest, versus a mind that cherishes and has concern for others.

I have heard that reaching the position of a Prime Minister has tremendous benefits for the individual. One of the biggest benefits is to have a huge pension. I heard that if Tony Abbott had been able to stay in the position for four more days he would have got that pension, but he missed out by four days. I heard that they have to have the position for two years. There were four days missing from fulfilling that two-year requirement. I suppose he would have known the details, but he missed out on that great opportunity.

Of course the text goes into more specific details but it is good for us to understand it on a practical level first before we try to relate to what has been explained in the text. Let us consider another factor that we all can relate to. We may hear comments from people saying, 'I am not getting along with my partner, companion or friend, because they are only thinking about themselves and their own interest, and they don't really think about my interests. That's why I don't get along with them'. This is a significant point, and if indeed they are self absorbed and thinking only about their own interest and not taking consideration about the other's interests, it will cause a fall-out and not be appreciated.

With a self-cherishing mind one wishes for well being and happiness for oneself—all good things such as power, physical strength, fame, good status and so forth. The critical point here is with that interest for oneself what one does in order to achieve that. As the text explains, and we need to pay attention to whether this is true for us and also look around to see if it's true for others, in order to achieve all goodness for oneself one will engage in a lot of negative and unethical activities that will bring about problems. Recently someone confided in me, and they honestly shared their thoughts and feelings, 'I want to have everything going well for myself, but that sort of attitude and mind seems to bring me more dissatisfaction and more problems'. Indeed, when one has such a high expectation and wants everything to be well and good for oneself and focuses such a strong interest for oneself, one will experience difficulties and problems when one is not able to achieve that and one's expectations are not met.

When an individual with such an attitude of wanting everything to be good for him or herself, including fame, status and appreciation by others, notices that others are not appreciating or agreeing with them and not fulfilling all their desires they experience angst in their mind.

As the text further explains, the faults that occur from this desire of wanting all good things, and focusing and wanting everything to go well just for oneself, include disparaging and having contempt for others and jealousy can arise when others are doing well. Jealousy is a prominent state of mind that obstructs our joy and we feel unhappy over the success of others. The reason why we feel unhappy about others' success is because we want that success just for ourselves, but we may not admit that. That is why we are unhappy and feel jealous when we see others' success. That is a negative state of mind which causes jealousy. Furthermore, out of jealousy anger may arise, and one will immediately react to even a slight misuse of words, or an inappropriate facial gesture from others may cause us to get upset and angry. These are faults relating to the self-cherishing mind.

With that sort of attitude one reaches a state of mind where one is not able to bear others' criticism and the slightest inappropriate gestures. With that impatience one easily gets upset and angry and begins to see others as against one, as if everyone is one's enemy. This is all the creation of negativity in one's own mind. The state of mind of lacking consideration for others' wellbeing and taking others' needs and interest into consideration starts to develop into a negative state of mind. When things are not going well for one, rather than looking into one's own state of mind and condition and acknowledging the faults within one, one begins to see faults outside. This is how we get into the habitual pattern of blaming others. Everything that goes wrong for one is another's fault. That is how others and everything can appear to be against one. This occurs when one is not taking the initiative to look within and acknowledge the cause or the problem within oneself.

When one has a strong sense of 'me', then that is followed by a strong attitude of 'mine'. All the examples given earlier show how one can become very narrow-minded when one considers, 'this is just mine and no one is allowed to go there'. This kind of attitude arises when there is a very strong clinging to one's own position from a strong self-cherishing mind. When one has such an obsessive focus on one's own interest one is not appreciated by others. It is hard to relate to such people.

These are the summaries of the faults of the self-cherishing attitude. In contrast to that, and what is explained next, are the virtues of the mind that cherishes others. A mind that cherishes others is explained more extensively later on in the text and we will go through that in our next session. However, just to give a summary here, cherishing others comes from acknowledging that just as one wishes for happiness others too also wish for happiness. Therefore it is befitting that one takes an interest in others' welfare. Just as one does not want to experience misery and suffering, others too, do not want to experience that. So, rather than focusing on my own happiness and getting rid of my own suffering, I need to consider others' happiness and help others to get rid of their suffering. When one develops such an attitude and mind one can notice the difference, an attitude that encompasses others' welfare leads to a more expansive mind. Whereas if the mind focuses just on one's own interests, it will be a narrow mind. We can relate to these factors as the advantages and benefits of having a mind of cherishing others. More details can be explained later on.

We can again consider these points in a practical way by considering someone who is only concerned for their own interest with a self-cherishing mind and is in a relationship. When we disregard the other's needs and interests it will eventually affect the relationship, and the other will not want to associate and be with you. One will then face a problem and may not want to lose the companionship of the other, but one has caused it to occur because of one's attitude. I have seen and witnessed cases where a father does not want to speak to his daughter, and a mother who does not want to speak to her son. I was trying to give some suggestions and said, for example, 'If the father does not want to speak to the daughter, but if there is a good relationship between the mother and the daughter, then couldn't the mother help to mend the bridges and make the connection?' But they were saying, 'That cannot be done because I have no faults, it is completely the other's fault'. Also when I made a suggestion that if the mother and son were not on speaking terms, the father could help to mend

that gap they said, 'No, that cannot be done'. The point is that when one's own interest is very strong it will prevent one acknowledging any kind of faults from one's own side. It will not allow one to see any mistakes from one's own side. It is entirely the others' fault.

This particular case and situation was occurring within a family who are actually living together. The parents and children are living together, but there was a gulf between the father and daughter, and between the mother and son. It seemed to be quite an absurd situation to me, because if they were completely separated then it is an understandable situation, but they are living together. The father is not happy because he is not on speaking terms with the daughter, whereas the mother is perfectly happy with the daughter, and they have a good relationship. The mother is not having a good relationship with her son, but the father is fine with him. It seemed kind of absurd to me and I was trying to give suggestions to bridge the gap between them. They were saying, 'Oh no, you can't, there's no way to mend this because the problem is coming from their side'. This is a situation where there may have been a small and insignificant reason that may have caused that gulf to begin with, but when the mind holds on so firmly to, 'I am right and others are wrong' it doesn't allow one to budge and one becomes so fixated with one's own rights it prevents one from seeing any kind of faults from one's own side. This is again to emphasise that it all comes from a strong, self-cherishing mind.

So, this comes down to not changing one's attitude. If one is fixated with one's attitude and does not want to change it causes small problems to escalate and unhappiness within the family. If one can change one's way of thinking and attitude that can start to relieve a lot of unwanted difficulties and problems. With that situation, if they were perfectly happy, then there is no need to change things. But I noticed when they confided in me, that the father and mother were not really happy and they didn't have a good relationship with their children. It is an unhappy situation and the way to change that is by changing one's attitude and one's thinking. So, the main point here is, again, a lot of problems can be relieved and solved if one can change one's attitude.

Before we end the session for the evening, let us again take the opportunity for a few minutes of meditation. This time we will use the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's name mantra being recited. As we hear the sound of the mantra, we keep our attention and focus just on the sound and when the recitation subsides, we will maintain our focus and awareness on the vacuity of the sound for a few moments. That will suffice for our meditation.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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Edited Version*

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