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# The Middle Length Lamrim

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## Why meditate?

When business-minded people get together, all they talk about are business-related issues. We all consider ourselves to be meditators, therefore we should be talking about and engaging in meditation. We are here to learn and practice meditation.

Our first question is why do we need to practice meditation? We need to meditate because we need to train and control our minds to rid ourselves of faults or negativities that we have acquired due to the lack of control over our minds. If we examine, we can recognise that the main reason we lack inner peace and happiness is because our mind is not under our control because it is overpowered by distracting thoughts. Hence, we need to recognise that we are in control and our mind is that which needs to be controlled.

As to the manner of how we control the mind, Lama Tsong Khapa advises that we place our mind on a virtuous object and become habituated with that object. A virtuous object does not refer to some external object or something within the continuum of another being. Rather it refers to something within ourselves, such as a virtuous or wholesome state of mind. In this way, it makes sense that when we meditate, we should place our minds within, and not under the power of distracting thoughts or mental afflictions. In this way, we can see the long-term benefits of meditation.

As we meditate our minds will become more acquainted with virtuous states of mind which will bring inner peace and clarity. Alternatively, if our mind falls under the influence of non-virtuous states of mind or distractions, we become stressed, anxious, depressed, and restless. Meditation practice is about cultivating a positive state of mind and bringing us a positive experience. We cannot have both a positive and a negative disturbed state of mind at the same time. So if we have a negative state of mind, we can't have a positive state of mind at that moment. A positive state of mind serves as the source of joy, peace, and happiness whereas a negative state of mind is the source of unhappiness, distress, sadness and turbulence. To always sustain peace and happiness whether we are walking, sitting or doing any work, we must sustain a positive and joyful state of mind.

We can understand from this that the single most important factor for finding the peace and happiness that we always seek is in fact guarding our own minds against negative states of mind. The famous Kadampa geshe, Geshe Chekawa said that without knowing what mind to keep and what mind to discard, there is really not much hope of finding true happiness, no matter what we do or what we achieve. We can also understand from our own experience that if we lack the right state of mind or lack happiness, we cannot find the happiness we are seeking, even if we are very successful in our work and have accumulated much material wealth. I have found this through a lot of people whom I know.

Someone said to me he practises the Dharma and meditation yet he feels things are not going well and this makes him suffer. Similarly, another person said to me, 'I've just had a couple of weeks' holiday, I have a good job and plenty of money, but I feel unhappy and confused about my life.' Meditation practice is certainly a very effective means of resolving our problems and bringing lasting peace and happiness. We must understand the benefits of meditation and develop faith in it as the only way to find true happiness.

## Self-responsibility is crucial

We are all always looking for happiness and trying to avoid suffering, but we don't recognise that the main cause lies within ourselves. It is crucial that we recognise this, and understand that the primary responsibility rests upon ourselves. If we wish for happiness we must create the causes; if we do not want to suffer, then we must get rid of the causes of suffering. So, we must understand that our happiness and suffering is our own responsibility. For example, we all know that when anger arises we immediately lose all peace and mental happiness. By recognising this, even if we are not in a position to immediately eliminate it, we feel unhappy and disturbed. We should try to recognise that the main cause for feeling that way is not outside but something within ourselves.

Meditation practice can help us understand and recognise negative states of mind and emotions as the main or immediate cause of mental unhappiness and restlessness. Meditation practice is the most effective means of settling down and resolving these unwanted thoughts and emotions. Through engaging in meditation practice, we overcome these disturbing thoughts and emotions, and then we will begin to feel calm, relaxed and experience a sense of clarity. Once a young student confessed to me, 'As you have advised, I am practising to counteract anger and it does work and I find it very beneficial. What I find it very difficult to practise is overcoming desire.' At that time I felt he was speaking the truth from his own experience, which is what we should all be doing. We must relate the meditation and Dharma practice to our own experiences and our minds. Unless we are applying our practice to our own minds and calming down disturbing thoughts and emotions, it will be very difficult to bring about the happiness we want.

## Benefits of meditation

Meditation is very effective for our mental and emotional wellbeing and a tool to get rid of various problems such as loneliness, which a lot of people experience. An elderly man said to me that when he feels lonely, he goes out to meet other people and do things. I appreciate that honest expression of his experience. I thought that when people experience loneliness, it is not necessarily due to not having a life partner or friend, but rather, it is caused by unending thoughts flooding into our minds when we are alone. If we don't manage these thoughts they bring unnecessary worries, stress, tension, fear, a sense of insecurity, and then even depression and end up with serious mental issues.

To avoid such problems people go out to meet other people, talk with them or take up some hobbies to occupy their mind. I am sure these external activities help. However, we cannot rely on such external activities all the time or when our life circumstances change. On the other hand, we can engage in meditation practice anywhere, anytime and at our own pace. It is perhaps the most effective tool to replace disturbing

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thoughts and emotions with peaceful and pleasant ones. In fact, these days many professionals recommend meditation and more and more people are showing interest in and following meditation practice, including many elderly people, as they find it very effective and beneficial.

In short, meditation practice is a practice where we direct our mind toward a virtuous object and through this, cultivate and maintain virtuous and wholesome states of mind. Lama Tsong Khapa said the end result of meditation is decreasing mental delusions or afflictive emotions. Therefore, when engaging in meditation practice, we are counteracting mental afflictions. As we eradicate mental afflictions, we will automatically see more inner stability, clear thinking and perception. We know from our experience that if we have inner stability and clarity, it makes a huge difference to our overall mental and physical wellbeing and thus to our success in life with whatever we do. We say prayers and talk about showing love and compassion for other sentient beings, but do we honestly really care about all other sentient beings? Most probably not because all we really care about is ourselves. That is of course fine and we must recognise the benefits of meditation practice and the benefits of overcoming mental afflictions for ourselves.

### **What does meditation mean?**

Meditation means cultivating a wholesome or positive state of mind. For example, when we meditate on love and compassion, we are trying to transform our mental attitude into a mind of love and compassion. It is not like meditating on impermanence and the emptiness of things, where we take impermanence and emptiness as the objects of analysis and investigation.

Although the love and compassion which we generate within us is a mental attitude of benefitting others or freeing them from suffering, Lama Tsongkhapa and His Holiness the Dalai Lama say that when it is generated within us it automatically brings peace and happiness to ourselves. This is very true. If whatever meditation we do is done properly, it will produce a positive state of mind. One master said that whatever practice we do, if it serves as an antidote to mental delusions, it is a Dharma practice and if it does not, then whatever you do it is not a Dharma practice.

### **Put it into practice**

Having learnt about meditation practice and its benefits, we should engage in meditating. It is recommended to first engage in the meditation practice that will remedy whatever type of mental affliction is the most overwhelming and strong in the sense of harming and disturbing us. Such mental afflictions can be anger or attachment and so forth. We don't necessarily have to eliminate the affliction; even reducing its force can be very beneficial because it means it has a less detrimental effect on us and brings us a bit more inner peace and clarity.

Nobody wants to be harmed. When we talk about the causes of harm there are both external and internal causes. Of these two, internal causes are more prevailing and frequent but difficult to manage. When we talk about external causes we are talking about something concrete and apparent. If it is a place that we don't like, we move to a different place or if it is a person that we dislike we can stop seeing them. If we are hungry we eat food and so forth. We take all these external measures to remedy the external causes of the problem. These help but they don't solve our problems. This indicates that

the cause of the problem is not just external but there are also internal causes that we need to address too. For example, if the cause of our problem is holding anger or attachment in our mind, then we will continue to suffer until we remedy it – moving to a different place is not going to help us much. So we must rid ourselves of anger and attachment.

### **Peace and happiness beyond sensual experience**

The first thing we can do to avoid a mental affliction is to recognise its object or the condition that triggers it. Once recognised, then one way to at least have a break from it is by distracting or occupying our minds with something else. So, from this perspective, the remedy to a mental affliction is for us to simply forget its object. This will work because whatever thought we generate is dependent on a specific object. A thought arises as our mind ponders on a given object or an event, so the occurrence of the thought is dependent on its object. This means that we can get rid of a disturbing thought by disengaging that thought from its object.

When we engage in meditation practice, our aim is to bring about a change to our state of mind, so that our mind is not in the grip of any mental afflictions, otherwise, the result will be that we will become subject to suffering. For example, a person whose mind is filled with strong anger cannot rest and cannot function properly. They are very disturbed and lack joy. But by engaging in meditation practice they manage to get a bit of a break from the control of anger or diminish the intensity of their anger. Even if they are unable to completely get rid of their anger, they will find a sense of relief, and a sort of peace and joy. So you can see how a temporary break from a mental affliction, or just preventing a strong or coarse form of a mental affliction, can result in such a great sense of peace and tranquillity. Imagine the extent of peace and bliss an arhat or foe destroyer will find because they have completely uprooted all of their mental delusions.

Most people think that there is no satisfaction and joy without the sensual pleasure that arises from indulging in desirous objects. Once I was having a casual conversation with a man at the St Kilda swimming baths. He asked me, 'Are you a monk?' When I said, 'Yes' He then asked 'Can you get married?', and when I replied 'No, I can't' he said, 'That's bad luck.' I understood what he meant and appreciated his honest comment, which of course just reflected his view. He said bad luck because he thought I was missing out on sensual pleasure.

However, from my perspective, I enjoy a tremendous sense of true peace and joy from living my life as a monk. It is said, that indulging in sensual pleasure is like the temporary relief that someone with a skin infection gets by scratching the skin, and if they keep scratching, then the infection gets worse. You need to think more and do more meditation to understand the level of peace and happiness beyond the sensual world. Is there happiness without mental afflictions such as desire and attachment? We do that anger harms us and that strong unfulfilled desire harms us in terms of their detrimental effect on our mental, emotional and even physical health. Hence, we can know that overcoming the pressure of such afflictions will bring relief, inner peace, and happiness.

This provides us with a bit of insight into the fact that there is joy and happiness beyond our sensual experience.

### **Happiness and its causes**

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Essentially, we need to understand that we are always seeking happiness and trying to avoid suffering. In this regard, all beings are the same, whether you are believers or non-believers, a human being or an animal. It is in pursuit of this deeply held wish to obtain happiness and avoid suffering that we engage in various kinds of activities.

We can get so busy doing things, running here and there. I often say we need more clarity as to the happiness that we seek. We have to remind ourselves that the happiness we seek can be put into two types. Mental happiness which is primarily dependent on the kinds of mental attitudes that we hold, and physical happiness which is primarily dependent on the good health and hygiene of our body. For securing mental happiness, the most effective method is meditation practice. Why? Because the main cause for bringing mental happiness lies within us; it is an internal factor, not an external factor. So, it can be difficult to recognise but meditation can help us recognise it. To bring about mental or inner happiness, we need to get rid of mental afflictions, and for this, we need to get rid of the disturbing thoughts that invite various mental afflictions. Really, meditation is the most effective means of overcoming these thoughts.

### **How you meditate**

In meditation, the main obstacle is distractions which take our mental focus away from the object of meditation. To maintain our mental focus on something that is most beneficial and supportive, our teacher Atisha said, 'of all friends, mindfulness and introspection are the best ones'. Mindfulness is like memory - we remember the object of meditation. If we have mindfulness in our meditation practice, then we won't lose the object. What does it mean by 'mind on the object'? All of these questions should be resolved in order to engage in effective meditation practice.

As to the object of meditation, it is internal, not external. You may have some external object on which you rely object, which is called *mig-ten* in Tibetan, but it is not the actual object of meditation, called *mik-yul* in Tibetan on which you have to focus your mind. The actual object of meditation is the mental image reflecting the relying object. This image is referred to as the generic image or more literally the meaning generality which is called *don-chi* in Tibetan. Focusing or concentrating on that object in meditation is not like watching the object with our eyes, where the object is out there and our eyes are here, leaving a gap between the two. At the beginning of our meditation, when we first focus on the object that is the mental image we will experience some sort of gap between the object and the mind. But as we meditate, we must close that gap completely to the point where it is said that our mind becomes one with the object or as if it is absorbed into the object.

In meditation, we are continuously using the two important tools of mindfulness and introspection. With mindfulness we remember the object by not forgetting it, whereas introspection acts like a watchman, keeping us vigilant and informed whether the mind is on the object or not.

We need to learn about the benefits of meditation, its objects, obstacles and counter-measures, as well as engage in meditation practice, to gain a full understanding and experience of meditation. This is how we can make progress in our practice.

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