
The Quick Path to Enlightenment

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Monkey mind

In Buddhist scriptures, the analogy of the monkey is used to describe the mind. A monkey never rests in peace – it is always jumping from tree to tree. If we check our mind, we see that our mind is just like a monkey. It never rests on a given object. Rather, the mind always follows objects of sensory consciousness such as forms, sounds, smell, taste, and touch. It hardly ever rests within.

Normally, we don't realise how our mind is always swayed by distracting thoughts. However, when we stop for a moment and check our mind, as we do when we engage in meditation practice, we can understand that our mind is, in fact, just like a monkey, always moving from one object to another because it is overpowered by mental distractions.

It is like going to a busy market and coming home without taking note of the activities there. If someone asks how the market was, we can only say that it was quite busy and that there were a lot of people there. Since we didn't observe the market closely, we don't remember specific details such as the number of people etc. However, if we had counted the people going in and out, we would be very surprised at how many people there were and the sort of things they bought.

Shortcomings of a distracted mind

We must find out what kind of effect the mind has on us when it is unchecked, and we allow it to wander after things. If mental distraction is harmless, then there is no need to worry about it. But mental distractions are harmful and by following them, we get into a lot of trouble.

Distractions are the major cause of wasting our time and energy. Due to our lack of control of our mind and allowing it to fall under the influence of mental distractions, we don't do what we are supposed to be doing, such as studying or working. Consequently, we are unable to achieve what we want to achieve.

Much worse, distractions fill our minds with defilements like desire, anger and so forth. In turn, this brings stress, anxiety, frustration and other sufferings to our lives. On the other hand, if we enjoy a calm and peaceful mind, we will be happy and can focus better and do things more effectively. In short, to do well in spiritual practice and in mundane life, we must get rid of the distracted mind. Keeping this in mind, we will now do a short breathing meditation focusing just on the incoming and outgoing breath.

[Meditation]

It all depends on the mind

Lama Tsongkhapa says, 'If our mind is positive, then whatever follows will be positive, but if our mind is negative, then whatever follows will be negative too. So, it all depends on the mind.' Here, we can understand that we must change our minds if we want to change our lives and achieve what we want to achieve. What do we want to achieve? Whether it is this current life or a future life, we all want happiness and a satisfying life. To achieve happiness, we must get rid of the negative states of mind within us. In other words, we must bring the mind under our control, instead of being controlled by non-virtuous and destructive thoughts and emotions such as desire, anger and so forth. As we subdue these negative states of mind, we will find more peace and happiness in our lives.

Afflictive emotions can be remedied

Even though we have had these emotions in our minds since beginningless time, and they seem to be an integral part of our minds, it is possible to overcome emotions such as desire and hatred, which bring unhappiness and suffering to our lives. If we closely examine these afflictive emotions, we can understand that they are not an integral part of our minds. Hence, they can be eliminated. If we contemplate their shortcomings, these destructive emotions become weaker, which means they can be eliminated. All the afflictive emotions, such as anger and desire, are incorrect states of mind, meaning there is no sound basis for them to be sustained within us. We can also say they can be eliminated because there are antidotes to counteract them.

Meditation on impermanence as a remedy to afflictive emotions

Meditation on impermanence is an effective means to counteract afflictive emotions. We tend to assume that things are permanent even though they are impermanent. This leads us to become attached and then frustrated. Therefore, we need to meditate on and become aware of the impermanence of things.

Life is impermanent and sooner or later death will strike. Likewise, all the things we possess and use in life are impermanent and constantly changing. When we become aware of the impermanence of the things we strongly desire and are attached to, our attachment to those things diminishes. For example, we may possess an object which is of great value and to which we are strongly attached, but as soon as we find out that we can't have it for long, our attachment to that object is reduced. Then we will not be too unhappy or shocked when we lose that object.

Afflictive emotions are based on subjective mental perspectives

Desire and hatred arise because of our perception of the object. When we perceive the object as beautiful and attractive, we generate desire. When we perceive the object as ugly and unpleasant, we generate hatred. Our perception doesn't reflect the way the object exists and is. Therefore, desire and hatred are obstructions to seeing things as they are. If we see things the way they are, as being impermanent, then there is no basis for destructive

emotions to arise. Desire or attachment towards other people arises when we perceive the person as attractive. If we perceive the person as ugly, then we are not attached to that person and won't find them attractive.

The time of death is uncertain

The reason why we must heighten our awareness of death and impermanence is to motivate our minds to follow the Dharma. There are three main roots or points in the contemplation of death and impermanence:

- Death is certain.
- The time of death is uncertain.
- Only spiritual or Dharma practice will be of benefit at the time of death.

We have finished the first point which is that death is certain. Knowing that death is certain, the next question in our mind is, what will happen to us after death? Do we become non-existent or do we go to the next life? If we go to the next life, then we certainly don't want to go to a bad rebirth such as coming back as an animal. When we think about how we can stop a bad rebirth and take a good rebirth the answer is Dharma practice.

So, we must follow the Dharma and practise it now because the time of death is uncertain – it can come at any moment. We must understand that the time of death is uncertain. If we were certain that we could live for a hundred or more years, then we could plan to just enjoy life for the first 50 or 60 years. Then, we think we could completely dedicate the rest of our life to spiritual practice. Unfortunately, this is not the case. There is no certainty about when death will come.

There are three main reasons why the time of death is uncertain.

First, our lifespan is not fixed. Some people die young. Some live a bit longer. Some die in the morning, and others at night. Nothing can guarantee our lifespan. Death can come at any time, and when it comes, nothing can stop it.

Second, the causes of death are many, whereas the causes for living are few. Even the causes for living, such as medicines and food can sometimes become the causes of death.

Thirdly, the body on which life is dependent is delicate and fragile. A small change inside our body can cause us to die. If our bodies were hard like a mountain or a rock, then it would be a different story. But this is not the case. We can see it only takes a very small cause to bring us pain and harm our health.

At the time of death only the Dharma benefits us

We move to the third important point of the death and impermanence meditation, which is to understand that, at the time of death, only our Dharma practice will help us. Nothing else will be of benefit. Normally, in a time of need, we rely on friends and relatives for help and support, but they are of no help at the time of death. We also rely on the material wealth for which we have worked so hard, but that too fails us at the time of death. We must even leave our bodies behind. So, the only thing which benefits us at the time of death is Dharma practice.

After death, we don't become non-existent. We take either a good or a bad rebirth. If we engage in the ten virtuous actions, we will take a good rebirth and if we engage in the ten non-virtuous actions, we will take a bad rebirth. So, at the time of death and after it, only the Dharma practice of engaging in the ten virtues and abandoning the ten non-virtues and so forth will be of benefit.

Following our contemplation of these three points of the death and impermanence meditation, we generate a definite motivation to practise the Dharma, to practise it now and to practise it purely.

The kind of Dharma we practise depends on what we wish to achieve. If we wish to achieve a good rebirth, we need to apply the ten virtuous actions. If we wish to achieve not only a good rebirth but also liberation from samsara or worldly existence, we need to cultivate what we call renunciation and ensure that whatever we practise is conjoined with renunciation. Furthermore, if we wish to achieve the highest enlightenment – the state of buddhahood – we must cultivate bodhicitta, the altruistic mind of enlightenment, and ensure that our practice is conjoined by it. In addition, we need to gain the wisdom of emptiness to achieve liberation. So, depending on our spiritual goals, there are different spiritual paths and practices to learn and follow.

Taking refuge in the Three Jewels

Whichever path we follow, we must first know about it and then follow up by practising it. To gain knowledge about the spiritual path and follow it, we need guidance and help from others as we are not familiar with the path yet.

Hence, we learn about taking refuge in the Three Jewels – the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. We take refuge in the Buddha, as the perfect teacher and guide on the spiritual path. We take refuge in the Dharma Jewel – the inner realisations and qualities actualised within us – which is our actual protection and refuge. We then seek refuge in the Sangha Jewel, the spiritual community, as spiritual friends and assistants on the path.

In the scriptures, the Three Jewels are explained with the example of a patient recovering from an illness. To heal the illness, a patient relies on a doctor, who is like the Buddha. But that alone is not enough. The patient must take the medicine prescribed by the doctor, which will cure the illness. So, the Dharma Jewel is like the medicine. If, after receiving the Dharma teaching from the Buddha we apply and integrate it into our life, we can be free from suffering. Likewise, the patient needs to rely on the assistance of a nurse in the process of curing a disease. In the same way, we take refuge in a spiritual friend, the Sangha.

We will leave tonight's teaching here. Do you have any questions?

Question: How do you manage and overcome strong emotions when you are criticised?

That is difficult because when you are in a rage that moment is very powerful, and it is difficult for you to think rationally. The feeling of anger and hatred is so overwhelming it overpowers you and doesn't give you an

opportunity to think of the shortcomings of anger and meditate on them. The best thing is to put as much effort as possible into seeing the shortcomings and disadvantages of anger before it arises. If you have already acted on your anger, like killing an animal, you cannot bring it back to life.

Question: Do we have a choice in our lives? Isn't our life predetermined by our past karma?

You are saying that even when you continue to maintain a very positive and happy state of mind you feel that underneath you may have bad karma and that it may arise at any moment? The ripening of past karma also depends on the immediate conditions. Many different kinds of seeds are sown, but not all seeds arise at the same time. It all depends on where the water is and when the rain falls, and if the right conditions are there the seed will sprout. If we manage our mind and mental attitude well, then we can stop and even sterilise past karma from producing its result. We have many seeds of negative karma accumulated in the past, but if we maintain a positive state of mind the negative karma imprints will not be able to ripen. Whereas, if we, due to certain conditions, lose our temper, all those negative imprints from the past will suddenly ripen.

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