
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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As usual we begin with meditation.

What is meditation? It is familiarising our mind with positive thinking. Through engaging in this training we will be able to slowly discipline our mind and become more peaceful.

We need to train our mind to think in a positive way because positive mental patterns are not natural. Through training, it is possible to fully control our mind so that a positive way of thinking becomes more natural. With training, when we experience any form of discomfort or unhappiness we will notice that the cause is within and not outside of ourselves. We will be able to identify the real cause within. We will see that whenever a positive state of mind arises we experience happiness and peace, whereas when a negative state of mind arises we experience unhappiness and discomfort.

As we focus our attention inward, particularly to our mind, we notice how our mind is out of our control and always wandering after external objects. Because of these wanderings we continuously allow these conceptual or disturbing thoughts to build inside. These fill our mind with hopes, fears, dissatisfactions and frustrations. If we have a stream of water which flows in all directions, the current won't be strong. Similarly, because our mind is so scattered it is very weak and we don't have any capacity for directed thinking. If we were able to bring the mind inward and fully under our control, we would feel more hope and courage within ourselves. It is important to recognise the disadvantages of not having a controlled or a disciplined mind.

The purpose of the meditation is to bring the mind inward because, when the mind is always focussed outward and we step back, we notice many shortcomings. Meditation practice is something that we engage in daily, where we bring the mind to an internal object and in this way feel the stillness of the mind.

The meditation we engage in is to simply focus on the breathing – on inhaling and exhaling. Even though the technique itself is very simple, it will have the immediate effect of bringing peace within. When we find it difficult when our mental focus is scattered and we feel restless, for example when our mind is completely filled with hatred or anger. Someone may even give you many different ways of thinking – different logic or a different perspective on how to calm your mind. Sometimes it's very difficult. If we engage in the simple meditation of focusing on breathing we will know that the moment we bring the mind onto the breath, all of the restless thoughts immediately calm down and the mind seems to begin to relax.

As you have already heard about the features of the sitting posture, there is no need to go through that. Adopt the sitting posture which is most comfortable, and we will begin this meditation. With a relaxed and comfortable sitting posture, try to bring the mind inward by letting go of all thoughts. Whether those thoughts are positive or negative, wholesome or unwholesome, we are trying to empty the mind of all thoughts and let it sit inside. Having emptied all thoughts and turned the mind inward, there will be a point just before the mind starts to wander off, when one needs to remember to direct the mind to focus on the breathing. As much as possible try to keep the mind on the breath for the next few minutes.

[Meditation]

Thank you.

Initially it is better to limit the duration of the meditation to as short a session as possible, because having a really focused meditation is more important than how long you are able to sit in the meditation posture. Even if the meditation practice lasts only for one minute, and in that one minute you have applied the tools of the meditation well, and have achieved some settling of the mind, you have succeeded in the aims of meditation and have achieved something stable that you can build on.

Start with one minute until you are able to maintain the same settling of the mind for that period of time. Only then should you increase the time. If the mind wanders it is better to break the meditation and then start it again later. If you force yourself to sit there for a long time, there is a danger that you will build a bad habit of mental wandering into your meditation practice.

If you engage in meditation for a long time, but throughout the whole meditation period there is no stability or no stillness of the mind, then there is no point and you are not achieving the actual purpose of the meditation, which is to control the mind and bring stillness within. Meditation is not just about the physical discipline of sitting in a specific posture. It's not going to help very much, even if you sit in that way for a long time.

The way we should train our mind is to focus on the effectiveness or quality of the meditation practice. Even though it's a very short period, if you repeat the same short period over a day or a month or a year, then eventually it is possible to naturally sit with a focussed mind for the duration of an hour. It is important to *enjoy* the meditation practice as well.

Normally it is advised to stop the meditation practice when you feel like you want to do a bit more. If you stop then, you will be more motivated to do this practice again, but if you stop at the point where you are fed up with the meditation practice, then later when you think of meditation, you will have no motivation and you will probably hate meditation practice! It's very much like if you have someone who is close to you, and you are separated at a time when you both very much like each other, then when you see the same person again after some time, you will be very excited to see them. If you separate from a person at a time when there are some tensions, you won't be excited to see this person again.

Another very important purpose of meditation is to free ourselves from the dominance of mental afflictions. As long as you remain under the control of mental afflictions there is no freedom, even to choose your actions. You are forced to do some actions which are against your own interest, against your own wishes and your own intention. For example, there are some who have the problem of controlling their aggression. This can be to the extent of committing murder. Rather than getting angry at these people, there's a good reason to feel empathy towards them. It may be even possible that they are aware of their actions but cannot control their aggressive nature. They may be aware and very much want to be rid of it. For example, from our own experience we know that when we are empowered by anger we lose the freedom to choose our actions. When there is no clarity in the mind it is very likely that our actions will also be destructive. Therefore, we have to remind ourselves that meditation practice is about how to gain freedom from the power of mental afflictions. In a way, when we engage in meditation practice we are battling with these mental afflictions. The outcome of the meditation is when there is weakening or decreasing of mental afflictions. This is a good sign of the effectiveness of our meditation practice. Lama Tsong Khapa also mentioned that the sign of good spiritual practice is the diminishing of mental afflictions.

I am also trying to show to you how to bring about happiness and joy through meditation practice. Opposed to happiness and joy, there is misery and suffering. When we look at the cause of our suffering and restlessness, it is none other than the influence of the mental afflictions and our mind falling under the control of these mental afflictions. When we fall under the control of anger, pride or competitiveness and we are under the dominance of such mental afflictions, it is impossible for us to experience any happiness. If through meditation practice one is able to totally eliminate the mental afflictions, make them weaker or prevent them arising, one can immediately feel the difference in terms of finding more clarity, more stillness and happiness within oneself.

I also normally tell people that meditation is also a form of education - educating oneself about one's own mind! This, of course, is not only knowing how to practise meditation, but actually applying the practice, knowing first of all what meditation is.

As we said here, it is training our mind to a positive way of thinking and understanding that it is possible to control the mind with training. So in this way, if you are familiar with meditation practice and have gained some sort of conviction, when you are in a situation where someone is very annoying and you are boiling with hatred and anger and you continuously think of that person then you are feeding your own anger, and the outcome will be more restlessness and misery for yourself. If you immediately realise you are going through something unwanted and the main cause for this is because your mind is occupied or involved with that person, then rather than directing your mind to the anger, look at the nature of the anger and try to think, 'Are there benefits for me from having that anger or not?'. You need to reflect upon this and on the possible outcome if you

don't manage it. In any case, every time you think about that other person, if you focus on your own nature and on the anger itself, it will have the effect of actually lessening the anger. The reason you are able to lessen or prevent anger is because you have shifted the object of your mind from external to internal objects. Some say that you feel agitated if they try to direct their mind. They find that instead of benefiting, it makes the mind more agitated. If that is the situation, it is more beneficial to apply breathing meditation to first calm the mind.

We will stop here and chant the Buddha's mantra. Make sure you feel comfortable in your sitting posture. In this meditation where we also chant the mantra of the Buddha, the object we should be focussing our mind on is the sound of the mantra. As we chant the mantra we try to keep the mind on the sound of the mantra. At the point where we stop the chanting, we try to rest the mind inward.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

Thank you everyone!

*Transcribed by Bernii Wright
Edit 1 by Carla Betros
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version*

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