Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe 4 April 2018

As usual it would be good to first spend some time discussing meditation.

If you are sitting doing meditation, then it is natural for us to talk about it.

As I usually explain, a good way to understand the meaning of meditation is that it is to familiarise one's mind with positiveness. And since the practice itself involves familiarising one's mind with positiveness, then it is worthwhile to contemplate, to look within, and to see what particular state of mind the positiveness here refers to. So it is worthwhile to investigate what a positive state of mind is.

Also specific to the meditation practice is choosing a virtuous or positive object to focus on, and to familiarise one's mind with, and to intentionally keep one's focus on that object. So this understanding is something really useful in order for one to develop a positive practice.

The benefits of engaging in meditation practice, through familiarising oneself with a virtuous or wholesome object, and more specifically a virtuous and wholesome mind, again and again, one starts to really establish a basis for a true sense of wellbeing and happiness within oneself.

In contrast to that however, it may be the case that we are actually more familiar with focusing on objects that cause us distress, namely afflictive external objects, and also afflicted states of mind. And if we allow our mind to be influenced by the afflicted states of mind then that will cause us distress and turmoil.

So there is an immediate positive effect that one can experience when one focuses and familiarises one's mind with a virtuous object. In the moment that we really allow our mind to settle down and focus on the virtuous object, a disturbed mind will naturally settle down, and that is an immediate positive benefit for us.

these are really important points to consider and to think deeply about, because we are so prone to being disturbed by internal or external conditions. With the slightest imbalance either externally or internally, we immediately get affected and we experience the consequences of a disturbed state of mind – we experience unease in our body or mind.

As the great Indian master Shantideva has mentioned, when the body is disturbed by illness, then that is when the body feels unwell and physical unease is experienced. Likewise, when the mind is disturbed by the afflictions, then one experiences unease in the mind, or an unwell mind. So these are important points to reflect upon as a

way to reverse that situation, and to protect one's body and mind.

As beginners, this is something we can easily relate to. It is not something too profound for one to be able to understand and to put into practice. The main point here is that when we adopt this very simple method, the practice of meditation, it can really help to settle our mind down which otherwise would be disturbed and agitated.

If we allow the mind to be in a disturbed state and agitated state for a long time, then the situation can get worse and worse to the point where one starts to really feel weighed down, and we feel despondent. We even could start feeling a sense of depression. There is a lot of talk a about depression, and depression is something that can occur when the mind becomes completely overwhelmed by discursive thoughts. Conversely, having a clear, bright and a focused mind will help us.

It is important to really pay attention to these points as a means to avert and overcome a mind disturbed by afflictions.

Some people may feel that they are not really affected by any difficult situations, and that everything is fine, and so they may feel that they do not need to think about this practice of meditation so much. However, while that may be the situation at present, one never knows when the time may come where one begins to experience the effects of a disturbed mind. When conditions are generally okay, then that is when one feels a sense of wellbeing and ease, but as soon as conditions or circumstances change, then that is when the real test comes, and the vulnerability of one's state of mind is put to the test.

If, when circumstances change, and things are not going so well, and one experiences turmoil and a disturbed state of mind, one does not have the means to pacify one's mind, then that is where a situation can get really bad for oneself.

Really, the main point is that one needs to be extra vigilant, extra careful and cautious, when one meets with certain conditions that cause turmoil. It is possible that we may come into contact with good conditions, but sometimes bad conditions or circumstances also occur. If one is prepared, one will be able to withstand whatever changes come about externally, and be more likely to maintain a steady undisturbed state of mind. That is important.

Therefore, if you actually take up this practice of meditation and really try to apply it sincerely in your life, then, due to that familiarity, when difficult situations or external problems arise, you will really be able to maintain control, and not allow the circumstances to completely unbalance you. This is something that I have explained previously many times. I cannot over emphasise that we need to really prepare ourselves so we can accept the challenges and difficulties when they arise.

We are bound to experience certain conditions that are challenging. It could be external conditions or internal conditions, and in fact the main source of turmoil and difficulties are actually dependent on inner conditions. When we are affected by worry or anxiety and so forth,

then if we don't really manage it well, we can feel disturbed. So really the best way to prepare oneself, and to protect oneself, is through the familiarisation of the meditation practice. That is something we need to bear in mind.

When we engage in this practice we can also really cultivate a discriminative wisdom, which is a deep inner intelligence that recognises what is pleasurable for oneself and what is harmful.

Now we will spend some time in the actual practice of formal meditation, and for that purpose we will adopt a comfortable and relaxed posture.

In order to engage in meditation practice it is important that we first identify and choose an appropriate object to focus on, and this is an object that does not cause afflictions to arise in our mind. We focus on an object in order to anchor our mind so that it does not get dispersed in all directions. Some people may prefer a particular object to focus on; while there are many appropriate objects to focus on, certain objects may be more suitable for one's mind and so for that reason one may choose to focus on a particular object.

However, the object that we regularly choose here as a common object to focus on is our own breath.

Choosing the breath is very significant for us beginners because, as the great master Lama Tsongkhapa has mentioned, for someone who is affected by a lot of discursive thoughts, focusing on the breath is the most appropriate and the most suitable object to focus on as a way to settle the mind

The reason why we need to apply an appropriate method to settle down the discursive thoughts is because the discursive thoughts are one of the main causes of interference whenever we wish do something. It is the discursive thoughts that affect the thinking in our mind and cause hindrance and interference. So that is why we need to settle that down.

So for an individual who is affected by a lot of discursive thoughts, or put simply, excessive thinking, engaging in a meditation technique that involves further analysis or thinking will not work. It will not be suitable, because their mind is already affected by excessive thinking.

For example, when someone is really affected by intense anger, if you ask them to meditate on love as a way to overcome anger, in that very moment when they are experiencing intense anger they will not consider that as being suitable for them. They will not take that on board, as meditating on love is not something that they can relate to right then.

However, a simple meditation of just focusing on the breath is something much more manageable because it involves a less strenuous state of mind. In fact, when one focusses on the breath properly and attentively, is said to enable the mind to settle down. The discursive thoughts and the very hyperactive state of mind will naturally settle down. Consequently, the mind becomes clearer and brighter and when the mind experiences this very clear and bright state, it actually also experiences a sense of deep relaxation, deep relief and a genuine sense of relaxation.

In regard to the specific instruction of how to focus on the breath, is said that the breath itself needs to be in a natural state. That means it has to be free from a deep inhalation and exhalation that is audible, and also be free from forceful inhalation and exhalation, such as a long inbreath or a long out-breath in a forceful manner. So in brief, the instruction is to maintain one's breath in its natural rhythm, just in the way that one would normally breathe, calmly and naturally.

Also, when one actually begins to focus on the breath, one of course applies mindfulness, an awareness that the breath is coming in and the breath is going out. Just maintaining that awareness, even just focusing on the breath itself coming in and going out is actually a very effective means to maintain one's focus.

So we adopt our appropriate physical posture, such as being relaxed but upright and straight. Then, most importantly, we need to have the right state of mind, which, for the meditation purpose, is to withdraw our attention from all forms of distractions whether internal or external. This includes not only the distractions which we would call negative distractions, but also the positive thoughts and so forth; temporarily we need to withdraw from those as well. The main point is to try to disengage from all mental activities, thoughts, mental processes and so forth, and just bring our full focus and attention onto the meditation object which is our own breath, completely focus on our own breath.

Initially, as beginners, we may find it hard to maintain a focus on the breath for a long duration, and actually the advice is that one should not attempt to focus on the object for a long time when the object may not be clear and steady. It is far better to have a good focus for a minute or two initially, and then take a small break, and then readjust the focus again, and in this way really focus single-pointedly for a minute or two. Then we can gradually increase the span of our focus, and our attention on the object, and it will actually become stronger, and steadier for a longer duration.

Otherwise if we begin our meditation by allowing our mind to be seemingly focused but actually distracted, like that, then that in itself can become a bad habit. Although we seem to be in a meditative state, the mind is actually always half distracted and half wandering, and that will be very difficult habit to change later.

If we can make sure that we are adopting a proper technique, from the very outset, in that we really focus on the object itself even for a short period, and we experience the positive effect of a focused mind, we will naturally be keen to continue to practise meditation.

Otherwise, as just mentioned, if we make an attempt to meditate but allow the mind to be completely distracted, then after a certain time we will become weary of that. Meditation will start becoming difficult. And because it seems that you are not making any progress, you may think that there is no point in meditating and that you may as well give up. That is the fault of not having utilised the technique properly. So it is important to have this clear understanding right at the start of our meditation.

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So now by setting our mind to the purpose of our meditation, we will try to maintain a one hundred percent focus on the breath itself and engage in this meditation for the next few minutes.

(Pause for Meditation)

Now while maintaining our posture and focused state of mind, we can change the object of our focus to the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is the name of Buddha Shakyamuni. After the recitation finishes, we can just maintain that focus and awareness.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

So that is sufficient for now. If there is a question I can maybe address one question, and it is fine if there is no questions.

Again, just to reiterate, it is important to find ways and means to associate with positive states of mind. If we can associate with positiveness every single day, and not allow our minds to be separated from that, then that will be the best assistant in whatever we do.

Within the positive states of mind, the most essential is the mind of love and compassion. This is the most positive state of mind that one can cultivate. A true sense of love and compassion is really essential for one's wellbeing and for the wellbeing for others. So if, in our daily life, we can really familiarise our mind with the values of love and compassion, and try to really integrate love and compassion into our normal way of thinking, then that will be most effective.

One aspect of the incredible effectiveness of love and compassion on a personal level is that if one extends true love and compassion towards others, it actually helps to overcome a lot of negative states of mind within oneself. So the afflictive states of mind that cause us distress and unhappiness, can mostly be overcome by love and compassion. It would be wonderful if one did not have to experience the ill effects of the negative states of mind; how wonderful it would be if these states of mind can be overcome by love and compassion.

So the more we familiarise ourselves with love and compassion, the more we will naturally be imbued with a sense of love and compassion towards others. And further, the more we familiarise ourselves with love and compassion, the mores our mind naturally becomes more and more relaxed, and more joyful and happy.

These positive effects are something that we all can experience. When we have a true sense of love and compassion towards someone, we don't in that moment experience anger towards them, and we don't experience jealousy towards them, or a sense of competitiveness or pride.

Therefore, it is very clear, that when one's mind is dominated with love and compassion these negative states of mind that causes distress do not arise.

The main consideration for parents who have a true sense of love and compassion towards their children, will be the wellbeing of their children, and from the parent's side, they will only be thinking of how to benefit their children, and how to contribute towards the betterment

of their children, rather than having a sense of anger or pride or jealousy towards them.

Likewise, when there is a mutual sense of love and compassion in a relationship with partners or companions, there is a true bond, and a real sense of harmony between those two people.

So in this way we can see that love and compassion is really the main cause for a sense of genuine happiness for wellbeing. This is something that I don't say lightly. I have spent a lot of time, in fact most of my life, really just investigating and thinking about this point. And having some level of experience myself, I can definitely assert that love and compassion is the most valuable state of mind. And furthermore, it is not something which is completely alien to us, we all have the seed or the basis of love and compassion within ourselves. It is just a matter of further developing it and perfecting it, and that is what we need to do.

If we investigate about it further, we will come to acknowledge that whenever we face some sort of problem or difficulty in life, particularly one that it is hard to deal with by ourselves, then it becomes apparent that we have to rely on help from someone else. So we would naturally seek help from someone who has a true sense of love and compassion for us. That would be the person who would come to our aid, not just anyone.

So this is how we can again validate that the value of love and compassion. As I stress regularly, in any relationship the most important element is a true sense of love and compassion towards each other. Of course, that is not to say that a relationship may not initially be based on attachment, as it is hard to be completely free from attachment in a committed relationship. However, if both sides can work towards going further than just feeling attachment towards each other and go beyond that to developing a true sense of love and compassion, then that will really establish a genuine bond between two people.

Otherwise, if it is just based on a sort of fleeting attraction and attachment, (and I couldn't say that there is no enjoyment and happiness at all in that kind of relationship) it is definitely not be durable. When the attraction starts to wane, then the relationship will also fall apart, That is quite obvious.

However, those relationships that continue on are those which are based on a true sense of mutual love and compassion. Love is the sentiment of wishing others to be happy.

When we see they are lacking happiness, we are not able to bear that, and we wish them to be happy, that is the sentiment of love. Whereas compassion is the sentiment of not wanting others to experience any kind of suffering. When one sees others experiencing misery or suffering or pain, one is not being able to bear that, and wishes them to be free from that, and does whatever possible to help them to be free from the misery or pain. That is the element of compassion.

These are important elements that we needs to further develop and cultivate as a means to maintain that true sense of wellbeing within ourselves and for others.