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# Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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9 May 2018

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So as usual we will do some meditation together. With meditation, the first and most important thing is your sitting posture, specifically to adopt a comfortable sitting posture.

We know from our own experience that finding a moment to rest physically doesn't necessarily mean that mentally you will be peaceful and happy as well. In our everyday life, even if we have all the good conditions that we could possibly think of in terms of material necessities, like plenty of food, clothing, drinks, and a good house, are present, it still doesn't mean that we are peaceful and happy mentally, and in fact it is possible that mentally we could be feeling very disturbed and very unhappy. So therefore, after one achieves a very peaceful moment physically, it is then good to look within and to check our mind.

With people who have exactly the same good living conditions, one person can be generally happy and peaceful, whereas others may not have the same peace and happiness.

Also, in a domestic situation, we can have two people who are sharing the same bed, one can very easily fall asleep and there is no problem, whereas the other might really toss and turn and have a lot of sleeping problems. There is a difference there even though externally they are both enjoying the same conditions.

So, what does this experience tell us? What it tells us is that when it comes to true happiness and peace, the most important causes are the internal causes and conditions, rather than external factors or conditions.

People can enjoy the same external good living conditions, but there is a difference in their level of peace and happiness. When we look into the causes, we can see that something that is not difficult to understand. If we investigate and focus on the cause of restlessness and feeling disturbed and unhappy we see it has nothing to do with the external factors; rather it is due to the internal factors which preoccupy the mind. Such a person experiences restlessness and unhappiness because of all the thoughts in their mind, whereas others don't experience this. Rather they enjoy peace and happiness as they don't have all the disturbing thoughts and feelings in their mind. Somehow that second person has fewer thoughts, and possibly is able to control all these thought processes.

Therefore, despite all the good external factors, when we go through difficulties and problems, we cannot really blame another person or the external conditions. Where we have to lay blame is with the true cause, which is

nothing other than one's not being in control of one's mind, and consequently the unruly and disturbing thoughts within oneself.

There are a lot of instances where we can relate the cause of our problems to lack of control of our own state of mind or our own thought process. If we look inside we can identify the reason why we feel down, or why we feel tense and unhappy. We can actually pinpoint that the main reason is a particular thought process that is going on. On the other hand, there can be times when we do not experience restlessness but instead experience peace and feel very contented with our situation. In those circumstances we see that the reason why we feel positive is mainly because, even though there can be difficult external factors, one is mentally very contented and satisfied and feeling at rest. That is the main cause.

So it is important for us to realise and understand that in order to reduce the problems in life, we have to reduce or diminish certain ways of thinking, and the states of mind that serve as the main cause of these difficulties. We have to do something to reduce these thoughts or negative states of mind, and we have to realise that unless we do something, and work on reducing these thoughts or negative states of mind, there is not much possibility for one to experience more peace and happiness in one's life.

In fact, there is great benefit in just knowing one's own state of mind. If we look within our mind, we can see that there are negative patterns of thought, as well as positive patterns of thought. It is of great benefit to recognise that working on reducing or diminishing the negative states of mind can actually completely change one's outlook on life, and one's experience.

In relation to this I can share with you a story about my interaction with a younger layperson who has now become a very good friend of mine. Once when we met, this man, who had some knowledge of Buddhism, asked me if I had actually achieved what is called a state of samadhi, which is like a perfect state of single-pointed concentration or calm abiding. I replied, 'No, unfortunately not'. Possibly he made such a comment because he thought that I look like a very calm person and so he asked the question, 'What is your secret to this?'. I replied, 'There is no secret, it is just knowing my own mind and working on getting rid of all these negative states of mind'. This man really appreciated this piece of advice. Then some time later he saw me from a distance, but I didn't notice him, and later on when we met he said, 'I waved at you but you didn't take any notice of me'. I said 'I didn't see you', and then we came much closer.

The point that I am making here is the benefit of working on yourselves - as much as possible getting rid of negative states of mind, in terms of enhancing more peace, more stability, and more happiness in your life. Anyone can find peace within if they can calm their mind from all the disturbing thoughts.

One technique to counteract the negative states of mind is to just to observe the negative state of mind itself. If you simply focus on the nature of that negative state of mind itself. Look at the cause which gives rise to this negative state of mind, and what kind of effect it has in terms of

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what you do. Consider whether it is possible to actually fulfil what the mind influences you to do or not. Sometimes if you look at the nature of the mind, and investigate the negative state of mind itself, then you will notice that somehow it is actually beginning to subside and lose its force.

As you focus on your negative or restless state of mind, you can also consider whether there is any remedy to that or not. As an effect of this close observation of your own state of mind, you will notice that in fact the force of the negative state of mind diminishes. One of the main reasons why it diminishes is nothing but the outcome of you being in that moment, relating to your own mind, and actually abiding within yourself.

When you focus on your mind it is like you are abiding in your mind, your thoughts are within yourself rather than being under the influence of external distractions. This is one way you can understand how bringing the mind inwards, letting the mind rest within yourself, benefits you in terms of enhancing peace and happiness.

There are certain states of mind within ourselves which, whenever they arise, have the effect of bringing disturbance; when you do not have this kind of mind, you notice that there is a sense of peace and happiness. So we learn here, that observing our own state of mind is like an opening to a new direction, almost like a guide showing us a new way to finding peace and happiness.

We are considering all these topics and issues, in order to show the benefit of engaging in meditation practice, and the benefit is very obvious. When we engage in meditation practice, where our main task is to really direct our mind, or mental focus, onto a meditation object and let the mind rest there, we prevent out-going thoughts or mental distractions, which are normally regarded as a source of disturbance. Meditation is, in a sense, a way to enable us to protect our inner peace and happiness, and at the same time it helps us to counteract those factors which bring disturbances.

To illustrate further, in everyday life when we say, 'I am happy' or 'I am unhappy', there is reason for us to say that. Normally when you say that you are not happy, one reason can be because you are not feeling well physically, that you have some health problem and you are sick, and so you say that you are not happy. There can also be some other factors, that when things are not right, again you will say that you are not happy. Even though you have all the other conditions in place, if your mind is disturbed, or mentally something is bothering you, you will say that you are unhappy. In that case, you are pointing to your mind; an emotional disturbance is something that lies, and you can point to that.

On a positive note, at times when we enjoy good health and we feel very good, we are able to say that we are happy. Regardless of other conditions, when you are mentally in a very good state, you will be in a position to say that you are happy. So, what we understand here is the relationship between ourselves and our mind and our body and other living conditions.

If our reason for being unhappy has something to do with our health, then, as we always do, we will take some

action to improve our health, such as something to do with hygiene, or something that is external.

In the same way, when we say we are unhappy, it is important to realise that one very important reason has nothing to do with our physical health or other conditions but is to do with something in our mind. That is what we have to understand. That this is the reason why we engage in the meditation practice, and we find that it is only the meditation practice which is effective in overcoming such problems – the difficulties related to our mind.

I have been saying a lot of things, but you have to understand that even though I am sitting on this throne, and whilst I'm saying lots of things, I don't see myself as somebody different from all of you but rather I see myself as exactly the same as everyone here. I am trying to share my knowledge on the basis of everyone here being a very close and a very good friend.

There are a few more things to add before we start the meditation. Remember what the Lord Buddha said: you can be a master of your own self, and you can also be an enemy of your own self. What the Buddha said is very true. A lot of the time we don't actually realise that we are our own worst enemy. When we think of even the physical health, sometimes we are very irresponsible for our health and hygiene. The term 'enemy' means is someone who brings you harm, and there are lots of instances in our life where we are harming ourselves. We can harm our own physical health, and by not being responsible for our own emotions and way of thinking, we can also harm ourselves a lot.

In essence, when we talk about Buddha saying that you can be a friend to yourself, we are talking about trying to adopt the right actions of body, speech and mind in our life. If we work on that, then we can create the right actions of body, speech and mind, and then we can be our own best friend, our own best protector. Being very irresponsible with our actions of body, speech and mind, what we create is unwholesome and negative and destructive. Then, as the Buddha said, we become our own worst enemy.

Now we will start the meditation. So make sure that you feel comfortable with sitting, and relax your body. Then try to get rid of all the outgoing thoughts and put an effort into stopping the mind from wandering all over the place. Try to let the mind completely rest or abide inside within yourself.

In this meditation, the object where we should be directing our mind, in fact placing a one hundred percent focus of the mind, is just on your breath, the incoming and outgoing breath.

Then, as you are trying to keep the focus on the breath, if you feel that the mind is about to take off from this focus, then again, without getting too frustrated, just simply once again focus on the breathing, and again put the mind back onto the breath. Just maintain this and continue the meditation by just mentally counting or being aware of the incoming and the outgoing breath.

*[pause for meditation]*

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So we now chant the Buddha's mantra and again just continue the meditation, but shift your focus to the sound of the mantra as we chant.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

On a regular basis it is good to do some meditation practice and know that the focus of the practice is really to train our mind. We should also know that our mind is actually trainable, but we have to be very gentle with the mind and go slowly as we look more closely at the mind. Through effort we can influence or change the mind to a happy or positive way of thinking while preventing negative ways of thinking.

This is of tremendous benefit in terms of working towards bringing peace within our mind and having a more peaceful state of mind also benefits or improves one's physical health. Further, knowing that it is possible to bring some peace and happiness through training or through working on our mind, this kind of knowledge not only has benefits now, but in fact you will find that as you get older, through this method of mind training, you will reap even more benefit.

So why I always tell the people that, is not because I have some extraordinary knowledge and experience to show you, but one little thing that I personally find very useful is working on, and making an effort to bring calmness to my mind. That is very beneficial, and it allows me to really enjoy my life, and to completely contain myself in the physical or material conditions that we have, and then just being here and enjoying. Whilst it is not great knowledge, it is a small thing that I always try to share with others.

Thank you very much.

*Transcribed by Su Lan Foo  
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Edited Version  
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