
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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To begin with, make yourself comfortable in your sitting posture and most importantly, relax the body. In a relaxed state of body, we will do our usual meditation. It's good to think about the goal of what we are trying to achieve in meditation practice. Whatever we do, we need to have some kind of set goal, so for meditation practice it is important to recognise what our goal is.

There is a general aim or goal behind every activity that we undertake. Likewise, we do the same for meditation where our goal is to achieve a state of happiness.

When we have a clear recognition of our goal, it enables us to measure our actions. We can judge the success of that action against the original goal. As just mentioned, if the general goal is to achieve happiness, and we are happy as a result of our actions, then we have a good reason to be happy with the outcome.

However, the kind of outcome that we judge as successful in our normal lives is typically in terms of the amount of money that we make. There are some good reasons why money is important, and we can easily gauge the outcome on the basis of how much we earn. There are a lot of things that we can do and can acquire with money. Of course, we are not saying that money is totally useless.

The basic goal that we look for in our life, is happiness. We can ask the question 'is happiness something that we can buy with money?', in the sense that the money actually is the happiness that we are seeking. When we talk about 'happiness', we are talking about something experienced, a feeling of satisfaction within our mind. From that point of view, it is very clear that the outer objects, such as money itself, are not happiness. If money is happiness, then we have to deduce that the more money we make, the more happiness we should be finding or experiencing in our life, which isn't the case.

Due to the fact that money is not happiness (and *vice versa*), a lot of conflict arises when people expect money to bring them happiness, especially after making lots of it. When that doesn't happen, they not only experience frustration, but it will also leave a lot of room for conflict and confusion in their minds in terms of the purpose of their life.

It is also a fact that no matter how successful we are externally in terms of creating all the good conditions of life, these conditions may not necessarily turn out favourable or beneficial for us. This tells us that external conditions alone are not enough for us to find happiness. Along with that we also need to create the internal factors for finding happiness.

This should be a topic that we all need to investigate - not just those people who are seriously looking for happiness but even sceptics. We can all look into how external good material conditions alone are not the only factor for bringing happiness. There also needs to be something else. What is that? It comes from within our mind. It is worth

investigating whether the real cause of happiness is something external or internal or both.

When we end up very frustrated and disappointed despite all of the success that we achieve in terms of the external factors of our life, we need to seriously think about what is lacking for us to achieve happiness.

We could have a situation where despite an increase in our material success and seemingly increased happiness, there is an increase in confusion and more stress and more tensions and disturbances within ourselves. So let's relax and try to think why this is the case, and especially looking inside ourselves, within our mind. Because when we talk of an unhappy experience, we are talking about something close to us, something within us. We are talking about our own emotions and feelings. We can all see some link between this disturbed state of mind (the experience within us), and our external success or external development. What we see is that within us, the immediate cause may be that we could have a stronger emotion, such as greed, some state of jealousy, pride and so forth. Then again, when we look at what brings about all of these mental afflictions, then we can relate all these to being brought about by external causes. In particular, an increase in our wealth seems to lead to increase in our mental distractions, which leads to an increase in afflictive emotions, which is why we experience more unhappiness.

The real cause or the real source of all of our unwanted experiences and the unhappiness that we go through is the mental afflictions that arise in our mind. It is as if these afflictions are 'roping' our own happiness. Therefore, when we talk of a meditation practice, what we are trying to do is get rid of the influence of these mental afflictions from our mind. Getting rid of our mental afflictions is a goal of meditation. Then whenever we engage in meditation practice, we make an effort to try to disengage our mind from all of the distractions that arouse these mental afflictions. We can appreciate that the moment we disengage our mind from all of these distractions, we begin to experience true peace and the stillness within.

A meditation practice can be applied to overcome the source of the mental afflictions that bring about suffering and misery in our life. Therefore, when we practise meditation it doesn't necessarily mean that there's just one technique or one application. It depends on what you are targeting in the meditation practice. As said before, essentially it is the technique to overcome or to get rid of mental afflictions. For example, from time to time it could be some uncontrolled hatred or anger that can be the main source of our disturbance. In that case, when we can recognise it, we need to develop an understanding of the causes and conditions that bring about this anger. Even if we don't understand much, when we engage in meditation practice at least try to shift the focus of our mind just onto the meditation object instead of pondering the object or the event that brings about the anger.

If you move or shift the focus to the meditation object then, at least temporarily, anger will be prevented. We can see that a meditation practice is a technique that is going to work and is very effective at least temporarily preventing or suppressing any form of mental affliction, which could be strong desire, jealousy, or pride. Whatever it is, the moment we engage in meditation practice, with an intention to counteract any specific mental affliction, if we place our mind on the meditation object in that way, then we at least get a temporary break from those disturbing emotions.

In other words, meditation is a bit like getting rid of all of the 'mental baggage' that we carry. If there is something within us, we feel disturbed. Whenever that disturbing feeling is there, we cannot really enjoy ourselves, we cannot find peace. So in this case the purpose of the meditation is to get it out of our mind, and out of our system. However, you cannot do that if you keep connecting the mind with that disturbing emotion, which is itself keeping the connection with all the causes and conditions which are most likely some external event or object. Therefore, when we engage in meditation practice, when we focus our mind on the meditation object, we are in a way breaking that link between these disturbing thoughts or emotions with the objects and the conditions that bring them about.

We can see how the meditation technique is simple. Yet if we really put in an effort and try to do our best to keep our mind focused on the meditation object, then the benefit that this meditation has in terms of getting rid of or overcoming our emotional turbulence, is quite amazing. What we are trying to find out here is why we are practising meditation. In order to do the practice, we have to feel positive about meditating, in terms of having confidence that this practice is a very effective tool for what we are trying to achieve, that is, minimising and overcoming disturbing emotions.

People go through a great deal of suffering and misery because of not being able to come to terms with changing life situations. There will be changes in our relationships, for example, where the other person has decided to separate from us and it is all over. Of course, this can be very difficult for the one who is still in love with that other person. They will have to undergo suffering and pain for as long as they mentally cannot come to terms with this separation. The nature of that suffering is simply that they are mentally unable to cut themselves off from their attachment to that person or that relationship, their connection with that person, even though in a real-life situation, as far as the other person is concerned there is nothing there, no connection anymore. But it can be painful if we do not mentally come to terms with that and stop being attached to or craving that person.

I see meditation practice as something that will truly benefit a lot of people by lessening their suffering. That's why I've been lecturing on this all the time. I've also seen a lot of people who apply the meditation practice and found it useful in overcoming their difficulties, or at least to be able to better endure and get over the hardships of their life. When we talk of meditation practice, it is not something that anybody can just easily apply in practice. Even though as we just discussed before, the process and the technique sound very simple, but it's only as simple as our ability to re-adjust the object of our mind. For example, somebody who cannot come to terms with the end of a relationship can, rather than being preoccupied with the problems of the relationship, diminish their suffering by redirecting their focus to something else like practising meditation.

The longer you stay in that practice, the more your hardship will diminish and then eventually go away. In terms of the practice, being in a position to apply meditation practice mostly depends on our familiarity with the practice. It's not something that you can apply immediately; typically, you just wait until a disaster happens and then you apply the practice! Rather, it is something that you have to familiarise yourself with over a long period of time, to the point where you see your ability to overpower the mind, which leads to the ability to easily switch focus of the mind onto various

objects. As you do this, not only are you able to switch the focus from one object to another, but you can also stay with that object for a prolonged period of time. When we reach that kind of state, then we can really appreciate that meditation is an excellent tool to overcome a lot of the suffering and misery that we go through in this fast-changing lifestyle.

I also say that the meditation practice is a way to challenge this mind within us, which is a very wild, unruly, untamed and very destructive. It is like our number one trouble maker! When we look inside our mind we can see there's a pattern - the suffering and hardship that we go through are all a product of some sort of thought process that we cultivate in ourselves, without awareness. A lack of awareness means we have different thoughts in our head rather than focusing on the chosen object. We keep thinking about other things, and then somehow, we end up somewhere and we lose all of our peace, we become restless and we can feel unsettled and confused. We go through all of that and yet somehow we start to blame the difficulties and the misery that we undergo on external objects, on other people, even though all of these problems stem from within ourselves. Of course, there could also be some other problems or hardships that can in some way be conditioned by an external cause. However, at the same time, there is also an internal cause for that.

If we think of which one is more important to overcome, then we will notice that if we could in fact overcome the internal cause of the suffering, then we will be able to overcome the suffering. However, if you are trying to overcome the external cause without working on overcoming the internal factor of suffering, then the result will be that no matter how much you work on overcoming the external cause, there will never be an end to suffering because there is a clear trend with these external obstacles. When you overcome one obstacle, another one will come, so it is endless.

In short, it is important to follow up with a few points that we discussed before. Happiness is in our own hands. We are able to resolve a lot of unwanted suffering and bring more happiness into our lives - so understand that this is all in our own hands.

With this in mind we will now begin a short breathing meditation. So please make sure that you feel comfortable, relax your body and then try to settle all of the disturbing and agitated thoughts. Then gently we will direct our mental attention on the outgoing and incoming breaths, trying to make every effort to keep the focus on the breathing in and out. If you get distracted, just simply try to bring your focus back to the object.

[Meditation]

We can continue the meditation by directing our focus to the Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra as we chant it.

[Recitation of mantra]

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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