
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

འཕམ་ལམ་རིམ་འབྲིང་བ་བཞུགས་སྒྲོལ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual we should begin with a comfortable sitting posture and a fully relaxed body, and upon finding ourselves physically at ease it would be great to also achieve peace and rest within our mind.

It is very important to understand the benefit of achieving some sense of peace and happiness within ourselves at a mental level. Our usual thoughts about peace and happiness and the degree of satisfaction and comfort that we seek in life are mostly based on the values of external world, and this is not necessarily the right way. Rather, if we closely investigate the true source of peace and happiness beyond the external objects, we will find that the causes lie within ourselves at the mental level. So, it becomes possible to achieve a sense of peace and happiness within ourselves, irrespective of external conditions.

Having said that, of course it is very important to maintain good physical health, which is also relevant to our overall wellbeing. We may enjoy optimal physical health of the body, however, if our mind is very stressed, disturbed or agitated, it may harm or adversely affect our body and consequently throw our physical health and wellbeing out of balance.

This shows that the causes of happiness on the mental level are more important than those on the physical level. By comparing the levels of the two factors for peace and happiness in our life – the internal or spiritual factors and the external or material factors – we may notice a serious deficiency in our internal level of peace and happiness. That is why we should turn our mind to learning and practising meditation. So our focus in meditation is to develop the internal factors conducive for peace and happiness. Meditation also involves learning about ourselves and about our mind.

Geshe Shawo said that happiness begins with the lessening of desire for various objects. This is very true because if we reflect on this, we can recognise how a great deal of the frustration and unhappiness we experience is not so much to do with our immediate living conditions but more to do with a lack of satisfaction and contentment within our mind. As a result of this we are perpetually suffering and caught in unending demands and challenges throughout our life. As this great practitioner Shawo implied, we begin to find happiness as we begin to decrease desire. As long as there is desire there is no satisfaction. When an unfulfilled desire prevails, there is no happiness because desire makes us feel as if something is lacking and a sense of dissatisfaction arises, which in turn causes us stress.

We can consider this in the context of our own life situation. In our case, there is no real shortage of the basic things necessary to sustain our life and enjoy it. However, if we don't control our desirous mind, we may feel that we don't have enough, because when one desire is fulfilled, another one immediately arises, and another one after that. So as long as we are overpowered by desire, there is no way for us to find satisfaction.

Another great Indian master Ashvaghosha also said that there is no worse a sickness or disease than having a desire, which is essentially saying the same thing! It is not only in Buddhism that we repudiate desire and cultivate a sense of contentment, but the Christian tradition also emphasises the importance of a sense of contentment. So, all of this shows that if we are unable to control our mind and free it from the influence of desire, then no matter how extensive our achievements and success, we will lack a true sense of satisfaction and happiness.

In order to cultivate a sense of contentment, we need to change our way of thinking. The great Indian master Nagarjuna said that the purpose of wealth is to bring satisfaction to our mind, to ourselves. Of course, acquisition of wealth does not automatically bring satisfaction; rather satisfaction depends on whether we are mentally contented with the wealth acquired. If we enjoy good health or our living conditions are sufficient, then we have a good reason to be contented with what we have and feel grateful. We need to learn to say that everything, such as our health, possession of wealth and friends etc., is good enough. Not only are we saying this, but in fact mentally contenting ourselves with whatever we possess has a positive impact on our experiences. The moment we acknowledge and feel grateful in our mind that we have everything we need such as wealth, possessions and friends, we will find peace and contentment.

Meditation practice helps us to transform our way of thinking, and through it enhance a sense of peace and happiness from within. When we engage in meditation practice we are resting our mind on a chosen object which brings peace and calmness and it is important we try to do it on a regular basis. The length of the time we partake in this doesn't matter! It could be only for one or two minutes, but it is of great benefit in terms of giving us the opportunity for sufficient reflection and the means to create the causes for peace and happiness within ourselves.

Unless we control our desirous mind, we cannot find satisfaction, no matter how much we achieve in our life. Without desire being brought under control, we may be always wanting more and more and the best of the best. Therefore when we talk about true sense of satisfaction and happiness, one important cause is to mentally cultivate a sense of less desire and contentment. In relation to this, somebody commented to me that there must be a very close connection between Buddhism and Christianity because he thinks that they probably are the only two religions that have a system of monasticism or orders of monks and nuns hood. In the monastic system there is a great emphasis placed on living a very simple and contented life and this frees a lot of time which

enables the members to focus on pursuing spiritual practice.

We can be inspired by just observing how some Christian practitioners lead their lives. Some nuns dedicate their entire life to serving other beings and the community at large and when we look into their individual lives, they do not really possess anything which is a great source of inspiration.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama once said that he heard about a Spanish monk who did a retreat for six years and His Holiness said, 'I actually took the opportunity to meet him!'. This monk just lived on nothing else but dry bread for six years which was enough to satisfy his life, thus illustrating his practice of simplicity and contentment. When His Holiness asked him about the nature of his practice and meditation, he said that he focused on developing love. Actually, the moment he said the word 'love' he expressed a strong sense of love and emotion on his face.

His Holiness also found that moment very touching and inspiring. Christian practitioners draw their inspiration of developing loving kindness in their faith in Almighty God. It is in their faith in God that they find the inspiration to practice and to develop living a life of contentment and simplicity. They fully dedicate their life to other beings and from that source, they are also able to totally eliminate self-centeredness. It is because of all these practical benefits from cultivating faith in God, that His Holiness has a great respect and admiration for all the non-atheist schools of faith.

It is obvious that some Christian practitioners have completely overcome the self-cherishing mind because internally, their only concern is for the welfare of other beings. So as previously said, these practitioners manage to overcome the self-cherishing mind because of their belief and faith in Almighty God, and it is for this reason that His Holiness the Dalai Lama has great admiration for the Christian faith. One very eminent Christian leader even commented to His Holiness: "you seem like a true Christian ... a good Christian!". As a follower of His Holiness and also from my own observation of Christianity, I also greatly respect and admire all other religions'.

The previous occupant of Tara Institute was The Daughters of Charity, an order of nuns with a mission for the disadvantaged. When we first moved here I became a good friend of nuns who moved across the road. I became particularly close to one nun, Sister Maeve, who shared with me a lot about her life. She travelled a lot to different countries and used to write to me and also meet me when she returned. We often shared tea and visits to each others places. I really had great admiration and respect for her practice and whole-hearted dedication to serve those in need.

When the nuns were living here and looking after about one hundred underprivileged children, they didn't have a heater and the living facilities were very basic, and my friend nun did a lot to take care of those children. At one stage she also travelled to India and was involved in taking care of many poor and homeless children. she also did some missionary work in South America in the

middle of a forest providing shelter for thousands of disadvantaged there too.

Before we begin our meditation practice we should remind ourselves of the benefits of engaging in meditation practice. We need to ensure that we feel positive and enthusiastic about our approach to the meditation. Meditation helps us direct our mind fully inward, as a result of which we can feel our mind at rest, experience happiness, positive energy, confidence, and hope from within. On the other hand, if our mind is too distracted or preoccupied with various disturbing thoughts and is wandering off in all directions, then as a result we may feel depressed, having low self-worth, or too stressed, anxious, confused, and unhappy. I think sometimes people suffer depression as a result of lacking control or discipline over their mind. To put in other way depression can be purely self, or mentally created disease.

However in meditation practice we overcome mental distraction and direct the entire focus and energy of our mind onto a single object of our choice and maintain concentration on that. As a result, meditation practice brings in more courage and motivation to do things and so forth.

As we all know our mind doesn't have the natural tendency to just to sit; rather it is more habituated to going after various objects. This shows that we need to engage in meditation practice which is to train our mind to get used to sitting. Through meditation practice we can tame our mind so that it functions under our command - to be able to make it just sit when we want it to sit. This is to say that wherever we want to rest our body but we can be sure that our mind is also at rest. For example if we relax on a chair at home, we know that our body is resting on the chair but if we are familiar with the meditation practice we can also make sure that our mind is relaxing at the same time. Our mind will relax, the moment we cease all thought processes, and put a brake on wandering thoughts. What we need is the total sense of relaxation which happens when both our mind and body are resting at the same time. Sometimes it may be effective in terms of therapeutic effect, or as part of our mind training to we talk to our mind. When we decide to rest at home we should tell the mind 'I'm staying home, so you should also stay home with me, and please go out and leave me alone at home.'

You might find it a bit abnormal to hear from me that you should have a dialogue with your mind as way of disciplining the mind rather than teaching you about philosophy by using various jargon words. I prefer to use simple words and keep things simple but relevant to your life. I say to you to talk with your mind, and see how you can bring your mind closer to you. In one way perhaps you will find it easier to develop closer relationship with your mind than developing a relationship with another person who makes their own decisions and has their own life to live. Whereas if you say to your mind, 'I'm staying home and please, I also want you to stay with me' there is more chance that your mind will listen to you than asking your friend to stay with you! *[laughter]* Furthermore, when we talk about building a relationship with the mind you have heard frequently from me how our best and

most reliable inner friend would be to cultivate in our mind, love and compassion for other beings

Through the meditation practice we cultivate peacefulness and happiness within our mind. The term for 'peace' in Tibetan is *shiwa* meaning pacification of distraction. Therefore, peace arises from meditation because in meditation we are pacifying the mental distractions which are the source of various disturbing states of mind or emotions. When the distractions are all pacified then naturally will experience happiness, so therefore meditation enhances peace and happiness within us. Even though it is currently out of our reach to experience everlasting sense of peace and happiness, at least when we meditate and when we are able to rest our mind, we can temporarily prevent the manifestation of the mental distractions and as a result of that, we can experience some peace and happiness .

With this in mind we can now begin the meditation practice, so please make yourself comfortable in your sitting posture. If there are any outer distractions, you should try to get rid of them and allow your mind to completely rest within yourself. Following this you need to gently focus the mind on the breathing and then as much as possible, ensure your full focus on the incoming and outgoing breath.

[Meditation]

We can now chant the Buddha's mantra, so make sure your mind is directed inward and then as we chant the mantra, direct your mental attention to the sound of the mantra without being distracted by any other objects.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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