
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Please make sure that you are in a comfortable sitting posture and that your body is fully relaxed. Then reflect upon this passage by Lama Tsongkhapa,

If your mental attitude is positive, then what follows after will it be also positive.

If your mental attitude is negative, then what follows after will it be also negative.

Hence, everything depends upon your mind,

So make a consistent effort in cultivating positive mental attitude.

This passage shows us the source of happiness and suffering. It indicates that the happiness we experience is derived from a virtuous, white, or positive actions, whilst the unhappiness we experience is derived from black or negative actions.

Generally, our mind can have three different attitudes—positive, negative or neutral. However, this passage by Lama Tsongkhapa focuses only on the positive and negative states of mind: it says that if we cultivate a positive state of mind, then the path which follows will be positive, whereas, if we cultivate a negative state of mind, then the path which follows will be negative too.

We mentioned positive and negative actions. How do we define these? We can define these two from the point of view of their results. Positive or virtuous actions are those actions which have the capacity to bring about happiness and joy, while negative or non-virtuous actions which have the capacity to bring about unhappiness and dissatisfaction. If we reflect on the meaning of virtue and non-virtue from this perspective, we get some idea of what actions we should adopt and what actions we should avoid in our everyday lives. Hence, this reflection serves as a guide for our life.

When we observe some people's conduct and ethical behaviour, we will notice certain behaviours which bring them suffering and unhappiness. Those behaviours are inappropriate, negative and destructive in the eyes of others too. Whereas other behaviours are admirable, positive and beneficial for them and also for others. They bring joy and happiness to them and to those around them. The main cause of our actions has more to do with what lies within us than the external world and conditions. That is what we understand from the passage from Lama Tsongkhapa. The main source of feelings of happiness or unhappiness is our own state of mind. Hence, there is the causal link or connection between our actions and thoughts. The passage states that wholesome actions stem from a positive mental attitude or virtuous state of mind whilst negative and destructive actions stem from a negative state of mind.

With this understanding we discover that practices relating to transforming our mind are the most effective and beneficial practices that will bring benefit our life and the lives of those close to us. Cultivating loving kindness and

caring thoughts towards others develops and enhances positive states of mind and diminishes negative states of mind. Not only does cultivating loving kindness and warm heartedness bring about a positive transformation in our mind, but it is also of tremendous benefit to ourselves and others. In fact, a positive state of mind serves as the true refuge, protection and saviour for us.

In terms of the actual practice, we have to begin showing a positive mental attitude towards those closest to us; those we interact with in our daily lives. Practising and cultivating loving kindness and thoughts of benefitting others on a daily basis, while preventing hostile and harmful thoughts, brings immediate benefit to us and those close to us. We don't have to wait for these benefits in the future. As well as we don't have to wait for the time to practise, we can practice it right now of extending benefits to loved ones and even to those distant from us.

If we check the reality of our life situation, we can understand the importance of being friendly, kind and positive to other people. Our situation is that we live a life which is a part of society and our well being is very much dependent upon our relationships with others. Therefore, it is important to be in harmony with those we interact with in our everyday life and be more considerate of them too. I am not saying that we are unaware of doing this. But we need to focus and think about the best way to interact and communicate and build relationships with others. Taking this into account, we can understand the benefits of cultivating a positive mental attitude. As we understand from the passage from lama Tsongkhapa, all our actions are a reflection of our internal mental attitude. We can see that by focusing within and making an effort to cultivate a positive state of mind, we can improve our interaction and relationship with the outside world. This will help us to overcome stress and tension in our relationships. If we maintain a positive mental attitude, we will develop harmonious relationships with others in which we can enjoy our interactions with them such as having a cup of tea or a meal together, a good spirit of atmosphere without any tension or conflict. So we understand that our actions are influenced by our state of mind, and a positive mental attitude truly brings us peace and happiness. In fact, peace and happiness that derives from the mind or from within us is totally reliable and unending, whereas, external objects such as wealth etc., which appear to be a source of happiness is unreliable, and there is no guarantee that it will bring us satisfaction and peace.

Hearing all this from me, you may think it all sounds true but perhaps you are also thinking it is easier said than done. If we think that this teaching is too difficult to put into practice, it indicates our weakness in bringing our mind under control and how far we are away from releasing our mind from the grip of mental afflictions. To a great extent, we experience a lot of frustration because of the lack of control over our mind. There are so many instances in which we have no choice but to fall under the influence of afflictive emotions. Even if we want to be really caring, friendly and of benefit to others, we cause harm to them and sometimes even our acts of good intention, instead of benefiting them somehow end up as being harmful.

Of course, there's no doubt we all want to be at peace and enjoy happiness but there are moments in which we cannot be at peace. Therefore, it is important to investigate the main cause of this and why we are unable to achieve what we want to achieve despite our effort and success. If we look

into it, then we will understand that the main cause is mental afflictions; some form of negative and destructive emotion that is controlling our thoughts and deeds. We need to think about this. If we think we can observe that in order to find more peace and happiness and to be a better person, we need to recognise that we must abandon negative thoughts and deeds, and the fact that the main source of all the negative thoughts and deeds is within us. Then we investigate how to overcome them.

When we look at the influence of a negative state of mind, the mental delusions and distractions, we can note that it can be very overwhelming for our mind. Therefore, we need to practise meditation because engaging in meditation is the only effective means of counteracting mental delusions. In meditation practice, we need to bring our whole attention, focus and energy inwards. For example, as we engage in meditation practice, we have to overcome mental distractions and slowly fix the mind on the given object. It is also important to note here that meditation practice is of great benefit only if we understand its purpose as being to counteract, challenge and overpower the mental delusions. When we have this as a set goal of our meditation, we will reap more benefits. If instead of this, we simply see meditation practice as just sitting and experiencing stillness, then it may provide some peace and relaxation while we are practising, but beyond that there's no benefit.

It is very beneficial to give thought to understanding our own situation. For example, when we are mentally stressed and disturbed we can be emotionally unstable and agitated. We cannot think or do things properly. As a result, we suffer. In this situation, if we think about it, we can identify the cause of the turmoil and mental disturbance that we are experiencing. In a similar way, based on understanding of our own situation, we can understand the actual cause when a friend is agitated and unstable, saying and doing things in an abnormal way. We can recognise and relate the actual cause to their mind, that there's something inside disturbing and bothering them.

There's a Tibetan expression in which we use the word, *nying-je* which literally means what a pity! But it's more a sense of empathy. Empathy will arise when we recognise the suffering and the cause of the suffering that the other person is afflicted with. When we see the true cause, we can easily feel empathy. In this way, it will not affect us and make us react. The key point is how important it is to apply meditation practice; to understand that the whole point of the meditation is to transform our mind and get rid of the influence of mental afflictions. In this way, meditation practice not only benefits us while we are practising but also afterwards when we engage with the outside world. When we encounter situations and circumstances, meditation practice will have an impact. It will influence us and help us to understand and look at situations from a different perspective.

We are also saying here that in practice we should begin by cultivating and developing love and compassion with those close to us. Sometimes we unnecessarily ask ourselves, 'where is the opportunity to practise this?' The perfect opportunity is when those close to us are facing difficulties in their lives. Then we apply our meditation practice—understanding that how when we are helpless, feeling miserable and suffering, our mind is completely overpowered by disturbing thoughts and mental afflictions, and we experience misery and suffering. In a similar way, we should try to understand, when our friend is

experiencing the same. In that way we can recognise and feel their situation, then generate love and compassion and a sense of empathy.

When we decide to help a friend, we should focus our mind how and the best way to help our friend in full consideration of the friend's best interest. For example, taking them out for a meal, listening to them or having a pleasant conversation. The important thing is to ensure we adopt the right mental attitude and show a genuine thought of helping our friend.

It is really awful to see some people how some people ignore, neglect and keep distant when their friend is undergoing hardship and in miserable situation. But that kind of mental attitude and action, though it may seem like we are protecting our own interest and comfort is not serving our purpose in the long run, because it is affecting our relationship with the friend. It is a matter of applying common sense – that's what we are discussing here. If we were in the same situation as our friend, much in need of tender love and support, and someone came to help and support us, we would cherish, appreciate and trust our friend even more. Hence, any help we give to our friends particularly in time of need would build, strengthen and develop more trust, and faith in our relationship.

Let me tell you this story of a Tibetan family that I knew; some of you might have heard it before. This Tibetan guy was married to a younger woman and they had two children. His wife was always nagging him and was very talkative and spoke harshly to him. He went through a difficult time and thought his wife would leave him because of their age difference and had lost faith in their relationship. So, he began to put more restraint on their spending and so forth in order to save for his future. Then, one day he had an accident in which he broke his leg. During that time his wife took very good care of him and actually was very gentle and caring for him. As a result, he regained his faith in her and started to even show his appreciation of his wife to others. This story clearly shows how much people appreciate and remember those who help them in difficult time.

Let's now do our usual breathing meditation. Check your posture and relax your body. Our object in this meditation is inhaling and exhaling as we breathe. Having brought the mind inwards, we focus on inhaling and exhaling without being distracted by other objects.

(Pause for meditation)

We will continue with the meditation by chanting the Buddha's mantra. As we chant we direct our focus to the sound of the mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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Edited Version*

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