
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

འཕམ་ལུགས་ཀྱི་ལོ་ལྔ་པའི་རྒྱུ་རྐྱེན་གྱི་སྐོར་གྱི་བཤེན་པ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

5 September 2018

As usual, we will begin with meditation.

Let's first reflect on the benefits or the purpose of engaging in the meditation practice. Meditation is a means to train our mind in order to develop and enhance true knowledge and to bring about some positive changes within our mind, a positive mental habit. When we talk of meditation or Dharma practice, it is really something to do with enhancing peace and happiness within our mind. Therefore, it is very important that when we engage in meditation or Dharma practice we focus within ourselves for we want to achieve inner development.

The purpose of people going to school from a very young age is to secure a better future in terms of enjoying good living conditions and good health. However, the purpose of pursuing spiritual practice is to ensure peace, happiness and clarity within mind. Since we also very much need happiness within our mind, we need to integrate spiritual practice with secular education so that we can find good conditions for the well-being of both our mind and body.

At the same time, we should have a sense of personal responsibility for achieving the mental and physical happiness, which we all seek. Particularly with mental happiness each individual has to create the causes in order to obtain it because it is not something that someone else can bestow on us. In fact, peace and mental happiness is a form of personal experience and a sort of feeling; but we cannot automatically share it with each other. As to material objects we can give to others and receive from them. The good thing about mental peace and happiness is that it is ours and not like an external object which sometime makes us worry that someone else may steal it from us.

Essentially, we are talking about the importance of achieving mental and physical happiness, which is really the main purpose of our lives. Our progress and success in life should be measured in terms of the level of mental and physical happiness that we achieve. When we try to achieve mental happiness, we focus on our own mind, aware of our way of thinking, make an effort to enhance and develop clear thinking, and try to access and utilise our discrimination and intelligence, and develop a positive mental attitude. As we develop more mental qualities, we will find more inner peace and happiness. Having said this, it is also important that we have a healthy body and comfortable living conditions and take personal responsibility in this regard. This is why I especially encourage younger people to look after their physical health and the hygiene of their body in order to live a healthy life. We need to ensure that the food and

drink we put into our mouth does not destroy our good health, and that we do not eat or drink anything toxic. They should do well in their education and be career-minded, in order to have a good future. If they are successful in education, they will have more opportunities in their lives and a more secure and brighter future.

We are here to focus on meditation and spiritual practice, which will bring about more peace and happiness within us. Through meditation practice, we are also trying to overcome the continual source of problems from within us. We can imagine that if there is nothing within us that disturbs our lives, confuses or torments us, the outcome will be that we will find ourselves in peace and happiness. However, if our mind is disturbed, agitated and lacks concentration, this can be an impediment to performing even ordinary activities effectively and it can be a great obstacle in our lives. Therefore, through the meditation practice, it is important to recognise those things within our mind that are troublesome to us. Not only do we recognise this, but also at the same time we should see those troublesome states of mind are unreliable, destructive, and hence we should not fall under their influence or be misled by this mind. Through this process of applying meditation practice, we can diminish and prevent these negative states of mind.

If we have a close look at our present state of mind, particularly to see how much ability it has, in terms of concentration and mental attention, we will notice that it is very weak. For instance, if we try to direct our mind to a particular object, it won't stay there even for a very short time, but simply loses its focus on the object very easily. On the other hand, we may have a certain thought, which we find very disturbing, yet if we try to overcome that, it is very difficult. Even if we don't want this thought, it keeps coming back.

Therefore, we can appreciate the benefit of engaging in meditation, and through this practice we can achieve some level of ability to control our mind. If we want to direct our mind to a particular object, we will be able to do that. In this way, we can prevent any unwanted thoughts.

As well as this, there are also other important benefits to being able to control and fully direct the mind to the object or any task we are engaging in. We will be able to place our full mental attention on the object with a lot more focus and power. For example, when a river is flowing down a mountain, if it is divided and scattered, it becomes very weak, whereas if it is consolidated and focused in the same direction, the current can be very powerful.

Likewise, we can appreciate the benefits of meditation. If we can achieve this state of increased concentration through this practice, then whatever we do can be more effective. In the meditation practice, we choose an object on which we need to focus. It is important to understand that the very purpose of meditation is to bring the mind within, and to calm the mind inside, therefore the object of focus should not be an external object. Having said that, if you are using an external object as a base, it should only be used in the initial stage to familiarise

yourself with the object. However, when you begin the meditation, the object should not be out there, but rather it is something within yourself. It is important to understand that the object is within your mind. In Buddhist terminology, this is called a generic image, so whatever object you have out there, you have the generic image in your mind.

In meditation, when you direct your mind to focus on the object, it is not as though the mind is here and the object is there, with the mind gazing at and observing the object. Instead of this, it is important to direct the attention so that the mind is merged with or dissolved into the object, with no separation between the mind and the object.

This briefly explains the object that we use in the meditation practice. When placing your mind on the object, there are two very important tools to help maintain and sustain the meditation practice. One of these is mindfulness, which is more like the memory of the object. The other important tool is introspection, which is more like an awareness, the part of the mind that has the ability to watch the meditation. It is like a detective checking how your meditation practice is going.

The main obstacles which you will need to challenge and overcome are mental sinking and mental excitement. The indication of sinking is when our memory of the object is not clear or fades away. If the clarity in our mind and the focus on the object seems to be fuzzy, this is the arising of sinking, which we need to overcome. Excitement is regarded as a form of attachment, which distracts the mind from the meditation object, such as pleasurable or desirable objects. Therefore, during meditation, you will need to apply mindfulness and introspection to remedy sinking and excitement.

In order to make good progress, the great meditators advise beginners to make their meditation period session short, and have more sessions, so that they can look forward to doing the meditation practice again. The idea is to make the practice very effective, because whether you are doing well is not dependent on how long you have been sitting there doing your meditation practice, but you have to look at the quality and effectiveness of the practice. Your meditation is effective in whatever duration you practice if it helps you to counteract the faults of sinking and excitement. Even if the duration is a short period of one or two minutes, it is worthwhile, because if you apply it effectively, you will feel very positive about it. It is said that you should stop at the high point when you wish you could continue for longer.

On the other hand, you may sit in meditation but lack the proper application of mindfulness and introspection; in fact, when you find it difficult, you force yourself to stay there longer. This is the wrong approach because it becomes more like meditating on sinking and excitement. If you repeat this kind of meditation, then your mind will become habituated to these two faults which will arise when ever you sit in meditation. However, if you try to focus on overcoming the faults and making the session enjoyable rather than forcing yourself to do a long meditation, then after a month or two, you will notice that you will slowly be able to extend the meditation session to four or five minutes without much interruption

of sinking and excitement, so in this way you can make progress.

We will now do a very short breathing meditation. For a successful meditation practice, it is also very important to choose a suitable sitting posture, which you will find is very effective for the practice. Choose the right posture, then relax your body fully and gently try to overcome all distracting thoughts, letting the mind rest completely within yourself. Bring the mind inwards, through overcoming all outgoing thoughts. When you overcome and empty all the thoughts, you will find your mind focussed inwards, without any objects. It is said that it is good to let the mind remain in that state, without any objects of focus, but simply resting the mind inwards for a little while or to the point when you notice that the mind goes after an external object. At that point, you can begin the breathing meditation by directing the mind to inhaling and exhaling the breath.

[Pause for single-pointed meditation]

We will now chant the Buddha's mantra and continue to keep the mind inwards but redirect the focus to the sound of the mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

This breathing meditation practice does not require us to think or study much about it as a meditation technique. It is said that using our own breathing as an object for the mind to focus on is effective in terms of cultivating an increased state of concentration. For example, in certain situations where you experience a strong thought of hatred and anger, this causes the mind to become very restless and disturbed. In that situation, if someone is advised to practise patience or to cultivate love and compassion, it may be very difficult and challenging. However, it is not that difficult to do the breathing meditation practice - you just have to focus on the breath, so you may find that this technique is effective in immediately calming down the mind.

There are various techniques for the breathing meditation. A popular one is to direct your mind to the inhaling and exhaling as you mentally count the breaths. One inhalation and one exhalation count as one round of breath. It is very important that your mental attention is placed completely on the breathing without any other objects distracting your focus, but that you direct the mind to focus single-pointedly on the inhaling and exhaling, as you mentally count the rounds of the breaths. It is said that after twenty-one rounds, you will see the results of completely resting the mind within yourself.

We will leave tonight's teaching here. There is time for one question.

Student: Sometimes when I think of the Buddha in my head, I find there are flashes of light, which can dislodge the Buddha, because they are more lively. Is there a way to give Buddha more light?

Normally what comes easily to our mind are those objects that our mind is familiar with. It is very obvious when our mind is used to certain objects, we will find that the objects keep occurring in our mind all the time. I had an old friend who did a long meditation, where he focused

on a certain syllable at the navel. He did this so well that later whenever he meditated, this syllable kept appearing in his mind and sometimes it became an interruption to his meditation.

In order to cultivate concentration, it is generally advised that it is better to choose an object that you find easy and which is suitable for you to focus on.

Many years ago, I was in Kathmandu at the big Boudhanath Stupa at the same time as Lama Zopa Rinpoche. I clearly remember, at that time when I was meditating, there was a bright light that kept appearing in my mind. Later on, the same light kept coming back, however it's not there anymore.

Generally, we recommend the image of Lord Buddha. I am happy to hear that you are using the image of the Buddha for your meditation. There are some additional benefits for using this image.

For devoted Buddhists, the image of the Buddha is specifically recommended to use as an object to achieve single-pointed concentration and calm abiding.

It also has significance later on, especially in tantric practice when the meditator engages in deity yoga practice where you arise as the deity such as the image of the Buddha. Therefore, for Buddhists, utilising the image of the Buddha as an object to achieve calm abiding has a long-term benefit for the tantric practice.

As Buddhists, from your experience you can understand the added benefit when you focus on the image of the Buddha. If you can sustain the focus, it's not just achieving the concentration but there is also more benefit to it.

To summarise, as discussed earlier, the purpose of life is mental and physical happiness, which are most important for us, therefore the meditation that we do is to achieve that purpose, particularly the happiness on the level of our mind.

That is all for tonight, and I thank you all for attending.

*Transcribed by Ai Chin Khor
Edit 1 by Ingrid Leibbrandt
Edit 2 by Sandup Tsering
Edited Version*

© **Tara Institute**