
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

འཇུག་ལམ་རིམ་འབྲིང་བ་བཞུགས་མོ།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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As usual please begin by fully relaxing your body. Not only am I advising you to relax, but I must also relax. If we all sit in relaxed way, then together we create here a peaceful and relaxed atmosphere, don't we?

It also helps us to feel more inspired and motivated to do certain things if we know it is only for a very short time. So we should also have the thought that our meditation is only for a very short duration. It's possible that we also feel more motivated when someone else advises you to do things, so sometimes it's good if the meditation is guided by another person. Alternatively, you can guide it yourself by conversing with yourself, such as saying your own name and then saying; 'you need to relax, this is a time for relaxing, stop wandering everywhere, be calm, be calm.'

There is no doubt that we all wish to enjoy true peace, and relaxation, and joy, all the time, but we don't actually experience that, we can't find it all the time. So the question is, what is impeding it? I always say that if we look at the reality of our own existence, or what it is constituted of, then we find that it is constituted of something we call it body, my body, and something else that we call a mind, my mind, and another thing that we call me, I, or self. These three aspects - my body, my mind, and I - always go together, they exist together and accompany each other. So there is a close interconnectedness between these three things.

The role of the mind is particularly very influential in pre-determining the wellbeing of the 'I' and the body. We can see that if the mind is restless, or agitated, or lacking peace and happiness, and not behaving properly, then even if the 'I' and the body need rest, they cannot get it. We need to ensure that we have a calm and positive state of mind in order to find true peace and happiness and even to feel relaxed in our body too. Without doing anything to calm our mind, then whatever other things we do to find peace and happiness may be futile.

It is essential for us is to know, and to be educated about, the true cause of happiness, which is what we want, and the true cause of suffering which we do not want.

It's not that we are not already trying to find happiness and to avoid suffering, in fact, we may indeed be trying hard to do that, but it's just that we cannot find the peace and happiness that we are looking for, and instead, there seem to be unending problems. Our situation clearly illustrates that we are not tackling the true cause of suffering, and we are not working on creating the true cause of happiness, and we can also see that we have been misled by some sort of inner delusion or confusion.

As we were just saying, in reality, our mind is the main source of the happiness that we want, as well as suffering that we do not want, but we don't view that way. Instead, we view external things and events as the main source for all our experiences. For example, whenever we are unhappy or feel down, we tend to look for the causes externally, something to blame it on. Whereas, in fact, the main cause lies within us, the main cause is our own mind. If we check within, we can relate the main cause to a state of mind, we can recognise that state of mind as the culprit. So really the blame goes to the mind as a primary cause of all the turbulence that we go through in our life, all the unwanted things that we experience. Therefore, the key here is to recognise that unless we do something to eliminate or undo or overpower, the unruly and unsubdued mind within us, we cannot really find true peace and happiness no matter what else we do, or achieve, in our life.

Then the question is: is it possible to overpower or eliminate that unruly mind? Although we experience the mind as if it is overpowering or ruling us, actually the mind is under our control. Therefore, to think or believe that the mind is above us is a delusion and is wrong. In terms of the three aspects of mind, body, and I, the I is like the owner or controller, and the other two are owned by the I. This is clear to us from the phrases we use all the time, such as 'my mind, and my body.' These phrases indicate that the 'I' is the owner and the mind and body are owned. So the 'I', as the owner, should be able to do whatever it wants to, with the things that it owns, and indeed those phrases indicate that we do have the capacity to rule our own mind.

Then how are we going to do that? How are we going to bring our mind under control? The answer is, through the meditation practice, as the practice of meditation is really about subduing the unsubdued mind. The true peace and happiness that we are talking about, manifests and flows from within us as we settle all the disturbing thoughts and emotions.

No matter what we accomplish, and how much we succeed, externally, if we lack inner peace and happiness, then we are not going to be happy and satisfied with our lives, instead, we would feel that we have no meaning and purpose in our life. From this perspective, we can understand and acknowledge the importance of having sustainable peace and happiness within us, and how important and precious that is. Our purpose of life then should be achieving that inner peace and happiness. All our actions and activities should be directed towards achieving that, and through this, we will feel that our life is fulfilling and meaningful.

In order to recognise, and verify, that our experience of happiness or unhappiness primarily derives from our mind, from within us, we need to understand our mind and its influence over our feelings. We can develop this understanding by continuously observing our mental continuum. As we do this, we will note that whenever a positive state of mind arises, or is present within us, as a direct effect of that mind, we feel happy, calm, and relaxed. On the other hand, whenever there is a negative state of mind, as a direct result of that mind, we will feel

unhappy, miserable, disturbed, and restless. This clearly shows us that if we want happiness, we need to cultivate and maintain a positive mental attitude, and if we don't want misery, we need to get rid of negative mental attitudes. Therefore, our focus on enhancing peace and happiness, and reducing suffering and dissatisfaction in life, is within our mind. That is very important.

Usually when we get disturbed emotionally, when we get upset and unhappy, we tend to relate the cause to external things, such as other people or some changed circumstance. We then get into the battle of trying to win them over and change them, and I have to say that trying to change other people, and trying to change the world, is quite a frustrating and huge task, and one that's not going to bring true peace and happiness at the end anyway.

As stated before, considering that the primary cause of our peace and happiness is our own state of mind, then the more positive states of mind that exist within us, means that we are happier and more relaxed. And more steadiness of our mind means we are more stable with our life, whereas more negative states of mind mean that we become more disturbed or unhappy or paranoid. So the key to bringing happiness, or to reduce unhappiness, is within us, it is not out there. In a way that's good news for us because it means that we can find it, whereas if the key is in the outside world, such as with some other person, then we have a big problem. Therefore, we don't always have to fight with other people to overcome our problems; we can overcome a lot of our problem simply by calming our mind and altering our mental attitude.

Essentially all our actions throughout our whole life take place on two levels; in thought or in deed, and of the two, thought is more important. Thought predetermines, and shapes, and drives deeds. If the thought is positive, the deed will be positive too. If the thought is negative, the deed will also be negative. The negative-ness or positive-ness can be defined in terms of the outcome being desirable or undesirable. And we can also speak of neutral thought or deed.

Meditation practice can help us to understand our mind, and to develop self-awareness, and through this, to develop the skill to subdue the mind. We have discussed the importance of achieving a calm, and happy, and stable state of mind, and we may think that we understand it, and that's why we don't take it that seriously in terms of putting it into practice.

In fact, it is not as simple to understand as we think. Looking into our mind, looking within ourselves, we probably know that we are not really happy; we see that we have much confusion, and many distracting thoughts, and we can feel that we are under a great deal of pressure. Yet we say to ourselves that things are okay, sometimes we even ignore clear symptoms of serious problems, we pretend that we are happy and that everything is going smoothly. In this way, life goes on, and we pass our time wandering here and there.

However, if suddenly we confront an adverse or unbearable situation, then at that moment we get completely overwhelmed and shocked. At that moment, our knowledge of meditation can be too remote, and even

if it is there, we will find it extremely difficult to apply it, and we will find ourselves in a very helpless situation where we can't think properly, and we experience deep pain and suffering. We will find that external things, such as having a nice house, plenty of food and drink, clothing, friends and so on, cannot reduce our suffering, none of this helps to overcome the suffering that we are undergoing. In those moments, we understand the failure of material conditions, and also we may not have the spiritual resources, but even if we do, we find it extremely difficult to apply them.

Before you confront any adverse situations, if you have already given thought to, or are familiar with, the practices of thought transformation and meditation, then certainly you will be less susceptible, and better equipped, to face the external challenges of the life. When we talk about hardship and difficulties in our life, how much we can endure depends to a large degree on our mental attitude. With increased tolerance and patience within our mind, we are far better prepared to overcome difficulties, and not to be so affected by them. Through our meditation practice we can increase our mental courage, determination, and hope so that no matter what happens in the outside world, we can maintain our inner peace, stability, and happiness.

I will stop here, and we will do the usual breathing meditation. Make sure that you feel comfortable and fully relaxed in your body. Try to let go of all the distracting thoughts. Despite your efforts, if your mind is not settling down, then try to recognise that unsettling thought. Once you have identified it, then you say to it; 'you are the main cause of bringing disturbances and harm to my life and stealing all my peace and happiness'. You can then say to it; 'now I won't let you disturb me'. In this way try to generate a strong motivation to get rid of that thought. With this motivation, you begin the meditation, which is simply to focus on the incoming and the outgoing breath, without being distracted by any other objects.

Breathing Meditation.

We continue the meditation with chanting the Buddha's mantra, and now you just need to switch the focus of your mind onto the sound of the mantra as we chant it.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

This is the end of the talk tonight but if you have any questions please feel free to ask. Are there any questions?

Question: I have a question relating to the relationship of 'I' and mind. Between them, the 'I' is said to be the controller, and the mind is the controlled. And then later on it is said that the mind overrules us. I am just wondering then what is the 'I' in the context of our discussion?

Answer: Referring to your first question, when we talked about the 'I', the mind, and the body, and the 'I' as the owner or controller, we are talking about the 'I' which is the conventionally existent 'I', the 'I' that exists relatively. This is the 'I' that when we say to ourselves that I am going to bed, that I am doing this and that, the 'I' which goes to sleep, that does things, we call it the relative or conventionally existent 'I'. We are not talking of the

negated 'I', or self, in the context of the Buddhist doctrine of selflessness.

Your next question relates to our discussion about how our mind or thought predetermines our actions and in that sense can overpower us. Even though the 'I' is the ruler, the mind can act as a ruler. If the mind that acts as a ruler is a bad one, then we get into a lot of suffering because of it. That's why we need to learn about how to subdue or control the mind. Think of the 'I' as the king and our various types of mind as ministers.

Question: What is the wisdom that overcomes anger?

Answer: If you talk about permanently eliminating mental afflictions, then we have to uproot the afflictions. The wisdom which has the capacity to uproot mental afflictions is the wisdom that realises emptiness, the ultimate nature of things. This wisdom directly counteracts or opposes ignorance in relation to ultimate reality. With that ignorance, we grasp at things as having an intrinsic self, and from there arises all the mental afflictions.

Just to give a quick overview of the Buddhist presentation of how to achieve the cessation of suffering, first, we have to recognise true suffering. And then just as all other things, we also have to understand that there are causes for suffering. There are two true causes of suffering, the mental afflictions or delusions, and karma. Karma results from mental afflictions. There are many types of mental afflictions and the root of all types of afflictions is the ignorance with respect to the ultimate reality, which is ignorance of self-grasping. That is the root cause. This way of tracing the root cause of suffering, to the ignorance of self-grasping, is a unique doctrine of Buddhism.

From the above, we can understand that if we abandon self-grasping, then we achieve the cessation of suffering, the truth of cessation. Then there is the question of if it is possible to destroy or abandon the ignorance of self-grasping. It is possible because this view is untenable, it cannot be validated by logical reasoning, and it lacks the support of valid cognition. According to the ignorance of self-grasping, things exist inherently and independently, however, this is not the case in reality. If we check how things seem to exist to our perception, they seem to exist inherently from their side. This very much reflects an ingrained ignorance within us with regard to the way things exist in reality. In reality, things are dependent arisings. As we probe into the way things exist in reality and begin to enlighten ourselves with the knowledge that things are empty of an inherent existence, the ignorance will diminish, and can even be uprooted through meditation.

From the point of our own experience, we can also trace how all our karma and delusions are rooted in this ignorance. Deep down we all have a sense of 'I', which we experience spontaneously, and very much on an instinctive level. We can feel that sense of 'I'. Not only it is there, but we also grasp at that self. Due to grasping at that self, we then automatically generate desire for any objects that we perceive as attractive or desirable, and we generate aversion for any objects that we perceive as unattractive or undesirable. Similarly, we generate a close

feeling of attachment to friends, and hatred to enemies. We can observe that the stronger the force of our grasping at the self, then likewise the force of the delusions or mental afflictions that are derived from this are stronger. And then this strong force of the delusions is a stronger driving force with which we engage in creating karma. That is how sentient beings are subject to the perpetual cycle of birth and death, which we call samsara.

So it is very important to observe our experience of this sense of 'I' deep down within us and to see how we, or 'I', exist to that sense of 'I', in order to realise the wisdom of selflessness. We can talk about a relative 'I', which is the reference to the 'I' when we say I am eating and so on. That 'I' does exist, and it is the doer of the actions. However, when we talk of the 'I' in the context of the doctrine of no-self or no 'I', then we are talking about the 'I' that needs to be rejected in order to gain the wisdom of emptiness. The negated 'I' indicates an independent or inherent self, which is a false mode of existence of things.

We can observe different types of 'I' in our experience, for example when your friend or partner has done something totally against your wishes, and you find it very annoying, you will get very angry, and you may say to him or her, 'I am not happy with that or I don't agree with you.' At that moment if you check, what sort of 'I' is it that you experience, and how does it exist. You will find the 'I' has a very concrete reality of its own, existing independently and inherently. This very much fits into the negated 'I' as apprehended by the ignorance of self-grasping. You will even find experiences of such an 'I' very disturbing to your mind and emotions. Whereas when we say to a friend, 'that's wonderful, I like it', in this context the I is more like one that is relatively existent, and it does not particularly affect your emotions to go high or low, nor have an effect on influencing your mental attitude.

Question: If you have overcome all the delusions and everything, and nothing will affect you, then you won't get afflicted by the other person?

Answer: No, after you have overcome delusions from their root, they will never arise. There is a text which gives the example of three beings looking at a beautiful woman. Each one of them has a different perspective; to a lustful man she is an object of his lustful desire, to an adept meditator, who perceives everything as unattractive and filthy, she is just a skeleton, and to a dog, she is just flesh for food. Our perspective of things changes just as our feelings towards others also changes. We could have an attachment to a person, and then later on hatred towards the same person and vice versa.

Thank you.

*Transcribed by Su Lan Foo
Edit 1 by Sandup Tsering
Edit 2 by Robyn Ralton
Edited Version*

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