
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

འཇམ་དཔལ་ལྷན་པའི་འགྲུབ་པའི་བཀའ་སློབ་ལྟར་།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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As usual please adopt the sitting posture which you find most comfortable and relaxing for your body. You should think, and recognise, that you are here to relax and rest your body. So even though it's for a short period, ensure that you feel your body relaxing – that's important.

Right now, we have put aside all the other things to do; we are here to get a bit of rest in this quiet place, and besides getting rest, do we have any specific purpose or things to do here? I think that the answer is yes, that we are here to understand our mind more, and to facilitate peace and happiness within our mind.

In order to achieve that understanding we need to gain control over our mind, and realising the possibility of gaining control over our mind is of paramount importance. But first we need to understand the benefits of gaining control over our mind.

Essentially, we all are always looking for peace and happiness, but true peace and happiness lie within us on the mental level, and therefore, the correct means to achieving it is through transforming and controlling our minds. We must recognise and understand this fact.

On the other hand, we need to recognise and understand that the main source of our problems, our worries, discontent, stress, anxiety, frustration and so on, is the very disturbed and distorted states of mind within us, and because of those minds, we become emotionally and mentally unstable and unhappy. As a result, we cannot think and do things clearly and effectively, which in turn results in us experiencing more and more suffering, and even depression.

Nobody wants to experience such disturbed states of mind. So in order to find true peace and happiness, we need to think about and understand how we can overcome the source of the problems within us. In this way, we can see that we could have a completely different mental outlook on things and events so that even if our outer circumstances are not that favourable, we can still be at peace and find happiness. We would also become less susceptible to outer changes and more resilient, stronger and more stable inwardly. Recognising the fact that the source of our problems and difficulties lies within us, as well as recognising that the remedy to overcome them also lies within us, or is within our reach, gives us hope when we face difficult situations. This understanding enables us to see the light, even in gloomy life situations.

So if true happiness lies within us, is there a means to achieve it? If the true cause of suffering lies within us, is there a means to overcome it? What is it? How do we

cultivate it? We need to seek the answers to these questions.

Here we can understand that what we are talking about is something within, or on a mental level, not something that is external nor material. Therefore, it should occur to us that the means to find happiness and to overcome suffering also lies within us. What we need to do is to train ourselves to direct our attention onto our own mind, and in there we need to bring about changes in terms of our mental outlook or attitude.

On a mental level, we need to recognise that a positive and wholesome state of mind brings about peace and happiness, whereas if we lose that positive state of mind, then we lose our peace and happiness. I quite frequently say that a positive state of mind is really the most valuable, the most beneficial and precious object that you could possess. It can be the most reliable and unflinching object of refuge and protection for you.

In fact, meditation practice is all about cultivating positive states of mind and diminishing negative states of mind. The more positive states of mind that one generates, the more one finds peace and happiness. Whereas the more negative states of mind that one generates, the more one experiences suffering. When we understand this, then we can see the point of engaging in meditation practice, and the point of applying mind-training, in terms of developing positive mental qualities, and diminishing negative mental habits.

Within us we all have positive mental qualities, and we need to recognise them and to acknowledge their great benefits to ourselves and to others. Then we will sincerely make a conscious effort to protect these qualities and not lose them due to any adverse conditions. At the same time, we make a conscious effort to prevent negative states of mind from arising, and if they do arise, become aware of them, and think of ways and means of getting rid of them.

Overall, we always need to be mindful and aware of all of our actions. We need to ask if our actions, or any activities that we do, are meeting our desired goal or not? Indeed, what is our goal?

I think it is important to reflect upon these questions that relate to our wellbeing and see that from the beginning of our life we have been seeking happiness and wanting to avoid suffering. But our idea of happiness is very much based on material or physical values, hence our mental focus is also mainly directed towards external objects. Not only that, but we spend most our time and energy in pursuing external objects. However, the issue is that we never feel contented and satisfied, regardless of our outer successes. We never feel that 'I have now got everything that I need and that's enough.'

If we believe that the sensual world is happiness, then we will feel that whatever we have got is not enough, and not good enough, and we say to ourselves that we need something better, something else, and to obtain that we need to do this and that. After achieving that thing, we repeat the same fantasy, and the result is that the unending dissatisfaction, anxiety and stress in our lives is perpetuated. On the other hand, if we achieve peace and

happiness on a mental level by achieving a calm and positive state of mind, then there will be less need, less worry and stress, less anxiety and frustration, and more happiness, and a greater sense of contentment.

Even if we do not possess much materially, we would feel contented, and live a happy life, and be able to say that 'I have everything I need, I am lucky, and I have nothing to complain about in life.' Therefore, I say that when we think about various things that we could possess, the one thing that we should all possess, indeed that we must possess, is the positive state of mind within us. In fact, you will find that it is the most important and beneficial thing that you can possess.

Meditation practice helps us to recognise true peace and happiness within us and helps us to enhance it. We could go into great detail about the reason why we are not able to enjoy inner peace and happiness, but in essence, the main reason is that our mind is under the power of, or in grip of what we call mental afflictions. So really the main purpose of meditation practice is to counter the mental afflictions within us.

In meditation practice, the first and most important thing is to direct our mental focus inward, and at the same time subdue all outgoing thoughts. As said before, the goal of meditation is to enhance positive states of mind and to diminish negative states of mind – both of these states of mind lie within us. Therefore, we must focus our mind inward in order to understand them, to achieve calmness, and to remove the rough and wild mind within us. If our mind is wandering about with distracting thoughts, or overpowered by external distractions, then we cannot meditate. Just as we need to focus on our external needs and facilitate those to improve our material living conditions, we need to turn our focus inward for meditation practice.

Further, I think we need to adopt a realistic approach in whatever we do in our life. Meditation practice is definitely very beneficial to living a happy and meaningful life, so it's worth trying it out. However, as we cannot determine its result by trying it out just a few times, I advise people to include meditation practice as part of their daily activities.

If you practice it regularly, even if it is for a very short time, say five minutes each day, then over a period of time you can notice the benefit it brings to your life. It would be good to find time for a short meditation in the morning, as well as at night. At other times you can decide for yourself what's best suited to you, such as if you have some time off from work you may want to do some extra practice or a longer session. Sometimes you may even be able to find a short period for meditation at your workplace.

Obviously we must work to make ends meet, because without working who will provide us with food, clothing, and shelter? I have some reservations regarding those few people who say they want to give up their job to do full-time meditation. Meditating is not as easy as they think, and besides, there are others who don't work, but they don't do more meditation. I advise people to maintain a balanced life between your personal life, your work, and your meditation or spiritual life.

Another important thing that I often advise people about is to try to cultivate a positive state of mind, so when you wake each morning you think that 'I will be kind, caring, and helpful to others, and I won't do any harmful actions to them.' This positive attitude will influence your actions throughout the day. If you remember to cultivate the same motivation every morning, then eventually you will cultivate it automatically as soon as you wake up.

After this, as mentioned before, do a short meditation to experience inner calm, and think about how to make the day meaningful by maintaining a positive state of mind, such as being helpful, not harmful to all other beings. At the end of the day, if you carry any stress, tension, or anxiety from your work, then try to eliminate this by engaging in meditation practice. It is also good, before you go to sleep, to build a habit of reflecting on how you have spent the day. Rejoice and feel positive in whatever good things you have done through the course of the day, and feel remorse for any misdeeds or harmful actions you may have done and resolve to not repeat them in the future. If you integrate meditation practice into everyday life, regardless of the length of the session, then as time goes by, you slowly make progress, and the practice becomes easier and becomes a habit.

We should also note that in our practice our focus should be inward. We are not necessarily saying that good outer conditions are an impediment to our practice; but good outer conditions can become an impediment to our virtuous practice if we see them as the end result of our actions, rather than as a means to achieve a higher purpose of our life. If we have the right mental outlook, then, in fact, we can transform positive outer conditions as a means of reaching our higher goals. I certainly find the good living conditions that I now enjoy very useful for enhancing my practice of developing virtue and diminishing non-virtues. Good living conditions and circumstances are the result of good karma from the past, therefore if you have found them now then be inspired to create more good karma. Whereas bad living conditions and circumstances are the result of bad karma from the past, so if you meet them now then be inspired to minimise bad karma and to purify it.

If you engage in meditation practice on a regular basis, then even though in the beginning you may have to make a lot of effort and even find it very difficult, it will eventually become part of your daily life. And then, when all this practice that we do becomes part of our daily activities, we can also be in the position to find lasting peace and happiness. And in a sense, if we continue to do this day after day, our life as a whole will be very stable; we will experience a stable life with stable peace and happiness.

Therefore, it doesn't matter whether the situation you are in is good or bad, what is important is your mental outlook. If you have the right mental outlook, then every situation is positive, in the sense that it offers an opportunity to create virtue and abandon non-virtue.

Now we do our usual breathing meditation where we direct all our mental attention onto the incoming and outgoing breath. You begin with a very relaxed body and try, as much as possible, to get rid of all distracting

thoughts so that your mind is fully settled within yourself. And then you begin the meditation by focusing your mind on the incoming and outgoing breath, and try as much as possible to keep your mind there, rather than being distracted by external objects.

(Pause for meditation).

Now as we chant the Buddha's mantra, try to focus the mind on the sound of the mantra, and keep the mind inward without being distracted by external objects.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNI YE SOHA

We have just a little bit of time for questions, so if anyone has a question please raise your hand.

Question: When do we do an analytical meditation?

Response: Usually analytical meditation is recommended for beginners because actually setting the mind single-pointedly is not easy. When you are doing analytical meditation, it is vitally important that your mind is fully focussed on the topic of your analysis, without any distractions. So from this perspective, analytical meditation is also helping you to develop concentration. In terms of the order of which of the two - stabilising or analytical meditation, to engage in - the analytical meditation is recommended first for beginners, whereas advanced meditators alternate between using analytical and stabilising meditation in their practice.

Having said that, I think it should be left to individuals to decide which of the two meditations best suit their practice and needs. Sometimes, if our mind is too agitated and disturbed, we can't think and do things properly. In this case, engaging in the stabilising meditation might be a good way to calm our mind immediately, which is very necessary sometimes.

Thank you. Are there any other questions?

Question: How do you meditate when your mind is overwhelmingly distracted or disturbed?

Response: If our mind is too disturbed and too agitated, then the recommended meditation is breathing meditation. Breathing meditation is a very simple technique, which does not require much knowledge, whereas some other meditations can be very complex, which is too hard to comprehend when your mind is disturbed. Breathing meditation is just simply a matter of focusing, or resting your mind, on the inhaling and exhaling of the breath.

One way of doing breathing meditation is, while focussing your mind on the breath, to mentally count the cycles of inhaling and exhaling with the awareness of 'I am breathing in, I am breathing out, then in, then out.' It is said that if you can keep the mental focus on your breathing for the duration of twenty-one cycles, that is counting each inhalation and exhalation as one cycle, then all the disturbing thoughts will be gone, and you will find the mind will be fully abiding within yourself in a state of stillness and clarity.

An example used to describe the nature of the mind is a clear mirror. Just as the mirror can reflect the colour of whatever object is placed in front of it, for example if the object is blue, the blue will reflect in the mirror, similarly

the nature of the mind is clear and pure. By nature, the mind is not rigid or static, but due to certain objects or thoughts, it becomes agitated, and when those objects or thoughts are gone, the clear and pure nature of the mind becomes apparent.

Breathing meditation is also regarded as a preliminary practice prior to the main meditational practice because of its effectiveness in quickly calming the mind. We can also apply breathing meditation any time we need to really calm down. Sometimes we start off a meditation alright, and then later on we might find it very difficult to continue because of the influence of overwhelming distractions or mental afflictions. In such a situation it is good to apply the breathing technique to counteract the distractions and then go back to the meditation. It is said that if we continue the meditation whilst under the influence of mental distractions, then we develop a bad habit of always meditating with distractions, and this habit can eventually become very difficult to overcome.

Both questions are very good. The same questions are raised in many scriptures as well.

Meditation practice is certainly not just sitting in nothingness; rather it should be an awakening, and before an awakening we expect to confront the challenges of doubt and mental delusions. So if any doubts or questions arise in the meditation that is the sign of progress.

Thank you very much.

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Edited Version

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