
Heart Advice

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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As usual, we begin our meditation by fully relaxing our body. We are here to talk about the meditation practice, which is often discussed in the wider community. In fact, meditation is a popular topic these days. Essentially it is just like any other activity we undertake in our life – it helps us to achieve things in life. One thing that we hear quite often is that meditation is a practice to control or safeguard our mind.

Whether meditation can safeguard or control our mind and if this is relevant to us or not is a question of understanding and finding out if there is any benefit to us if we meditate. What are the benefits for us if we meditate? What are the benefits of being able to safeguard or control our mind? On the other hand, what are the shortcomings or the disadvantages if we don't control or safeguard our mind?

The key here is directing our attention towards our own mind. We are not trying to find out about someone else's mind. Meditation is really about understanding our own mind. Therefore, you have to focus on your own mind, and try to understand what it means to safeguard it. If you safeguard your mind, what are the obvious benefits? Whereas if you don't safeguard or control your mind, what are the disadvantages for you?

The moment we start to bring the mind inward and directly focus it by itself brings some inner peace and relaxation.

In the *Bodhicharyavatara*, Shantideva says, 'But if the elephant of the mind is completely restrained by the rope of mindfulness, then all perils vanish, and complete well-being is obtained.' This is an analogy where our unsubdued mind is like a wild elephant, whereas a mind that is subdued and controlled is like a tamed elephant. If we use this analogy, we can imagine that if our mind is not controlled it will be like a wild or mad elephant, which can potentially cause great destruction and even disaster. Conversely, if the mind is tamed then it can be very useful, just as a tamed elephant is very useful.

When our mind is not under our control it is like a wild elephant, so we start by looking at this unruly state of mind and the harm it can cause. We can see how our mind can easily chase after wrong objects or become influenced by negative and destructive ways of thinking. As a result of losing our mind to wrong objects or negative mental attitudes, we can go through tremendous suffering and stress. For example, can we imagine ourselves being happy if our mind is overpowered by strong waves of anger or pride or jealousy or extreme competitiveness? Will we have any happiness or peace? We can understand that when we are lost in anger and so forth, that we will experience huge suffering and pain and restlessness.

If you are completely overpowered by destructive states such as anger, jealousy and so forth, then just like the mad elephant, we can cause great destruction to our own life, and as a result of that, experience suffering and misery.

If an elephant is fully tamed, then instead of causing destruction, it can be helpful to us. Therefore, we have to understand that whenever we feel unhappy in life, or if we feel restless, then this is an indication that we have unleashed the untamed mind. For example, sometimes the moment when we get out of bed in the morning we feel unhappy, as if something is not right. This is a sign that an untamed mind is rising within us. If we think about this, we can relate our lack of happiness to our untamed mind. We can then ask ourselves the question: What can we do to tame our mind?

Shantideva also shows the way of controlling or taming this crazy elephant-like mind. The method is meditation practice in which the untamed mind can be disciplined and brought under control by tying it to a virtuous object and applying alertness.

Just like firmly tying a wild elephant to a pole, in meditation practice you tie your mind firmly to a meditational object with the rope of mindfulness and train it with the hook of alertness. As the mind is brought under control, we are able to overcome all our fears and suffering; you will have happiness in the palm of your hand.

The elephant trainer initially trains the elephant by tying the elephant to a pole, and uses a metal hook to train it. If the elephant doesn't listen to or obey the trainer's order, then the elephant's head is hit with the metal hook. Using this technique, eventually the elephant can be brought under control, and become fully trained. In the same way in the meditation practice, the object that we use for meditation, which is a virtuous object, is like the pole, and mindfulness is like the rope or the chain that we use to tie the mind to the meditation object.

One important aspect in the meditation practice is to develop single-pointed concentration, which means to keep the mind continuously on the meditation object. And then, just as in the training of the elephant, we use the hook of alertness to ensure our mind is focussed on the object. If the mind is not fully focussing on the object, then alertness allows the meditator to bring the mind back onto the object. It is through developing single-pointed concentration by continuously applying mindfulness that we will be able to fully train our mind.

Mindfulness plays an important role in meditation practice. If you lose mindfulness, then you lose the virtuous object. So, in meditation we should generate the motivation to mentally remember and retain the virtuous object. Mindfulness is a mental factor that remembers the object, so it is very important to apply it in order to retain the mental attention on the virtuous object. As to the object of the meditation, it must be recognised within us internally; it is an inner object. In order to meditate, we need an object, and if the object is an inner object, it is important to recognise that object clearly. Then you apply mindfulness, in the sense of having a recollection of the object in your mind. This is how you make progress.

The more you are able to remember the object with full concentration and full focus, the more progress you are making. It is mindfulness that holds the object and keeps it present. As you continue applying mindfulness and focussing on retaining the object in your mind, your concentration on that object becomes steadier and more stable. Along with developing stability in focussing on the object, you also need to develop clarity within the mind.

In meditation practice, we direct our mental attention fully on the object, to the point where our focus becomes a single-pointed concentration. When we can do this, then we will be able to overcome and get rid of distractions. This includes the mental excitement that causes our mind to chase after external objects. These kinds of distractions will cease as soon as our mind is completely fixed and focussed on our meditation object, and we will develop more stability in our focus and clarity within our mind.

As we continue to develop this inner stability and clarity, we will achieve a meditation experience called mental pliancy or suppleness, where we experience the suppleness of our mind. This mental experience is an indication of having pacified a bad mental state that prevents us from achieving stability and clarity within our mind.

As a benefit of having pacified that bad mental state, your mind experiences a state of pliancy, which makes the mind very alert and fresh. Following on from that mental pliancy, we will be able to focus with greater concentration and stability, then we will experience physical pliancy, or physical suppleness, whereupon we will pacify a bad physical state, such as a feeling of heaviness of our body which impedes the development of perfect concentration. As a benefit of achieving physical pliancy, your body becomes more alert and supple. By taking advantage of the mental and physical pliancy as you make further progress in the meditation, the wind within the channels flows very well and this induces an increased state of mental and physical pliancy, as well as physical bliss. This physical bliss arising from the physical pliancy or suppleness will eventually culminate in inducing a mental bliss arising from mental pliancy. The perfect single-pointed state of the meditation called calm abiding or *shamatha* is a state of single-pointed concentration which concomitantly induces mental and physical bliss.

So hopefully you've got some idea about how, through meditation practice, our mind can be completely subdued, completely brought under control. Lama Tsongkhapa said in his *A Hymn of Spiritual Experience*:

Concentration is a king ruling the mind:
When placed, it is as immovable as Mount Meru;
When sent forth, it engages all virtuous objects.
It induces the great bliss of a serviceable body and mind.
Having understood this, the lords of yogis rely continuously
On the meditative stabilization that destroys the enemy,
distraction. I, a yogi, practiced like this.
You who desire liberation, should do likewise.

Tsongkhapa says the concentration is like a king who overpowers and conquers the mind so that when the mind is ordered to sit, it can stay unmovable like Mount Meru, in the sense that no disturbing thoughts or mental distractions shake the mental focus. But if you let the mind go, then it can easily go after all sorts of objects. Meditative concentration can bring the bliss of mental and physical pliancy, making both mind and body workable and alert.

In order to counteract the enemy of disturbing thoughts, we need to safeguard our mind, with regard to which Shantideva says:

Oh you who wish to guard your mind,
I beseech you with folded hands:
Always exert yourselves to guard
Mindfulness and alertness!

In this verse, Shantideva emphatically advises those who wish to gain control over the mind to rely on mindfulness and alertness and safeguard the three doors of body, speech and mind. When we engage in meditation practice, the two most important tools are mindfulness and alertness to train ourselves in guarding the mind and developing a perfect concentration. Similarly, the tools of mindfulness and alertness are also essential to safeguarding the three doors of body, speech and mind, so that whatever actions we create are virtuous and beneficial. Therefore, we need to apply mindfulness and alertness or awareness, not only while meditating, but also when we are not doing a sitting meditation.

Tonight we covered the shortcomings that arise if our mind is not brought under control and is not safeguarded. Then we talked about the benefits of keeping our mind under control and how to safeguard our mind. We also briefly covered how meditation is the most effective way to safeguard our mind.

In our spiritual practice our main task is to always observe our thoughts and emotions, and discern their effect on our life. We will notice that there is a state of mind with a negative mental attitude which has a clear pattern of bringing shortcomings and harm to us. Since we do not want that, it will naturally occur to us to do whatever we can to not fall under the influence of those negative states of mind.

On the other hand, as we recognise we also have a positive mental attitude, which has a pattern of bringing positive and beneficial experiences and results, we will naturally be more inclined to think about what we need to do to safeguard and further develop that pattern of thought.

Let us now do a very short breathing meditation together. Please begin with fully relaxing your body. And then try to get rid of all the outgoing or distracting thoughts from your mind and find your mind abiding fully within. Having brought the mind inward, we then begin this breathing meditation, which is simply directing our mental focus fully onto the incoming and outgoing breath. (*Pause for meditation*).

We now continue with the chanting of Buddha's mantra, and here instead direct our mental focus onto the sound of the mantra as we chant.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

Thank you. Just as we discussed tonight, understand and recognise the benefit of integrating meditation into your life. It is important to recognise that there are certain kinds of problems we experience in our life that are all directly related to our own state of mind. For example, it is very difficult to find peace and happiness if we are overpowered by unfulfilled desire or strong anger. We need to get rid of those negative states of mind that result in our suffering. But if we do not recognise and acknowledge the fact that our problems stem from our own mind, then we won't even think of counteracting, let alone getting rid of those negative mental states.

For example, anger is a destructive emotion that arises within us. In fact, destructive emotions are the main cause of our suffering, but instead of recognising that, we typically blame the person or situation that has conditioned this anger to arise within us as being the main cause of our suffering.

We do not normally recognise that the actual cause of anger is within ourselves. However, if we recognise that, then we will also recognise the direct cause of our suffering, which we do not want, lies within us because it is the anger within that causes this suffering. In this way, we can at least consider doing something to get rid of anger within us.

Meditation is simply one way to get rid of or reduce suffering in our life. Since all our suffering stems from mental afflictions, we will find meditation practice very beneficial. When we meditate, we are disciplining and controlling our mind by placing it on a virtuous object, an object that enhances inner peace and tranquillity and which doesn't arouse any form of afflictive emotions (such as anger and so forth) that disturb our mind and wellbeing. When we become familiar with meditation practice by doing it over and over again, we can then apply it whenever we need to, for example, whenever we confront any mental afflictions such as anger or so forth. We will find meditation practice a very useful and effective tool to overcome the various problems and challenges we face in our life.

Thank you.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

*Transcribed by S Kim Foon Looi
Edit 1 by Cynthia Karena
Edit 2 by Sandup Tsering
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