
Heart Advice

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

26 June 2019

As usual, we begin by fully relaxing our body. As we relax physically, we may notice that we feel relaxed maybe for a minute or a very short period, but then thoughts arise and we lose that sense of relaxation. What kind of thought arises at that moment? The most common one is the type of thought that we are most familiar with in our normal life. Consider two different people. The one who is normally more habituated with a peaceful and virtuous state of mind will notice the same thought arising quite naturally when he is resting physically. So, he can easily find mental and physical peace and happiness. Whereas someone who is habituated to mental afflictions cannot even rest physically because of being easily troubled by disturbing thoughts such as anger. So, he finds it difficult to rest his mind even if his body is resting.

There is no doubt that everybody wishes for peace, relaxation, and happiness. But, the cause for peace and happiness is not physical or material. I normally say that as we reach old age in our eighties or nineties, we become too weak to do much physically, so the peace and happiness that we need is more dependent on our state of mind. Whereas younger people are physically more mobile; they can travel and engage in various physical activities, so they have more opportunity to find peace and happiness on a physical level. Regardless of this, we all understand that everyone, regardless of age, needs a reasonable amount of peace and happiness for their wellbeing, good health and longevity. The main cause of true peace and happiness lies within us – it is more on a mental level than on physical level.

If we hear about some lovely, beautiful place, we immediately wish to go there to see and enjoy the place. In the same way, we have a desire to walk into and experience a peaceful and happy state of mind. So, the question is how to tap into our inner peace and happiness? The answer is to make an effort and try to cultivate and familiarise ourselves with a virtuous state of mind, and a correct mental attitude.

In fact, meditation practice is the answer. The term for meditation in Tibetan is *Gom*, which literally means a practice of directing the mind onto a virtuous object and familiarising the mind with that. It is by familiarising our mind with that object that we are able to cultivate and build positive mental habits so that a virtuous state of mind can easily arise. There are a number of students here that I know, including an elderly woman, who really acknowledge the value of the spiritual practice they have taken up in their lives. They have found it extremely beneficial. She really appreciates the benefit of the meditation practice she does; she says it gives her tremendous peace and happiness.

The master Atisha said:

The best friends are mindfulness and introspection.

The best excellence is to have great altruism.

The best instruction is constant observation of your mind.

These instructions provide us with a practical guide for our meditation practice. By applying these, our meditation will become effective and also relevant in terms of bringing peace and happiness, not only while meditating, but also after the meditation. The function of mindfulness is remembering the virtuous object. With mindfulness we are able to remember, sustain or retain a virtuous state of mind, and remember our virtuous practice. If we have a virtuous state of mind, we have a peaceful and joyful mind – we won't have any unhappiness or inner disturbance. Therefore, the main purpose of practising mindfulness is to maintain a virtuous state of mind. Whereas if we lack mindfulness, our mind will easily be distracted, and overpowered by other external distractions and thus become disturbed.

Along with mindfulness it is also important to apply introspection or alertness, which is a mental factor having the function of watching our thoughts and actions. It is very important that we apply mental introspection to observe our thoughts to discriminate between positive and negative states of mind. In this way, introspection ensures that mindfulness is functioning well in keeping our mind in a virtuous state as it makes us aware if any faults occur in our meditation. Thus, we are able to remedy faults in our meditation as they arise and make progress smoothly and seamlessly.

As you know I live up there in one of the upstairs rooms. Every day I get up around 4.30am but occasionally not until 5 am. From the start to the end of each day I always try to apply mindfulness and retain a virtuous state of mind. As I have been doing it regularly, it now comes quite naturally to me. For instance, in the morning when I get up, I remember my virtuous practice as if it is my daily routine. So, mindfulness is something I practice day in and day out. I can't say that I have gained any high spiritual realisations, but I can say as far as my practice of mindfulness goes, I have made good progress. That's why I am saying mindfulness practice is very beneficial because it is the most important factor in maintaining and developing virtuous thoughts and deeds.

A lot of us are not only interested in meditation practice, but also say that we have been practising it. Indeed, there are some who have been boasting that they have been practising meditation for many years. We have to check and recognise what kind of effect that meditation practice has on our life and our experience. What sort of benefits do we gain from learning and practising meditation? Are we becoming a better person as a result of meditation practice? Are we able to minimise or reduce the amount of mental defilements or afflictions within us? As a result of our meditation practice, are we able to find more peace and happiness and satisfaction in our life or not? The answer to all these questions depends on our understanding of, and how we actually practise the meditation.

As you know, meditation is a practice where we direct and familiarise or habituate our mind to a virtuous object.

Do we actually do this whenever we engage in meditation practice? We have to recognise that if we are not applying or practising meditation properly - that is, familiarising our mind with virtue - then no matter how long we boast of following a meditation practice, there is nothing to feel proud about because the whole thing is a waste of time. If we continue like this, we are deluding ourselves and the end of our life will be quite empty.

On the other hand, if we do the meditation practice properly - that is, if our effort is directed towards counteracting and decreasing mental defilement or afflictions - then we will gain the true benefits of the practice and in that way our life becomes meaningful. As far as the actual meditation practice is concerned, there is no doubt that you will find it very effective in counteracting mental defilements such as anger, jealousy, pride and so forth.

When the mind is placed on a virtuous object, there is no room in our mind for any mental defilement to arise. For example, two people can't sit on a cushion made for one person. Likewise, when our mind is in a virtuous state, then it can't be in a non-virtuous or negative state at the same time.

To be more specific, for example, if we feel love and compassion for someone, then at the same time we can't feel anger or jealousy towards that person or feel pride or want to compete with that person.

Why do we need to overcome all these mental afflictions, such as anger, jealousy, pride, and so forth? Because they are the direct cause of our suffering, our misery and all our unnecessary worries and disturbances. For example, if we have anger in our mind for one minute, then for that minute there is no happiness and no peace. Whereas if for that one minute we are able to enjoy a state of mind without anger, without any other forms of defilement such as jealousy, then we can be sure at that moment we do have peace and happiness. Just as anger brings unhappiness, the annihilation of anger is mental peace and happiness.

This is why it is said mindfulness and introspection or alertness are our true friends. True friends help us in finding happiness and peace, likewise mindfulness and alertness secure peace and happiness. It is not enough to simply say 'I meditate.' We've got to make sure the meditation practice we are doing is effective and has the aim of transforming ourselves into a better person through overcoming mental delusions.

When meditation practice is done properly, then not only do we benefit while meditating in terms of finding peace and happiness, but even when we are not meditating we benefit from it because we will notice that, as a positive influence of the meditation, we have less mental delusions, or we are better prepared to counteract mental delusions and have more capacity to maintain virtuous thoughts and deeds. In this way, meditation practice serves as a true cause, or basis to bring us stable peace and happiness in our life.

In short, we understand meditation practice to be a means of familiarising our mind with a virtuous object. We also talked about the benefits or advantages of familiarising or resting our mind on a virtuous object,

and the shortcomings and the disadvantages of our mind not being familiar with virtuous objects. In essence, we need to understand that we need to cultivate a virtuous state of mind. For example, a virtuous state of mind such as love and compassion for others, fulfils our fundamental wish to be happy. It also helps us to fulfil a fundamental wish to avoid all the things we do not want, i.e. suffering. Love is the true sense of care that we show others by genuinely and sincerely wishing them to have happiness. Compassion is a mental attitude of genuinely and wholeheartedly wishing others to be free from suffering. In order to cultivate love and compassion we must meditate.

What does meditating on love and compassion mean? It means transforming your mind into love and compassion. For example, if we meditate on love, then love becomes an object of our mind in the sense of transforming our mind into love. Whereas when emptiness is an object of our meditation, we direct our mind to analyse it. Unlike meditating on love and compassion, we are not trying to transform our mind into emptiness.

The other thing that I frequently say is that when we start practising love and compassion, which is a virtuous state of mind, the object of our practice is no other than all those who are close to us, such as our partners, relatives, and friends etc. In other words, we need to think of those who are around us and make an effort to genuinely show them love and compassion. If we practise love and compassion, the immediate benefit is strengthening our relationship with all our loved ones. This is because the actual practice is to make a concerted effort to always be helpful and supportive in terms of giving them happiness and eliminating their suffering. As a matter of fact, this is the best way to protect and secure our own interests and needs. To be honest, we need support from others, and our wellbeing is dependent on them. Those in whom we can place our hope for receiving support, and who will give us happiness and help with overcoming problems are our loved ones. Therefore, we can clearly see the benefits of cultivating love and compassion and practising meditation in our everyday life.

The purpose of meditation practice is to cultivate a virtuous state of mind, and through this we find more peace and happiness in our life. A calm and virtuous state of mind not only benefits us, but it also enables us to extend benefit to others as well. As to the effectiveness of meditation practice, the single most important thing is having a steady and focussed mind. This is essential, not only for meditation practice, but also for success in mundane activities too. If we lack mental attention, if our mind is distracted, then let alone achieving our set goals, we will find whatever we are doing very boring. The time we spend in the activity will seem unending. However, if our mind is there with the activity and we are fully present with what we are doing, then our activity is more effective and enjoyable.

When we engage in meditation practice, it is very important, first of all, to ensure our mind is within ourselves and is steady. Once the mind is steady and focussed, then meditation practice - or whatever virtuous activities we do - will become very effective and

productive. Meditation practice is a way to free our mind from mental afflictions or defilements. If we look at our mind, it has probably fallen completely under the power of mental afflictions; it may even be completely imprisoned by mental afflictions. So, we have no control over it at all. Meditation practice is about empowering ourselves through gaining control over the mind by defeating the force of mental delusions. In this way, meditation is about freeing the mind from the bondage of mental affliction. Once the mind is free, we can utilise it to realise our full potential. If a horse is well trained, the rider can direct it to go wherever he wants to go. In a similar way, once the mind is fully trained then we can use it for any virtuous practices we want to do.

In tonight's discussion we have learnt that meditation practice is also a training for us to be able to direct our whole mental attention on a chosen object, or on whatever activity we do. Normally, the full force of our mind is not focussed. We find our mental attention seems always very scattered, going here and there.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that if the flow of a big river is directed to one area, the current can be very strong, whereas if it is scattered in different directions, then it loses its force. In the same way, when our mental force is focussed in one direction, to one object or one area, then it will be very powerful in terms of producing a greater result. To be able to direct all our mental attention on a specific area is beneficial, not only in our Dharma practice but also in our mundane activities. For example, good mental attention and concentration makes a lot of difference if you are sitting for exams. I sat in many examinations in my early days, so I know the importance of good mental attention and focus during the exams.

On this note, we had better do some meditation because we have talked enough about how to meditate and the benefits of meditation.

The meditation that we normally do is a breathing meditation. We need to ensure that our mind is single-pointedly focussed on inhaling and exhaling. Whatever meditation practice we do, we should always give a bit of time to make sure we choose a physical posture that is most suitable for ourselves. One added benefit of a breathing meditation is that even though it is a simple technique, it is very effective in immediately calming our mind down and cutting distracting thoughts from our mind. For example, if our mind is boiling with anger or rage, we can overcome that by simply directing our mental attention onto our breathing. Applying the practice of patience, or cultivating love and compassion as a remedy to immediately cooling down that degree of anger, is not all that effective.

So in meditation, as much as possible, direct your whole mental attention onto the breath and try to retain a single-pointed concentration on the breath. What prevents our mind from focussing on the meditation object is distracting thoughts. In order to maintain our single-pointed concentration on our breath, it is important to make every effort to prevent any thoughts from arising, whether they are positive or negative. We will find that

resting the mind on the breath culminates in peace and tranquillity within us.

So, we will begin our meditation now.

Meditation

We continue with chanting the Buddha's mantra. As we chant the mantra, we should direct our mental attention onto the sound of the mantra. After we stop the chanting then keep the mind in peace and tranquillity.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

Thank you again for coming tonight and also especially because you all paid good attention to my talk. I can't say my talk went well, but I can say that the motivation with which I began the talk was a positive one.

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