
Heart Advice

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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As usual we should begin with a relaxed body. However, when we are physically relaxed it is always important to pay attention to our mind. We want to make sure that our mind is also peaceful and relaxed at the same time. In order to put our mind into rest and peace we need to observe our thoughts. If we recognise any agitated or distracted thoughts, then we should try to get rid of them and allow the mind to calm down. So, it is very beneficial to always observe and check our thoughts.

Not only when we engage in meditation practice, but even if we are not meditating, especially when we are taking a break from our usual busy life to relax and refresh ourselves, it is very important to check and observe our thoughts, and ensure our mind is also at rest so that we can make the best of that moment of peace and relaxation.

As we observe and examine our thoughts, we can develop a capacity to discriminate between the thoughts or states of mind that are beneficial, and those that are harmful and destructive for ourselves and others.

Having this discriminating knowledge is very important because if we lack this, then instead of remedying the problem, we will easily become habituated to harmful states of mind and won't recognise them as being destructive. We may even hold onto them and feed them. In this way, they serve as the major cause of suffering and hindrance to achieving our goals in life.

We are here to learn about Dharma, which is known as *cho* in Tibetan. This word *cho* means to change or amend, which in this context relates to our way of thinking and doing things. We can ask the question: why do I need to change or train my mind? To find the answer we need to have a close look at our mind. If we do this, we can recognise we have two patterns of thinking or mental attitudes: one is a positive force and beneficial and the other is a negative force and harmful.

Therefore, the practice of Dharma means changing our mind in terms of cultivating positive states of mind and getting rid of negative states of mind. Our outer deeds and behaviours and their consequences all derive from our mind. We can understand how our mind is negative, unruly and lacking clear thinking, by imagining what would happen if we said out loud everything that goes in our mind. Most likely the people would think we have gone mad and feel very uncomfortable and unsafe being near to us. However, if we have a positive state of mind, and we speak or act out of that, then people will admire us and think that we are a good-hearted person.

As we observe our mind, we can recognise that some of the problems that we experience are directly caused by our mind. Dharma is in effect a purification practice; 'purifying our state of mind' really means cleansing or sweeping away the negative states of mind that bring us trouble. We will find that the moment we clear our mind of all the negative mental attitudes, all our problems are gone. No longer do the external objects or circumstances that we thought were the source of our problems serve as causes for problems. Ultimately the main cause of all our problems lies within ourselves.

Generally speaking, it isn't that difficult for us to recognise the advantages of having control of our mind. We can recall times when we wish our mind was calm, but due to the influence of a strong distracting thought there is no mental peace. At that moment we fall prey to disturbing thoughts. It is very good that we are aware of and recognise what our mind is doing to us. We will note that whether we are happy or not, disturbed or peaceful, relaxed or not is much dependent on the wellbeing of our mind. If our mind is happy, we are happy, if our mind disturbed we are disturbed too. Of course, none of us wants problems and an unhappy mind. So, the question is finding an effective way to overcoming our disturbing and troubled mind.

Often, instead of dealing with our own unwanted thoughts and emotions, we react to others as if they are the cause of our problem. For example, under the pressure of our troubled mind and our own problems we speak harshly or behave badly to others including our friends. The worst part of this is that we think this is the way to overcome our problems, and a way to relieve unwanted feelings within us. Is this true? In fact, if you think about it, instead of solving the immediate problem it brings more problems. For instance, harsh speech to others will damage your friendship and relationships with others and provoke them to retaliate. It is best we utilise our own discriminating wisdom to determine the effective way of solving problems in our lives. If we apply our wisdom, we will see that expressing our mental problems to the outside world is not the remedy to our problem; rather it just brings more problems – for ourselves and others. Mental problems can be even detrimental to our physical health.

The famous Geshe Ben Gugyal said, 'I have one task – thrusting the spear of an opponent into the head of my delusions. When a delusion raises its ugly head. I increase my alertness and with great effort I plunge the spear straight into it. Then it leaves me in peace and I am happy. That's what I do all day long in my room.' So it is important we direct our practice to our mind and counteract the disturbing thoughts and delusions that arise and live in our mind. If we don't try to get rid of them, we can't find the peace and happiness that we seek. We need to always remain alert and vigilant so that we become aware of any disturbing thought or mental delusion when it arises. Then we will be able to apply a remedy to overcome it, or at least not be completely dominated by it.

By applying our knowledge of the Dharma, we can remedy various problems in our life, especially those that are related to our mind. So, Dharma practice is very beneficial and relevant to our lives, as it deals directly with the actual cause of our problems. For example, in Dharma practice the antidote to hatred is loving kindness or tolerance. Normally a lot of us think that the way or remedy to overcome unwanted thoughts and emotions is expressing them externally. This may give some temporary relief but is not the correct remedy, because later on you will find that you have not overcome the problem. Certainly, letting our emotions such as anger run free by committing the violent action of killing others is an extremely negative action. But not engaging in such violence doesn't mean that you have killed the anger.

The remedy to overcome anger, for example, is to apply patience. You will find that the effect of putting an effort into actually developing patience and cultivating loving kindness will actually reduce the force of anger. We will also find that as a result of applying the correct antidote to anger, we will experience the benefit of being able to generate love and enjoy a calmer state of mind. This serves as a cause for increasing our peace and happiness.

So our Dharma practice is really about calming our turbulent mind or resting our unrested mind. Our practice is to bring about some positive or beneficial changes within us. I would say it is more beneficial if we could do something right from the beginning to be able to prevent anger from arising. Once it arises, we find it hard to counteract, especially as its influence is so overwhelming.

So, meditation practice is a means of preventing disturbing thoughts and emotions from arising through training our mind. In the beginning, training our mind can be very challenging for us because our mind is not used to listening to us; rather it is more used to being influenced by various distracting thoughts. As we discussed earlier, it is very important for us to recognise that within our mind there are states of mind that are beneficial and other states of mind that are harmful. We should have a good ascertainment of this understanding. Then, on the basis of this, we engage in meditation practice, and it is clear to us that the purpose of meditation is subduing our mind so that it doesn't fall under the influence of disturbing thoughts.

In meditation practice we normally direct the mind towards a specific object and try to make an effort to let the mind stay on that particular object. Why are we doing that? Because one of the primary causes of those unwanted thoughts or emotions is their respective objects. Therefore, with the meditation practice, we are preventing those disturbing thoughts and emotions by diverting our mind from their objects or by cultivating different mental perspectives in our mind. Although, as we said earlier, this might be quite challenging and difficult in the beginning, however if we are persistent in our practice, and apply this meditation practice over and over again, then eventually we will find the practice easier and through it be able to gain some control over our mind. Having gained that control, then later on if we do not want our mind to focus on a certain object or we do not want a certain thought, we can achieve that simply by directing our mind onto something else.

We need to recognise that as human beings, one of our unique features and advantages is our human intelligence. It has the power to analyse things and know right from wrong and the difference between what is beneficial and what is harmful. As far as external things go we are quite good at evaluating them. We are quite good at keeping things that are useful and throwing away other things because they are useless and rubbish. So, we have a natural tendency to accept the good and reject the bad. Just as with the outer world, in the internal world of our mental attitudes if we recognise states of mind that are beneficial and those that are harmful, then we will naturally want to keep the beneficial ones and get rid of harmful ones.

The point here is that deep down we all have this sense of 'I' and because of that we have a natural tendency of wanting only things that are good or beneficial, and not wanting anything that is bad or harmful. That's why I am saying just as we have a good sense of what is good and bad with respect to external things, in a similar way we have attitudes that are beneficial and harmful in our mind, and accordingly we work towards knowing what to accept and reject. In this way, we can enrich our life with more happiness, joy and peace. Inwardly the beneficial thoughts include loving kindness, tolerance and so forth, whereas the harmful things are anger, desire etc. which serve as a source of misery and problems.

It's not realistic to think that we can immediately overcome anger or desire completely, but it is within our hands to be able to get rid of very strong or forceful forms of anger or attachment, which can actually cause a great deal of pain and sorrow.

We have been here for just over an hour. We are here to find a relaxed time both physically and mentally and then to give a bit of thought to our mind and life in general. We are here to recognise and develop the intelligence and discriminating wisdom that we possess as human beings and utilise it as a guide for our life.

We generally say, that when we meditate, we engage our mind with virtuous objects, and through the meditation we habituate or familiarise our mind with these virtuous objects. However, when we engage in a breathing meditation, we direct our mind to the inhalation and the exhalation of the breath as its object. The breath, in itself, is not a virtuous object, however meditating on the breath can pave the way for a virtuous state of mind to arise. Alternatively, if you engage in meditation with a proper motivation, then through the influence of the motivation, it can be called a virtuous practice.

The breathing meditation has a unique benefit of, at least in that immediate time frame, preventing any manifest form of mental affliction from arising. We could also achieve the single-pointed state of concentration through breathing meditation and then by depending on that we can achieve other higher states of meditative concentration.

The breathing meditation is very effective to immediately overcome disturbing thoughts, especially if we are experiencing very intense afflictive emotions like strong attachment or anger. If someone is under the strong influence of attachment or anger, and if you advise him to cultivate love or patience, he might not like it so in fact your advice might aggravate his situation. Instead of that, if you advise the person to try the breathing meditation, he might try it. There is not much to learn about breathing meditation. It is simple technique to apply, but it is very effective in the immediate time frame in calming our mind down.

We will do the breathing meditation together for just a few minutes. Make yourself comfortable and relax your body and check your thoughts. You may notice that there are some external distractions which may have some influence on your state of mind. If that is the case, then try to get rid of, or let go of all outgoing thoughts and try to fully calm your mind. By doing this, you can immediately feel calm and at peace the moment your mind stops chasing after wandering thoughts, and external objects. We start this breathing meditation by simply directing our complete mental attention onto the incoming and outgoing breath.

Meditation

Now we are going to chant the Buddha's mantra. Instead of focusing on breathing, we now direct our mental focus onto the sound of the mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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Edited Version*

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