
Heart Advice

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

27 November 2019

We need to ensure that we have a relaxed and comfortable physical state, as well as a relaxed and peaceful state of mind. This makes a huge difference to the effectiveness and productivity of what we do, such as discussing the Dharma.

Relationship between mind, body and self

I frequently say that our existence and wellbeing is founded on our body and mind. In addition, we also have the 'self' or 'I'. These three – our body, our mind and our self – always exist together and accompany each other. When we think of ourselves, it is not just our body. Our mind is a companion for the self. There is some sort of integrated relationship among the three. Of course, those who believe in future lives believe that at the end of this life, we lose our body, and that the continuum of our mind and our self goes on to future lives.

Having recognised the fact that we have a body, as well as a mind and a self, we need to look into the relationship and connection between these three. The three are very much inter-connected. For example, changes to our body can affect our self. Likewise, the occurrence of changes to our mind can also affect our self. Whether we ourselves are in a position to say, 'I feel good', or 'I feel sad and miserable' depends on the wellbeing of our body and mind. When somebody asks us, 'How are you?' and we say, 'I feel good and wonderful', we are feeling emotionally happy. But, if we say, 'I feel terrible', then this indicates that we are feeling down – just like we feel when we have low self-esteem or when we lose all interest and motivation in any activities. If we look into the relationship between ourselves and our mind and body, we can see that whether we say we are happy or unhappy relates very much to the wellbeing of our mind and body.

Pain and pleasure are personal experiences

Feelings of happiness and joy, or unhappiness and misery are feelings and emotions we experience as an individual. It is a personal kind of experience and not something we can share with others. If we are experiencing sadness and unhappiness and someone who has great love for us is in front of us, we cannot share this unwanted feeling with that person, nor can they take on our unwanted experience. At the same time, if we feel happy and positive then, even if we feel like sharing it with our loved one, we can't share it with them, nor can we give it to others. This is something we need to understand when we talk about happiness, suffering, pain and joy. These are very personal feelings; an experience an individual has to go through by themselves.

Self-responsibility

I am simply sharing my way of thinking. Our experience of pain and pleasure is something we go through directly as an individual being and we need to understand that we must take responsibility for our own wellbeing. If we want happiness, then we must create the causes and achieve happiness ourselves. Likewise, if we do not want suffering and dissatisfaction, then we must take responsibility for preventing its causes and conditions. We really should not pin our hopes or rely on others to bring us happiness and solve our problems. It is important to always think, 'What do I have to do to achieve happiness and avoid suffering in my life? What skills and knowledge do I need for that?' In order to be able to manage life's situations and be self-sufficient, we also need enough courage. We can't afford to feel hopeless. We need to understand that wanting happiness and not wanting suffering is the fundamental aspiration of all living beings, including animals. So, the question is: how can we fulfil our aspiration?

What kind of mind drives our life?

Going back to our discussion on our self, our mind and our body; of the three which has the most power? In actuality, the self has the most power. The self is like the chief or the leader of the other two. However, in our lives it is the mind which rules over our self and everything else. We need to recognise how we, how our self, is overpowered and led by our mind. We have got to investigate what kind of mind is leading us. If it is positive, then it is fine. But this is not always the case. Often, the mind that leads or controls us is a negative one. For this reason, we follow meditation practice as a means to control and subdue the mind.

Another thing to take note of here is that we each have only one body and one self, or 'I'. However, although we say we have one basic mind, it arises in various states. So, in a sense we have various kinds of mind. We need to understand our mind more because it is the main force which predetermines the experience of our self in terms of happiness and sadness. Beside the mind, of course our physical health is also important for our wellbeing.

Furthermore, we can put the various states of mind into two classes – positive and negative states of mind. If we go into more detail, then we can find other types of positive states of mind. Similarly, we can also observe many different negative or destructive states of mind. We need to take into account the kind of mind or mental attitude that is guiding and leading us. This matters because if the mind leading us is negative, then we will end up with more suffering and misery in our lives. If we think about what and who is commanding us, it is our mind which is commanding us to do various things. Therefore, if the commanding mind is peaceful, happy and clear, we are heading in the right direction and will experience a happy destination. However, if the commanding mind is confused and negative, then we will end up with an unhappy result.

A healthy body matters to our wellbeing

Beside the mind as the primary driver of our everyday life and experiences, the body also plays a big role in determining our daily experience. For example, if we don't take care of the health of our body, then we get sick and suffer health problems. As a result, we experience pain and misery in our lives. We know how some people with health problems at around sixty or seventy years of age find out from their doctors that they are due to their addiction to smoking or alcohol when they were younger. So, the body is also an important factor in determining our wellbeing and our experience of happiness or suffering.

Our mind is our permanent companion

So, the focus of our topic is our mind which we always have, along with our self and body. The mind is like a permanent companion to the self and the body. If the state of mind accompanying us is positive, we will then be able to say to whoever we are with, wherever we are or whatever we are doing, 'I am happy, and I feel good'. On the other hand, if the mind accompanying us is negative and unhappy, then not only will we feel bad and miserable but whatever actions we create, whether verbal or physical, they may become negative in the sense of causing harming to others and ourselves. For example, when anger arises in our mind, we lose our inner peace and happiness and send negative vibes to others and can even harm them.

If possible, we should try to prevent negative states of mind such as anger from arising at the beginning. If we are unable to prevent it from arising, we need to be aware of it arising and know its shortcomings. In this way, we can at least prevent any actions that a negative mind could propel us to do. In terms of negative states of mind, pride can sometimes cause problems. There are various types of negative states of mind that we should be aware of such as anger, pride, jealousy and competitiveness due to the fear that others will rise above us. From our own experience, we should know that all these states of mind are detrimental to our inner peace and joy and that they propel us to do harmful actions detrimental to the wellbeing of others and ourselves. Essentially, these negative states of mind and actions undertaken under their influence are contrary to our own interests and the interests of other beings.

We need to ensure that we are accompanied by a positive state of mind; a mind full of loving kindness and compassion. We also need to understand that others are the same as us in wanting happiness and not wanting suffering. We need to care about their wellbeing, respect them, admire their qualities and empathise with their misery. If we maintain such a positive state of mind, then, regardless of where we are, whoever we are with and whatever we do, we will find peace, happiness and joy in our lives as well as being able to help others.

We don't have to be religious or a Buddhist to learn about our mind.

We don't have to be a Buddhist or for that matter, have an affiliation with any religion to learn about our mind,

our self and our body. We all have a mind, a body and a self and all our life experiences are related to the relationship between our mind and our self. So, we don't have to study this as a religious thing. The bottom line is that we will benefit greatly from knowing our mind and body and taking good care of them.

From one angle, we can understand that feeling good or bad depends on our mental attitude and perspective. A positive mental perspective results in positive feelings while a negative perspective results in negative feelings. So, mind is the main source of our actions and emotional wellbeing. We need to recognise this through gaining true discriminating wisdom. Through this wisdom, we can recognise the benefit of enriching ourselves with inner qualities by enhancing positive states of mind like kindness, compassion and discriminating wisdom. Relying on this wisdom for guidance and direction in terms of what actions to do and what actions to abandon means taking responsibility for ourselves. It is also our guide and protector.

So, we know that we have our mind and our self and that there is a relationship between the two and also that the mind seems to be ruled over and commanded by the self or the 'I'. This also means that the mind is responsible for whatever we go through in our lives. If we don't like it, we need to identify the mind that is responsible for it and say to it, 'I don't like it.' If we like it, then we need to strengthen and develop the mind that is the cause for that.

As we hear about this, it all sounds wonderful and we can say, 'Very true, very true'. However, engaging in mind training practice – bringing positive change within our mind and winning the battle against negative states of mind – is a difficult task.

In order to make progress in our practice, we need to gain a deeper understanding of our self and mind, to the point that it sinks into our heart. Thinking over the topic once or twice is not enough. We need to think about it over and over in our everyday life and discern what we are experiencing – whether what is primarily derived from our mind is pain or pleasure. For example, when we feel anger, jealousy or pride, we recognise it arises from within us and that it acts as a cause to destroy our peace and happiness. So, when we feel unhappy or upset, it is vitally important to direct our attention inward and recognise and observe the negative mental attitude or mental defilement brewing within us and to understand that as the main cause of feeling down.

We all know from experience that we cannot be happy if we have negative states of mind like anger and jealousy and so forth. When we experience some pain and sadness, we have to think of the cause and relate the cause to what lies within ourselves. In this way, we will understand the purpose of meditation practice, see the benefits in engaging in it and bring about true happiness and peace through practicing meditation in our lives. Meditation practice is the means to counteract these negative states of mind which are the source of our suffering.

As mentioned earlier, to counteract negative states of mind, we must direct our focus inward because they are within us. We can recognise them and eliminate them by generating the opposing force which is also within us in the form of a positive mental outlook. In a way, meditation practice allows us to lessen our grasping and clinging to external things. Hence, it can bring a major shift to our view of things, to events and to our long-held view of happiness and suffering and its causes.

Meditation practice is an exercise to train our mind and through it we can overcome mental afflictions such as anger. When we meditate, we are supposed to keep our mental focus turned inward. For example, we can observe and be aware of the anger itself, instead of thinking about external things and circumstance which we view as the cause of our anger. In another words, we can be more interested in meeting and talking with anger than the external things that cause anger. We can say to the anger, 'Geshe-la said you are bad to me'.

Our mind is trainable and changeable. Through meditating and training our mind we can transform our whole perspective on things and events. Even the technique of diversion is very effective in changing our mental landscape. When we feel strong anger, we will find it decreases if we divert our thoughts from the object of anger to something else. We can even temporarily prevent it from arising. However, if we don't do that, our mind cannot forget the object of anger and it will hold onto it as if it was very precious. Then the more we think about what made us angry, the more enraged we become.

A simple practice can save a major problem

We can observe here that, by applying this simple technique of diversion, we can prevent a bad situation from turning into a disaster or we can even stop a disaster from arising. When we are bogged down with a problem, we can get out of it by simply shifting or changing our mental focus onto something else.

For example, when your loved one is in a bad mood and is very upset and arguing with you and you are at the limit of your patience, I tell people, completely out of my intention to help them, to say 'I love you' rather than reacting to him or her. This is a good way to cool things down.

We have to recognise that, no matter how much we love each other, we cannot smile and be sweet to each other all the time. So, there are moments when we lose our temper and have bad days. We have to understand and be aware of the impact we have on our loved ones if we throw a tantrum or nag or are nasty to them.

At the same, we have to understand the benefit of showing our love and affection to them. We have to remember that our loved ones are very special people and we have a special place for them in our hearts. In most traditions when people marry they take a vow to share happy and unhappy times. So, here we are talking about being nice, kind and patient to someone with whom you share everything in life.

When people seek my advice on resolving their relationship problems, my main advice to them is to say

to each other, 'I love you, I care about you', because this is true. Regardless of what's happening, deep down there is love in their relationship. So, you don't need to feel shame about expressing that feeling of love. I give this advice to a lot of people and many have come back to me and said that this advice works and that they found it helpful. Again, the solution is a simple statement of saying, 'I love you' but it has the potential to break down barriers in our relationship with others.

I will summarise what we have discussed in this talk before we do a short meditation together. We mainly focused on the importance of maintaining a positive state of mind or happiness on the mental and physical level as an effective means to sustain lasting peace and happiness in our lives. We talked about the importance of making an effort to cultivate and safeguard our happiness and peace on a mental level. We don't want to lose whatever peace and happiness we have found in our lives. We need to sustain it all the time. More than anything else, it is important to focus on how we need to take self-responsibility and maintain a positive mental attitude. If there are any unwanted thoughts and emotions, we need to focus on changing and getting rid of them, and our best tool is utilising our own discriminating knowledge. Unwanted thoughts and emotions are not something we can get rid of by simply listening to some music. The key is to work on our mind. We also talked about the relationship between ourselves, our mind and our body and how lasting happiness for ourselves depends upon good mental and physical health. Therefore, we need to understand it is vitally important for our own benefit to take good care of our mind and body.

We will do a breathing meditation together for just a short time. We should make sure that we sit in a comfortable and relaxed posture. As we have discussed a lot, we will let go of all distracting thoughts and let the mind fully dwell within ourselves. We will begin this meditation by directing and maintaining our focus on the incoming and outgoing breath and preventing the mind from going after any other objects.

[Meditation]

Thank you everyone.

*Transcribed by Ai Chin Khor
Edit 1 by Katherine Boland
Edit 2 by Sandup Tsering
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