
The Condensed Graduated Path to Enlightenment

། བྱུང་ཚུབ་ལམ་གྱི་རིམ་པ་བཞུགས་སོ། །

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga
Translated by the Venerable Tenzin Dongak

6 October 2004

We will meditate for a little bit as usual. Sit in a good, comfortable posture. Mentally, you have to generate a good motivation. Also, you have to know very well how to meditate – and one thing to consider is the purpose of meditation.

Everybody experiences problems. While there may be a few exceptions, everybody experiences internal problems – sometimes very strong ones – despite having a good external material situation. This happens regardless of whether the person's status is high or low, or whether they are ordained or a layperson, or whether they have long or short hair, or light or dark skin, and so on.

The problems that everyone experiences are usually a creation of the mind. They usually arise because of certain mental states, certain ways of thinking that cause those problems. Therefore, it is very skilful, instead of always looking outside for the cause of one's problems, to look inside and to look at one's mind. What we will find is that the mind thinks all kinds of crazy things.

This again is probably an experience shared by everyone, yet nobody talks about what is actually within their mind, because if they did, they would be regarded as mad. We regard people who always immediately express what comes into their mind as being unhinged or not quite stable. This shows that normally our mind is so crazy that we can't really express what we are thinking. This situation applies to most people.

Therefore, we need to engage in some method to lessen the disturbed states of the mind. As long as we don't lessen the disturbed states of the mind, it will be nearly impossible to experience true happiness. If we think the moments of true mental happiness that we experience in our lives, they are few and far between; usually, they are very brief and disintegrate easily. To experience greater mental happiness, one needs to lessen the problem mind. The fewer problematic mental states we have, the more mental happiness we will experience.

As we mentioned, even though these mental problems have many aspects, basically they can be all traced back to attachment and anger. As long as the mind is possessed by attachment and anger, it will be difficult for it to experience happiness. So, it is very important to trace the cause of one's problems back to one's own mental states.

Normally, we blame external factors, because our mind is so focused on external objects. However, one has to

recognise the significant role that the different mental states play in creating one's suffering. Often, even though the over-conceptualising mind may be induced by an external condition, it is really the main condition for our suffering within us. For example, if one's friend or partner comes home late and one doesn't know where he or she is, this may act as a cause to set in motion a train of thought about all the different possibilities for why the other person has not come home, and what he or she is doing. At the moment this train of thought starts, one's mental happiness is lost. I think this is also a common experience

So, what we have to analyse is whether this situation is something that can be resolved or not. Is it a situation about which we can do something? Or is there nothing we can do to resolve it?

By analysing the mind, we will find that there is something that we can do, because the problems are given to us not by our primary consciousness, but by the adventitious, temporarily arising, disturbing thoughts, which are not of one nature with the primary consciousness.

We know from our own experience that disturbing thoughts will sometimes arise, but they will also go away; they are not there all the time. This shows that they are not actually abiding within the nature of the primary consciousness, but are arising temporarily and adventitiously. Therefore, there is something that one can do to lessen them. This gives one the opportunity to free oneself from the control of the disturbing thoughts. This fact – that there is something that one can do, that the disturbing thoughts can be lessened – delivers into the palm of one's hand the possibility to do something. So, one becomes empowered.

By analysing one's mind in such a way, one comes to recognise that, on the one hand, as long as one remains under the control of the disturbing thoughts, one will not be able to experience happiness. At the same time, we come to realise that if we generate a different type of thought, we will experience mental happiness. In this way, one generates discriminating wisdom or awareness that can discern these two different situations.

I am giving this explanation in order to convey to you something about the purpose of meditation. If our mind always engages with the multiplicity of external objects, this in turn will generate a multiplicity of different types of conceptual and disturbing thoughts; in such a way, one's mind becomes distracted and disturbed. To counteract this, one has to train the mind to focus on a single object. By focusing the mind on one single object, all the other disturbing thoughts, over time, will subside and the different conceptual and disturbing thoughts will be stopped. Then the mind will experience happiness. In this way we can understand that if we don't let the mind fall under the control of the disturbing thoughts, we can then experience happiness.

As we said before, on the basis of sitting in the appropriate meditation posture, turn the mind inwards, not engaging with the multiplicity of external objects, but

rather focusing the mind inwards. Then place the mind single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath, letting the mind enter the breathing. We can meditate in this way for a few minutes. (*Pause for meditation*)

4. How to guide with the actual instructions

4.1. The way of relying on the spiritual friend who is the root of the path

4.1.2. A brief presentation of the way to strive

4.1.2.1. The actual way of striving

4.1.2.1.1. How to strive during the meditation sessions

Last time, we discussed a few points. First, as a beginner, it is more skilful to have many, short meditation sessions, because as a beginner, one's mind is more likely to fall under the control of mental excitement or mental sinking. If one doesn't meditate properly from the beginning, one will set up this trait of a disturbed meditation, which will be carried through later on. So, it is better, when one starts meditating, to focus more on the quality of the meditation than the length of the meditation session. By having a good quality meditation from the beginning, one will set up this habit of good quality meditation, which will then carry on and increase.

Last time, we also started to talk about the instructions that deal with overcoming mental and physical difficulties during meditation. When one meditates, one's mind should neither be too tight, nor too relaxed; both carry different types of faults. If the mind is too tight, it will cause different types of mental as well as physical problems. If the mind is too relaxed, it will cause other types of problems, such as mental sinking, lack of clarity, darkness, and so forth. When we say that the mind should be relaxed during meditation, we mean relaxed but not too relaxed – one has to find the right measure and tune one's mind just right. In this way, one will have fewer obstacles during meditation. But this is something that we can only achieve through experience.

To experience a successful meditation, it is important to find a middle way between being too relaxed and too tight. If the mind is too tight, it tends to create all kinds of other types of internal problems, and the energies within one's body become blocked. People say that in this situation many different types of unpleasant things happen to them. For example, sometimes they hear voices during meditation, or feel they are being prodded by something. This will cause them to say, 'When I meditate, different types of problems occur'. But these problems occur because they are not meditating properly; they have not trained in the correct meditation method properly from the beginning.

One will experience other types of problems if the mind is too loose and relaxed, so one has to find a middle ground. Finding this middle ground between being too relaxed and too tight is the secret instruction for avoiding mental and physical difficulties during one's meditation. If one follows this instruction, one will have fewer obstacles and the mind will be lighter. These different types of faults come about when the mind is not flexible, is too heavy, and so forth.

So, we have finished the present chapter, which was what to do during the meditation session. The next point is what to do during the post-meditation period, in between meditation sessions.

This principle that we have outlined – of first having the preparation part, then having the main part, then having the conclusion – can be applied to any type of meditation session that we do.

For tonight, we will stop here and have some time for questions and answers, if you have some questions. If you don't have any questions, I will continue.

Question: Could you explain in a condensed way how to meditate on emptiness, please?

Answer: That's quite difficult to do. To put it in simple terms, initially what we have to do is to analyse the appearance of self, the self-image that appears to us when we start to think in terms of 'I'. We have to analyse the self-image, the mental image that appears when we start to think 'I'. This image of 'I' that appears to the mind has to be investigated.

Particularly during times of happiness or sadness, a very strong sense of 'I' arises within the mind, and this 'I' that appears to the mind during such times seems to exist independently out of its own nature or from its own side. During times, for example, of strong emotional distress or happiness, there's also a very strong sense of 'I' and one can then see very clearly that the 'I' appears to be totally independent of anything else. The grasping at this independent 'I', at the independent nature of the 'I' is called self-grasping.

When we understand that the way the 'I' appears to us is actually non-existent, we will understand emptiness. So, to understand emptiness, one has to understand that there is a discrepancy between the way the 'I' appears and the way the 'I' actually exists. We have to analyse the way the 'I' appears to the self-grasping mind and the way the 'I' actually exists. In such a way, one comes to understand that the way the 'I' now appears to one is actually a distorted appearance, and this absence of the perceived object is emptiness. So, in simple terms, that's what it is.

When we say 'emptiness', what is lacking, what is absent is this perceived object, this object that appears but that actually is non-existent. This non-existence of this perceived object is emptiness. Emptiness doesn't mean that the 'I' does not exist, but that the mistaken object that is mistakenly perceived does not exist. It is good to reflect on this a little. If this reflection helps to counteract self-grasping, then it will have been worthwhile.

Question: So the ultimate aim is to come to understand that the meditator doesn't exist?

Answer: No, the meditator exists. The meditator doesn't have to stop existing. The meditator becomes purified in the process of meditation. The meditator gains qualities and progresses along the path to enlightenment. So, the meditator doesn't become non-existent.

The 'I' is not supposed to become less during meditation. What has to become less is the innate self-grasping.

There's the danger that by not understanding what is actually referred to when meditating on selflessness, that one will think that the aim of meditation is to eliminate the self or the 'I'. That is quite an understandable misconception, but it is still a misconception. The aim of meditating on emptiness is to reduce self-grasping.

In the Heart Sutra, there are many words that seem to refer to an absence of objects – for example, 'there are no ears, no nose, no tongue', and so forth. All of these words refer to the meditation on emptiness. But the way to read those words is that, for example, when it says there is no ear, this means that is no *inherently existent* ear, no *inherently existent* nose, and so forth.

If one has reached the stage where one can see selflessness directly and one remains in meditative equipoise on selflessness, seeing selflessness directly – at such a time, there would be no sense of self. That doesn't mean that the self has ceased to exist. Rather, at such times, when one sees selflessness directly, there would be no sense of self for the meditator.

When they initially gain some understanding of selflessness, some practitioners may generate a fear of becoming non-existent. This happens because of not having identified the object of negation very clearly.

For example, at one point, when Lama Tsong Khapa was teaching on emptiness, one of his disciples had an insight into emptiness, and because of that he had the perception of himself becoming non-existent and he held onto his own robes. Lama Tsong Khapa immediately praised him, because Lama Tsong Khapa could see that he had some realisation of emptiness.

Question: Could you say more about the emptiness of the ear and so forth, please? And, could there ever be something that exists inherently?

Answer: What it means is that there is no ear or nose that exists independently from parts and causes and conditions.

For example, if the ear were to exist independently of causes and conditions and independently of parts, it would have to exist inherently – it would have to have intrinsic existence. The lack of an existence that is independent of parts and causes and conditions is the lack of inherent existence. This is what the Heart Sutra refers to when it says that the ear is empty, or there is no ear.

If you take this clock, there is no clock that is independent of causes, conditions and parts – there is no such clock that exists independently of causes, conditions and parts. This is the meaning of dependent arising – that it is dependent on its parts.

In the Prasangika system, nothing exists inherently. However, the other tenets say that phenomena do exist inherently. The Prasangika tenet-holders however do not accept any type of inherent existence. They say there is no object that exists inherently. However, there are other Buddhist tenets that do assert inherent existence.

The Prasangika say that nothing exists inherently because nothing can be found at the time of analysis. However,

the lower tenets say that there is something findable at the time of analysis, and that's why the lower tenets assert some type of intrinsic existence.

This idea may be similar to certain ideas in quantum physics, where they say that it is impossible to pinpoint the exact location of particular particles when one know their velocity, and vice versa. That you can never know the location and the velocity simultaneously – you can always know one, but not the other. There is also the idea here that there is something not findable at the time of analysis. Of course, they are not looking for the object of negation, so it is not the same, but the principle may be the same.

Question: Does one need calm abiding to meditate on emptiness?

Answer: No, you don't need to have calm abiding to meditate on emptiness. However, to generate superior insight, to have the realisation of superior insight, one needs to have the foundation of calm abiding.

As was said at the beginning, turn the mind inwards and place it single-pointedly on the mantra of Shakyamuni Buddha.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

Transcribed from tape by Gabrielle Thomson

Edit 1 by Mary-Lou Considine

Edit 2 by Venerable Tenzin Dongak

Edited Version

© Tara Institute