
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

འཇུག་རྒྱུ་རྒྱུ་ལམ་རིམ་འབྲིང་བ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

26 September 2012

As usual we can spend some time in meditation. For that purpose, we can adopt a comfortable and relaxed posture.

In meditation, it is not sufficient to just have a comfortable and relaxed posture, because meditation really is a technique to train the mind. If we fail to put significant effort into training the mind, then our meditating does not suffice as an actual practice. Our minds need to have positive training.

The positive training we can give our minds is to adopt mindsets that are genuinely relaxed and calm. Naturally calm and tranquil states of mind relax us. For example, if we take some time off for a couple of minutes during a very busy day, we will distance ourselves from our busyness and we will have a genuine sense of relaxation. This helps us to rejuvenate. Similarly, we need to meditate to train our minds to become genuinely calm and relaxed. Therefore, when we adopt a relaxed physical state, we also need to relax mentally in order to have a genuine sense of relaxation. This combination of physical and mental relaxation is what enables us to have a real sense of fulfilment.

Training your mind helps you to have control over it, so that you can use it for appropriate purposes. The consequence of lacking control over your mind is that it will become very busy and restless, because it moves in every direction and follows every thought. Also, a restless mind will eventually affect your physical condition because you will not feel physically relaxed, even if you adopt a comfortable posture. Therefore, if we lack real control over our minds, we will not be genuinely relaxed, because a disturbed mind affects us on a physical level. For example, sleep is a form of physical relaxation and a natural way for us to rejuvenate our bodies. After sleep we feel refreshed and strengthened physically, and can engage in our normal activities again. However, when our mind is out of control and disturbed, we find it difficult to have a good sleep, and we might have to resort to taking sleeping pills. Even if we have the softest bed, comfortable blankets, and all the external conditions conducive to having a good night's sleep, we will not relax if the mind is troubled and chaotic. We have all experienced a restless night's sleep due to worry, and we have all experienced a sound sleep because we are relaxed internally. From this, we can see that even something physically natural, like sleep, will not benefit us if our minds are not calm and relaxed. There is definitely a connection between our mind and our physical condition, so we need to learn how to control our minds.

Some people may feel that they may lose their freedom if they adopt a technique that controls their minds. They may think that a controlled and disciplined mind entails a loss of autonomy. However, that would be a misunderstanding of what a controlled mind means. There is no loss if you have a controlled mind, there can only be gain, because a controlled mind is to your advantage and contributes to your wellbeing.

As I mentioned previously, if we don't have control over our minds, the consequence would be that we follow every whimsical thought or idea our minds come up with. The nature of an ordinary mind is for it to have all sorts of different ideas and thoughts. However, if we followed everything our mind came up with, we might be led into engaging in actions that are harmful, which could be potentially disastrous. An individual who has an uncontrolled mind, and thus no self-control, would be regarded conventionally as an ill-behaved and undisciplined person. That individual might engage in all sorts of harmful actions that are detrimental to his or her wellbeing and health. If we look at examples of an uncontrolled mind and its results, we can see that the consequences can be drastic.

By taking the initiative to have self-control and cultivate a controlled mind, we first need to develop self-analysis and check what the state our minds are in. We do this by really looking into ourselves and seeing what kinds of thoughts and ideas arise, and what types of impulses they entail. We can consider whether engaging in those thoughts and impulses are beneficial or harmful to us. Are the attitudes and thoughts we harbour conducive to positive feelings and behaviour? Or are they negative and harmful? We can answer these questions and distinguish whether a thought or action is useful or not through self-analysis. This means that we can use our intelligence and wisdom to determine whether our thoughts and actions are conducive to our wellbeing.

Taking the initiative to use our intelligence to honestly assess our thoughts and impulses is a very helpful way to lead a meaningful life. If others point out our negative attitudes and ill behaviour, we might not readily accept their opinions, and get upset, angry and defensive! [*Geshe-la laughs.*] So it is far better to look into yourself and determine your own negative attitudes and behaviours. Usually, we do the contrary, and complain and find faults in others. We need to change this approach and instead look into ourselves and recognise our own faults.

So, if we take the initiative and use our intelligence to be self-analytical, we will become aware of our own thoughts and actions, and this will prevent us from being pre-occupied with other people's faults. This self-awareness is a means to protect ourselves and a worthwhile practice in our lives. Essentially, the protection is our wisdom of knowing what is right and what is wrong for us, or what is harmful and what is conducive to our wellbeing. When we use our intelligence in this way, it becomes the ultimate source of protection for our welfare.

In order to apply techniques of self-awareness and further cultivate the wisdom of knowing what is right

and wrong for ourselves, we need to have a clear and bright state of mind, which is free from too many thoughts. The way to obtain a bright and clear state of mind is to practise withdrawing our minds from all forms of distraction and bringing our focus within. Meditation is the method to do this because it trains our minds to be focused and controlled.

Meditation is the only technique that can help us to develop positive qualities, such as having a clear and bright state of mind. It is also the only way we can develop our intelligence, so that we can be self-analytical and distinguish between what is harmful and what is beneficial for ourselves. Basically, a practice of meditation increases our inner wisdom. We might have heard this said about meditation and we might feel inspired to meditate, but first it is important for us to know how to meditate and how it benefits us. Meditation acquaints us with conducive and positive ways of thinking in life, and it helps us to avoid negative ways of thinking, which are harmful in our lives.

The meditation technique we will adopt now is one that requires a comfortable and relaxed posture. There are specific points to be mindful of when sitting in a formal meditation, which I would have explained previously.¹ However, the main thing is to have a comfortable and relaxed posture. It is also important to have a clear and bright state of mind, as well as a positive intention or motivation for doing the practice. Having a positive motivation for doing the meditation practice is ideal.

We can remind ourselves that if we don't apply the meditation technique now and continue to let our minds be in their normal state, our mental habituation will lead us to follow all forms of distractions. These distractions come in the form of thoughts, memories of the past and speculations about the future, all of which are the cause of our troubles. The more our mind is distracted in meaningless affairs, the more our mind becomes disturbed. So, in order to have a relaxed and calm mind, we need to be disciplined and turn away from those distractions. You can even make a commitment to yourself that for the next few minutes you will not allow your mind to be distracted by anything.

A restless, disturbed and troubled mind, a mind that is full of worries, doesn't come about because of deprived external conditions. Most of us here will definitely have adequate physical conditions for our comfort and sufficient means for our survival. However, the worries and the troubles in our mind seem to come from being completely dissatisfied with what we have and not being content. This dissatisfaction adds to our worries and fears. Therefore, we need to recognise that this discontent is disturbing our minds, and use the meditation technique of choosing an appropriate object, such as our individual breathing pattern, to focus on completely

And so, for the next few minutes, we will set an intention to focus solely on our natural breath and keep a single-pointed focus on it and nothing else. In this way we will

spend the next few minutes in meditation. [*Pause for meditation.*]

If anyone has questions, they may raise their hands.

Question: Sometimes my breath is laboured when I do a breathing meditation and this can make my practice difficult. Please can you suggest what I can do to help my breath flow more naturally?

Answer: It is of course not easy, because in order to have a good, relaxed state of mind we need to have a relaxed breathing pattern. To practise breathing meditation the breath needs to be natural and not laboured. However, if the mind is anxious or busy, it causes the breath to become laboured. Genuinely calm, relaxed and natural breathing is related to the state of mind. We can see that the state of mind we have affects our breathing because, when we are going through some difficult period or have a difficult task at hand, we often sigh and take a long breath. If we can temporarily let go of issues and thoughts, however, we can bring our minds into a settled and calm state because we are not focused on the different worries we have. By letting go and bringing our minds into a natural and calm state, we can help our breath to be natural, relaxed and unlaboured.

Buddhist teachings say that an anxious mind prevents natural breathing. On a subtle level, an anxious mind disturbs what the teachings call the "wind element". If our internal wind element or energy is disturbed, we can have physical ailments, such as feeling physically tight, or having pain in our necks and shoulders. This kind of tension is a consequence of the lack of a good circulation of oxygen through our breathing when we are stressed. Specifically, the subtle wind energy within the body is not able to flow and be well regulated. Ultimately, the physical tension we feel is a result of an anxious state of mind.

There are precise techniques to regulate the rhythm of our wind energy (our breathing), such as the nine-round breathing meditation. However, even the breathing meditation that we adopted before suffices as a technique to regulate our breath—the wind—into a natural rhythm. Regulating our breath is not just the physical action of breathing in and out; the main emphasis in regulating our breath is to expel the stale wind and breathe in fresh air. A good and helpful measure for this is to go to clean areas, such as snow mountains, where the air is very fresh and clean.

When we are in fresh-air areas, like snow mountains, it is good for us to take very deep breaths. [*Geshe-la demonstrates slow and purposeful abdominal breathing.*] Breathing fresh air in this way is said to be very helpful in reducing stress. Of course, it might not be easy to go to the snow mountains! [*Everyone laughs.*] However, vigorously breathing fresh air in and out can help us to overcome certain ailments, which in Buddhism are called "wind imbalances". If you are stressed and the wind is not being cleared properly, your speaking might be affected; you might intend to speak, and the words might come to your throat, but they don't come out well from your mouth. [*Geshe-la again demonstrates deep, slow breathing and spends as much time breathing out as he does breathing in.*] Breathing clean air in this manner clears

¹ See transcript dated 15 February 2012, which describes the seven-point sitting posture of Buddha Vairochana.

away stale breath and brings in fresh energy and air; it rejuvenates us and helps us calm down our minds, so that they are more focused. [*Geshe-la once more demonstrates slow, deep abdominal breathing.*] Focusing on long exhalations and long inhalations in this way can be very helpful, especially in the morning. If you do this in the morning, you can feel quite settled and calm during the day.

Are there any other questions?

Question: How do I use mantras in my meditation practice? Do I do the mantra recitation first and then the breathing meditation, or the other way round?

The purpose of reciting a mantra is to accumulate virtue. So, to accumulate virtue, one needs to be in a positive mind. The only way to have a positive and virtuous state of mind is to first have a focused mind because, if the mind is completely distracted, it cannot be in a virtuous and positive state.

The breathing meditation we completed earlier is referred to as a preliminary practice because it is a meditation engaged in prior to performing other forms of practice, such as reciting mantras or doing other meditations. The basis of reciting a mantra, or doing some other form of practice, is to accumulate virtue by being in a positive state of mind. Having a virtuous state of mind would be difficult if it is distracted and chaotic. Therefore, in order for us to engage fully in these meditation practices and to adopt virtuous frames of mind, we need to first bring our minds in a neutral state through a preliminary practice. Then, from this neutral state, we can focus on having a virtuous and positive mindset.

The breathing meditation that we adopted earlier is one of the best techniques presented in the Buddhist teachings to achieve a neutral state of mind. The teachings mention that if we focus and count our breathing rounds up to twenty-one times, then, our minds will definitely settle down and be in a neutral and calm state. From that state of mind, we can adopt practices that accumulate virtue, such as reciting mantras, visualising a deity and so on. Therefore, to answer your question, it is appropriate to do the breathing meditation first before you recite mantras.

When we have developed a focused, neutral and calm mind through a breathing meditation, the recitation of mantras becomes highly meaningful because each mantra is recited in a conscious and virtuous state of mind. The great India master Shantideva has mentioned that reciting mantras with a distracted mind does not serve any purpose. Of course, that is not to say that there will not be some benefit—the essential nature of a mantra is that it is a blessed name, so we will get some benefit from reciting it, even if we our minds are not in a virtuous state. However, Shantideva is indicating that there is not much of a positive outcome from practising mantra recitation with a distracted mind; you will not derive the full benefit of the mantra if your mind is distracted. According to Shantideva's explanation, we can logically assume that reciting seven mantras with a focused mind derives much more benefit than reciting a hundred mantras with an unfocused mind. That is the way to understand it.

Nevertheless, the recitation of mantras is of incredible benefit. Of course, if you do it with a focused and virtuous state of mind, you will derive the full benefit. However, the very act of reciting the mantra will at least prevent us from engaging in idle gossip! [*Geshe-la laughs.*] For the time that you are occupied with reciting mantras, you will not be gossiping! [*Everyone laughs.*]

The questions that you asked were very good and very practical. So thanks for that. Are there any other questions?

Before we conclude the session for the evening, let us again adopt a comfortable and relaxed posture and take the opportunity to spend a few minutes in meditation. The object that we can focus on this time will be the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. As we hear the mantra chanted, we can try to keep our full attention and focus on its sound. Then, as the mantra subsides, we can try to maintain a focus on the residue of the sound, on the absence of the sound itself, as if there is nothing within our minds. To focus on that for a few moments is said to be very meaningful and very beneficial. So let us adopt that technique now.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

*Transcribed by Peter Boothby
Edit 1 by Tanya Simmons
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version
© Tara Institute*