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# *Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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As usual let us begin by sitting in a comfortable and relaxed posture.

I regularly share that adopting a comfortable and relaxed posture is conducive for our wellbeing on a physical level, but most important is to nurture and develop positive states of mind, such as kindness and happiness. These states of mind are the fundamental factors that contribute to our wellbeing. Having a kind and happy mind, along with a clear mind, are the most valuable qualities we can possess. They are essential in our lives.

We all possess kind, happy and clear states of mind – we all naturally have these qualities. We've all experienced and we all know what a happy state of mind is, and we all have kindness and clarity within us; these are qualities we are not deprived of. Knowing that we already have these qualities is important because we can further cultivate kindness, happiness and clarity no matter what level they are currently at. Developing these qualities is a measure we all need to take.

Spending time and energy in improving our external conditions will benefit us, but spending all our time and energy in this way and neglecting the development of our inner qualities would be to our great disadvantage and a vast pity; paying attention to acquiring good external conditions is natural and necessary, but paying attention to developing our inner mental qualities is even more significant.

This is something I put into practice. My life is mainly spent in trying to further develop and secure inner qualities; I don't really pay much attention to acquiring good external conditions and situations. From a worldly perspective, I might seem to be a failure because I do not have too many external things! [*Geshe-la chuckles.*] Nevertheless, having worked and spent time and energy in trying to cultivate my inner qualities, I definitely feel I have derived some benefit, and my mind is unquestionably much happier and more content. The reason why I am sharing this personal experience with you is to encourage you to develop your inner qualities. You may not be able to lead a life completely like mine and cut out developing external situations, but spending some time and energy in developing your inner qualities would be worthwhile.

In relation to your situation and life, completely neglecting to spend time and energy in acquiring good external conditions would be unrealistic because in order to live in the external world according to others and society, adequate external conditions are necessary for you. Some other teachers and geshes might feel I am

giving advice that is contrary to the Buddhist teachings; they might think telling others that acquiring external conditions is necessary is contrary to the Buddha's teaching, which focuses only on developing internal qualities as the spiritual practice of Dharma. While others may be critical of my approach, my personal view is that those of you who live in the world and live with others, need to have an adequate place to stay, and money for clothing, food and living expenses, otherwise maintaining a normal life in society would be difficult for you.

Now, having said that you should not neglect your external conditions, you should also not spend all your time and energy just acquiring that because happiness obviously does not come just from having good external conditions. If that were the case then we would have to conclude that the wealthiest people on this planet are the happiest people. But we all know from the many examples of people that have enormous wealth, that their good conditions don't necessarily make them happier. Similarly, if happiness comes from good external conditions, then, people who do not have wealth would be most unhappy. However, again, we can see through situations around us that those who do not have much wealth are not necessarily miserable. These examples clearly show that happiness is not dependent on external conditions and having material things. Instead, happiness depends on the development of inner qualities, and so these are necessary for us to cultivate.

External situations and conditions naturally improve anyway because so much time and energy is spent in that kind of progress. Since my arrival in Australia, I have seen many improvements in external conditions on individual levels, but also on a national level – infrastructure and so on has advanced a lot. However, I am not sure whether people are much happier as a consequence. We need to pay attention to and focus our minds on developing our inner qualities. While we engage in the external world we need to acquire good external conditions for our survival, but our main focus to ensure our happiness needs to be on how to improve and establish good and positive states of mind within ourselves.

A kind and happy state of mind depends on our attitudes. Since our attitudes are something within us, we can say that happiness is dependent on internal conditions. How we manage a situation we find ourselves in depends very much on the attitude we have; if we have a happy state of mind we can manage difficult situations, but if we don't, we can be daunted and frustrated in relatively easier situations. If we recognise this and acquaint, familiarise and strengthen our minds with kindness, clarity, happiness and joy, the more likely we will naturally experience positive attitudes in whatever situation we find ourselves in. If we neglect acquainting ourselves with positive attitudes and instead follow our usual pattern of seeking happiness in external sources, we will be disappointed; or if we continuously believe that our happiness is dependent upon external sources and always seek external situations to make us happy, then that acquaintance will make us disheartened when something goes wrong. Relying on external situations for our happiness will cause us great difficulties and

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complications when we are faced with problems because we haven't understood that the main cause for our happiness lies within ourselves, thus we might not have acquainted ourselves with positive frames of mind. Considering these points are necessary and important.

One of the main ways we can develop positive qualities is to train our minds to focus inwards rather than outwards. Focusing outwards, on external things, is something that most of us are already familiar with. We have had a lot of experience in focusing on external distractions and are very familiar with the pattern. The younger generation may not have had as much experience with this because they are at the start of their lives, but most of us here are middle-aged and beyond, so we know that after spending a lot of time and energy in focusing outwards, the consequences and results have not been that great. Therefore, we can see from our own experiences that focusing on external things has not brought any real lasting contentment, or has been a cause for happiness. Training the mind to focus inwards, however, is an optimum method to slowly reduce our distractions and counteract our tendency to focus outwards.

Focusing inwards is what meditation is all about. The meditation technique involves choosing an inner object and focusing on it. Using this technique of meditation is really worthwhile to invest our time and energy in because it is conducive to your wellbeing. Many have confided to me about the benefits they have had of meditation. One example is of a ninety-two-year-old woman who has adopted and practised the meditation technique in her life. She had a fall and broke some bones, so was taken to hospital, but her son commented to me that she is in quite a happy state of mind, and is not daunted or too upset because her meditation practice has helped her. The son is not someone who normally pays much attention to meditation, but he made this comment about his mother being in a very good state of mind and attributed his mother's attitude to being because she regularly meditates. From this we can see that a meditation technique throughout life is useful. Meditating is helpful for the young, middle-aged and especially as we grow older. If we have familiarised ourselves with meditation, it can bring true solace and benefit for us. Therefore, I regularly encourage people to adopt a meditation practice because it is very worthwhile and the most valuable thing in their lives. Meditating is like a loyal friend that will help us during happy and difficult times; it can be a comfort and a real companion.

*[Geshe-la explains himself in English that a happy mind is a good friend, but an unhappy mind is not. He explains that he has no brother, no sister, no father, no mother and no children, but he has a happy mind and that it is his dear friend. He further explains the value of this friend by describing how he lost many things when he was forced to leave Tibet, and although nearly everything was taken from him, his happy mind could not be taken. This meant that when he lived in Tibet he was happy. When he arrived in India he was happy. When he came to Australia he was happy. He says that having this happy mind makes things very easy and outside friends don't really contribute to his happiness. But then he says he likes his outside friends ... and his cups of tea ... and then everyone laughs.]*

There is an instance I want to relate to you about how external friends can sometimes fail us and be a cause for unpleasantness. This incident occurred when I was in India and travelling from Delhi to South India; our flight was delayed, so we were put up in a hotel and returned to the airport the next day. While I was waiting, I noticed a couple in their fifties, who seemed relaxed and were sitting down leisurely, ordering tea. When their tea arrived, the lady picked up her cup and spilt a little bit, and her partner must have thought it was amusing because he laughed. She got so upset [*Geshe-la giggles*] that she put her teacup down very quickly, stood up and walked away from him; of course, her husband had to follow her and apologise. When I noticed this small incident causing so much discomfort, it reminded me that unease can happen even with a friend or with someone you love and share your life with. This is because if your mind is deprived of being in a genuinely happy state, any small incident can cause you turmoil and unpleasantness. Whereas, if you maintain a happy state of mind, then, wherever you go and whatever situation you find yourself in, you can always depend on it because a happy mind will never fail you in enjoying the moment you are in. I have mentioned my experience of being deprived of external things and even being separated from my family, but my happy state of mind has always aided and never failed me. So, from my own experience, I can say that a happy mind definitely has benefits.

For our wellbeing, we need to secure an attitude that will help us not to be daunted when there are small mishaps or situations that don't go according to how we want. Even insignificant incidents, like some tea being spilt and someone laughing, can cause us turmoil if we have not secured a genuinely happy state of mind. The value of a happy state of mind cannot be overemphasised. In fact, losing your happy state of mind is a great loss because it is so precious. If we considered happiness to be a possession, it would be the most prized and valuable asset we have. Therefore, paying attention in securing, maintaining and developing a happy state of mind is very important.

Indeed, when we greet anyone, the first thing we ask is, "How are you?" We can see from this that, even in a worldly context, the most valuable aspect of a person is his or her wellbeing, which is reflected in this greeting. If the response to this question is positive, the person who asks feels happy and comfortable because the other person is doing well. This shows that the answer affects the person who is asking the question. If the person responded to the greeting that they are not well and explains the reasons why, the person who asked the question would feel uneasy about their situation. Even mere words or simple responses can affect our minds.

So, if we ask ourselves whether we want to be a happy person and the answer is yes, and if we want to have a clear state of mind, be kind, considerate and so on, the responsibility of acquiring these qualities is no one else's but ours. We must take the personal initiative to develop these qualities because they are internally cultivated and do not come from external sources. This again underlines the benefits of meditation as a way to gradually increase positive qualities.

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Another benefit of our meditation practice is that it helps to increase our intelligence, which in Buddhist terms is called “wisdom”. Wisdom refers to being able to analyse and distinguish between what is positive and what is negative within yourself. Recognising and adopting what is positive and conducive to our wellbeing, and recognising and discarding what is negative and harmful to our wellbeing is very useful. The ability to do this comes from our internal wisdom, and meditation contributes to developing and increasing this type of analytical intelligence.

Our analytical wisdom helps us to identify positive states of mind, such as kindness, and view it as something essential for our wellbeing and happiness. If we develop our wisdom and understand this, we will naturally further develop our kindness. As we develop our kindness, the opposite and negative states of mind, such as being hurtful or inconsiderate of others’ feelings, naturally reduces and we recognise these negative states as not being conducive to our wellbeing. Our determination to minimise and discard negative states of mind naturally increases as our positive states of mind are cultivated. Meditation is the process of developing our minds so that genuine internal transformation can take place.

So now that the advantages of meditation and disadvantages of not paying attention to ourselves have been outlined, we can adopt the meditation technique.

We can readjust our physical posture to be upright but comfortable; ensure that you are sitting in a comfortable and relaxed manner. We then need to pay attention to the state of our minds, and remind ourselves of the great advantages of practising meditation. Acknowledging this is a way to seize the opportunity to meditate and apply the technique fully by not allowing our mind to be distracted with external things or even with thoughts. Normally the mind is habituated in being distracted in these ways, but for now, and for the purpose of this meditation, we need to fully commit and apply discipline to our minds. We can tell ourselves that we are not going to allow our minds to be distracted with various thoughts, but instead bring our full attention and focus inwards. Bringing our focus inwards means having a blank state of mind, where we are not occupied with any thoughts or ideas, but are focused on our personal breath. Of course, as beginners we naturally are not able to stay long in this state, however, for the duration of the practice we can try to maintain this state of mind and place our attention on our natural breathing. For the next few minutes we will observe the breath. [*Pause for meditation.*]

We don’t have too much time left in our session, but if you have any questions, we could spend the remaining minutes on those.

*Question:* How do I deal with someone who is causing me a problem?

*Geshe-la:* Whether we address an incident depends on whether it should be taken seriously. Some situations or incidents may need to be attended to because of the effects on us. Saying something in these instances may be reasonable. However, you need to consider if there is a

sufficient reason to respond, and if there is, that the response you make is made from a good state of mind.

Some situations or incidents may not be important enough to address. For example, there may be a situation where what another person says seems inappropriate or unreasonable to you, but by not retaliating or responding to what was said, you may not really lose out because there may not be any real loss to yourself. So, for situations when what someone says is a little inappropriate or out of proportion, and if there is no real loss for you, then, giving that person the victory and letting the comment or behaviour go is better than retaliating.

I regularly mention that the reality of a relationship is that we cannot expect both sides to always be smiling, joyful and saying nice words. Every relationship will have moments and times of unease. That is part of a relationship’s existence. All relationships have times when uncomfortable situations occur, or when things are said that may be inappropriate. However, taking the initiative to really understand the situation and see that the other person is not saying they don’t love or care for you, but is saying these things or acting in a certain way because their mind is a little bit disturbed or unhappy, is beneficial. Therefore, when people say inappropriate things or do inappropriate gestures, you can understand that the state of their mind is a little bit disturbed or unhappy, and instead of retaliating and becoming upset yourself, the situation can be a cause for you to develop more consideration for others. The Buddhist teachings say that this practice can be the basis to develop real compassion for another person. This is very significant to consider because the teachings also say that practising patience ultimately means not allowing a situation to disturb your mind. If we allow an incident to disturb and upset our minds, then, it will only contribute to escalating the uncomfortable and uneasy situation. This is because becoming upset does not help or appease the situation. We can use this teaching in our close relationships – the relationships where we eat, walk and spend our lives in close association with others. Partners, who are in a committed relationship and share everything they have, such as their household, food and money, also benefit greatly from following this teaching’s advice. Close and committed relationships are where we cultivate real compassion and understanding, and develop genuine patience.

Some of you might have heard this story I’ve told previously about my friend, a Tibetan man called Jampa, who is married to a comparatively young lady. Jampa is an old acquaintance of mine and so he confided in me about his relationship with his young wife. He said that she bickers and scolds him a lot, and says so many things but that he doesn’t really pay much attention. He said that if he were to pay attention and say something back, it would only cause more conflict and they would fight. Jampa said that he doesn’t want to fight, so he doesn’t let that kind of situation happen. He also said that he was not really sure how long she would stay with him anyway because she is quite young and might leave him for someone else, so he is careful about his financial situation and makes sure his savings are safe! [*Laughter.*]

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After being in a relationship for a while, having kids and running a small business together, they were doing okay and were able to put their children in a boarding school in Darjeeling. Every once in a while one of them, usually Jampa, would go to Darjeeling and fetch the kids for vacation time and take them back to school when teaching recommenced. One time, Jampa was travelling to Darjeeling on a bus that had an accident, which resulted in his leg being broken. His leg was badly damaged, so he was confined to a hospital bed for about a year. Jampa later confided to me that, during his hospitalisation, his wife came to nurse and look after him, and put so much care into his healing, that his earlier doubts about her leaving him completely went; instead, he developed total trust in her.

I feel this is a significant story because it shows that even if a person bickers, scolds or speaks harshly to you, if they have a kind heart and genuine concern for you, then, regardless of the few harsh words, his or her kindness will mean they will care and help you at times of difficulty and distress. A companion who can help us at times of real need is a really good friend.

In contrast, there are instances of relationships that have really astonished me. For example, instances where children have taken their parents to court for the sake of one, two or three thousand dollars. Sometimes, when I watch TV, I have noticed in *Judge Judy* that these kinds of cases often come up [*everyone laughs*]. Even Judge Judy sometimes seems amazed that the claims brought to her in court are of small incidents that have been made into huge lawsuits. These types of legal proceedings really highlight what can happen if a situation is followed up unskillfully or unnecessarily.

So the main point is that if an incident is significant, responding in a clear state of mind that does not have anger might be necessary, rather than offering the victory to the other person. However, if the incident is small and doesn't really affect you too much, accepting the loss or giving the victory to the other person may be appropriate. The main focus in either situation is not to be upset and not to respond with anger. His Holiness the Dalai Lama makes a significant point when he reminds us that if the situation deems a response, it can be dealt with by not losing your genuine concern for, and kindness to, the other person; this is most important. The implication is that you can still address problems without losing your compassion for the other person.

So before we conclude for the evening, let us again take the opportunity to spend a few minutes in meditation. This time we will focus on the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. As the mantra is recited, we can try to keep our full attention and focus on its sound; then, as the recitation subsides, we can maintain our focus on the mantra and the space it leaves for a few moments.

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