
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

འཇམ་གུང་རྒྱལ་ལམ་རིམ་འབྲིང་བ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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First of all I would like to express my great appreciation and joy in being here connected with like-minded friends, and for such a gathering as this to take place again.

I don't have much to bring you as a gift except some warmth from India's heat! [Laughter.] Mundgod was particularly hot, although, when I travelled to Varanasi and Sarnath, I was much cooler because the north was quite cold. However, my comfort was looked after by my cousins and certain monks there, and they found a nice place for me to stay in the south too, so overall my time in India went very well and I didn't have any difficulties.

The nice place found for us to stay in the south meant that it was cooler inside, so even though it was hot outside under the sun, it was not a big problem inside. Regardless of the heat, the main thing is that I had a happy and joyous mind while I was there.

When we were at His Holiness' teachings in Sarnath, where the weather is much cooler, the monks initially sat with one bare arm, which is a feature of monastic dress. His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, saw this and said, "Don't leave your arms bare because you could fall sick. Wrap yourselves up and wear your clothes well because it is cold." That is the great extent of the kindness and consideration His Holiness has for others. [Geshe-la puts his palms together at his heart; there is a pause while he reflects on the great extent of His Holiness' kindness.]

So, returning to our gathering here of like-minded people, I think our mutual focus is very significant. These gatherings, and the discussions that take place, affect us on a personal level in two ways. On the one hand, we may be able to better detect good qualities that we have, which otherwise we may not be able to see well; on the other hand, we may be able to better detect our faults and negativities that we need to overcome. The discussions we have here can help us to see and better understand these two aspects of ourselves.

The acknowledgement of there being certain faults and certain good qualities within ourselves is developed initially; we all have the intelligence and wisdom to know which internal qualities are beneficial and which internal qualities are unhelpful. We can use our wisdom to see the need to adopt and further develop our positive qualities and to abandon or overcome the faults. As humans, we have the intelligence to recognise that we need to possess good qualities and not to voluntarily adopt negativities. This intelligence that humans have gives us a unique opportunity to uncover our potential; using our intelligence in this way is the main responsibility we have in our lives. Taking personal responsibility for our individual wellbeing by adopting and developing good qualities, and slowly overcoming and eradicating our faults is something that we all need to work towards – the personal responsibility to do this is solely ours.

We all have a natural tendency of wanting to benefit ourselves and the wish to not be harmed. If we look into what the ultimate benefit is for ourselves, we can see that it is happiness – having a happy state of mind. Acquiring genuine happiness is the ultimate benefit for us. If we look into what we don't wish for, we can summarise it into what we call 'suffering'. We all wish to overcome things that cause us suffering. This underlying intention we all have, wanting to experience happiness and not wanting to experience any suffering, serves as the basis for leading our daily lives.

We all commonly share the tendency or intention of wanting happiness and not wishing to experience suffering and unpleasantness. We also all have the capacity to recognise that when certain positive conditions come together we experience a sense of happiness and, conversely, when certain negative conditions come together we experience unhappiness or suffering. We can all appreciate how this happens.

There are many different means and ways of acquiring happiness and removing suffering or unpleasantness. However, we can summarise it into two main separate systems. One system tends to focus externally by relying on exterior means to achieve happiness and remove suffering. The other method is to focus internally and look within to search for the causes that bring happiness and remove suffering. Focusing on what is happening outside ourselves is what we would call 'the worldly system', and focusing on looking within ourselves and investigating our own minds is what we would call 'a religious or spiritual system'.

Adopting the means of seeking external causes and conditions for acquiring happiness and avoiding suffering does contribute to our contentment generally. Although, if we look honestly into whether external means contribute to a genuine sense of internal fulfilment, we can see that external conditions don't really contribute to the happiness to be experienced within our minds. Having plenty of external resources does not seem to bring about a true sense of satisfaction and contentment in our minds. This lack of satisfaction and contentment seems to be prevalent even with adequate external means. Why is that? Why is it that, even with external appropriate conditions, it is possible that we lack internal mental happiness?

Even if this experience does not ring true for you personally, you may have observed that others who have adequate external resources, such as wealth, do not necessarily have inner happiness. This proves that mental happiness is not entirely dependent on external means; a person can have adequate material means and still be deprived of inner happiness. So, if a person lacks a genuine sense of happiness despite external gains, then, it clearly indicates that the real cause and condition for happiness does not lie externally. When we can acknowledge this as being a fact, then, we may choose to use the religious or spiritual method as a remedy.

We should always try to adopt an attitude of having less desires and attachments. This equates to protecting our minds from having overly strong desire for external things and from having excessively strong attachment to external things. If we instead develop contentment with whatever we have that provides us with our basic needs, we will be adopting an attitude of less desire or attachment. And if we feel happy with what we have, for example, if we say, "This is sufficient because I'm fed, clothed and sheltered", then, we have adopted that state of mind.

Great masters of our Buddhist tradition, such as Nagarjuna, say that having less desire and knowing contentment is the essential quality needed for a happy life. Analysing and thinking about

what the great masters say and applying it to our lives is significant. If we analyse our life and constantly think we are lacking things and don't have enough, our minds will be in turmoil and we will always feel dissatisfied. Whereas the moment we look into our situations and feel we are well off and things are fine for us, is the moment we adopt and acknowledge that we have enough for ourselves. This state of mind is contentment, and joy can occur immediately when a contented mind is adopted; earlier states of anxiety and turmoil will subside, and the mind will start to feel happy. This is something we can all experience.

My adoption of this attitude has definitely been very useful for me; I am sharing my experience with you so that you can adopt it too and benefit from it. If you can adopt this attitude of recognising that things are not too bad for yourself and that you have all the basic essentials, then, regardless of your social or financial status – even if you do not have much and are making ends meet – the attitude will really help you. For those of you who do have a significant amount of resources and wealth, developing such a state of mind will help you to lessen your pride, and reduce thoughts about your high social standing and wealth. An attitude of contentment is definitely useful, regardless of your present situation.

I can relate some recent accounts and share my experiences on the benefits of having less desires and knowing contentment in order to lead a happier life. I studied and lived in Sera Monastery, so while I was there in south India recently, I visited and met with some of my old friends who have all become old and frail; some are quite ill, particularly two elderly monks who are very sick. One of these elderly monks is mostly confined to his bed. He is a close acquaintance from my past in Tibet and comes from a nearby village to mine, called Shinay. In the past I have tried to help monks like him and give them contributions for their welfare, even though I don't have much myself. This elderly monk would acknowledge this and tell his other friends, "Geshe Doga used to help me when I was really deprived and I had a hard time." When I visited him recently, I found that physically he is very frail and ill, and confined to his bed because moving about is hard for him, but he told me he feels quite good, and is content and happy. He mentioned that one of his students in Switzerland sometimes sends some money for his care and to help contribute to ceremonies and pujas in the monastery. This monk also has a student in America who sometimes has sent contributions. So he said, "Everything is fine for me. I am really fine and well. I feel content and happy." Of course, compared to our Western standards, he might have had no more than two or three hundred dollars to live on, but nevertheless, he was not complaining at all. In fact, his not having one per cent of the good living standards and conditions we enjoy here does not daunt him. He accepts the meagre things he has, his living conditions and his current state of being confined to his bed. Clearly, his obvious acknowledgment of what he does have and his contentment with it, contributes to his happy state of mind. There is no need for him to complain because he is quite joyful and happy.

The other sick and elderly monk I mentioned earlier is eighty eight years old and supported by one of our residents here, Carol. Carol has helped this monk for many years and has made a significant contribution to his welfare. This monk is currently able to walk around by himself without any support, and when we met I asked him how he felt. He said, "I feel very good. I am quite happy." After we had talked, he wanted to give me tea, but we did not have time for tea, so he offered me a scarf to show his appreciation. Overall, our encounter was very nice

and he looked fit and well, despite being ill. Also, I heard from others that when he receives the money Carol sends to him, he immediately uses most of it to make offerings to other monks and explains that Carol is the very kind lady who sponsors him.

The main point is to acquaint ourselves with developing an attitude of contentment within our hearts and minds about our circumstances. This will really help us have and maintain happy minds.

To summarise what has been shared so far, genuine happiness in life seems primarily dependent on the individual's state of mind rather than on external resources, and the individual's mind can be broadly divided into experiencing positive and negative states. Negative states of mind or delusions, such as anger and attachment, influence us in ways that cause turmoil and problems in our lives. However, we have the ability to recognise and overcome them. Positive states of mind, such as love, compassion and kindness, are qualities that benefit us in our lives. We all naturally possess these positive qualities and have the great potential for developing them further.

Taking the initiative to maintain and protect our minds' positive states is the most important attitude we can have. This is because protecting our minds' good qualities is the ultimate protection we can give ourselves. We may ask, "What exactly are we protecting our minds from?" The answer is that we are protecting our minds from being influenced by the delusions.

Sometimes protecting our minds from any delusion arising is not possible, so the next best thing for us to do is to protect our minds from strong and intense delusions arising. This requires self-analysis and an investigation into the state of your mind.

I would like to mention here, as I do regularly, that what I am sharing is based on my own attempts to protect my mind, which although meagre, have benefited me. I am not implying that I do advanced levels of practice. I am sitting on a throne higher than you because to do so is traditional, but the attitude in my mind, and how I feel, is that I am sitting with you and working on my own mind too.

So, as I said previously, protecting your mind involves honest self-analysis. Whenever I am about to do something, I ask myself why I am doing it. I question myself whether it is a worthwhile thing to do. And I think of what kind of intentions are motivating me to want to do it. If I find a hint of a delusion arising in my mind, I warn myself to be careful because what I am about to do may be influenced by negativities. I am wary, careful and cautious in how I conduct my daily life, and this has benefited and helped me. I share this with you because adopting this simple technique helps you to protect your mind from delusions. All that is required is honest self-analysis, examining your motive and intention before you say or do something, and checking your state of mind to evaluate what is arising.

When anger arises you could ask yourself if allowing yourself to be overpowered and controlled by the emotion would be an advantage or disadvantage to yourself. You could think of what the outcome of allowing yourself to be consumed by this delusion would be. If you feel influenced by strong attachment or greed, you could think of what benefits and disadvantages this influence would have for you, and what the outcome would be. Questioning, analysing and evaluating what is going on in your mind through an honest check system is adopting a true protection for yourself. This method is one that helps you to avoid and be influenced by negativities, and instead adopt positive states of mind. The initiative and personal interest to do this can be developed.

So, how we develop this initiative and personal interest to protect our minds is by meditating. The technique of meditation is nothing other than adopting a state of mind by voluntarily leaving everything else aside to focus on a specific object. If we meditate for a minute, then, during that minute we will definitely have a relaxed and calmer mind. If we adopt the meditation technique for two minutes, we will experience a calm and tranquil mind for two minutes. In this way, even if we meditate for a few minutes, we are able to experience meditation's benefits and positive results. The focus we employ in temporarily leaving everything else aside, is the advantage of adopting the meditation technique.

If you focus on a virtuous object, the result is a relaxed and tranquil state of mind. A virtuous object does not cause delusions to arise and it intentionally distances your mind from focusing on an object of delusion. If we are able to meditate for one, two or three minutes, we will reverse our focus on negativities for that time. By not focusing on our delusions, but on a virtuous object instead, we will experience tranquillity and calmness in our minds.

We can verify this for ourselves. When we apply the meditation technique in a proper way, we are able to see the great truth of Buddha's statement that "the subdued mind is a happy mind". By stating this, the Buddha is implying that an unsubdued mind will be a troubled mind full of turmoil. We can see from our own experience that when our mind is subdued, meaning that it is not influenced by the delusions, then, we can experience a genuinely happy and joyful mind. Therefore, the definition of meditation is that it's a technique where one voluntarily focuses on an object for a certain duration, so that delusions do not arise.

Now that the benefits and advantages of meditation have been outlined, we can allocate some time for meditation. We can go through the meditation technique in more detail in future sessions. I usually try to introduce the techniques of meditation at the beginning of our yearly sessions, but this evening we are running out of time. However, most of you will be familiar with the physical posture needed, which is to be relaxed but to sit upright.

The object that we usually choose to meditate on is the breath. The breath is a neutral object; by focusing on your breath, delusions will not arise in your mind. So the breath is a very appropriate object for us to focus on. In order for us to benefit from meditating, we need to be fully committed and consistently apply our focus on our breath. This simply means that for the duration of the meditation, we need to intentionally commit to our focus. You can commit to yourself that you are not going to allow your mind to be distracted by other thoughts, memories or anything else, but you will try to keep your entire focus just on your breath.

An analogy of focusing on the breath single-pointedly would be to hold your left index finger upright and move your right index finger continuously towards it; if the left index finger was not there, your right index finger would just continue to move. However, if the left index finger is upright and the right index finger moves into it, then, the right index finger will stop moving. This stopping of movement and the touch between index fingers is similar to the focus of meditating on the breath. Maintaining the touch of your left and right index fingers is like the focus your mind has when 'touching' your breath. You can maintain the contact between your fingers in the same way that your mind makes contact with your breath. This 'touch' or focus on your breath is what meditation is. So, in this way, we

can now adopt the technique of meditation. [*Pause for meditation.*]

Just as we have attempted in our short session now, meditating regularly would be useful to adopt in our daily lives. A short, but consistent, practice would be beneficial for you. Then, you can slowly think about different techniques and postures when your practice is regular.

Meditation can be understood as a remedy or medication to help settle our minds, which otherwise are quite chaotic. A chaotic mind is not a good state to have because it can cause a lot of trouble for you.

If we focus on things that are not going right or well, or rather, if we seek things to complain about, there will be no end to our complaints. So using your focus on something positive really helps to settle the mind. Once when someone was asked, "Are things going well?" Their response was, "I can always find something that is not right, so things are not going well!"

Finding a reason to complain or finding something unsatisfactory, is relevant even to those of us who are seriously trying to adopt a genuine spiritual life and meditate. Even people who devote themselves to meditating may find something that is not really right, and so cannot focus well. They want to meditate, but something else comes up, and they find themselves running off to attend to that thing. So people who genuinely want to practise meditation may find that there is always something that does not go well for them. As that is the case, adopting an attitude that does not expect everything to be perfect and right for you is good. If something is not right, then, adopting a patient state of mind and willingly enduring some hardships will help.

The Buddhist teachings mention that practising or adopting patience by willingly accepting or enduring hardship is the best remedy to overcome hardship. This seems to be true because as long we fight hardships and see them as unwelcome, our fighting against them will only trouble us. However, the moment we accept hardships, they dissipate; the mental agony dissolves and we feel more relaxed.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama frequently shares that the difficulties and hardships he has experienced in his life have helped him learn a lot and gain so much knowledge. Remembering His Holiness sharing his personal experiences about practising patience during hardships is a good antidote for us when we have hardships.

Of course, no one but ourselves can solve our personal problems. We all have a personal responsibility to overcome our own problems, and the best way to tackle them is by having a courageous mind – a mind which is not despondent. The best way to have a courageous mind and not be despondent is to not be overwhelmed with hardships and difficulties. If you are overwhelmed by hardships and difficulties, then your mind will be dejected, and you will feel discouraged and have no strength. If, however, you willingly accept hardships and difficulties, then, your mind will not feel overwhelmed and discouraged.

Even when we look at contemporary, worldly examples, we can see that renowned people have gained their achievements through hardships and difficulties. The elite athletes of today, for example, are where they are now because their difficulties led them there. Their achievements have not been smooth sailing. However, because they having willingly endured and accepted hardships, they have gradually reached the stage of becoming well known and being good at the sport they are in. This is something we can learn from.

Whatever activity we engaged in and whatever goal we seek to achieve, there are always two factors involved. These are opposing factors and conducive factors – that is true for achieving any kind of goal. What we need to do is to acquire the conducive factors and overcome the opposing ones. Hardships and difficulties are normally experienced when trying to overcome the opposing factors, so if we willingly endure and accept those difficulties, then, the opposing factors are something we can overcome.

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I had a discussion with a young layman sitting next to me when I was in India during the teachings. I was telling him something about what we had heard. We had not met before, but he seemed fond of me and wanted to debate. *[Laughter.]* Later I found out that he had been a monk and had studied very well. He was very well versed, but when he started asking me questions about certain points and debating me on them, I was kind of boastful and said, “There’s really not much point for you to try to debate with me because I was brought up in the traditional system from a very early age, where the whole attention and focus was to debate Dharma points.” *[Everyone laughs.]* I was letting him know that my familiarity with debate comes from a life-long commitment and passion from a very early age. Also, the living conditions in Tibet were so poor that we didn’t have sufficient food or adequate clothing in the very cold climate. Traditionally, a debate involves clapping your hands to make each point when answering a question. However, clapping your hands in a very cold climate makes them crack; young monks getting cracks in their hands and bleeding was very common. However, despite the cracks in our hands, the cold and the very poor living conditions, we endured hardships and debated for long periods with an empty stomach.

I heard later that when this man was a monk, he studied at His Holiness’ monastery, Namgyal Monastery, for eleven years and was a good student and debater.

During our discussion he made comments about what achievements I might have obtained. He was really fond of me and said, “You seem like you might have developed the state of calm abiding. Would that be true?” I said, “Oh, I am far from achieving calm abiding, but I do have a happy mind.” Since he was a debater, he immediately had a question *[laughter]* and asked, “So, how do you achieve a happy mind?”

I told him that if you lessen the superstitious and discursive thoughts in your mind, you will naturally achieve happiness. When he heard my response, he became very quiet. He was reflective and contemplative, and kept quiet for a while. His facial expression changed and he sat there thinking about what I had said for some time. What I told him seemed to really hit the mark! *[Much laughter.]*

Before we end the session for the evening, let us again adopt the appropriate posture for meditation, which is a relaxed posture. We can also adopt a clear state of mind. The object that we can choose to focus on now is the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni’s mantra. So, as with previous meditation, we can try to maintain our full attention and focus on the sound of the mantra, and, as the sound subsides, we can maintain that focus in our minds.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA