
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 we can spend some time in meditation. As I mention regularly, one of the purposes of meditation is that it is a method to control one's mind. To have control over one's mind is really important in one's life.

What does it mean to control one's mind? What it implies, and why it is essential for our well-being, is that meditation serves as a way to withdraw our mind from the influence of negative states of mind, that are called delusions. When we bring our attention and focus inwards, we gain the control over our mind to make it focus on whatever we want to. We seem to relate to the idea of positive and negative energies, so if we allow our mind to be under the control of the negative states of mind, then it is as if we are allowing our mind to be influenced by negative energies; and our life is then directed by negative energies. Whereas if we have control over our own mind and focus on positive objects, our life is naturally directed by positive energies.

This then serves to protect whatever happiness one may already have established. If our happiness has declined, the meditation practice will help to restore and increase a sense of happiness and joy within us.

Another practical matter that we need to be mindful of in our situation is that it seems in many cases that while the general conditions for our well-being are intact, we may become carried away by one thing that we think is missing in our life. We can then become completely obsessed with this and fail to acknowledge all the other good conditions that we already possess.

Often we get side-tracked and distracted with the one thing that we seem to be missing and long for. When we become obsessed with whatever it may be that we feel is missing in our life, then that becomes our whole focus and our energies are completely drained by that obsession. It is important to step back a bit and look into what one is longing for and which seems to be missing in our life. Is this something really necessary and essential for our well-being? The practical way to look at this is that if one does not have that situation or condition that one is obsessed with, whatever it may be, would it harm one's physical condition or well-being? Would it harm or hinder one's life in anyway? Analysing in this way the thing that we feel is missing in our life, may, in many cases, be the opposite. If we have that the thing that we feel we are missing it may be detrimental to us and harm our physical well-being. If we really look into it and analyse what seems to be missing and we are longing for, it may be something that we would be better off without. It is good to analyse it in this way to see how it affects us.

This self-analysis of looking into what is it that we feel is missing in our lives and whether that is something that contributes to our well-being or is detrimental and harms us, is important. If we do this analysis and start familiarising ourselves with this way of thinking then, eventually, it becomes a way of life. It becomes part of our being. Right now it may not seem to be natural because we have a tendency to let things go and just follow whatever random passions and thoughts that arise. We just go after whatever we fancy rather than stopping and analysing whether it is useful for us or not. Initially this way of thinking may seem uncomfortable and we may not be used to stopping before we act upon something and really thinking about it. However if we start doing it more regularly then it becomes a good and positive habit.

This way of analysing a situation before we act upon it is a way of increasing one's intelligence and what one would call 'wisdom' in Buddhism. When one's wisdom and intelligence starts to increase then that becomes our ultimate protection. It is our own intelligence and wisdom that becomes our best companion, along with the other good qualities such as genuine loving compassion and kind-heartedness. These good qualities are our best companion, aid and protection. I emphasise this again and again.

When we think about it, what is it that we need to acquire and protect for our well-being? It is really two-fold: good physical conditions and good mental or psychological conditions. These are the two aspects that we need to pay attention to. So how do you go about acquiring and protecting good physical and mental conditions? It is by checking and analysing what is beneficial and what contributes to our physical and mental wellness. If we don't think about it and don't use our own intelligence, then we will never be able to find out what the contributing factors to our well-being are. So it is this practical approach that I try to share with you.

To re-emphasise the earlier point, what I see is that a lot of the problems that people seem to experience and face here are mostly psychological problems, and seem to be related to not feeling content with one's good conditions but rather being obsessed with something else that one is constantly trying to seek and fulfil. The driving force that one is trying to fulfil is often something that is actually not conducive to one's well-being anyway. But one seems to be completely obsessed with that because one hasn't taken the time to think about whether what one is pursuing is really useful for one or not, and whether it is worthwhile putting all that energy and time into pursuing it. If one were to take time to analyse one's situation and acknowledge and accept that what one is seeking is not really conducive for one's own well-being, then perhaps we would feel that it is okay to let go. That voluntary intention and wish to let go can happen when one begins to see and understand the situation. I feel that many people are stuck in a mentality of being completely obsessed with a situation that is not really conducive for their well-being.

My constant concern is how I can let you know that there's another way of thinking and approaching things in life rather than being obsessed with one thing.

It seems that having shared this numerous times over the years has helped many to change their approach and attitude to developing their well-being. Some people used to come to me and completely break down in tears when they start relating their problems. However having followed my suggestions it seems to have helped them change their way of life and approach to the extent that a positive transformation has taken place; this can be attested to. Once when they came to see me they broke down in tears as soon they talked about their situation but when they come to see me now they are joyful, happy and smiling. That must attest to the fact that a positive transformation has taken place and they have experienced some benefits from what I have shared with them.

We need to consider this point: a lot of our psychological problems may be in relation to a discontent within ourselves, a dissatisfied mind. If we don't make an attempt to acknowledge our good conditions and start to feel grateful for what we have, and that we have a great potential, we will be constantly led into that state of mind and attitude of being discontented and dissatisfied. A dissatisfied mind is not a happy mind; it is a mind that is deprived of happiness. If you can start to develop a sense of contentment and satisfaction within yourself then, naturally, your mind becomes lighter, happier and more joyful. So this is a way of changing our attitude, particularly in relation to acknowledging the good conditions that we have.

We need to try to develop a state of mind where we change our focus and energy from a heavy, weighed-down negative energy, to a light, joyful sort of energy within us. I often notice that people seem to hold on to their problems. It is as if their problems become personal and very important for them. It seems to be odd, in a way, whilst we are seeking happiness and good conditions we should rightfully be spending time and energy to create good conditions for a joyful and happy mind, but we are actually holding on to the very things that makes us feel weighed down and depressed with a 'heavy mind' and a sort of stale energy. We seem to become almost obsessed and hold on to that. It is like we don't want to give that up.

The way to give that up is by transforming one's mind so that one changes one's approach and attitude to see what is conducive for us and what is it that we need to discard. The way to go about that, which can assist us to change to a more positive attitude and have more positive energy within us, is the practice of meditation. So, in this way, the meditation technique becomes relevant and useful as a tool for us to slowly gain that within ourselves. Having mentioned that, we can now spend some time in meditation.

The meditation technique that we adopt here is one where we use the breath as an object to focus on. The benefit of doing this practice derives from the commitment we make and the sincerity with which we apply the technique. Like anything else, it does require

some mental discipline and we need to put our energy into the practice. The way that we need to tune our mind for the practice of meditation is firstly to acknowledge from our own experiences that at the moment we allow ourselves to be influenced and carried away by negative thought patterns and obsessions. These lead us to a dark place. They are like a heavy burden that leaves us weighed down and in a depressed state of mind. As a consequence we lose our positive energy. We can all relate to certain thought patterns and ways of thinking and attitudes that lead us to an unpleasant state of mind.

Having identified and acknowledged these factors, what we need to do to train our mind is to form the determination not to be influenced by them during the practice of meditation. First of all, we acknowledge that while there are certain negative tendencies and attitudes that we may have, and thought patterns that we may be inclined to follow, on the other hand another part of our reality is that we also have great potential. We are all humans and, as a human being we naturally have a certain level of intelligence. We have the natural inborn intelligence of being able to discriminate between what is good and bad. Physically we are all fit, much fitter than some in other situations. So we are in a good physical condition. We have a good mental capacity. We need to acknowledge that we have these good conditions as a way to encourage ourselves to try to overcome that sense of despondency or a lack of self confidence. As human beings, we do have great potential. So we acknowledge that thinking, 'While I have these natural qualities and good conditions right now, I need to fully utilise the potential that I have within myself'.

Having acknowledged our potential and having acknowledged, on the other hand, that there are some negative tendencies we can make a commitment to ourselves that, 'I am not going to allow my mind to be influenced by those negative ways of thinking and negative attitudes. It is those negative patterns and attitudes that weigh me down and as long as I allow myself to be influenced by them, I will have a state of mind that causes me distress and lots of problems'.

With regard to these very thoughts and negative attitudes we think, 'I have identified you now; you are not going to trick me any longer; I am not going to allow myself to follow you anymore'. We need to identify what the real foe is. The real foe is our own negative tendency. So we acknowledge it, and we are now making a determination not to follow it.

Training our mind is basically a matter of attitude. If we develop that strong determination not to follow these negative tendencies during the practice of meditation we will definitely be able to avoid following them and we will be able to focus on the breath because of our determination and discipline. The good habits that we develop now can slowly and gradually become a way of thinking and a way for us to conduct ourselves in our every day life. Having prepared ourselves for meditation in this way we now focus on the natural rhythm of our breathing and spend the next few minutes with a hundred-percent focus on the breath itself (*Pause for meditation*).

That will be sufficient for now. We can cover something from the text, as we haven't gone through it for a while. However, if there are any significant questions you may ask them now.

Question: For those who may be experiencing intense stress or anxiety in specific situations such as at work or studying or that sort of thing, would your advice be to change our attitude towards it and use meditation as a tool?

Answer: The meditation technique can definitely help. I personally feel that the stress and anxiety we experience in work or study usually comes about when the mind is not settled down and is not calm. When the mind itself is too rushed and busy that adds to the situation making it stressful and one experiences anxiety.

The meditation technique involves the training of our mind to focus on a particular object. In our meditation here we use the breath. With familiarity and practice it is actually a practice of trying to lengthen our attention span. When that training is applied in a work or study environment our minds will be likely to be more focussed and will pay more attention. When one is more focussed and attentive to what one is doing it naturally becomes more fruitful and successful. When things go well in study or work there's no need for stress or anxiety to arise. Stress and anxiety usually arise when things are not going well. If the mind is very distracted that seems to cause things not to go well. Often when the mind is distracted it is not able to focus on a given thing and that is when the task at hand is not accomplished.

For example, in a work or study environment you have to be at your desk to focus on your task. If your mind is not 'at the desk' where one should be focusing but is completely distracted, then whatever task at hand will not be accomplished.

Another way to think about is that we seem to have a tendency for our mind to rush to the next thing before the first thing is accomplished. Often we seem to rush off trying to finish other tasks before we finish the first task and, of course, if we are not able to finish everything right away we start feeling anxiety. Anxiety seems to arise when we feel rushed and try to do everything right away. If you have a few tasks listed down for the day you are already starting to feel anxious about having to finish and accomplish tasks two, three, four and five while you are doing task one. That becomes too much for your mind to cope with and anxiety arises.

This can also happen in spiritual studies. As I have shared in the past, during my escape to India I once got very good advice from the local people. I asked them, 'When will we reach our destination?' The local people in the area would reply, 'Oh, you will reach there quickly, if you go slowly' (*laughter*). This has been very good advice in my life. We don't have to feel too rushed. If we do it slowly, it can be accomplished quickly.

I can, of course, understand that sometimes the situation seems contrary to one's capacity, especially when many tasks are given before the first task is accomplished. Some have confided in me that in a working environment they may be working on a document and before that is

finished, two, three or four will be piled up on the desk. When they noticed that a few more have piled up that naturally seems to cause anxiety. My practical advice to someone who had this experience was, 'You are being paid by the hour so work on the tasks at hand and try not to waste that hour. Try not to think about the other tasks right away, even if they are on the desk. When you have finished the first task then go on to the next one gradually. The 'approach' that I mentioned earlier about going slowly to reach there quickly is the same in a study or work environment. Take it easy and do the work slowly in a calm and nice way.

You may have other experiences yourself. In our early days when we had to do our exams we often noticed that sometimes when we are rushing to write the answer we actually put the answer meant for the next section instead of the current one. When you are too rushed you can make mistakes like that.

It seems that sometimes this sort of anxiety and stress comes to those who easily get overwhelmed, worried, emotional or over sensitive. There may be different temperaments or characteristics of individuals. There is a Tibetan saying, 'Someone may have physically grown up and look mature but their mind may have not grown up with the body yet'. They may have a child-like mind that is easily irritated or emotional and takes things too seriously. Individuals have different temperaments.

Someone whom I closely associated with once came to me and brought a very thick study book with him. When he showed me the book he said, 'I don't know where to start, from the back or the middle or front! There is too much to really comprehend.' He was showing signs of being anxious without even having started the book yet. My practical advice to that individual was, 'Don't worry about the other parts of the book, don't even look at them to begin with. Just start with part one where it begins. Your lesson will begin with part one so just familiarise yourself with the first section and let the other sections be for now. The very reason that you are going to the classes is to learn. If you already knew the contents of the book then you wouldn't need to go to the class to do the studies. So the whole purpose of going to study is to learn about the subjects that are presented in this book. So take it gradually, one section at a time'.

To summarise the main point in relation to your question is that overall, meditation will help one to have a good temperament.

Besides the anxiety and stress that I mentioned earlier, any work environment seems to have a lot of potential hostility in relation to competitiveness, jealousy and rivalry amongst colleagues. These sorts of situations can definitely occur in a work environment. If one has attuned one's mind to meditation and tried to implement that in one's life, it definitely helps one to deal with that.

The practical approach and advice that I have shared with people is that we sometimes need to think about the practical aspect of our lives. For example, what is the main reason we go to work? The goal is to earn a living; to work honestly and to get a wage. That is the goal of working, right? Otherwise one would not be going to work. If one is able to please one's boss, please all your

colleagues and have good relationship with everyone that's great and is a bonus. But if that is not achievable and not possible, at least if you do the task at hand honestly and do your share and get paid for that then you has served the main purpose of going to work. Sometimes we go beyond what it is that we set out to achieve trying to please everyone. It is hard, it would be good if we can please everyone but sometimes it is not practical and not possible.

As I have shared previously, to try to implement meditation practice, particularly what we call the Dharma that is the understanding behind the purpose of meditation in one's life can definitely contribute to a good working environment. A person who takes the initiative to apply meditation and the Dharma will naturally be an honest person who does his or her part in an honest way to contribute to the company and will not deceive the company or the boss that they are working for. Try to contribute in an honest way and that will be a genuine contribution to the society in whatever way we look at it. That, in itself, also has its practical benefit, you are earning your livelihood in an honest way. This is one practical example of the benefits of the practice.

Someone else confided in me that he was helping to build a new flat behind his place for his niece. The worker in charge happened to be a Buddhist following the Thai Buddhist tradition. He was not actually Thai but a Caucasian who followed the Thai tradition. He was a trust worthy person and doing his work well. This made the person confiding in me feel very confident that he could rely upon this worker.

People have often asked me how can practising meditation or studying Buddhist philosophy, the Dharma, can help in a working environment? How can it contribute to the society? My answer is that it can definitely make a positive contribution.

Some others have approached me with a dilemma that they sometimes have to face in their work situation. They find others starting to take things from the work place that they are not entitled to. Someone said to me, 'Other workers are taking advantage of the system, but I am a Buddhist so I am not allowed to take things. So, am I missing out?' (*laughter*)

As I have regularly shared, the essence of the practice, through meditation or otherwise through the study and so forth, is as a means to develop genuine kindness in one's heart and to become a genuinely kind person. When one has developed a kind heart, then whatever environment one finds oneself in, whether it is work, study or family, the kind heart will contribute to the well-being of that environment. That is the greatest benefit we can offer to others. With that kind heart, whatever we do will be imbued with that quality.

So it is in this way that we can see that striving to develop a kind heart is the most essential endeavour that we can engage in. That is the best contribution towards our own well-being and life. We can see that in all walks of life kind-heartedness is essential. Particularly when we look at situations where people are unwell, you can see there's a tremendous practical benefit in the healing process of the patients if the doctors who assist them are kind. That

is definitely felt by the patients. We can see the great benefit in this kind of way as well.

So these are the ways that we can understand the practical benefits of meditation practice. When it contributes to being a kind and gentle person then others will experience the positive effects. If you have a companion or partner who may have been a little bit unsure of what it is all about, but if, when you come out of meditation practice, you are kinder and gentler with them they will start to encourage you to go and meditate. If you have missed a few sessions they may start reminding you to go and meditate (*laughter*). So this is how others can see the positive effect. While the meditation technique is what they may immediately be relating to, what they are beginning to see are the positive effects that are one's genuine kindness and consideration towards them. That is what really helps and benefits them.

As His Holiness The Dalai Lama has commented, if one were to ask others, or if you were to ask yourself, 'Do you want to have a good companion or good friend?' and the answer is, 'Yes, I would like to have a good companion or a good friend', then the next question would be, 'How do I go about finding a good companion and friend?' His Holiness's practical approach to this is, 'If you have a kind heart, this will definitely contribute to finding a good companion and friend'. It is a fact that someone who is genuinely kind-hearted will not be deprived of companions and friends. They just increase more and more.

Keeping in mind those points that may be useful in our life, let us now, before we conclude for the evening, again spend a few minutes in meditation. This time the object to focus on can be the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra or name being recited. Whilst we hear that chant we try to keep our full attention and focus on the sound itself and when the recitation subsides we remain in that empty space and focus on that for a few minutes. That will suffice for a good meditation.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

Transcribed by Ai Chin Khor
Edit 1 by John Burch
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
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