
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'll spend some time in meditation. For that purpose, try to adopt a comfortable relaxed posture, and a relaxed and happy mind.

At both the physical and mental level, we are striving to have not only physical wellbeing but also mental wellbeing, which means having a happy mind. When we think about our physical and mental condition, we all naturally want to be happy and enjoy a sense of wellbeing. If we then consider whether we can personally achieve that, the answer is definitely, yes. We each have the individual responsibility to achieve it for ourselves. That is where we need to direct our focus and energy, whether we are concerned with our temporary wellbeing in this life, or inclined to work towards the betterment of our future life.

The very fact that we are born as a human being means we are born with a certain amount of intelligence and potential. While we all naturally have that inborn physical and mental potential, if it were left as it is, unfortunately it would not be fulfilled naturally, by itself. Rather one needs to recognise that potential then fully utilise it to benefit one's own physical and mental wellbeing, so that we stay well and happy. That is something we need to strive for.

Thus it is important to first recognise we have this great mental and physical potential. Then we need to go further and think, what I am going to use this for? How I am going to utilise my great potential?

Let us first consider how to maintain our physical wellbeing. Protecting our physical health is the main contributing factor. Likewise, with mental wellbeing; we need to protect the appropriate conditions required for our mental wellbeing. By protecting our body, we achieve physical wellbeing, and by protecting our mind, we achieve mental wellbeing or mental happiness. What is the best technique or method to help to protect the mind? The simple answer is the practice of meditation, which is the optimum technique for protecting the mind.

When we lack mental happiness, the factor that disturbs our mental peace and happiness is what we call the negative thoughts or negative states of mind. When we are able to identify the inner negative attitudes and thoughts as the cause for our mind to become disturbed, we can identify the fact that the cause lies within our own mind. The cause of our mental disturbance is not primarily external, but rather lies within ourselves.

I don't have to go into too much detail about the means of protecting one's physical wellbeing because you may all be skilled enough in doing that already. Basically, the main contributing factor for our physical wellbeing is protecting our health.

How do we protect our health? By making sure we have all the conditions for good health intact and trying to eliminate

those factors that are detrimental to our health. The good conditions for health include having nutritious food, observing good hygiene and getting adequate sleep, which are really important contributing factors to good health. Being sleep-deprived can definitely wear us down physically. In the Buddha's teachings, it is explained that sleep is one of the factors that rejuvenates our body and restores our energy. We need to ensure we have the required amount of sleep, good nutritious food, and so forth. On the other hand, we need to protect ourselves against those things that are detrimental to our health, such as consuming wrong types of food and other kinds of substances that might harm our health. It is best to try avoiding them as much as possible. These are the measures we take to protect our physical wellbeing.

We definitely need to take responsibility for protecting our physical health and wellbeing, as well as our mental health and wellbeing, because the consequence of not doing so is that we will experience pain and misery, what we call suffering. When we experience suffering, we have to experience it alone. It is not as if we can share our discomfort and pain with others to lessen our suffering; we cannot ask others to take a bit of our physical pain. Each of us has to experience the ill consequences of not protecting our own body and mind. Since we don't wish to experience pain and suffering, we need to take responsibility for avoiding that pain and suffering.

We can share our material things with others. But with material things, often there are disputes and arguments over who gets what, and we don't want to share so much of our things! [*Geshe-la chuckling*]

When we experience suffering such as illness, could this discomfort be shared? Since we have many friends, companions and relatives, we might go round and ask each of them to take a small bit. If you asked everyone to take a small bit, it wouldn't seem too much for them, while it lessened your own suffering! [*Geshe-la laughs*] It would seem like an appropriate way to ease one's own pain when others agreed to take some of that pain away. However, that is not possible.

Likewise if we could share our happiness, then whenever we gained a genuine sense of wellbeing and happiness, we could share it with our loved ones. When we noticed they were deprived or feeling down or not feeling well, we could share our wellbeing with them. That would be a very good thing to do. However, both suffering and happiness must be experienced solely by an individual; it cannot be shared. Thus we need to ensure we create our own wellbeing and happiness.

With this way of understanding, we begin to understand that we need to take full responsibility for our own happiness and wellbeing. If we don't wish to experience suffering or discomfort, we need to take full responsibility for eliminating the causes and conditions contributing to our own miseries and sufferings.

In addition to protecting the wellbeing of our body and mind, there is a third factor to consider, which is what we refer to as 'me' or 'I'. When we refer to 'I' as an individual, we have this notion that it is something beyond our physical body and mind. However, there is a clear relationship between our body and mind and the 'I'. When the body and mind are well, we can say 'I feel well'; conversely if the body or mind are not too well, we say, 'I am not well'. That individual being we refer to as 'well' or 'unwell' is clearly

related to the body and mind. This is how we can understand that, as an individual being or entity, each of us is made up of this threefold aspect of the body, mind and 'I' or the individual self, which is the person who has ownership of the body and mind.

To further emphasise this point, when we say 'I am well', where do we point, what are we referring to? Do we point out to our possessions—to how much material wealth we have? Is it in relation to this that we can say we are well? If a billionaire were physically and mentally unwell, could they point to their billions of dollars and say, 'Oh, I am very well because look, I have got this amount of money and that makes me very well'? That is not the case, is it? On the other hand, there could be someone who was quite impoverished, who didn't have much material wealth or possessions but who might feel very well physically and mentally. If you asked them, 'Do you feel well?', they would have a confident and immediate response. Despite not having material possessions and wealth, they can say 'Yes, I feel very well'. This clearly shows that the real factors that make one well or unwell lie within oneself, not externally.

Our friends may also contribute to our happiness, although they are not the ultimate source of it. We can't deny the fact that we get some enjoyment and happiness from friends and companions. However, even if one has a best friend or companion, that in itself is not the main cause for one to feel well. We may have the best of friends, but if we are physically or mentally not feeling well, we are not able to say, 'I am well'.

Conversely, someone may be without too many friends or might live by themselves, but if they are physically and mentally sound, they could say, 'I am well'. For example, a woman living without a partner but who is physically and mentally healthy and experienced a sense of wellbeing, will confidently claim she is well. That clearly shows that experiencing wellbeing does not depend on having a companion. A woman might have a good partner, who is quite good looking, has a good career and good status, but when you asked her if she were feeling well, she would consider her own physical and mental wellbeing and answer based on how she was feeling physically and mentally, not in relation to her partner. This is an important point to consider when referring to our personal wellbeing.

You may already be aware of these points; however, my attempt to share them with you is to present them from a different perspective or even as a reminder for you. Since we are all concerned for our wellbeing, we need to consider what the real contributing factors are, and how to maintain our physical and mental wellbeing. It is worthwhile to consider these points and implement them. When we start to experience real mental and physical wellbeing, it will have a positive effect upon our immediate companions, relatives and so forth. So it is not entirely selfish for us to strive for our own wellbeing because it has a positive effect upon others. If one is considerate of others' welfare, one will work on truly improving one's own wellbeing; that will definitely contribute to others' wellbeing too.

To summarise the main points we made earlier, we all naturally strive for physical and mental wellbeing, so we need to take full responsibility for securing that. This involves creating the conditions for our physical wellbeing, such as avoiding certain kind foods and substances that would otherwise harm our health. We try to minimise or avoid those things known to be detrimental to our health.

Yet even though we take these measures, there are times where we fall ill with viruses, or we have a body that is not completely immune to all kinds of disease and so forth. So, the best we can do is to apply those measures that we know are conducive to our good health and avoid those things that are detrimental to our health. These are points that we need to consider.

It is the same with our mental wellbeing. It is our ways of thinking and habitual attitudes which destroy our sense of mental peace and happiness. Once we identify and recognise our thought patterns, and negative ways of thinking, and how they are so detrimental to our mental happiness it is important to try to change them.

As I regularly emphasise, my advice is very much focussed on the younger generation. That is because it is when we are in our prime; it is a time when our potential is at its greatest. It is all too easy to neglect to develop that potential, or even destroy it. If we can seize that opportunity when we have fresh young bodies and fresh young minds we can derive so much benefit. Essentially that means being mindful, carefully checking, for example, what one is consuming. It might taste nice or feel nice, but it could be detrimental to our health. If we aspire to live to a ripe old age, we need to create the right conditions now, putting into place every measure to protect, rather than destroy, our health and our state of mind. If we don't nurture our mind and body properly now, then that would be great pity. These are points to really consider.

My advice to the younger generation, out of great concern for their wellbeing, is to be mindful of protecting their physical and mental wellbeing. Now you might think that is difficult to do. But there's no part of life that doesn't involve some hardship. That is part and parcel of life. However, we can manage that hardship if we willing to accept it, and face the challenges it provides. While it is still hard and difficult, if we have the right mental attitude it won't be too daunting, and we will be able to manage it. There is nothing that we cannot overcome if we apply determination and courage to the problem.

If we protect our health and really put the time into getting a good education and so forth in our teen years, then by the time we are in our mid-thirties we will have secured a decent job, and acquired a certain amount of money. If someone asks how you are doing, then even though you aren't millionaire and don't have an abundance of money, you won't hesitate in saying, 'I am doing fine'. With an honest earning, you are confident about being able to face the world and stand on your own two feet.

On the other hand you might neglect to utilise the great potential of your teenage years, when your intelligence is really at its peak, and spend your time on frivolous activities, drinking and having fun, and not paying much attention to your education. Then when you are in your thirties, and someone asks you, 'How are you going?', you might have to reply, 'I've got no job, and no money'. You may have a healthy body, which would be one advantage, but if have abused your own body with substances so forth, you might have to admit, 'I am not in good health'. You might have a sense of loss and no direction in life. That would be really pitiful state, made all the sadder because it is something that could have been avoided.

I talk here from my own experience. Between the ages of 16 and 20 I applied myself to my studies. I found it easy to learn, I had a lot of energy and the more I applied myself to

study the more I understood, and my intelligence seemed to increase day by day. When I think about it, I attribute that to being in the prime of youth, the time where we have the natural capacity to apply our intelligence to learning. I saw that when I studied and learnt, it really did increase my understanding and wisdom. I am sharing this experience with you, only because my intention is to help and benefit you.

I often ask myself what is the best and most practical advice I can give to young folk so that they don't waste their life, so that they can utilise their great potential, and so that they can reap the benefit in the later years. It is out of this genuine concern that I try to share my advice with them. When you are young, it is good to have mentors, someone to look up to.

So how can meditation help us to achieve physical and mental wellbeing? In summary, we first need to be inspired to meditate, and that can only come when we truly see the benefit of the practice of meditation.

The simplest way to see the great advantages of the practice of meditation is to ask two questions. To the question, 'Do I want to be happy?' the answer is most probably a resounding 'Yes!' If one were to then ask, do I want to experience suffering?' the immediate answer will more than likely be, 'No, and I don't want even the slightest discomfort'. That in itself shows why we need to meditate, because meditation is a technique that will definitely help to protect one's physical and mental wellbeing. Undertaking a meditation practice gradually increasing it day-by-day, whenever we can apply it appropriately, will definitely contribute, and indeed enhance our own wellbeing. With that in mind we can feel encouraged to take up the practice.

I have gone through the specifics of our sitting posture for meditation previously, so we need not spend time on that now. The main thing is to remind ourselves to be in a comfortable, relaxed but upright sitting posture. The next part of the meditation practice is making the commitment to ourselves, 'For the next few minutes, I am going to engage in the practice of meditation. So I will completely withdraw my attention from all other forms of distractions including random, discursive thoughts, good or bad. In this way we withdraw ourselves from external distractions and objects, and bring our full attention within ourselves. Having brought our focus inwards, we apply our attention and focus on the inner object. For the purposes of our meditation here we use our breath as our object to focus on, based on the natural rhythm of our in breath. Using that as a medium, we place our full attention and focus just on the breath, coming and going out. So thus for the next few minutes we place 100% focus on the breath itself and nothing else. So in this way we adopt the meditation practice.

[meditation]

It is really beneficial to apply this meditation technique regularly in our busy life. Are there is any questions? If so, please raise your hand.

Question: Geshe-la, you mentioned earlier about the importance of protecting our physical body, however I once read in a text, that we need to forsake even our own body in order to protect our mind. So, how is that to be understood?

Answer: There is a possibility that one can misinterpret the text that you mentioned. The misinterpretation would be that it is not necessary to protect your body, and that protecting your mind is most important. Basically the text

emphasises the need to protect one's mind because the consequences of not doing so are harder to see. The gravity of the consequences of destroying good intentions, good thoughts and good qualities of mind is much greater than not looking after the physical body.

But we need to protect ourselves both physically and mentally. Even worldly people are capable of acknowledging and understanding the need to protect one's physical body, whereas the need to protect one's mind is not so obvious, and therefore not readily understood by ordinary people.

Question: The same text explains that in order to practise we need to remove ourselves from our family and loved ones?

Answer: We need to understand the advice given in teachings in its proper context—we can't apply the same meaning to every circumstance. We can't take pieces from here and there saying, 'Now, how do we apply this?' We need to understand that advice might be on a higher level, for really great practitioners, who are dedicated to spending their whole time and energy on Dharma practice. For them, relatives and close ones can be detrimental to their practice. Being attached to your relatives or friends can actually hinder their progress when they take too much of their attention.

But if you relate that to ordinary people who are not engaged in serious practice then the advice might sound like, 'Oh, don't engage in any interaction with your family or friends'. On the one hand if there is no real Dharma practice, but on the other hand you are neglecting your own family and friends. I have a certain amount of experience with meditation. It is mentioned in the teachings that one of the main obstacles to progress in meditation practice is strong attachment. The great master, Shantideva, explained this in great detail in his works such as *The Bodhisattva's Way Of Life*. Of course if you don't have strong attachment, then there is no harm in relating to one's relatives and so forth.

I can relate this to my own experiences. I was very young when I went to Lhasa to study in the monastery. It was customary that after three years, if we so wished, and if we received permission, we could go back home. I really wanted to go back home to see my parents again but my teacher advised against that. So even though I had a strong longing to go home, I respected my teacher's advice and didn't go back at that time.

But because I failed to go back after three years, which my family was really looking forward to, the presents and financial support started to dry up! It was their way of making me feel desperate to go back home. Because I no longer had my small allowance from home I started to experience great difficulty and hardship in finding food and so forth. It was difficult. Nevertheless I persisted with my studies.

When not sending my allowance didn't work they sent messages saying, 'Have you abandoned us? Don't you love us anymore? How about your mother who is not well? You should really come back soon'. There were many different attempts to get me to go back home, but I stayed in the monastery. About four or five years after I had left home one of my cousins came to Lhasa to establish himself, and he opened a small shop. I went to visit him, and when he saw me in my very ragged clothes and looking quite malnourished, he said, 'You are crazy! You must be mad to live like this when you could go back home and be looked

after. Why stay here under these conditions? After this, I didn't go and visit him anymore.

Rather than distracting me from my studies and making lose my enthusiasm all of this coaxing from my family actually had the opposite effect. Every time I heard something about leaving my studies and going back home, it made my determination to stay on even stronger, despite being malnourished and not having good clothing and so forth. I saw my study as being very important and really necessary, and that became my priority. If I hadn't developed that strong determination to study I might easily have been persuaded. However far from encouraging me to come home, all of my family's efforts only strengthened my determination to stay.

In this country, the conditions are such that it is much harder for a monk to be respected. I have heard of cases that when someone wanted to be ordained and wear these robes, their family said, 'Don't come back wearing those robes!' Someone once confided in me that, after having met with Buddhism and determined to become ordained, old friends started to say, 'We can't go out with you any longer if you wear those clothes!'

To put things in context, in this country others may not understand what Buddhism is all about and so forth. They might be a bit concerned about what their neighbours or society in general will think about wearing such different clothes. In Tibet of course this is a common practice, that is understood by everyone. To give another example someone I know well, Sally, who is from Tasmania became interested in Buddhism. She travelled to India and spent many years in Dharamsala. I heard that her parents were saying, 'Our daughter has gone completely crazy! She must be mad to be staying in such a remote area'. They thought she was out of her mind.

Then she returned to Australia as an assistant to my own late teacher, Geshe Ngawang Dhargye. After coming to Melbourne they went to Tasmania. When she met them her parents were astonished. Sally was a different person, she was much kinder, and much calmer. They were really impressed with the transformation. After they had met Geshe Ngawang Dhargye themselves, they told her, 'You can travel with this teacher wherever he goes. If you are with him that's fine'. That's when she actually moved to New Zealand with Geshe Ngawang Dhargye. So we can encourage others by transforming ourselves.

The point is that the stronger our attachment to people and things, the more it affects our mind, and thus we can be influenced one way or another because of our attachment. That is the main thing we need to work at overcoming.

One of the factors necessary for ordination is leaving household life behind. There is specific term which translates as something like 'leaving home beyond home'. It implies that once you leave your ordinary lay life and your home then you don't turn and go back again. That means that you have made the strong determination that once you have set your mind to engaging in the practice of Dharma, you will not turn back to being involved in the lay community again.

In Tibet there is a region near Lhasa called Pempo. Apparently there was a prominent geshe there. A couple who had become quite wealthy through trade felt that something was missing in their life, and really felt like they needed to have children. So they went to the geshe and requested him to pray that they would have children. The

geshe replied, 'What more can you achieve? How could having children make you any happier? Why would not having children make you distraught?'

What the geshe was saying was that if you treat all the people in this region as your children, then you will have lots of children. That would mean that you've got many more people who are suffering, who you have to take care of. Whatever the country or region or province, there are always some people who are sick, some people who are getting old and some people who are dying. There is a continuous cycle of these things.

Thanks for the question. I got side-tracked a bit and, gave a very lengthy answer so excuse me for that! However, you did listen well, so thank you.

Geshe-la said in English, 'That's my story—not seeing my mother; poor, ragged clothing. For many years I didn't even have proper blankets!'

While I don't encourage you to go to the same lengths of hardship, if you do endure some difficulties and hardship, especially when you are young then, as I said earlier, having endured hardships in the early parts of my life I can confidently say that you will reap some good results. I have certainly had some good results—a joyful mind and a good physical body and everything else. So I encourage the young ones to not be daunted, to bear hardships and difficulties, to be persistent and adopt the good things, and good conditions.

You don't become rich by lying down and wishing to be rich, and then miraculously become rich. It's the same with saying, 'I need a nice car', 'I need money', 'I need good friends'. You actually need to exert yourself to reap good results.

The only thing that will happen from wishing like this is that but the mind becomes so busy with all these kind of different wishes and thoughts that you actually start to become deprived of sleep. That's the only thing to be gained from mere wishing. No sleep! Then you have hard time waking up early in the morning, and trying to face the day.

Thank you for listening.

Before we conclude this session, let us take the opportunity to spend a few minutes in meditation. This time as we place our entire focus and attention on the sound of the Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. As we hear this mantra we try to place our full attention on that sound. Then when the recitation subsides just maintain that attention and focus on that space.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

*Transcribed by Su Lan Foo
Edit 1 by Mary-Lou Considine and Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version*

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