
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

ལྷན་སྐྱོད་རྒྱལ་ལམ་རིམ་འབྲིང་བ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

22 May 2013

As usual we can spend some time in meditation. To do this we adopt a relaxed comfortable posture. It is good for us to understand the significance of the practice of meditation and how it can assist us. First of all we want to achieve happiness for ourselves. There are many ways to do this but the essential way of obtaining happiness is by protecting one's mind. We don't readily recognise and understand the importance of this for ourselves. We are more familiar with focusing outward and looking into external things as the cause of our happiness. In fact we spend most of our time and energy looking into external factors for happiness.

While this is a not a completely wrong approach, we don't achieve any lasting benefit from it. It is true that we do get some benefit from seeking outward material things that contribute to our happiness. But just spending all our time and energy focussing outwardly while neglecting to look into our mind, and protect those conditions within our mind that contribute to our happiness is detrimental to our overall sense of happiness and wellbeing.

The practical approach for us would be, instead of spending a one hundred percent of our time and energy focusing on external conditions, to spend at least fifty percent of our time looking inward and investigating the causes and conditions for happiness within us. That is highly recommended.

The shortcoming of our habituation and one hundred percent focus on acquiring external conditions for ourselves is that while we might be able to achieve a significant amount of resources for our wellbeing, we could actually end up not being totally satisfied and content within ourselves. That is because, by its very nature, the desire for external conditions cannot be satisfied. The more we get the more we want, and we are never really content. Therefore, though we may spend a lot of time and energy on acquiring external conditions we will never acquire enough for us to be completely satisfied and content.

We need to change our attitude towards acquiring external conditions. If we do acquire a certain amount wealth or good external conditions for our wellbeing we need to develop a sense of contentment. We need to feel, 'This is adequate and enough for me. I don't need to exert myself further because what I have obtained now is fine.' That sort of attitude would help us to be a little bit more content.

The moment we develop a sense of contentment with external, material things such as wealth the mind experiences immediate relief and settles down. Whereas

when we are not satisfied we experience an agitated mind. The mind starts to feel turmoil and it is as if our mind is being puffed up and we are not able to settle down.

It is the same in our relationships with our companions as it is with other external things. If a companion makes a suggestion and we can accept that and agree, 'If that is what you wish, then it's fine with me', then we feel at peace and settle down. If we constantly reject their suggestions and say, 'No that's not good enough for me, I won't accept that' then the more we reject their suggestions the more we feel real agitation in our mind. We cannot feel satisfied and happy because we are not able to agree with whatever has been suggested. This is a similar situation. If we can develop a sense of contentment it helps to appease the mind and it settles down and as a result we experience more peace. That is the point to recognise.

In common language we use the word 'satisfaction'. From a religious point of view we use the word 'contentment'. Contentment is that inner sense of feeling satisfied within one's inner being. Buddhist teachings use the term 'contentment' and there's a saying that 'The best wealth is contentment'. You will find the same message in Buddhism, Christianity and other spiritual traditions. Contentment is really what can bring us a true sense of satisfaction and happiness. This is true because the lack of contentment leads to an agitated mind.

When we think about it, the reason we need wealth is so that we can feel that our needs are taken care of and we can feel secure. If one develops a sense of contentment that 'what I have is sufficient' then that brings a sense of security to one's mind. Wealth is meant to give one a sense of security. If one develops a sense of contentment within oneself, then that provides security and suffices for wealth. So when we analyse the saying 'contentment is wealth' we find it to be very true. If we don't develop that sense of contentment we always seem to be dissatisfied and wanting more and more, which leads to lots of anxieties and worries. A person full of worries is not a happy person. If we are seeking happiness why would we intentionally destroy our own happiness with a lot of unnecessary worries and anxieties? This is the point we really need to consider. If we truly seek happiness then why not develop the conducive conditions to feel contentment within us.

The essential messages of other traditions such as Christianity are making the same point that is presented in the Buddhist teachings. His Holiness the Dalai Lama said at a gathering of thousands of people that the way that a Christian develops contentment and less desire is by having strong faith and belief in God. His Holiness further explained that having a strong belief and faith in God itself serves as a means to have less desire and brings about contentment. If one attributes whatever one has as a gift from God one develops a sense of being content and happy with what one receives. When one has such a strong belief then, whether things go well or don't go well, one attributes that to God and doesn't complain. Therefore, as His Holiness mentioned, that sense of ego, the 'I' in 'I'm not feeling well'; the strong self-cherishing

mind, can also be reduced. These are incredible points that His Holiness brought up within another tradition and show another way to work against the self-cherishing mind. For His Holiness to confidently share this with a big gathering shows the incredible insight he has into this.

Returning to the earlier discussion, meditation practice ultimately serves as a means to protect and subdue the mind. Subduing the mind means being able to bring our attention and focus inward, rather than completely exerting it externally. So we need to understand how we achieve happiness through subduing the mind. The opposite of subduing the mind is allowing the mind to be completely distracted by external phenomena. If the mind is distracted outwardly then all our energy is focused outwardly and the mind gets agitated and is in turmoil. That is the consequence of not having a subdued mind and it causes turmoil and unhappiness within one's mind.

Meditation is a technique to focus all our energy into one point. When one applies this technique of bringing one's whole focus and potential energy to one single point it appeases an agitated mind and the mind becomes naturally calm and tranquil. Because it distances the mind from external factors it is the reverse of being completely distracted. The way to contain one's mind using this technique is by choosing one object to focus on. It has to be an appropriate object, an object that does not cause delusions such as anger to arise. Having chosen the appropriate object, when one applies one's full attention and focus to that object one's mind becomes contained within and is not dispersed. Because it is not dispersed externally in all directions the mind naturally becomes tranquil and calm.

So, in order to meditate, we need to identify an object. The object should be something that we are all already familiar with. If we are not familiar with an object we will not be able to have mindfulness when we focus on it. We will not be able to be mindful because we are not familiar with it.

The two main tools of meditation practice are mindfulness and introspection. Mindfulness involves being able to bring the object to mind. Therefore, as explained in the teachings, the object needs to be one that one is already familiar with because one cannot possibly bring to mind of an object that one is not familiar with.

There are three attributes of mindfulness: The first is to focus on a familiar object. The second is to maintain a constant stream of awareness on the object. The third is that one should not waiver from the object. So these are the three attributes of mindfulness.

Introspection is another part of the mind that checks whether that mindfulness is intact at all times and that there is a constant stream of mindfulness upon the object. Introspection checks whether the mind is still focused and is continuously mindful of the object or not. The function of introspection is to bring the mind back again if it waivers.

Having discussed the technique of meditation we can now apply this technique for a few minutes. Let us re-

adjust our physical posture so that we are in an upright, comfortable, relaxed posture. We make a commitment within our mind that, 'For the next few minutes during this meditation, I will not allow my mind to be distracted by other objects such as discursive thoughts and so forth.' We bring our mind's focus completely within and the object of focus is our own breath. Then we apply a one hundred percent focus on the breath itself and don't allow the mind to focus on anything else. We will apply this technique now and spend a few minutes in meditation. (*Pause for meditation*).

It would be good for everyone to try to implement regular meditation, just as we have attempted in our short session now, in their everyday life. We will find that there is some benefit, particularly when our mind is in turmoil or agitated. If we can apply this technique of focusing on our breath it can really help settle the mind and even that temporary relief while we meditate is really beneficial.

When we are not in a formal meditation session and we are pursuing our everyday life we can train ourselves in analysing the state of our mind. Analysing our mind means looking into the kinds of thoughts that go through our mind and being able to distinguish between positive thoughts and negative thoughts. It is only by making the distinction between positive and negative thoughts that we can recognise for ourselves what is going on in our mind.

If we find negative thoughts we should try to get rid of these thoughts and increase our positive thoughts. This is the way to increase our mental stability and wellbeing. We can all identify within ourselves certain thought patterns or attitudes that have no sound basis. It is not really logical to be thinking in that way and it causes unnecessary worries and anxieties within us. What's the use of dwelling on certain kinds of thoughts that create unnecessary worries and anxieties?

These worries may even cause loss of sleep. Some people have confided in me that they couldn't sleep well the previous night. Sometimes they say that this relates to their work. They might have sent an email or something and they are worried about it. They lost a night's sleep worrying about the email. This is really an unfortunate state to find ourselves in.

If we made it a habit to analyse our thoughts and ways of thinking we would increase the deeper sense of intelligence within us. In Buddhism we call this wisdom. When we develop that wisdom within us it really assists us and becomes our unfailing companion in whatever we do and whatever predicament we are in.

We all face the issue of making decisions in life. Sometimes we might be faced with a situation where we are completely lost. That happens when we are not able to resort to our inner wisdom. What would the outcome in that situation be if we regularly analysed our thoughts and our attitudes in relation to the situation around us? If we undertake that analysis we would be able to make good judgement of what to do and what not to do. That good judgement comes from our own inner wisdom.

This doesn't, of course, mean that we don't listen to others. We might still seek advice from others in certain situations but we can't rely on always being able to run to someone else. We need to be able to make the right choices ourselves. We need to be able to stand up for ourselves and use our wisdom to make right choices. This is something I regularly emphasise and I do so out of a genuine sense of kindness and concern for you. I want you to know how to be best able to assist yourself. This is something that really we need to think about it.

Another important point is that we need to have some discipline within our mind. Whatever we do requires discipline. It is not just a religious practise. Everything that we do in life requires discipline. Our thought patterns, the choices we make, how we conduct ourselves internally, all require discipline. We need to try to develop a regular, personal discipline so that whatever situations we find ourselves in we will be able to keep our integrity. It is through our own personal discipline that we will not fall for whatever is going round and be able to maintain our dignity and integrity by making the right choices. Making the right choices comes from our experience.

The great master Shantideva, out of his great kindness, offered advice on these matters. He said that before we engage in any activity it is best to first to weigh the outcomes. Is this something that I will be able to manage to do or not? What is the outcome? Having weighed the pros and cons of the situation, having found that it is manageable and that you can comfortably engage in this action, then do it. If one finds that one is not able to do that then it is better to not even start. Just leave it, don't get involved from the beginning.

The main point of Shantideva's advice is that if you begin something and don't complete it then that, in itself, becomes a habit, whereby you tend to do many things but leave them unfinished. You start something but leave it unfinished. You start something else and leave that unfinished. This, in itself, becomes a bad habit.

4.2.2.1.2.3. The way to train the mind in the stages of the path of beings of the great scope

4.2.2.1.2.3.2. The actual paths

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2. How to develop an awakening mind

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1. The stages of training the awakening mind

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.1. Training the mind in the pith instructions on the six causes and effect, which comes from the lineage traced to the great master Atisha

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.1.2. Extensive explanation

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.1.2.2. The actual training in the stages

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.1.2.2.1. Training the mind to strive for the welfare of others

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.1.2.2.1.2. The actual development of the mind that strives for others' welfare

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.1.2.2.1.2.2. Cultivating compassion

We can now go on with the text a bit. We are continuing on with the subject of love, particularly on developing love. How to meditate on love was explained in the previous sessions. The systematic sequence for

developing love that is presented in the teachings is very helpful.

The teachings say that firstly one should focus one's love on one's relatives and one's close ones. One develops a genuine concern and sense of love through focusing on those beings. Then, after having become familiar with developing love with relatives and close ones, we focus it on to strangers. After having become familiar with developing love for strangers we would be able to focus on enemies, and develop love for one's enemies or those that we disagree with. In this way one increases one's focus to all living beings.

This systematic presentation of how to develop love is a very reasonable, very logical way to approach love. The ultimate objective is, of course, to develop love for all sentient beings. The teachings make a point, which will be explained more specifically later on, that it may only be an assumption that we have developed love for all sentient beings when we have the general sense of, 'Yes, I have love for all sentient beings'. We might have that sense of love for all sentient beings in general, but if it does not have a good sound basis, and is not structurally embedded with strong foundations, it may be only an assumption that we are having developing love for all sentient beings. When we focus on a particular sentient being we may not actually feel love for them. When we focus generally on all sentient beings it may seem that we have love for all beings but when we start focusing on someone who is disagreeable one may start questioning whether one has that love.

The systematic approach to overcome this risk is to first meditate on those who are close to us, relatives and close ones. There is a point to this. First of all, we find that it is naturally easier to develop or feel love for those who are kind or close to us. Generally speaking it is easier to develop love for them. We don't have to exert ourselves too much to feel love for someone we feel close too.

The aim here is to develop a general sense of concern and true unconditional love towards those we consider close. Familiarity with unconditional love will help us when we shift our focus to strangers or people that we feel indifferent towards. It will become a little bit easier to feel unconditional love for strangers or those we feel indifferent towards because of our earlier familiarity with these states of mind.

Then, when we are familiar with that, we shift our focus to those we call enemies. If you feel you don't have enemies then it may be people that you have disagreements with. If we don't feel a genuine sense of unconditional love for our close and dear ones it is impossible for us to think that we will be able to develop unconditional love for a stranger or an enemy. Therefore we have to begin with those we are close with. Then that familiarity can be carried on to others and then the wider perspective of all sentient beings.

This approach to cultivating unconditional love by focusing on objects in systematic way is also true for developing compassion. It is the same. First focus on close or dear ones then focus on strangers and then enemies.

The text then explains the way to meditate to cultivate love and compassion within oneself. First the teachings explain developing compassion. The object for developing compassion is others who are experiencing various forms of suffering and one wishes them to be free from that suffering. That wish for them to be free from suffering is said to be the actual element of compassion.

The process is the same to develop love. The object is again others, this time those who are deprived of happiness. When one sees the plight of those lacking happiness one develops a keen, genuine wish for them to be endowed with happiness. That is the sense of love that one develops towards the other.

An important point to note here is that meditating on love is different to meditating on the breath. When we meditate on the breath there is an object that is the breath and there is a separate mind focusing on it. There is a subjective and objective distance. Whereas when you meditate on love the mind itself is generated into the aspect of love. The mind itself transforms into loving kindness. This is the difference when meditating on love.

Having focused on others who lack happiness the mind that wishes them to be endowed with happiness is the actual love. The way to meditate on how others are lacking happiness is to focus on the various forms of happiness. There are numerous forms of happiness that others experience. Generally there are two types of happiness that can be distinguished. These are contaminated and uncontaminated happiness. Contaminated happiness refers to fleeting sensual pleasures. There can be physical contaminated happiness and mental contaminated happiness, which are experienced as the five sense pleasures. Uncontaminated happiness is a genuine sense of bliss.

When we think about the various forms of contaminated happiness, normal worldly pleasures, we realise that there are many beings who are deprived of this. There are various forms of pleasures. There are pleasures in relation to the eye sense such as being in contact with beautiful sights. Many people are deprived of having beautiful sights. They lack the happiness of beautiful sights. In relation to ear sense there are beautiful sounds. There are many people who are deprived of hearing beautiful sounds. They lack that opportunity. We could also examine nice tastes, nice smells, and nice tactile feeling in relation to our body senses. There are many forms of contaminated happiness in relation to the five senses experienced on the physical level that many beings are deprived of.

Then we can go into mental happiness, a sense of wellbeing or contentment. There are various forms of mental happiness that beings are deprived of. When we really think about it in detail we come to recognise that there are numerous objects of happiness that beings are deprived of. Even when we focus on one sentient being we will realise that they are deprived of many forms of happiness. Leaving aside uncontaminated happiness for a while, they even lack contaminated happiness. When we think about this again and again in great detail we begin to get a genuine sense of how unfortunate and pitiful that situation is.

We meditate on how wonderful it would be if they were endowed with happiness and had all the forms of physical and mental happiness. We begin with contaminated happiness but then, more importantly, wish them to be endowed with uncontaminated happiness.

When we reach a point where our mind becomes really imbued and very familiar with that strong intention for them to be endowed with happiness we develop a sense that, 'May they be endowed with happiness and may I be able to lead them to the state of happiness'. It is in that way one takes the personal responsibility for leading them to the state of happiness. This is how one meditates on love.

When one meditates and focuses in that way we come to the point of not only wishing them to be happy but making the resolve that, 'I myself will ensure that they are endowed with happiness'. When one makes that strong, keen resolve then that is when one is taking on the personal responsibility of ensuring that others are happy. When one takes on that responsibility one does so within one's capacity. To the best of our ability, we take the initiative to ensure that they are happy.

As mentioned previously, we start with our close ones, such as relatives and dear ones. How incredible would that be to take the responsibility to ensure that our close and dear ones are happy?

Before we conclude this session for the evening, let us again take this opportunity to spend a few minutes in meditation. This time we use the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra being recited as an object to focus on. While the mantra is being recited we try to withdraw from all other forms of distraction, thoughts and so forth, and place our full attention and focus upon the sound of the mantra. While it is being recited we completely hold a one hundred percent focus on that sound and then, when the sound subsides, we maintain our awareness in that space or vacuity for a few moments. We can spend the next few minutes in meditation in this way.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

Transcribed by Kim Foon Looi

Edit 1 by John Burch

Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

Edited Version

© Tara Institute