

---

# *Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*

ལྷོ་མཛེས་རྒྱལ་ལམ་རིམ་འབྲིང་བ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

10 July 2013

---

As usual we can spend some time in meditation. When we consider the significance of meditation, we first need to contemplate who we are as an individual. This is done by looking at ourselves and seeing what is there.

When we examine what makes us an individual, we see that we identify with a “me” and an “I”. We also see that, along with this self-identification of “me” and “I”, we have a physical body and mind. In fact, we are able to see that wherever our sense of self-identity goes, our physical body and mind travels too. This is the reality of our existence.

Since the “I” and “me” has a body and mind, we consider ourselves to be well when our bodies and our minds are well. We will say, “I’m well”, when asked, “How are you?”, because we are referring to our bodies and minds being in a healthy state. Thus, I regularly emphasise, again and again, that the most important assets for our personal wellbeing are our physical and mental health; in fact, nothing else directly contributes to our wellbeing. We need to recognise this crucial point, and really consider and acknowledge it, so that we understand its importance.

Since our individual wellbeing is reliant on our physical and mental health, paying attention to and taking care of our bodies and minds is a reasonable pursuit. We also need to recognise that there will always be opposing and conducive factors to our wellbeing. Therefore, we need to determine what these conditions are.

In relation to our body, we need to ask ourselves what factors oppose our physical wellbeing. By recognising what is detrimental to our bodies and what harms us physically, we are better placed to try and avoid those conditions. We can also ask ourselves what factors benefit our bodies, and through identifying the conducive conditions for our physical welfare, we can pay our utmost attention to adopt them. Similarly, we can apply this process of identification to recognising what the opposing factors and conducive conditions are for our mental wellbeing.

Out of the two aspects of our wellbeing, our mental health is of primary importance. This is because our mental happiness has the most significant contribution to our overall wellbeing. We can relate to this by recognising that when our minds are in a clear and sound state, our individual wellbeing is optimal. This is a very important point to acknowledge and really understand. The point leads us to recognise that paying attention to promoting our mental happiness—how to develop and increase it—is the essential way of looking after

ourselves. Therefore, concentrating on establishing what opposes and what encourages our mental happiness is reasonable.

When we investigate the opposing and conducive factors for our mental wellbeing, we might automatically think that they are factors that are external to us. For example, we might think the conducive conditions for our mental wellbeing are things like having good friends, or having a certain amount of wealth so that we are comfortable. We relate to these external factors as being the conducive conditions that contribute to our mental happiness, and, of course, to a certain degree, these things do contribute to our mental wellbeing. Having good friends and good resources to sustain ourselves does contribute to our mental health to an extent. But what we need to really recognise through investigation and scrutiny is that the primary cause for our mental wellbeing is not external but internal. We need to recognise that the main and real contributing factors for our mental happiness lie within us.

So, what are the inner causes and conditions that affect our mental wellbeing? If we investigate, we will see that positive thoughts and attitudes are mindsets which contribute to a clear and happy state of mind, but negative thoughts and attitudes are discursive because they distract us from our happiness and contribute to a negative state of mind. The more we associate with negative thoughts and attitudes, the more our minds are disturbed. This is because negative thoughts and attitudes are what causes our inner turmoil and what contributes to our lack of mental wellbeing. We need to pinpoint this phenomenon for ourselves and through doing so understand that our mental disturbances are really caused by our own disturbing thoughts.

We might now be wondering whether the opposing factors that harm our mental happiness can be overcome. Can negative thoughts and attitudes be eradicated from our minds? We need to contemplate this question. We also need to think about positive thoughts and attitudes. Is developing and strengthening positive mindsets possible? These kinds of questions are significant because if we really ponder them and personally analyse them, a deep sense of intelligence, or what Buddhism calls “wisdom”, will develop. Serious contemplation is how we cultivate our inner wisdom. We need to reach our own conclusions because inner analysis is what leads to conviction.

I can advise you now, however, that negative states of mind can definitely be overcome because there are antidotes that oppose them. Further, we all have the ability to eradicate negative states of mind. Likewise, positive states of mind can be developed and increased. We all have the basis for positive states of mind—we just need to recognise that we have it so we can cultivate beneficial mindsets. As this is the case, we all definitely have the means and the tools in us to eliminate negative states of mind and develop positive attitudes. Knowing that we have the tools, we need to exert ourselves to use them. We might see that we have the ability and potential to eradicate negative attitudes and develop positive states of mind, but if we just sit around and do nothing, then

---

---

nothing will happen. We must exert ourselves and apply what we know.

So, what tools do we use to prevent ourselves from being dominated by negative states of mind? First, we need to recognise how we are influenced by our minds, which in turn are influenced by negative thoughts or attitudes. Negative thoughts and attitudes are what determine our behaviour and also our characters. From this we can see that our behaviour and characters are determined by negative states, because we as individuals have not taken control of our minds. Instead, we have let our minds be influenced by negativities. For as long as we allow our minds to be influenced and dominated by negative states, we will be compelled to act in ways that are negative, and our damaging attitudes will also govern our characters.

When we recognise this for ourselves, we can apply a technique to change the situation; we can change how our minds are influenced by taking control of them. Having control over our minds means we don't allow our minds to be influenced by negativities. We own our minds, so we can make the determination and decide not to let our minds be influenced by negative thoughts, attitudes and emotions. When we have control over our minds, and don't allow them to be influenced by negativities, then we have become our own master. If we have mastered ourselves, we can ensure that our minds are influenced by positive thoughts, attitudes and emotions. This consequently affects our behaviour and characters in a positive way.

Meditation is the technique that helps you to take control of your mind so that you can master yourself. It is the means to ensure that your hyperactive mind is focused on positive objects and not swayed or distracted by negative objects. Meditating involves choosing an appropriate inner object and deciding to focus on it. Your choice and determination to maintain your focus is virtuous because it is how you divert yourself from all the forms of distraction you are usually occupied with. By choosing to focus on an appropriate inner object, you completely distance yourself from objects that cause you inner turmoil, because you have diverted your attention away from them. Your mind is then able to experience a release from its typical focus on negative objects, and your disturbing states of mind will lessen and eventually cease. The result of the cessation of discursive states of mind is experienced as a sense of inner tranquillity, which is a blissful feeling. The blissful feeling we experience is a direct result of meditating on an appropriate inner object. Our experience of feeling bliss may be momentary or very short, but the more we familiarise ourselves with it, through developing our meditation practice, the more the feeling expands. We can summarise a meditation practice as being a technique that familiarises us with focusing on a positive object in order to relieve our minds of discursive states. The effect of eradicating discursive states of mind is experienced as the bliss of tranquillity, and this feeling of bliss will become longer and more stable as our meditation practice develops.

You can use this brief introduction to the technique of meditation as the basis to understand how every style of

meditation works. There are many different forms of meditation, but no matter which technique you adopt and no matter what inner object you choose, understanding the process and the reasons behind a meditation practice is vital. We need to remember that the essence of every meditation technique is to familiarise ourselves with focusing on positive objects so that we distance ourselves from negative distractions. Meditating is nothing more than familiarising our minds to be positive.

We may now see that the causes and conditions for individual mental happiness lie within the individual's own mind. Your mental happiness is in your own hands because only you have control over it. Put simply, only you have the power to determine whether you are going to be happy or not.

Your physical happiness is mostly related to external conditions, so controlling them is usually restricted, but your inner happiness has the potential to be limitless because only you have complete control over it. As this is the case, protecting your mind is crucial. You must guard your mind by paying careful attention to it and recognise that a meditation practice is the ideal method to protect your mind from negativities.

The great Indian master Shantideva said, "If you wish to protect your mind, apply mindfulness and introspection." Mindfulness and introspection are the essential tools to shield your positive and virtuous states of mind. The first tool, mindfulness, is the state of mind that constantly remembers the virtuous object; its function is to continuously remember the mind's positive focus. The second tool, introspection, is the state of mind that keeps a constant vigilance over the mind by checking its focus has not drifted; introspection's function is to continually monitor whether the mind has been distracted from the virtuous object and bring the focus back to the object if it is not there already. Mindfulness and introspection are essential for our focus when meditating, but they are also essential outside of our meditation practice. In our daily lives, they ensure we do not get carried away, or influenced by negative states of mind. Shantideva emphasised mindfulness and introspection to us because they are the main tools to safeguard our happiness. So, I appeal to you, with my palms joined together, to please endeavour to do just that—use mindfulness and introspection to protect your mind.

We can now spend a few minutes in meditation. I have explained the details of the meditation posture previously, but the most relevant aspect is to sit in an upright and comfortable posture. Establishing your determination to not allow your mind to be distracted with external objects for the next few minutes is important. To meditate we need to have discipline. You can say to yourself that you will do your best to bring your full attention within and not to let any thoughts or attitudes divert your focus from the chosen object. An inner focus is needed because we will not be able to maintain our focus if there is no object to focus on—just bringing our minds within ourselves may not be sustainable for very long. So, choosing an object for

---

meditation is essential for us. The inner object you can choose to focus on now can be the natural inflow and outflow of your breathing pattern. We can use mindfulness to be fully aware of the breath coming in and going out, and introspection to check our focus is on the breath. This is the meditation technique we will adopt for the next few minutes. [*Pause for meditation.*]

That will be sufficient for now. We don't have too much time left in the session because I have spoken so much about the benefits of meditation! [*Everyone laughs.*] However, there is time to go through the text a little bit, unless anyone has any questions.

*Question:* I find focusing inward difficult, so can I focus on something external to calm me down instead?

*Geshe-la:* The technique of focusing on an inner object presented earlier was a single-pointed meditation. Not everyone will find this technique suitable initially; they may find it does not really work for them. So to those people I often suggest they go for a walk, go for a swim, or take a break instead. Why not do something relaxing to take you out of your busy mind? Spending time relaxing when you have a busy life is appropriate, and relaxing is particularly appropriate for someone who attempts the inner-object technique, but finds it stressful. We have missed the point of the meditation if we become too tense. I recently told an older person who was having difficulty with his meditation not to worry. He likes to swim, so I said, "Each time you lift up your arm and take a stroke, think about that action and focus on it." I told him that just focusing on that action mindfully as he swims is sufficient and he seemed appreciative of what I said. Others here now who find focusing on an inner object difficult may not realise that there are more techniques; they might curl up a little and do nothing. [*Geshe-la demonstrates timid and uncertain body language*] So knowing there are other meditation methods is important, rather than thinking that one form of meditation does not work so nothing will work. If you are already tense, meditating might not be appropriate, but you could do something active instead by going out and moving around, so that the energy can flow in your body. I've noticed that exercise regimes, like boot camps where you really exert yourself, help to calm very stressed people. These sort of techniques are appropriate and worthwhile to adopt. The main point is to find a way out of the spiral of thoughts that might be going around and around your head—the sort of thoughts we might be obsessed with—because they are the kinds of negativities that can cause you to feel down and depressed. Doing something different to divert your attention, like changing scenes, gentle exercise or hard physical exertion, can help you to come out of that spiral.

*Question:* What about playing music? I like rock music and I like to play drums.

*Geshe-la:* Normally I suggest listening to music which is calming! [*Everyone laughs.*] We have lullabies for toddlers and babies to soothe them and help them to go to sleep, so we can see that some kinds of music help our minds become less agitated and excited. I think gentle and soothing music is conducive to settling the mind; rock and pop music tends to stimulate us and make us restless.

Ultimately though, you need to use whatever technique works for you and helps to settle your mind. It is really unfortunate that we get caught in this state of mind and become so agitated and disturbed. Therefore, to protect your mind from this state, find a technique that works for you and use it for a day or even for a few hours. Having a technique that helps you to come out of negative states of mind is useful and it prevents negative spirals of uncontrolled thoughts. [*Geshe-la says in English that he likes listening to orchestras. He says he really likes them and thinks they are very nice. He also says that he likes the ballet. He says the ballet is very nice. He says that when you watch the ballet, no attachment, anger, jealousy, or sadness arise because all you are doing is watching, and that's good.*] Drawing can be a good distraction too, for example if you focus on copying an illustration and colour it in, that would divert your attention from other disturbing thoughts, which is useful.

These solutions I've mentioned help appease an agitated mind and although they are temporary, they are worthwhile because they make the mind more tranquil. Buddhism specifically recommends the technique of focusing on the breath as a short-term solution to pacify a very discursive mind. For most beginners, elaborate meditations are not possible straight away, so focusing on the breath is presented as a basic but worthwhile meditation for a busy mind. Of course, different meditations will have different effects on different individuals. One man, who used to regularly come to the teachings here, told me he found overlooking a cliff to the ocean and watching the waves worked best to calm his mind.

I appreciate your honesty in sharing what you feel; sharing is good because others may feel the same way, so thank you. I've always taken the approach of being relaxed about which meditation technique to do because presenting only one way of doing something will not suit everyone.

Are there any other questions?

*Question:* I was recently at a funeral and found it difficult to maintain a positive state of mind, because I was thinking about the friends and relatives left behind. Do you have any suggestions for this kind of situation?

*Geshe-la:* There are different ways of approaching this. First, though, we need to understand that usually great sadness arises because we are not fully accepting the reality of the situation at hand. If we reflect upon death being a natural process of life, something inevitable, and something we will all go through, we will more easily accept its reality. This acceptance of death as a reality can help appease our minds. If you feel for those who are grieving, you may feel sad yourself, so rather than following and dwelling in that sadness, you can recognise they have a reason to be sad because someone close to them has died. You can then turn the feeling into a positive one by wishing them well and developing a sense of compassion for them. Compassion is not dwelling in the sadness yourself, but feeling for them in a positive way; your compassion for them can appease their minds because of your genuine condolence and the feeling of compassion is beneficial for you too.

---

Certainly, when parents, children and partners die, there can be a genuine sadness, but sometimes people might join the grieving process because their own issues make them feel sad, so they cry too. Also, for some, when a parent passes away, the sadness can be a sense of regret that they did not do more for that parent when he or she was alive. My close acquaintances know that I think spending time with your parents when they are alive and developing a strong bond with them as much as you can, is good. Most people may not consider their parents as enemies, but nevertheless some people do distance themselves from them and do not pay them much attention. Then, when a parent passes away, they develop guilt or regret for not having done more for their parent when they had the chance. So to avoid this happening to you, I suggest you take the time to develop connections with your parents while they are still around. This may be difficult, but you can remember that the person is your mother or your father, and for that reason alone you can try to maintain a connection. There may be past problems and issues to deal with, but not focusing on them is best. I have heard that at joyous occasions, like a Christmas gathering, the father or mother may bring up all sorts of issues that makes everyone uncomfortable. Of course, from their side, they might think that the occasion is an opportunity they rarely get! [*Laughter.*]

Those who have worked in aged care have told me that grandchildren might visit once in a while, but the children often don't come. Then, when the parent passes away, they cry and there seems to be a big fuss, sometimes because of the inheritance. That is a very unfortunate situation. So while we may not stop others from doing this, we need to take the initiative and not follow their example.

Thank you for the questions. They were all geared towards adopting positive attitude, so they were good.

Before we conclude, we can again spend a few minutes in meditation. This time the object to focus on can be the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. Before we begin, we can again make the commitment to distance our mind from all other thoughts and objects, and place our full attention on the sound of the mantra. The moment the recitation subsides, there will be a sort of vacuity where the sound was. We can focus on that space too; doing so can be useful for our minds. Some people have commented to me that they would prefer to focus on nothing rather than choose a tangible object to focus on. Focusing on the space left behind from the mantra could be a good temporary form of meditation to appease your mind. So, in this way, we will spend the next few minutes in meditation.

*Transcribed by Kim Foon Looi  
Edit 1 by Tanya Simmons  
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe  
Edited Version  
© Tara Institute*

*TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA*