
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Spending some time in meditation would be good for us. So, for that purpose, we can sit in a comfortable and relaxed posture. It is good to remember that meditating is an attempt to train the mind not to be in an unruly and hyperactive state.

One of the most important aspects of meditation is to develop a good motivation for the practice. This good motivation or intention needs to be developed on both sides, from yours and mine, to secure a positive outcome.

The optimum motivation for meditating would be to dedicate our practice for the benefit of all others so that it directly becomes a cause to benefit them. In fact, doing anything with that intention is really worthwhile, because the more you familiarise your mind with the wish to benefit others the more it will benefit oneself. This is because the attitude of wishing to help others is an optimum cause for genuine wellbeing. Put simply, you will experience real contentment if you familiarise your mind with the wish to benefit others. You can investigate and check this out for yourselves to see whether it is true.

On a practical level, when you familiarise your mind with the genuine attitude of wishing to benefit others, you will experience great joy and happiness whenever you see things are going well for other people. This is contrary to feeling uneasy and unhappy when you see others making progress. Experiencing real joy and happiness when we see others doing well—whether we are personally acquainted with them or not—is an essential achievement derived from familiarising our minds with the wish to benefit all. Contemplating this consequence of cultivating a true sense of wishing to benefit others is something we all need to do.

Of course, if you develop a genuine sense of love and compassion for others in an unbiased state of mind, you will be prevented from having any sort of harmful intention towards others. A genuine wish to benefit others and not wishing to harm them is an incredible and far-reaching state of mind that, in itself, benefits everyone including yourself.

Thinking about a parent's concern for a child is a good way for us to understand the joy we can have by seeing others doing well and being happy. Parents naturally have a great concern for their children to do well in every aspect of their lives. When a child grows up and is able to manage and be self-reliant in securing his or her own wellbeing, a great sense of relief, joy and happiness is brought to the parent's mind. You can see how much benefit this assurance of a child's wellbeing has for a parent's mind and you can see that the experience is

definitely one that parents have. Even if you do not have children to experience this kind of genuine concern yourself, you can relate to it by thinking about your partner, a friend, or someone you are close to, who is doing well. When everything is going well for that person, you do have a sense of joy and happiness in your mind, don't you? So, we all definitely have had this experience.

The sense of joy and happiness we feel comes about because of our mindset of wishing to benefit the other person. The more we train our minds to have the attitude of wishing to benefit others, the more we can increase it to extend from our close dear ones to others we don't know well, and then further to strangers, and then still further to even include our enemies—people we would not normally be concerned about or feel joy for. The attitude of genuine love and compassion is so powerful that you can eventually feel joy for your enemies! Training your mind in this way is therefore of great practical benefit because it is a source of so much joy and happiness.

We can use our own experience to notice the advantage of this mindset for ourselves. When others show a genuine sense of concern for us and a wish to benefit us, we feel joyful, and if their attitude makes us happy, then our similar approach to others will have the same effect. Your genuine concern and wish to help others will naturally be appreciated by them. The practicality and benefit of this attitude is very precious. I cannot claim that I am capable of doing great levels of practices, but I do, at the very least, try to maintain a genuine sense of wishing others well and thinking how I can best assist them. Since I have that attitude wherever I go, I seem to be able to relate to others in a nice way and they also seem to be joyful when they see me. This has been my experience and I attribute it to familiarising myself with the attitude of wishing others well and to be of benefit to them.

An important point to note here is that extending this genuine attitude to all others does not compromise your wellbeing. On the contrary, this attitude contributes to it by increasing your sense of joy and happiness. We need to remember this because often the reason we are hesitant about showing genuine concern for others because we feel we might lose out, which is not the case at all.

Someone who is familiar with the attitude of genuine concern for others always wishes to benefit them in the best possible way, and the more that person is acquainted with that attitude, the more it will naturally induce a sense of great joy and happiness when others are doing well. This is how the noble beings, what Buddhist teachings call bodhisattvas, train their minds. Bodhisattvas actively dedicate their entire time and energy in benefitting others. It is their core practice. The only concern in a bodhisattva's mind is how best to benefit others; and they are always joyful and happy. Understanding and contemplating this is essential because putting this attitude into practice will provide you and others with real benefit, which is why I remind you and emphasise this point again and again. You can generate this attitude each time you meditate by making

the motivation for your practice the wish to benefit others.

Whatever you do, wherever you go and whatever situation you find yourself in, your mind accompanies you. Your thoughts and attitudes are always with you, so attempting to generate positive mindsets and thoughts, and familiarising yourself with them is practical and beneficial. Thus, practising to place your mind in a positive state is essential for your wellbeing. It is also essential for others that you do this, because you need to associate, relate and live with them. We often hear people say that their friend or companion only thinks of himself or herself and not about them, so that's why they don't get along. A self-absorbed person is usually the reason why there is a falling out between friends. If you have the feeling or notice that others are only thinking about themselves or their own interests, it does affect you, and ultimately the relationship. The communication in a relationship is not good if the other person carries that attitude. Therefore, you need to ensure that you don't fall in that category too and become self-absorbed by thinking only about yourself and your own interests. Instead, you need to generate the attitude of wishing to benefit the other person.

All the points I have mentioned relate to what Buddhists call a "Dharma practice", which is their spiritual practice. The literal sense of *dharma* has a connotation to uphold or to restrain, which is the essence of what a Dharma practice is. If you are practising Dharma, you are withholding your mind from negativities and negative attitudes. Whenever you apply a method or technique to restrain your mind from negativity, you are engaging in, by definition, a practice of Dharma.

I have outlined some practical reasons for avoiding negative attitudes and cultivating positive ones. All you need to do now is investigate what I have said and decide whether to implement my advice. To do this, you can remember the concern parents have for their children and how you feel about your close friends as examples of the altruistic wish to benefit others. These examples show that you have this attitude in yourself already—in fact, we all have the basis of positive attitudes within us already. Since this is the case, you can work on and increase the positive attitudes you already have. There is no need to feel you are setting yourself up for failure because what you are trying to obtain is too great or too noble. Instead, you can be practical and work on what you've already got and build your practice from there.

The best way to build your practice is to implement your positive approach with the people you associate with in your everyday life, particularly those you share your life with. If you live together, eat together, have a good time together, share your earnings with each other and so on, then, that is someone you share your life with, and you need to ensure that this person receives your positive attitude. If you do that, the relationship and time you have together will be joyful and harmonious, which is practical and beneficial.

Your good intention or motivation for your meditation sessions is related to your Dharma practice because it encompasses the recognition that you already have the

altruistic wish to help others within you. It just needs just to be recognised and further increased.

[*Geshe-la says in English that he has the wish to benefit others in himself too. He says his altruistic attitude is very small, and jokes that a microscope would be needed to see it. Everybody laughs.*]

These points are essential and most beneficial in your life because they are the basis for real happiness. They are your doorway to real inner peace and wellbeing.

I have explained at length the motivation that is required for meditating, but reminding yourself what your motivation is in your everyday actions is important too.

We can now spend some time in meditation.

All forms of meditation require an object of focus, so in order to meditate we need to choose an appropriate object to place our full attention on. The object that we will choose for our meditation now will be our own breath. The breath is something we can all recognise, so it is an easy object to identify and attend to.

When we place our full attention and focus solely on the breath, we automatically withdraw from all other forms of distractions, which naturally makes our minds tranquil and calm. This is because our focus on the breath prevents us from developing either attachment on the one hand or anger on the other. Attachment and anger are the two main states of mind that cause us angst and inner turmoil at any given time.

The most suitable state of mind to be in is one free from attachment and anger, because when the mind is obsessed by either of these attitudes, it is not in a stable condition; rather it is completely agitated with either excitement or aversion. If we attempt to do an analytical meditation while we are agitated, we will not be successful because our mind will be too disturbed. However, focusing on the breath will naturally settle the mind so that it is free from attachment or anger.

Using the breath as a mediation object is significant because it is a neutral object, so by choosing to focus on it, there will be no cause for attachment or anger to arise. Further, our entire focus on a neutral object, like the breath, will cause attachment and anger to subside, because even the choice of our meditation object is free from these two extremes. Thus, focusing on the breath is a very, very significant and meaningful practice because it is greatly beneficial for the mind.

So, for the next few minutes we bring our full attention within by focusing 100 per cent on our breathing pattern. By placing our attention on the appropriate and neutral object of the breath, we will be able to withdraw from all thoughts and forms of distractions. [*Breathing meditation.*]

That should be sufficient for now. Meditating regularly for a short time in the manner we just attempted would be a good habit to adopt.

We can now read from the text and cover some of its content.

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

The material we have studied so far is on the topic of generating compassion. Our recent sessions described what the *object* of compassion is and what *aspect* compassion takes. Briefly, the object of our compassion is living sentient beings experiencing any of the three types of suffering; the aspect of compassion is wishing for beings experiencing suffering to be free from it and taking the initiative to be the one to make that happen. The text now outlines the stages of how to develop compassion.

First, we will recap what compassion and love mean according to Buddhist teachings. Compassion is defined as a state of mind that focuses on the suffering of other beings, and through not bearing to think of them suffering, and wishing them to be free of it. Love is defined as a state of mind that focuses on other beings who are deprived of happiness, and through not bearing to see other beings unhappy, wishing them to have genuine happiness. These definitions are really important to consider as they clarify what we are trying to develop when we focus on other beings to cultivate compassion and love towards them.

The attitudes of love and compassion are contrary to thoughts that we might have towards beings we don't get along with—we might see these beings are suffering and unhappy, but rather than their states being unbearable to us, we might feel glad, or that their suffering and unhappiness serves them right. That approach would be completely opposed to genuine attitudes of compassion and love towards other beings. We would all have had the experience of seeing a close and dear one suffering and not being able to bear it. This unbearable feeling of seeing a friend, relation or partner suffering is what needs to be extended towards all other beings.

We need to overcome our normal way of thinking and attitudes towards others, and replace it with a genuine sense of love and compassion for all. The love and compassion presented here in the teachings that we are trying to develop is unbiased—there is no discrimination based on who the other person is. Instead, love and compassion is extended towards all beings simply because they are deprived of happiness and are experiencing suffering.

If things are going well for someone we disagree with or someone we call an enemy, we may feel sorrowful or unhappy, and if things are not going well for that person we may feel joyful or happy. But do these attitudes in relation to this person help us at all? If we hold onto an attitude of feeling happy when our enemy is suffering, do

we benefit in any practical way? When we really consider whether these attitudes are worthwhile, we will find that they do not help us. Further more our enemy is not harmed further by our feeling glad that he or she is suffering—the person's suffering definitely does not increase because we are happy about their unpleasant situation. And if we feel angst and pain every time things are going well for our enemies, we only harm ourselves. Holding these attitudes towards people we don't get on with, far from harming them it only harms us and causes us pain.

However, if we train ourselves to develop unbiased love and compassion for everyone, including our enemies, then the more happiness they gain, the more happiness we gain. This is the practical benefit of being genuinely glad and happy about the wellbeing of others regardless of who they are. A further crucial point is that whatever we experience in our own minds, whether it is angst or joy, is very much related to our attitude and the way we think. So, developing indiscriminate love and compassion towards all beings is of tremendous benefit.

Does anyone have questions?

Question: Is there a difference between love and compassion?

Geshe-la: The difference is in the way you approach the object. Love is seeing another being deprived of happiness and wishing for them to be happy, while compassion is seeing others suffering and wishing them to be free of suffering. They seem similar, but there is this slight difference.

The distinction between love and compassion is basically made on the two main experiences we all strive for as an individual: to be happy and to be free from any kind of suffering. We all naturally have these two inclinations. Therefore, love and compassion are the extension of these experiences and we wish for all others to experience them. So, just as we wish for happiness, we wish for all others to have happiness, and just as we wish not to experience any kind of suffering, we wish for all others to be free from suffering.

How do these attitudes work? Compassion operates by seeing someone in great suffering and having the immediate response in your mind, *How unfortunate they are in this distressed state. What can I possibly do to alleviate their pain and their suffering?* Having this feeling and thought is the element of compassion within you. Likewise, love works by seeing others deprived of happiness and wishing them genuine happiness. Of course, there are different levels of happiness, but that's the basic pattern of these attitudes. You first witness and acknowledge another person's suffering or lack of happiness, and based on this recognition, you develop the intention to alleviate their suffering or help them gain happiness. If you do not have that attitude or wish for others to be free from suffering and to be endowed with happiness, then the wish to benefit them to occur in one's mind would be difficult. This is an important point that we need to understand and recognise.

Thanks for the question. It was a very good.

Question: At the moment I am working casually in a prison and the staff there can be quite stressed and anxious. I don't work directly with the prisoners, but since I am naturally a very anxious person, can you advise me how to protect myself from absorbing other people's stress?

Geshe-la: You are confirming what I mentioned earlier about how our mental happiness and wellbeing is dependent on our surroundings. If others around us are hyperactive and anxious, then, it affects us and vice versa.

Some staff may be feeling anxious because of their lack of experience, and others may be afraid of the prisoners for practical reasons. After all, that kind of work can be quite risky and dangerous. I've heard that the lanyards prison staff wear need to unclip easily to prevent aggressive prisoners from strangling them.

Even though you are not in close proximity to the prisoners, the environment is still a prison and so it is a gathering of many unfortunate, like-minded people who are experiencing intense levels of negativity—negativity that brought them there to begin with. That would have an effect on the atmosphere and be a cause for feeling on edge. We all know that we naturally feel anxious when we are in a neighbourhood known to be a little bit dangerous, but feel calm and peaceful when we are in a safe environment surrounded by tranquil people. Similarly, we would feel uneasy and uncomfortable if we visited a family where we know there has been violence or a lot of fighting in case an argument or conflict starts, but we would feel relaxed if we visited a family who live harmoniously together. People often tell me that going to Christmas lunch or dinner fills them with apprehension and angst because although the gathering is supposed to be joyous, their parents might bring up old issues, which makes it uncomfortable.

Student: Should I say mantras to protect myself from becoming anxious when I am there? Perhaps the Chenrezig mantra would help?

Geshe-la: Yes, saying the Chenrezig mantra will definitely help because it is the mantra of compassion; reciting OM MANI PADME HUNG will help you feel calm and peaceful while you develop your compassion.

Are there any other questions?

Question: I am in a job where I give help, but the clients sometimes expect more than I can give, which makes me feel despondent. How do I deal with that?

Geshe-la: Well, satisfying their needs is almost an impossible task because there is no end to other people's needs! [*Laughter.*] You can only do what is in your capacity, or within the limitations imposed, with your best intentions. To think that you must meet growing expectations might not be useful because some people are never satisfied. [*Geshe-la chuckles.*] If a person's needs become greater and greater, how can you possibly give them everything that they want? And if they cannot satisfy themselves, how can you satisfy them? If someone comes to you with a mindset of never being fulfilled, then, there is no practical way you can ultimately satisfy them no matter how much you give. Doing your work

with the best intentions and within your limitations is the only measure you can really go by.

In relation to that point, I can share a story. The advice I normally share with parents is that when their children grow up and they appear more independent, that is the time to really extend their help. I gave this advice to a mother and she said, "Maybe my partner and I overdo this because we're giving a lot, but my daughter never seems satisfied and happy." She then told me how she and her partner had bought a nice house with lovely facilities and furnishings for their daughter, and when their daughter married, they helped her with the expenses. However, even though they provided their daughter with a furnished house and supported her financially, she still wanted more. The daughter would say, "Oh, I need money. Send me more money. Give me more money." The mother said to me, "We have done everything possible for her, but she still wants more." The parents had already provided and given their daughter so much, but she was not satisfied and there was no way to make her happy.

A young girl last year asked me a similar question regarding this dilemma—she was helping others, but the more she gave the more they needed, so she did not know how she could really help them. I told her that if someone has the mentality of never being satisfied and always wanting more, then, she needs to accept that she cannot possibly satisfy that person. We can all only do what is manageable and reasonable. Beyond that, we cannot do much more.

Thanks for the questions. They were very good and related to the content of the text we covered today. Initially, we recognised that the attitude of benefiting others is the noblest and best. However, we then were able to acknowledge that there are times when we may not be able to fulfil others' needs or wishes, even if we have their best intentions at heart. We can surmise from this that we need to find the right measures and means of how to practically extend our wish to benefit all others without bias.

Before we end the session for the evening, we can again spend a few minutes in some meditation. The object to focus on can be the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. Place your full attention on the sound and when the recitation subsides, you can maintain an awareness of the residue of that sound for a few moments.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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Edited Version*

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