
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

འཇམ་གུང་རྒྱལ་མ་རིམ་འབྲིང་བ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

10 October 2013

We can do some meditation, so for that purpose let's sit in a comfortable and relaxed posture.

One way to consider the significance of the practice of meditation is to think about how a controlled mind contributes to a general sense of well-being and happiness within.

We need to understand what it means to control the mind, or another term we can use is "taming the mind". The significance of having control over our mind or taming the mind is that we can then use this controlled or tame mind more effectively. For example, when a wild elephant is tamed, the mahout (elephant tamer) can easily put it to many tasks. Similarly, when the mind is tame or controlled then we can use it for many good purposes to achieve good results.

We might now ask, how do we go about gaining control over our mind? The way to tame or control our mind is to familiarise ourselves with an appropriate inner object. The more we familiarise ourselves with focusing on an inner object, and gain a single-pointed focus, the easier it becomes for the mind to engage in any task, for we then obtain a clear and focused mind.

We can see this to be true with whatever thoughts we have. We know that whatever thoughts or attitudes we are familiar with are those that arise spontaneously without much effort. Do you find that to be true?

We can relate to some examples of different attitudes or states of mind. Firstly, let's look at the negative side of the mind, such as having strong attachment. If we are most familiar with objects of attachment or desire, then with the slightest condition, such as when we see a beautiful object that we desire, we immediately develop strong attachment towards that object. This is true with other kinds of negative emotions as well. Similarly, with positive attitudes such as genuine love and compassion; if we were to familiarise ourselves with feelings of genuine love and compassion towards others, then these feelings will also arise spontaneously with the slightest condition of seeing the suffering of others. We can immediately feel compassion, too. Whatever our mind is familiar with naturally is what we feel more spontaneously. It is good to recognise this for ourselves and understand how our mind works in this way.

Once we recognise this to be true, then we will know that whatever state of mind we become familiar with is the one that is easiest to generate. The next step is to distinguish what kind of attitudes and thoughts we need to familiarise ourselves with, so we can further strengthen and develop them, as well as understanding

the kinds of negative attitudes and thoughts that we want to decrease, and not allow our mind to be familiar with.

Once we recognise this to be true and see the importance of familiarising our mind with positive thoughts, then we will start to take the initiative to implement this ourselves. We practise this by maintaining our focus on a virtuous object. We are training our mind to maintain a focus on a virtuous object that instils positive states of mind and positive attitudes within ourselves.

If we don't make this attempt and let our mind remain in its normal pattern, its normal way of thinking, then we find that negative tendencies become stronger in our mind. It is then very hard to remove ourselves from that negative pattern. Among the various states of mind or emotions, we can all relate to attachment as being a very strong emotion. When we familiarise ourselves with strong attachment, then that becomes the most predominate attitude in our mind, to the point where whatever object we are attached to is at the forefront of our thoughts. We become obsessed with that object of attachment to the point where, whether we are eating or drinking, walking about, in fact whatever activity we are engaging in, that object of attachment is at the forefront of our mind. We become so obsessed with that object of attachment that it starts to affect our normal life.

We can analyse our own state of mind and investigate and distinguish between positive states of mind, which contribute to our well-being, and the negative states of mind, which hinder us, obstruct our life and harm us. That distinguishing is very important. According to the Buddha's teachings, there are many classifications and levels to our states of mind. However when condensed there are the two main states of mind—a valid mind which is based on truth and reality, and a false state of mind which holds wrong concepts and views. This distinction shows that we all have certain states of mind that are based on truth and reality and certain states of mind which are based on falsity, i.e. which are not based on reality and truth. This way of analysing and thinking about our own state of mind helps us to recognise what attitudes we need to try to adopt and further cultivate, and what attitudes we need to slowly eliminate.

Being happy or unhappy seems to very much depend on which attitudes we are familiar with. Someone who seems to be more inclined in having negative attitudes, being very pessimistic and very judgemental is usually very unhappy. Whereas someone who is more inclined to having positive states of mind and positive attitudes seems to be naturally more joyful and happy. This goes to show that what contributes to a joyful and happy nature is very much dependent on the state of our mind or the attitudes within our mind.

States of mind that endanger our happiness are strong attachments and anger. Attachments and anger are defined as being faulty states of mind. That is because intense moments of attachment or anger taint our perceptions. We don't see the reality of the object that we are strongly attached to or have strong aversion towards. Attachment exaggerates the qualities or beautiful attributes of that object, thus our perceptions are not based on reality. Likewise with anger—the faults are

exaggerated. This is why strong attachment and anger are defined as being faulty states of mind and are within the category of what is called wrong consciousness.

Attachment and anger deceive us because they obstruct our perception from seeing the reality of the object. When we are dominated by strong attachment or anger, our perception becomes tainted, and we don't see things as they really are. When we recognise that, we will begin to lose our trust in anger and attachment. When we know that it deceives us, we will not give in, and this will definitely help to reduce the strong attachment and anger within ourselves. Otherwise, if we become obsessed with an object of attachment or anger, then these states of mind become the most prevalent. Whatever we do, wherever we go, it seems that we are always obsessed. The more we think about the object of attachment, and the more we add on to that and speculate, it will just increase further and further to where it comes to a point where we become completely obsessed. This can harm us and hinder our life by preventing us from getting on with our everyday lives.

One of the causes for delusions—negative states of mind—to arise in the mind is when too much attention is paid to an object that causes attachment or anger. The more we pay attention to the object, it becomes a means for that attachment or anger to increase. Therefore, with attachment the more we think about the object, the more we start to exaggerate the qualities of the object. Then we make up more and more reasons why that object is so wonderful. We feed our own desire or attachment towards the object based on unrealistic facts about that object.

Likewise, with anger; based on unrealistic projections we have of the object, anger starts to make us more and more upset. We feel very righteous and justified in our anger towards the object. The anger then increases as if it seems like it is burning within us, like fire burning within our heart. That's the intensity of anger we can feel towards an object. Inappropriate attention is another faulty state of mind that can cause us to become obsessed with an object of attachment or anger. Inappropriate attention causes us to exaggerate either the qualities or the faults of an object, so our mind becomes more and more subject to unrealistic perceptions.

How much the mind of attachment or anger becomes obsessed with the object depends on how much inappropriate attention there is on the object. With attachment, we only see the qualities of the object and see no faults. The more we think about the object, because of our attachment we only think about all the good things about the object. And the more we think about it, the more it appears to have no faults. For example, if it's a person then everything about the person seems to be agreeable. But that is however an exaggeration with our own perception that we don't recognise due to the obscuration of that strong attachment in our mind. Our attachment obscures us from seeing the reality. In short, attachment obscures the faults and exaggerates the qualities on the object.

Whereas with anger, it is completely the opposite. When we feel anger towards an object, we exaggerate its faults

and don't perceive any qualities. For example, the more we think about how someone has been bad towards us, the more we justify feeling angry towards them. The only thing that appears to us is their faults. This is again another complete exaggeration, because it is covering up the qualities that the object definitely has. We only tend to see and focus on the faults of the object. Then by focusing on the faults, our mind becomes more and more obsessed with seeing the object in a bad light, and we become completely angry with it.

When attachment starts to reduce, we begin to see the object a little bit more in its true sense, i.e. not completely faultless. When anger reduces, we see some of the positive qualities again. So we need to distinguish between how our mind perceives the object and how the object really exists.

To summarise the main point again, what we are trying to achieve with the meditation practice is to familiarise our mind with positive states of mind. At the same time we need to recognise the negative states of mind within us and try to reduce them. The way to reduce negative states of mind is to not allow ourselves to become too familiar with them. If we find at any time that there is strong attachment in our mind, then we need to recognise that it is a faulty state of mind and not allow ourselves to be completely overwhelmed and overpowered by strong attachment. When we see the disadvantages of strong attachment we need to start distancing ourselves from any strong attachment that may arise. Likewise with anger, by seeing the disadvantages and faults of anger, we need to start distancing ourselves and not become too familiar with anger. Otherwise, in both cases, either attachment or anger, when they take root and become strong and prevalent in our mind, then it's very hard to distance ourselves from these negative and harmful states of mind.

We need to apply this training before our mind becomes completely overwhelmed and affected by strong emotions such as anger and attachment. So, in this way can familiarise ourselves with a positive state of mind, such as non-attachment. We focus on objects that do not cause strong attachment or anger to arise, resulting in a mind of non-attachment and non-anger. To be happy, we need to familiarise ourselves with these positive states of mind.

The opposites of the three main negative emotions are referred to as the three virtuous states of mind. The opposite of attachment is non-attachment, the opposite of anger is non-anger, and the opposite of ignorance is non-ignorance, or wisdom. The more we familiarise ourselves with non-attachment, non-anger and non-ignorance, that in itself is a virtuous state of mind. What we need to identify here specifically is that these refer to minds that serve as antidotes for overcoming attachment, anger and ignorance. This ties in perfectly with the purpose of meditation, which is to have control over our own mind, or to tame our mind. Having control over our mind means specifically to be able to use our attention and focus in the right direction. Once we have control over our mind, then we can focus our attention on appropriate objects that will help us and nurture us for our own

happiness and well-being. Once we have control over our mind, we will be able to focus on positive objects. This shows the significance of the meditation practice.

As the compassionate teacher Buddha said, “a subdued mind is a happy mind”. This line in itself carries such a deep profound meaning. From our own experience we can relate to this being true.

I have already explained the physical posture when we engage in the meditation practice. However the main thing is to have an upright but relaxed posture. And most important is the state of mind, our intention. From the very outset we need to make this commitment that for the next few minutes, as we engage in the practice of meditation, we will not allow our mind to focus on any object other than the breath. Making that commitment means that for the duration of our meditation we will not allow our mind to be scattered; distracted by outward distractions.

Our mind is normally in a distracted state with so many different thoughts and ideas—and all in relation to worldly concerns, and worldly distractions. Our mind is already familiar with that. That doesn't take us any effort. If we allow it to be in this normal state, that is what our mind will focus on, completely following the distractions. That causes us distress and anxieties and fears in our mind. And all of the busy-ness in our mind that we find in our lives comes about because of completely allowing ourselves to be carried away with those distractions. Thus, for our meditation we need to intentionally withdraw our focus from all such distractions and bring our focus inward. We then apply our full attention and focus on the inner object, which in this case is our breath. *[breathing meditation]*

Question: Does Geshe-la have any advice on how to prepare the mind to memorise the verses of prayers?

Answer: The mind needs to be clear and steady when memorising something. The technique we use is to recite aloud whatever you want to memorise and then repeat it a few times. Then you start to be able to retain it.

Initially, you might not be able to memorise those lines right away. But after spending some time closing your eyes and repeating them to yourself, you will start to notice that you will be able to retain a few lines. And then you can build on that and increase the number of lines memorised.

Some people seem to have a good memory and can retain and recite things from memory well. But there are different views about memorising, with some saying it's not necessary. However, the mere recitation of prayers is meritorious. You collect virtue, and retaining the memory of those prayers will create merit. There is definite benefit. If you can memorise those words, then because you have retained those words in your mind, as you recite those words, you can start thinking about their meaning. There are some who carry around a text, for example, *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, and start to memorise it line-by-line making an attempt to memorise the whole text.

Student: I'm trying to memorise the *Twenty-One Taras* in Tibetan.

Geshe-la: The method we use is to memorise the first verse well. When we retain the first verse then we add on the next verse to memorise. In our tradition, this is the way - to incrementally repeat the verses until they are all memorised. After memorising the first verse, recite it again a few times and then the next day, add on another verse. And then recite all those verses the next day, and then add on a verse each time.

Even if you may not have a very good memory to memorise a few verses a day, even if you can remember one verse a day, then in 21 days you would have memorised the whole prayer! The practice of incremental memorisation is true with any kind of practice we do. Whatever we are capable of doing comfortably, we begin with that and then slowly start to add on to that.

In the monastic tradition you hear many monks reciting out loud. That's how they memorise prayers and texts, by repeating them again and again loudly. In the morning and during the day, they look at the text and repeat it again and again. In the evening there is a tradition of reciting whatever you have memorised during the day.

The students in the monastery recite texts outside in the courtyard, but not too softly so that the teacher couldn't hear it. They have to be near enough so that the teacher can hear that they are reciting the text that they have memorised.

This just reminded me of an incident with a Geshe who has since passed away, Geshe Shakya. In his early days he was prone to be easily frightened. However, one time when he was reciting a text outside, another monk said, “Why don't you come in and have some tea first? And then after drinking some tea, you can go out and continue to recite the text.” In Tibet, the monks were quite fond of telling ghost stories. Geshe Shakya himself seemed to be fond of telling or listening to ghost stories. But then after hearing some ghost stories while drinking tea, he was afraid to go out again to continue to recite the texts.

This reminds me of something the Dalai Lama once mentioned about how if we start adding our suspicious mind and superstitions to our way of thinking, then it seems to cause us fear, when in fact there is nothing there initially. If no-one said anything, we might not have had any fear. But as soon as we start to speculate and have that superstitious mind, we can start feeling afraid. Most of the things that we are afraid of are just paranoid fears. It might be based on some reality, something which is actually there or actually happening, but because of paranoia and speculation, we generate a lot of fear.

To relate to the question about how to memorise the texts or prayers, recite them out loud, repeating them many times, trying to retain that. That is the way.

Another story involves one of my cousins, who escaped from Tibet a while ago and went to a monastery in India to do some studies there. While he was in Tibet, he happened to be mostly spending time just doing menial work, such as farming and other hard labour. So he never really had taken time to study, even to study the alphabet. When he came to India to enter the monastery, he had to start from scratch, from the beginning. He had to memorise the alphabet and he was embarrassed

because he was already 18 years old. So he would close the doors so that no one would hear him and recite it inside. I have come to notice that his studies are going well, and he is knowledgeable about the texts.

Carol, who is here tonight, is the sponsor of this monk. They have really appreciated her continuous help. The monks in fact have nicknamed my cousin "the Buddha". The reason he got this nice nickname of the Buddha is because apparently he has never shown any anger or irritation. He is always calm and never gets upset or angry.

Question: There is a lot of pressure to look good and to be fashionable. Has Geshe-la any advice how to incorporate this into the Dharma?

Answer: Indeed, whatever activity we engage in we can make it virtuous with our intentions. In whatever activity, if you have the intention: "May it become a cause to make others happy" then due to one's intention the activity becomes virtuous. It is good to think, "May it become a cause to benefit others; may it become a cause to benefit all beings." So with that sort of intention, what otherwise may be seemingly normal, worldly activities can be turned into virtuous activities because of our intentions or motivations.

One example comes to my mind—I often comment that the people who made this building are really kind. When they constructed this building, they might have had the intention to help others. We have used this building for a good number of years now for good purposes that help and benefit others. That's why I often personally think about the kindness of the people who built this building.

Thus when we can see that others who may not be directly related to us doing good deeds, we get the benefit from that. Using that as an example, if we do things with the intention that it might help others, even if we don't have a direct connection, just by our appearance and manner we can possibly benefit others. It's possible. Definitely with our intention we can help others; so at least we can have that intention.

The main point is that whatever normal activities we engage in, if we do it mindfully and with the best intentions in our mind that it may benefit others, then it can indeed become a means to benefit others.

Now to relate another incident of someone that I recall many years ago when I was teaching up in Queensland in the Buddhist institute called Chenrezig Institute. I was then teaching the Lam Rim, the Stages on the Path to Enlightenment. As I was teaching throughout the days, there was someone who would have been in his late 50s or 60s. He was apparently new to the Buddhist approach, but as I was presenting the talks I could see that throughout the days he started to become more and more interested and more and more attentive. Later he confessed to me that he shot his friend's injured dog because he thought the dog's life was not worth living. That is something he now regrets. But a good thing he has done in his life is that he has never failed to pay his taxes. And then he said that he realises that paying taxes well was a good thing, one virtuous thing he had done because he had never cheated on that.

Indeed, someone recently also made the same statement. A rich person said that it is good to pay taxes because it helps the country progress and helps many disadvantaged people. And indeed we can see that taxes are used for either the elderly, or terminally ill, or children who need to have education. All of these benefits come out of taxes. So if we contribute to that fund, if we can think about it as a fund to help the disadvantaged, then it is a good fund that we are contributing to. The tax fund helps and benefits others.

When we consider that even when we go about our normal activities in a mindful way, it does benefit others. So this is how we train ourselves with even seemingly normal activities. With the tax system, rather than thinking that it's an unnecessary burden to pay taxes, think that you are making a contribution that will help others. Then, because of your attitude you will gladly pay your taxes without hesitation. This is one way of thinking about it.

We can all agree that all religious traditions have strong emphasis on charity. Charity is one of the core practice in every religion. In our everyday life, even though we may not find ourselves going out of our way to do charity and helping the disadvantaged and so forth, but if we personally take responsibility to pay our taxes, then this can be like a charity, which will help the disadvantaged.

Relating again back to the person I talked about earlier who had made those confessions to me. He actually related the story that, prior to coming to the Buddhist institute up there in Queensland, he had a dream where he was climbing somewhere, and then when he reached the top he saw a Buddhist monk. He found out where the Buddhist centre is and out of interest and curiosity he came up to the institute. Then he saw me there teaching. And later he said that the monk that he saw in the dream looked like me. These coincidences do seem to occur.

All the questions were relevant, and good. Thanks for asking these questions. Tara thinks logically and tends to analyse things well. She's very knowledgeable in her mind, so I appreciate that.

Before we end the session we can spend a few minutes in meditation, using the sound of the Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra to focus on recite. Maintain our focus just on that and try not to be distracted.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

*Transcribed by Peter Boothby
Edit 1 by Cynthia Karena
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version
© Tara Institute*