
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

འཇམ་གཟེངས་རྒྱལ་ལྷ་མོ་འབྲུག་པ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

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As usual we can spend some time in meditation. One of the main purposes of meditating is to subdue our minds so that we can experience true happiness and joy. The meditation technique does this by enabling us to have clarity and peace. We all have the capability to meditate, so subduing our minds in order to experience true happiness is definitely in our reach.

The great Indian master Shantideva taught that there are hundreds of ways to make the mind happy, but the supreme method is to practise meditation. We know from experience that worldly distractions do make us happy, but we can also see that this kind of happiness is fleeting and does not last long. Since we can recognise that the joy we experience through worldly activities is temporary, we can also see that worldly activities are unable to provide us with a genuine and lasting sense of happiness. The Indian master Asanga also emphasised that the happiness derived from the wisdom gained from meditation is very firm and stable. We can contrast this long-term happiness achieved through meditation with the short-term happiness derived through worldly pursuits. Indeed, verifying the truth of what these masters have said by using our own experiences in life is something really worthwhile for us to do.

Those who are middle aged or older would have had significant opportunity to see that happiness gained from external sources only lasts for a short while because the elated feelings soon give way to feeling down and unhappy for longer periods. Sometimes after feeling elated and happy, you feel so down that you become depressed, which can last for many years. However, the happiness that is derived from inner wisdom is a genuine source of happiness because of its durability. This happiness is self-generated so it is stable and stronger than the other kinds of happiness we experience in relation to external stimuli. We may experience joy from external means, but when we are captivated by external pleasures it completely distracts us and we fail to recognise that they can only provide short-term benefit. Subsequently, we need to remember that we can develop lasting happiness through our wisdom and use that intelligence to maintain integrity in the face of distractions. This generation and use of your inner wisdom will enable you to have a more stable outlook in life.

So, meditation is the way to gain true happiness because it is how you cultivate your inner wisdom. It is the technique of withdrawing your mind from external distractions. By training your mind in meditation to focus on an inner object, you distance yourself from external

distractions, and the more you distance yourself, the more your mind becomes familiar with the meditation technique and that strengthens your inner calm. You need to see the connection between your mind and the object it focuses on—how your mind is negatively influenced by an external object and how your mind is positively influenced by an internal object.

Understanding that there is a relationship between the mind, the subject, and its focus, the object, is worthwhile for you to look into and recognise. Ask yourself how this connection works. How does the interaction between your mind and its object take place and why does a particular type of interaction affect you in a certain way? If you pay attention and investigate the relationship for yourself you will see the connection. You have the ability to use your own wisdom to identify the interaction between your mind and an object, and to distinguish how your experience is consequently affected. By using your intelligence in this way, you will learn that if you let your mind focus on distracting external objects, you will experience excitement initially but eventually it will cause your mind to become scattered and unsettled. However, if you consistently acquaint yourself with focusing on an inner object your mind will start to become clearer and calmer, and you will have a genuinely positive and long-lasting good experience. External or distracting objects can only give you fleeting happiness because they usually agitate and disturb your mind, but if the interaction between your mind and its object is positive and based on wisdom, you will feel soothed, calm and relaxed. I therefore urge you to take the initiative to examine your personal experiences to gain this insight for yourself. This inner wisdom can then guide your conduct.

Another practical benefit of investigating the interrelationship between the mind and the object it focuses on is that you will gain more confidence with the significance of the meditation technique. You will gradually become more insightful about the worth of identifying and intentionally keeping your attention on an appropriate inner object, which will increase your initiative to meditate. Further, your deeper understanding of the interrelationship between your mind and its object will extend to an appreciation of the connection you have with other people. You will develop a strong incentive to ensure that your relationships with others are genuinely supportive of your wellbeing rather than harmful. This will enable you to have good bonds with others and to make the right choices in your interactions with them. When you consider the significance of the meditation technique in this way, you will see how it provides you with both the short-term benefit in your everyday life now, as well as the long term benefits. Ultimately, using your intelligence to analyse and apply this understanding in your daily life constitutes your spiritual practice, or what Buddhists call a Dharma practice. Your development of this inner wisdom and its application is why practising Dharma is significant.

So, using meditation to notice the interconnection between how the mind relates to the objects it focuses on is how you can lessen your involvement with objects that cause you distress. If you do not clearly see and

acknowledge to yourself that certain objects disturb your mind, or recognise how your mind becomes obsessed with an object, there will be nothing to prevent you from stopping the process of your mind becoming more and more agitated. When we are able to honestly admit to ourselves that our focus on particular objects disturbs us, then we are able to find measures that overcome the distress those objects cause. The best way is to intentionally withdraw and distance our minds from the agitation triggered by the object we are obsessed with. Meditation enables us to do just that through its intentional focus on an object that does not cause distress to our minds. The technique helps you to clear your mind so that it is more focused and calm instead. When your mind focuses on an appropriate object, it automatically distances itself from an object that disturbs it so that it is naturally released from its anxiety and angst. As times goes by and you become more and more familiar with the meditational technique, you naturally become less preoccupied with objects that affect you negatively. You will eventually be able to reach the stage where coming into contact with an object that troubles you will be easier to deal with because the virtue of meditating helps you to not be swayed or influenced negatively. That is how you are able to make progress.

This is also how you can release yourself from a problem that has been dominating your life for a long period of time and causing you a lot of hardships. Meditation can free you from your problems by doing nothing other than applying the practice of familiarising your mind with a virtuous object. You can apply this technique to every aspect of your life because every problem we have is in relation to some sort of object or idea we have about a situation. If we release ourselves from our fixation by distancing ourselves from the object that causes us agitation, we will be less affected by the object and instead gain great benefits.

I want to emphasise that we can all deal effectively with a specific problem in our lives if we apply the meditation technique. By meditating we can overcome that specific problem and then use that same method to overcome our other problems.

We all seem to be victims of reoccurring problems; as we solve one problem, another one arises. After we address the next problem, then something else comes up. This is the nature of our existence – what we can call being in samsara or cyclic existence. Our problems are seemingly endless, but when we have the right technique to deal with them, they will not overwhelm us. We always have access to meditation technique and if we maintain our practice, the solutions to our problems are always within our reach. We can apply the skill of meditation in every situation so that when a problem arises we are well equipped to handle it. His Holiness the Dalai Lama often says that through his experience he has found great solace in knowing there is always the means to overcome hardships and difficulties in his life. What His Holiness is sharing here is that enduring problems and finding the means to overcome them enables you to gain insights and wisdom to face any difficulty. He is saying that if we willingly accept a difficult situation, face it and think of

the problem as a challenge to overcome, we are better equipped to solve it.

This is why understanding the connection between your mind and an object is so important. All our interactions involve the subject—our mind; the object—whatever we focus on; the experiencer—ourselves; and the actual experience and our reactions to it. When we begin to see this interaction for ourselves, our understanding of the relationship between the mind and the object becomes more profound. And since there is a definite relationship between the mind and the object that it focuses on, we will also recognise the interconnection between mind, object and ourselves as the experiencer. We will understand that when the mind is focused on a positive object, the effect will be positive for that individual and vice versa.

Buddhist teachings outline that the most positive state of mind is one that is altruistic. The teachings further state that the most altruistic state of mind is called bodhicitta, which is the mind that aspires to attain enlightenment. This may be a little beyond our immediate reach right now, but we all have the basis for developing bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment. The basis for bodhicitta is love and compassion, which in simple terms is a gentle and kind mind. Love and compassion are virtues we already have within us. The more we familiarise ourselves with cultivating and developing them, the more our wellbeing and happiness increases. This is something we need to recognise and see when we realise the definite interrelation between the mind and the object it focuses on, and the experience of that interaction.

Now that I have explained the significance and benefits of the meditation technique, we can spend the next few minutes meditating. First, you need to sit in a comfortable and relaxed posture, and ensure that the state of your mind is one that will really embrace the practice. You will also need to put some real focus and energy into meditating to ensure the practice is authentic and genuine. The way to do that is to make every effort to distance yourself from all the objects that distract you. Distracting objects can be external but they can also be internal, like thoughts or memories. So, in your meditation now, you need to commit to completely withdraw from all forms of external and internal distractions, and place the focus of your mind on an appropriate object. The appropriate object we will use is our individual breathing pattern. Our minds will probably become completely side-tracked by all kinds of whimsical thoughts while we focus on the rhythm of our breath, but allowing our minds to be unfocused and influenced by these distractions would be a mistaken approach. We are meditating to train our minds to be unswayed by our agitations and troubles. Since this is so, we need to gently and continually place our full focus and attention on our chosen object, and completely withdraw our attention from everything else. We can use our wisdom and understanding of what we are doing to embrace the practice and motivate ourselves to do it well. This will help us to place a hundred per cent of our attention on the breath. So, in this way, we will spend the next few minutes in meditation. [*Pause for meditation.*]

Does anyone have any questions?

Student: When I explain the *tong len* practice to others they often become worried that it will bring them more suffering. How can I explain the practice without them becoming worried?

Geshe-la: Some people may feel that if they develop compassion they will bring themselves extra suffering. In fact, Shantideva taught that although developing compassion may initially appear to be taking on unnecessary suffering, however if one suffering can help eliminate many sufferings, then it is worthwhile. One way you can see this is by thinking that the temporary suffering you are experiencing is being used to alleviate greater suffering. This gives the suffering you experience a great purpose. *Tong len* is practised with others' welfare as the main concern, and with that as its basis, the practice is a way to develop genuine love and compassion. Since the practice is solely about concern for others' welfare, willingly accepting the difficulties you personally experience can be made easier if your intention is to benefit others. The example in the text that was outlined last week was that of a mother's wish to alleviate the suffering of her dear and only child. The extent of the love a mother has for her own child would equate to the lengths she would forsake her own comfort. A mother's willingness to accept and endure hardships on her child's behalf is a contemporary example of genuine concern and love. If there is not genuine concern for the other, then the *tong len* practice does not have a legitimate basis.

However, someone who is hesitant in taking more suffering upon themselves, may not be ready to practise *tong len*. Last week I mentioned that a person who is willing and ready to give their love and take others' suffering would be a person who has reached a level in their psyche where he or she willingly accepts difficulties and is wary of pleasant experience. The criteria for a practitioner of *tong len* is someone who has reached that point of willingly taking on hardships and is cautious of only having pleasant experiences. Someone who is attached to pleasure and is not ready to accept any difficulties or problems is probably not ready to do the *tong len*. [*Geshe-la says in English that if a person feels that the tong len meditation is hard and no good then the practice is not for that person. Since happiness comes from good karma, doing this practice with these kinds of reservations would not create a good cause for all sentient beings.*] When a person willingly accepts the suffering of others with the intention of alleviating the pain of all beings, it will become a cause for the suffering of all beings to be completely eliminated. That kind of thought shows a very courageous mind and is said to accumulate extensive merit and great virtue. If you find the practice hard to do when everything is going well, then the practice might be even harder for you to do when things do not go well. [*Geshe-la says in English that if you are concerned about taking on your own suffering when your conditions are relatively good, then you will find it difficult to take on other people's suffering, and you will certainly find tong len too difficult to do when your conditions are challenging.*] However, if you understand that taking on other people's suffering actually destroys the root cause of your own suffering, you naturally become more

willing to do the practice. So, knowing the correct way of doing the practice gives you the courage to take on the pain of other beings. In fact, the practice is wondrous because the visualisations of genuinely taking on other beings' sufferings completely eradicates the reason why you personally suffer. In this way you can eliminate your own sufferings as well as the suffering of all other sentient beings.

If you visualise other beings' suffering and problems entering you in the form of a black light, you can also visualise it striking the root cause of your own suffering, which is the self-cherishing mind. This self-cherishing mind is like a dark lump in your heart. This ugly lump can be completely destroyed by visualising the powerful external source of other sentient beings' suffering smashing it so that it is obliterated. When the practice is done using this visualisation technique, there is no hesitation in wanting the suffering of others to ripen on you because their suffering directly annihilates the root of all your own suffering. Meditating in this way is very important because if you take in the sufferings of others in the form of black light, and do not use it to demolish your self-cherishing mind which is visualized as a lump in your heart, and if you imagine the black light remaining inside of you it will cause extra heaviness in your mind.

So, *tong len* is using your imagination to take on others' suffering to develop compassion and send out joy and happiness to others to develop your love. If you practise just that initially, you will become more and more familiar with the process. You can then combine your imagination of giving and taking with your breathing pattern. This would entail breathing in the suffering of others in the form of black light, and as you exhale sending out your love to others in the form of a white light. The Buddhist teachings compare the use of the breath in this meditation technique to riding a horse because the practice is mounted on the breath.

Tong len is a valuable and significant practice because it trains your mind to develop genuine love and compassion for others; it cultivates your wish for others to be happy and free from suffering. Putting this into practise, even though it is using your imagination, is very powerful, which is why the giving and taking practice of *tong len* is viewed as being the essence of the great vehicle, the Mahayana tradition.

Are there any more questions?

Student: The Thirty-five Buddhas confessional prayer mentions transcendental wisdom. Please can you explain what that is?

Geshe-la: Transcendental wisdom refers to the wisdom of the enlightened beings—the wisdom of the buddhas. This wisdom transcends or surpasses ordinary wisdom because it is the perfection of wisdom. So what the prayer is referring to is perfect wisdom.

There are six far-reaching attitudes or perfections presented in the Buddhist teachings. These are the perfection of moral conduct, the perfection of patience, the perfection of generosity, the perfection of joyful effort, the perfection of concentration and the perfection of

wisdom. The six perfections are presented as a kind of two-step process: the first step is the cause and the second step is the effect. The causal aspect of the six perfections is found on the path, which is in the trainees' minds. The causal aspect of the six perfections leads to the effect of the six perfections, which are only found within the enlightened beings' minds. So, transcendental wisdom here refers to the effect of the perfection of wisdom and that is only found in a Buddha's mind.

The six perfections will be presented soon in the text we are studying, so more detail about them will be given in future teachings. Recently though, we had a one-day course on patience where the Buddhist teachings on the perfection of patience was outlined as not letting yourself be overcome by the object that causes you turmoil. You cannot perfect patience by getting rid of all of the things that make you impatient. Getting rid of all external causes for us to become impatient is impossible because they are infinite. So, the way to perfect patience is to develop genuine patience within yourself which is equivalent to overcoming all external obstacles that cause your impatience. Perfection implies that the practice has reached its utmost level and surpassed the training: it is faultless. Perfection means 'going beyond'. According to the Svatantrika Buddhist school, going beyond literally means to go completely beyond cyclic existence. However, the Prasangika Buddhist school, which is the highest Buddhist school, has two alternative ways of explaining what it means.

Thank you all for listening. I appreciate you paying such great attention.

Before we end the session for the evening, let us again spend a few minutes in meditation. This time we will use the sound of a mantra as the focus of our attention. The mantra to be recited will be Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra, which we can place our full attention on, and when the recitation subsides, we can maintain our focus on the absence of sound. That will then suffice as the focus of our meditation for the next few minutes.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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