
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

འཇུག་ཀྱི་ལམ་རིམ་འབྲིང་བ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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First, I would like to show my appreciation in seeing new and old friends alike, and for us to be able to gather here again. Since this is so, I say to you, “Tashi delek!”

This traditional Tibetan welcome has a profound meaning; “tashi” connotes auspiciousness and “delek” connotes wellbeing and happiness. The auspiciousness in “tashi” refers to the wellbeing of gods and humans, and the happiness in “delek” refers to the ultimate happiness of enlightenment. Thus, to greet you “tashi delek” in this context relates to the aspirations of our activities here. So, I am very glad we are meeting again because I think our gathering has a purpose and is meaningful.

Our gathering has a purpose because we are like-minded in wanting to promote happiness, and it is meaningful because we share an intention to nurture our own and others’ wellbeing. The strength of this intention may differ from individual to individual, but, as a group, we all aspire to our own and other’s happiness.

How do we improve our own and other people’s happiness?

We do this by recognising that improvement is not instant or tangible, because it relates to our spiritual development. Spiritual development is gradual rather than immediate and occurs internally. so it is different to materialistic gain. “Improvement” here refers to spiritual progress and relates to the betterment of an individual’s behaviour and character.

If you reflect on your character and behaviour, you will clearly see that every activity you engage in relates to your body, speech and mind. Further, the actions of your body, speech and mind can be negative or positive. You may dwell on the need for others to improve the actions of their body, speech and mind (and sometimes this may be appropriate) but the truth is that focusing on improving your own actions is essential for your spiritual development. Your main concern therefore needs to be improving your own actions of body, speech and mind rather than other people’s.

The actions of your mind encompass your thoughts, conceptions and ideas, and these result from the state of your mind. If you investigate your mind, you will see it has positive and negative states. Similarly, if you reflect on your body (not whether it looks beautiful or not!) you will see there are positive actions that benefit you and others, and negative actions that harm you and others. Likewise, if you watch your speech, you can see that its actions can be beneficial and so positive, or harmful and so negative. Thus, the positive and negative can be seen in all three areas that relate to your activities, namely your body, speech and mind.

So what are the body, speech and mind’s actions dependent on and how are they initiated? The individual self, what we identify as “I” or “me”, is what initiates the actions of body, speech and mind. The self and the actions of the body,

speech and mind are definitely interrelated, particularly the self and the mind because the self is strongly influenced by what goes on in the mind. If an individual’s state of mind is negative, the “I” will engage in negativities, but if an individual is influenced by positive states of mind, then the “I” will engage in positive deeds. A positive state of mind will lead the individual self to have beneficial thoughts, which will lead to beneficial physical acts and beneficial verbal actions. Whereas a negative state of mind will lead the individual self to carry out negative physical and verbal actions that are harmful. This is because the mind is the forerunner of our physical and verbal actions. We need to understand this by investigating the relationship between the self and the actions of the body, speech and mind.

After an investigation, we will come to understand that there is a definite relationship between our state of mind and our mental, physical and verbal actions. We will also be able to recognise that the self or “I” determines these actions based on the state of our minds. With this understanding we have no choice but to improve the state of our minds if we want our characters and behaviour to improve.

In other words, adjusting the state of your mind to be positive will improve your character and behaviour. This spiritual development is necessary if you wish for happiness and wish not to suffer. In itself, it is enough reason to improve your state of mind. We all know that when we suffer and feel unhappy, we can easily disturb other people and cause them to also suffer. Therefore, in order to benefit and not harm others, we first need to generate genuine happiness and be free of suffering ourselves.

So, even in this simple presentation, you can establish that your happiness is very much dependent on your own state of mind. This is contrary to the usual belief that happiness depends on external factors, resources and conditions. Please familiarise yourself with investigating your mind so that you can see that the real cause for your happiness lies in your attitude. Having a stable and positive state of mind, and more specifically a gentle and kind mind and heart, is essential for your wellbeing and for others you are in contact with.

If you ensure your mind is kind and considerate, it will naturally be in a genuinely happy state, and that will ensure you radiate happiness and joy to others around you. This will benefit you and everyone else. What could be more valuable than that? You naturally possess the ability to do this and it is possible to develop it within yourself. Further, if you ensure your mind is kind, your kind mind will automatically help to protect your genuinely happy mindset. Kindness, therefore, is your best friend and companion because it is the cause of your happiness, the protection of your happiness and the reason for encouraging the happiness of others.

Kindness is also your real friend and companion because its roots are inseparable from you. You definitely have kindness in you that you can nurture and grow, and since kindness is part of who you are, it is always with you and so it is your constant companion. Once you recognise this inseparability, you will never be deprived of true companionship. Your real best friend is in your own mind.

In my experience, happiness is maintained if the kind state of mind doesn’t decline. I have seen how a genuine sense of happiness is always there if the genuine kind attitude does not fade away. I have also seen that when the genuinely kind state of mind dissipates, the mind becomes unhappy. I

regularly share that I consider my best companion to be the love and compassion that I've tried to develop. I cannot claim I have great or extensive love and compassion, but the meagre love and compassion I have constantly worked at developing is definitely my solace and best friend. This is why I can confidently assert that I am a happy person.

If you make a concerted effort to develop a genuine sense of kindness and concern for others, it will become your invaluable asset and it will help you to maintain your relationships with others. If you do not have a good relationship with others and seek the reason why, you will find it is directly related to your kindness declining. Whereas if you have maintained genuine concern and kindness, then naturally your connection with others is good. We all know that dwelling on relationships that didn't go well brings sorrow to our minds, so it is worthwhile striving to have good relationships with others.

Our main concern here is to generate a genuine loving and kind attitude towards others from our own side. Our concern is not talking or thinking about how others have to love and be kind and nice to us. We have no ultimate control over how others behave towards us. The only thing we have control over is our own mind and the level of genuine loving-kindness we give personally to others. So, we need to focus our time and energy in improving and increasing the happiness of our mind by ensuring no matter what happens, our loving-kindness develops to become firmer, more stable and does not decline. We must pay attention to securing our own happiness and assisting other people with theirs.

We do not have much control over external circumstances, so the advantage of having a stable sense of happiness, alongside a genuine sense of calm in your mind, is that your peace and happiness will not be disturbed when adverse circumstances in external situations occur. A calm and happy mind is of great benefit in unfavourable circumstances because your happiness will not be so dependent on external situations that always change. External conditions will affect your finances, possessions, relationships and so on in positive or negative ways, but external conditions cannot affect your inner resources if they are stable and firm. This means that your inner resource of kindness can be relied on for your happiness because it is not dependent on what is happening around you—sometimes things will go well and sometimes they will not, so staking your happiness on external conditions is dangerous because they will fluctuate. Since happiness best depends on your internal resources, making those qualities firm and stable is advantageous.

When you strive to develop your mind in internal resources like loving-kindness you will notice your happiness increasing and becoming steady, regardless of your external situation. Your external situation may not have changed much, but you will find that you feel genuinely calmer, happier and more peaceful. This experience will prove to you that your happiness is not dependent on external factors and conditions. This experience will also verify for you that internal resources are the true source of your happiness and not just a nice idea, hypothesis or a philosophy to have. This experience will heighten your inner wisdom and make it deeper and more profound. Otherwise, you may think that what I am saying sounds reasonable and may all be true, but without experiencing what I am saying, you will be drawn to the belief that external circumstances are the real source of happiness.

In any case, I think everyone here would agree that they want to be happy. So, if you would like to be happy and can see that the happiness of your mind is important, you probably want to know how to develop happiness and whether it is possible for you.

Whether you can develop happiness is dependent on your internal conditions and if they can be acquired. We can see that this is true when related to external situations, like a tree, which needs a seed to sprout and grow, and requires various conditions to survive. There are conducive and adverse conditions for us internally, just like there are for external situations like the tree. No water, or being planted in infertile ground would be adverse conditions for the tree because they would prevent it from growing. Likewise, the development of a happy state of mind has conducive and adverse conditions.

The conducive conditions for a happy state of mind will be more stable if the mind is focused and not distracted. There is a technique that helps steady and make the mind alert, and that technique is meditation. Meditation is none other than a method to settle your mind, which is otherwise busy, chaotic and distracted. So, adopting and spending time applying the meditation technique is very worthwhile and meaningful. If you conscientiously trial the technique, you would be able to attest that it does calm your mind through its use of focus. The use of maintaining focus naturally settles the mind to make it peaceful.

Meditating enables us to gain control over our own minds. If we are not in control of our own minds, our minds will control us, and if our minds are in a chaotic state, we cannot develop our internal qualities for a happy state of mind. Therefore, meditation is essential in that it is the ultimate means to control our minds.

Meditating also enables us to identify what the adverse conditions are for our happy state of mind. An adverse condition would be anything that hinders or obstructs our happy mindsets. If we are in control of our minds, we will not allow our minds to be influenced and overpowered by these adverse or negative states, which Buddhism calls "delusions". Delusions are states of mind that obstruct our happiness, like attachment, anger and jealousy. These negative states of mind, particularly in their intense form, hinder and obstruct the happy state of mind. If we identify and recognise these adverse conditions, we will develop our wisdom further. Like the wisdom of understanding that happiness is internal and not external, identifying adverse conditions for your happiness and reducing them is wisdom resulting from your own experience. If you watch these kinds of attitudes you will verify that they disrupt your happy state of mind and so are adverse conditions. By being aware of what is happening in your mind and not letting it control you, you will be able to stop yourself from being influenced by delusions.

So, identifying the conducive conditions for our happiness as having a stable and undistracted state of mind, and identifying adverse conditions for our happiness as being mindsets that hurt ourselves and others is our prime purpose for meditating. Meditation will enable us to be clearer, and see these positive and negative conditions for ourselves. We can then encourage ourselves to develop and sustain our true companions, which are within us, and make the resolution to always rely on these true friends to guide us so that we do not get caught in accommodating adverse conditions and destroying our happiness. Wisdom gained

through experience makes the resolution of not letting negative states of mind overpower us and working towards positive states of mind instead much easier. Through experiential wisdom you can develop the strong initiative to promote and develop a kind state of mind. Experiential wisdom also enables you to maintain the determination to always follow and nurture your mind of loving-kindness.

You can periodically check yourself throughout the day and ask yourself what state your mind is in—are your thoughts and attitudes going in a positive or negative direction? This kind of self-analysis is something we need to take up throughout the day, on a daily basis, month by month and year by year. Checking your mind and controlling its direction is how you can ensure that your body, speech and mind's actions are positive and not negative. Your consistency in this will enable you to see the gradual transformation of your character because your mind will naturally become gentler. Do not expect quick results, the process is long, but it is steady, beneficial and worth it.

Since I have explained the significance and benefits of meditating, we can now spend some time practising the technique. Please adopt a relaxed and comfortable posture; there are specific explanations why this is important, but I will leave that for another time.

Buddhist teachings explain that what initiates our meditation is our motivation, so let us be clear on the purpose of meditating now. Simply put, the most positive intention we can develop for conducting a meditation is: I am spending time and energy meditating so it will become a cause for me to bring benefit for all beings and so I will not harm them. That is the most positive motivation you can have. The intention of wishing only benefit for others and no suffering at all for them is the noblest thought possible. This is the motivation we should strive to genuinely have.

Every meditation needs an object to focus on as a way to anchor the mind. We will use the breath as our anchor in this meditation. We need an anchor because one of the main adverse conditions for happiness is a distracted mind. So, for the purpose of meditating, let us withdraw our mind from all distractions and bring our mind to focus internally on our breath. We can remain anchored and focused if we place our entire attention on the natural rhythm of our breathing, the inflow and outflow of our breath. We will practice our single-pointed focus on just the breath and nothing else for a few minutes. *[Pause for meditation.]*

That will be sufficient for now. Conducting a regular meditation in our daily life using the technique we just did is worthwhile. The practice of meditation ensures your mind becomes calm, settled and in a naturally relaxed state. This affects the body to also become relaxed. Therefore, meditation will help you to maintain a physically healthy body because your body is dependent on the state of your mind. Buddhist teachings say that our body is made up of the four elements of water, fire, wind and earth. These elements are influenced by the state of the mind, so if the mind is calm and relaxed, the elements will settle and induce a healthy physical body.

Before we conclude the session for the evening, are there any questions?

Question: I have trouble in the breathing meditation with the instruction to focus on the tip of your nose. My meditation does not seem to work if I do this. Please can you explain what I need to do?

Geshe-la: The breathing meditation does not have an instruction to focus on the tip of your nose. The purpose of the breathing meditation is to focus solely on your breath. A focus or preoccupation on anything else, including external things like what your visual sense is doing, will distract you from the natural flow of your breath. Some say that your eyes should be open during meditation, but that's not in our tradition. The general instruction in this tradition is to not have your eyes completely shut or open, but to let your eyes be open enough to let light in and prevent you from becoming drowsy. Often a yardstick for this is to have your eyes open enough so that you can just see to the end of the nose, but this doesn't mean you focus on the tip of your nose.

If you find that having your eyes slightly open is too distracting for you, then close your eyes because in your case this might be the best method. Some traditions suggest having the eyes completely closed while meditating. Of course, I would never say other traditions are wrong because if their methods are suitable for you then that is beneficial. I share what I adopt from my tradition, which is the middle-way approach of having the eyes not completely open or shut, but whichever method you choose to stick to and practise is fine. The important point is that people who have developed a high level of concentration through their practice can have their eyes completely open or shut because their single-pointed focus has developed. Until we are able to reach that stage, our practice is to focus internally on the meditation object and not be concerned about other parts of our bodies.

Our genuine attempts to practise meditation as a technique to control the direction our minds go will ensure we gain experiences that convince us meditating is worthwhile. Our calmer, clearer and happier state of mind will be the proof of our practice.

Let us again use this opportunity to meditate before we conclude for the evening. We can remind ourselves to withdraw our minds from all external and internal distractions and bring our minds to focus inwards instead. This time the object of our focus can be the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni's name mantra. As that is being recited, we can keep our entire focus on the sound, and when the recitation subsides, we can meditate on the residue of the sound for a few moments. That will suffice as our meditation.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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