
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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As usual we can spend some time in meditation.

For that purpose we sit with a comfortable and relaxed posture and also try to adopt a clear, bright and calm state of mind.

It is good to consider the significance and real purpose of engaging in a meditation practice.

To establish a kind and peaceful state of mind, which is something that will accompany what we call 'our individual self' wherever we go, is what I consider to be one of the most essential elements for our well-being.

Thus, we regard a kind and peaceful state of mind as our most supreme friend—an inner friend. The best way to protect and ensure that we maintain such a faithful friend within ourselves is to acquaint ourselves with that state of mind again and again. The more we accustom ourselves to it, the less likely we are to lose it.

The disadvantage of losing this good state of mind is that it will be very difficult to restore, which you may find in your own experience.

Thus, the more we acquaint ourselves with maintaining this peaceful and positive state of mind, then as a result, we will experience less problems in our lives, which naturally leads to a happier state of mind. We need to see that connection, and intentionally acquaint ourselves with that peaceful and positive state of mind. Similarly, the more we acquaint ourselves with the opposite state of mind, which is a restless and agitated state of mind, then naturally we will experience more problems in our lives. This is the crucial point that we need to recognise.

The more we train our mind to focus inwards, without allowing our mind to be completely immersed in distractions and focused outwards, the more our mind will naturally settle down. When we don't apply the specific means to keep our mind focused inwards and we leave it in the natural state, it is most likely that our mind will follow its normal course of being completely influenced by the discursive and destructive thoughts, and that will mislead us. If we follow the discursive state of mind, it will become a habit, and we will be caught in the vicious cycle of following all destructive thoughts and experiencing an unsettled state of mind and turmoil. That will lead to more worries and anxieties and we will constantly feel unsettled. As a result, we will notice, that no matter what we do and try to achieve, there is always a sense of being unsettled or missing something in our life.

So we need to relate to the meditation technique as a means to train ourselves to maintain a kind and peaceful state of mind—that is the main objective and purpose.

Thus the process of the meditation, when we apply it appropriately, involves distancing ourselves from the distractions and discursive thoughts of the mind. By withdrawing from all that, when we apply it by focusing on an appropriate object, it allows our mind to become calm and peaceful, then that becomes a real practice, beneficial for our well-being.

In this process of applying the technique of meditation, when we are able to maintain that inner focus, even for a minute or two, we definitely get relief from a mind which is otherwise a very busy and unsettled state of mind. Normally we may notice also, when we hear distracting sounds, it may cause us some sort of distress; however it is relatively easier to ignore distracting sounds and let them fade away in the background. Whereas, when it is a mental distraction, that is difficult for it to subside naturally. When we have mental unrest, and it causes real turmoil, and we cannot escape from that. Thus the method and technique that can naturally appease it, is something that we need to find internally, within our own mind.

When we are able to maintain a more peaceful and clear state of mind, then we will come to notice that external circumstances do not cause so much distress to the mind. While things still happen around us in relation to others, it doesn't really disturb us so much, because we are able to maintain that peaceful and clear state of mind within ourselves. Whereas if we fail to maintain a peaceful and clear state of mind, then even the slightest external situation in relation to others can easily cause us to become distressed. We need to pay attention to this, otherwise we normally fall into the habit of immediately blaming others when something goes wrong. In reality we are getting upset and allowing our mind to become disturbed, but we blame others for the reason we become upset and angry. We have to be very careful here and genuinely check our state of mind to see where the disturbance is really coming from.

In checking our well-being, we can say to ourselves, 'You've got clothing, sufficient food, a car to drive, but you are still not settled, so what is causing all the trouble?' It is the disturbed state of mind.

So indeed this sort of internal dialogue with ourselves can be really meaningful and useful in detecting where the real problem lies, the difficulties and anxiety and stress that one is experiencing, rather than immediately blaming it on others and thinking that it is something external that has gone wrong and to check and detect the real trouble maker, which is within oneself. I personally engage in this dialogue myself, and I often say to myself, 'Geshe Doga, how have you been today?' If I find that I have had a good day and I have done good deeds, then I praise myself. 'Okay, you have done quite well' (*laughter*)

We can take the initiative to investigate how we become much more vulnerable to external disturbances when our own mind is unsettled. If we do an honest self evaluation and analysis within ourselves, we will come to recognise, accept and acknowledge that the reason why we get

upset and angry is not entirely dependent on the external situation, but on something internal. It is the discursive state of mind and thoughts, and an unsettled mind to begin with, which actually causes us to become angry. Through this analysis, we will begin to acknowledge that there is definitely a difference when our mind is in a positive, clear and peaceful state—we are not as vulnerable to becoming upset and angry, regardless of external situations. Whereas when we are feeling a little bit irritated and unsettled in ourselves, then the slightest external cause or condition can make us upset and angry.

When that distinction becomes clear to us, we have begun to acknowledge a crucial point—how our own state of mind and our selves as individuals are really the cause of our problems. When we notice that it is our own internal discursive state of mind that causes us distress, if there is a way to make our mind more settled and peaceful, and as our mind becomes naturally more calm and in a happy state, then external conditions will not cause us much disturbance. These are all points that I personally have made attempts to investigate and try out myself, and have experienced a personal benefit in applying the appropriate techniques of meditation. Having benefited from that, I share them with you, with the intention and hope that it will help and benefit you as well.

On contemplating the earlier points, we will come to understand one of the most essential and crucial elements in Buddhist philosophy called interdependent relationship, which investigates what we experience amongst ourselves and others. This is particularly in relation to the subject and object, where the subject is the mind, and the object is those things on which the mind focuses. In relation to the interdependent connection between subject and object, interdependent relationship also applies to the cause and effect sequence. Therefore, in relation to the subject and object, we will clearly begin to notice when we do this investigation, that when the mind, as the subject, is in a positive state when it relates to an external object, that object will also have a positive influence on the mind, rather than a negative influence. Whereas when the mind itself, the subject, is in a negative state, then when it relates to external conditions, the object, also has a negative effect upon the mind, and influences the mind to experience negativities. So in this way, we can clearly see cause and effect, and depending on the state of the mind, it interacts with the external object in a similar way, causing either a negative or positive influence upon us individually.

Therefore, as part of this process, it is really important to understand the nature of the mind and ourselves as an individual being. There is an interdependent relationship and connection between the mind, ourselves and the objects with which we interact. In this way, when we take the initiative, it becomes clearer that how we feel inside in relation to external objects is very much related to our own state of mind. The main point is, if it is dependent on our state of mind that we will have positive experiences in relation to the objects with which we interact, we will achieve a more calm, peaceful and positive state of mind by initially withdrawing our mind from all forms of distractions. Then we can apply our focus to the inner object that we have chosen. If we can withdraw our mind

completely from distracting thoughts or any kind of other objects, that will be the best way. Initially, if we find that we are not able to withdraw our mind 100%, then even withdrawing 50% from distracting thoughts and objects will also be a good attempt that we have made, so we apply this technique to the best of our ability.

If we look into how we interact with certain objects and the experiences we have, we will come to notice clearly for ourselves that there are certain objects which cause us distress, as soon as we see, or even think or hear about them. Having identified an object which influences us to have a negative reaction, an unpleasant feeling or sensation within ourselves, we need to not allow our mind to become obsessed with it. The more we focus on that object it results in unwanted states of mind such as anger. Then there are certain objects which will have a positive effect, and as soon as we see the object, it brings a sense of joy within ourselves. Hearing or thinking about a positive object brings a sense of well-being, joy and ease to our mind. Initially, our training here in meditation involves intentionally withdrawing our focus from the object which causes distress and not allowing our mind to focus on it. Instead, we adopt a technique where we intentionally focus on an object which does not cause distress to the mind, but brings a more tranquil and peaceful state of mind. When we choose the appropriate object and focus on it single-pointedly, even for five minutes, we will experience a positive consequence. In the meditation we are acquainting ourselves with the familiarity of focusing on an object that does not cause distress to our mind. As we gain some experience with this technique, we will naturally develop genuine wisdom that is borne within ourselves.

As beginners, we try not to set lofty goals for ourselves, but rather to be realistic and make attempts to genuinely keep our focus within and focusing on appropriate objects of our choice. When it is a genuine practice of focusing on the object, even for one or two minutes at a time, then that becomes a good foundation and basis for our further development. We will naturally and gradually begin to expand our ability to focus on the chosen meditation object. So it is in this way that we slowly begin to realise and understand the nature of our mind, which has the natural inborn quality of improving and transforming. It is possible to progress to a tranquil and calm state of mind which becomes more stable and long lasting. So it is in this way that we see the benefits and thus having explained all these benefits and the actual technique itself, we can now adopt a few minutes of meditation.

It is really worthwhile to adopt this training of our mind and to understand that it is indeed possible to train our mind; to progress and establish our mental well-being. We are gaining intelligence, so it is much more worthwhile to spend some time in this way, which causes our mind to be more tranquil and settled, at ease and more peaceful, rather than engaging in thoughts and activities which cause us more distress and the mind becoming more disturbed and unsettled. It would be like running around like a wild, crazy dog—there is no point wasting our time running around like a wild animal

when we have a choice and can adopt techniques to settle down our mind.

Thus we adopt an appropriate posture for our meditation. It is also advised to adopt a positive intention or motivation for the meditation practice.

The very term 'adopt' implies that if our mind is in a more negative state or completely distracted, then we need to intentionally cultivate a positive state of mind. This is based upon analysing our state of mind and checking what kind of thoughts are occurring at the moment. Of course if we find that the mind is already in a positive state, then we need not apply any specific measures beyond that, and this means while maintaining that positive state of mind, we then engage in the practice. However, if we find that our mind is currently, influenced by distracting thoughts such as attachments and anger, then that is something we need to intentionally overcome, and cultivate a more positive frame of mind. So the investigation process can be as basic and simple as having an internal dialogue with ourselves about the state of mind that we are in. We make a distinction between ourselves and our thoughts, and we need to be the one who takes control. We identify the thoughts and the mind, which becomes completely distracted, and goes in every direction, as being the trouble maker. Thus we tell that state of mind within a dialogue: 'It is because I followed every whimsical thought, every distraction and every negativity that you have come up with, that I have experienced so much turmoil. Up until now, all the troubles that I have experienced in my life are caused by you—the distracting thoughts. Thus, I am not going to allow myself and my mind to follow you distracting thoughts, even for a moment. I am not going to allow you to influence my mind anymore'. It is in this way that we intentionally make the distinction between the distracting thoughts and our own mind and not allow the influence of the distracting thoughts to overpower and control our mind. With that strong initiative we take, we can become courageous and think, 'I am in control here, I am in control of my mind'. Thus, as mentioned regularly for the practice of meditation and to adopt the appropriate technique here, we need to withdraw our mind from all forms of distraction including thoughts, ideas and bring our full attention and focus within ourselves. We then choose the appropriate object on which to focus, in this case our own breath, and place our full attention on the breath itself, being fully aware of each breath coming in and going out, and maintaining that focus for the next few minutes.

(Meditation)

That will be sufficient.

So I have done my part in giving you some information, do you have any questions?

Geshe Doga mentioned in English that our mind can either help us or harm us.

As the Buddha said, 'We are our own friend, but at the same time, we can be our own enemy'. So to give a particular example—if we didn't take heed of our state of mind and followed an impulse to steal, then depending

on what we stole, we could end up in prison for many years. No one else imprisoned us but ourselves—we were the ones who carried out those misdeeds. However on the positive side, if we engage in actions of helping and benefitting others with a kind and loving attitude, then that will bring about great solace, peace and joy in our own mind.

With your questions, I hope you don't give me a hard time (*laughter from Geshe-la*). I don't think I have given you a hard time.

Question: I find a lot of people in Australia are football crazy. Is watching all this sport a distraction for the mind?

Answer: When watching a big sport such as football is absorbed with a strong sense of attachment and aversion, then it definitely becomes a distraction for the mind. So you can see that when the elated feeling of joy occurs when your team has the upper hand and are winning—what is going on in your mind is attachment to your team. Then if the opponent's team is starting to win, then if you find that you are getting annoyed, upset and angry, that is aversion taking place. When there is a strong influence of attachment and aversion, then that causes either an elated state of mind of exhilaration or feeling very despondent, annoyed, upset and angry. If you watched the spectacle without a strong attachment to your own side, then even though if they win, you will feel a bit of joy, but you will not feel so upset or angry if the opponent wins because you do not have too much strong attachment towards your own team. However in relation to whether it's a good thing or not, it has become part of the tradition in the country to have sports and to engage in that sort of spectacle. It is hard for us to say, 'That's not good and we have to change that'. People need to come to their own understanding about it.

I must admit I also watch football, (*laughter*) but however again to be honest, I feel I don't actually enjoy the match that much if one team is much better. If one team really has the upper hand, the outcome is more predictable which takes the fun out of the game. I personally don't take that much joy in a team that I favour winning; it is not such a big deal for me. In fact, in terms of watching the game just for some fun and excitement, I find that when the teams have equal scores, there is more suspense and excitement. 'Who might win?' (*laughter*)

Once I remember an occasion I went to a game with Alan and his dad in Waverley. Collingwood and Hawthorn were playing at that time (*laughter*), and Alan's dad was barracking for Hawthorn. I had no particular reason, just a natural inclination to barrack a bit more for Collingwood (*laughter*).

That was maybe my first time going to a live match, and as Alan's dad was a member, we got quite good seats at the front. There were about 48,000 or 50,000 spectators. I brought some tea myself, but Alan's dad had arranged much more with flasks and thermos of coffee and everything.

Alan's dad was a very good person, I was fond of him. It was the year before last, when I met him. He was about 78 years old at the time, and quite good and fit for his

age. He used to come and visit me once in a while with some presents.

I recall in one of the last meetings I had with him, and he was sharing his concern for the up-keep of the centre. He was saying that it would be good if the centre could get some sort of revenue and make some money. Maybe in the future it might be difficult. He was sharing as someone who has adopted a business and seeing the outcome of an enterprise, whether it runs well or not. With that experience in life, he was taking a concern for the entity of the Tara Institute, and I thought that was very kind of him.

Thubten and Samdup were with me at that time. Alan's dad later said, 'Geshe-la, you seem to have a very good companions, I am sure they can help you out' (*laughter*).

So in relation to having good friends, as Alan's dad commented about the two individuals at that time, I definitely consider that all the people here are good friends.

Just on that note, carry the intention in our mind at all times and try to engage and have interactions with others with the intention of how I can help and benefit them. If we all carry that intention in our every day lives, then naturally we will all be mutually supporting each other, because we all adopt the intention of wishing to benefit and not harm others. Wherever we go on whatever occasion, there will be a natural fondness with each other and having good connections. We need to take the initiative to develop that sort of mind and then wish to contribute to the well-being of the self and others. That is something that I would like to remind people.

Before we conclude for the evening, we will again spend a few minutes in meditation practice, this time using the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra, as an object on which to focus. Withdrawing our mind from all distractions, we place our full attention and entire focus on the sound, and when the recitation ceases, we try to maintain that sense of vacuity of the sound and space within ourselves. We try to experience that tranquillity for a few moments and that will suffice for our meditation.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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