
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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We can spend some time in meditation. So let us adopt a comfortable and relaxed posture. Since we can all assume that everyone is a meditator, what we do when we gather as meditators is to meditate—that sounds reasonable. It is good to take into account that the mind is a very powerful tool for us. These days there is more and more research about what the mind is and how it functions. Indeed it seems the mind is a very powerful entity.

As an indication of the power of the mind, we can observe how a small insect goes about doing so many incredible activities just by the sheer power of having a mind. Let's look at a particular example of ant behaviour. In front of us there are no ants but if we put something sweet around then if there are ants in the vicinity, in some corner of the room, then immediately they will be drawn to the sweet substance. How are they attracted to this sweet substance? Obviously they can't see it from that far, so through smell sense or another attribute, they are conscious of the honey which is the function of the mind. Because the ants have an awareness of that sweet substance they are drawn to it. It is the power of the mind that draws the ants to substances such as food or sweet substances from long distances. We can also observe how ants move nests and how they carry their eggs with them when they move.

Because they have many eggs, they have to go back and forth, back and forth, carrying the eggs and then we can see that sometimes when one ant notices some sweet substance, it looks like they go back and then inform another ant, then you see more coming. So this really comes down to the power of their mind—the ability of the mind that enables them to do that.

While an insect such as a small ant may seem very small and insignificant in comparison to us, they have their own great abilities. They can achieve and do a lot, such as finding their own food and satisfying their needs and so forth. Many activities based around their survival are done through the function of their mind.

In comparison to the mind of an insect, our mind is without a doubt much more powerful, which means we have much greater potential. We can achieve much greater things with the power of our mind.

However with that great power and potential, our mind not only has a positive energy but also a negative energy that it carries at the same time.

Having acknowledged that there is both positive and negative energy and power of the mind, based on our own experience we can see that as the positive side of our mind increases it contributes a happier mind. Whereas

when the negative potential of the mind, or the negative energy of the mind increases, then that leads to more unhappiness and a more troubled state of mind. All our troubles, anxieties and fears and so forth are manifested when the negative side of the mind starts to increase. Unless we subdue that negative state of our mind, then we will never have a true genuine sense of happiness in our mind. We will never gain any real genuine tranquillity or peace of mind as long as the negative energy of our mind remains. So we need to definitely make an attempt to subdue the negative state of our mind. We will notice this through our own experience when we apply a real, genuine sense of inner investigation and analysis within ourselves. This analysis and investigation needs to be based on sound reasoning, with wisdom. As we apply wisdom to our self-analysis and investigation, it becomes even stronger and we have a more positive understanding and insight.

Everyone has both a positive potential in the mind as well as a negative potential in the mind. When we think about it, there might be some exceptions, or some extraordinary cases where people might not be affected by negativities. However, generally speaking, we can see that both the positive and negative potential of the mind does apply to everyone. There seems to be no exception whether they are rich or poor, of high standing, or are knowledgeable or not. Everyone at one time or another will experience either a positive state of mind or a negative state mind. When a negative state of mind is more prevalent, then the consequences are turmoil, and sometimes anxiety and fear.

The nature of humanity in terms of both the positive and negative mental energy prevalent throughout the human race is worthwhile for us to understand. Rich and poor are alike, there will be certain occasions where there will be some sense of joy or happiness but then at other times there will be sadness and an unhappy state of mind. This vulnerability, either feeling elated or feeling sad, can affect anyone regardless of who they are, which gives us a deeper insight into the existence of humanity. Based on this understanding, it will be easier for us to genuinely embrace everyone, because we understand that we are all alike, we all have times where we suffer and all have times when we feel joyful. This understanding means it will be easy for us to be more tolerant and more patient with others, and furthermore to be more compassionate towards others. Because we understand more about their nature, it will be easier for us to actually develop a genuine sense of love and compassion for them as well. Understanding these pervasive human vulnerabilities can help us to develop our own positive qualities.

It's hard to find someone who doesn't have any problems. This implies that there is no-one who is completely free from having problems. Furthermore, how people deal with their problems varies. While we can safely assume that all people experience difficulties and problems at times, what is different is how these problems are experienced, but more specifically how they are dealt with. We find that some people are not able to tolerate even a small problem, they seem to be crippled even by the slightest problem. Whereas others, even when they are experiencing significant difficulties and

problems in life, are able to deal with that effectively and the problems don't cripple them, they don't experience that great distress and are able to move on in life. So where does this difference come from, how does the different approach arise?

Someone who accepts their problems is better equipped to deal them effectively. So what does accepting problems mean? It means is to be a little bit more patient, and develop a little bit more tolerance. If you are patient with the problem, you have a better ability to assess the problem and then be able to clearly see a solution. If we are completely distraught and emotionally overwhelmed with the problem, then it blocks us from being able to see any good solutions for those problems and we start dwelling in self-pity. It becomes destructive when we focus too much on the problems and start to feel that it is unfair that we should be experiencing them. Some people complain and ask why do they have to experience these problems. They see the problems as if they are the only one in the world who is experiencing that problem, that no one else may be having the same kinds of difficulties.

This sort of attitude shows that their thinking is not based on reality, and that they are obsessed about their own problem and thinking and making such a big deal out of it for themselves. This type of thinking will cripple their ability to deal with their problems better, because they haven't accepted the problem. Understanding how problems affect us and how we deal with them can be a good basis for us to understand others' problems as well. If we are finding difficulties and problems then others are also facing similar issues. When we use our personal experiences to understand others, then there can be more acceptance of others' problems as well as our own.

So the main point is that if we are able to identify states of mind as being positive and having a good energy, and certain states of mind that have a bad negative energy, then we will find that the very instant that sort of energy takes over our mind we feel low self-esteem, and feel down and unhappy. However, there are ways to further develop and expand that positive energy or potential of the mind and decrease the negativities. We can do this through a meditation practice.

As we develop awareness through our meditation practice, we will then be equipped with the ability to assess our state of mind at any given time regardless of the external circumstances. Regardless of our external circumstances, we find that there may be times that even when there is no particular external trigger, such as people bothering us or pushing our buttons, we still find that we are feeling unhappy and unsettled. So if we can look into ourselves and look further into what could be causing that, and examining what kind of state of mind we are in, then we would be able to detect more of a prevalent negative state of mind or negative attitude within ourselves. When we recognise negative mind states, then we need to take the initiative to try to overcome them. The very process of identifying a negative state of mind within ourselves helps us to defuse the intensity of the negative state of mind. So on a daily basis we can apply a diligent awareness of our state of mind and caution ourselves when negative states of mind

are about to develop or take root. In my own situation, when I see that there is a negative tendency rising within me, then that is when I have to tell myself, Geshe Doga, be careful, there is the beginning of a negative state of mind arising here, you have to be careful. A negative mind is coming up here, so you need the sword of wisdom to sever it from the root.

The main point here is that when self-vigilance is applied to honestly detect what is going on in our own mind, that means that we are stepping back from the situation rather than immediately habitually blaming our external situation. First, check our own mind—what is going on inside, how are we reacting here? Regardless of the external situation, are we approaching this with a more positive and tolerant state of mind, with a wisdom mind? Or are we immediately reacting to our situation in a negative state of mind? We have to do this assessment ourselves. As a way to combat the negativities in our own mind, we need to regard that internal sort of negativity as our real enemy. The analogy of a sword is an analogy of applying the wisdom. Just as we would use a sword to combat an external enemy, here since we are combating the inner enemy of our negative states of mind. The sword represents the wisdom or intelligence that we need to apply to ourselves.

And rather than having someone else to prompt us, which we might not accept anyway, we need to take the initiative to look at ourselves and caution ourselves. This internal investigation will help us to defuse our intense negative state of mind, such as when we start to feel angry. If we constantly look at our external situation and find reasons to be angry and blaming our external situation, then our negative mind will only escalate, and we will only help the anger to become even stronger. But if we look inside ourselves and find that we are over-reacting, and that 'it is my own negative state of mind that is taking over and affecting me in a negative way'. The very process of recognising anger as a destructive state of mind actually defuses the anger. Immediately we start to become calmer. This is something of great value if we apply it in our everyday life.

To reemphasise the point, once we accept that a negative state of mind is an internal enemy, we need to overcome the enemy and the only tool or method we have to overcome this internal enemy is to apply a counter or opposing state of mind, which is a positive state of mind. Our own positive state of mind is the only weapon that can overcome our own internal negative state of mind and the reason why we emphasise 'the only' is because nothing externally can affect us, no external matter can change or get rid of that negative state of mind within ourselves. Since nothing externally can be used to overcome our internal negative state of mind, if we don't apply an antidote ourselves, then our negative mind becomes very powerful and eventually becomes something that we have no control over. It will have complete freedom to do whatever it wants and it can cause a lot of destruction. So that is something we need to pay attention to before it gets out of hand.

To come back to the analogy of using a sword to vanquish an enemy, of course that analogy comes from

ancient times, where the weapon to overcome and vanquish an enemy would have been a spear or sword. We are using that analogy and applying that to our inner enemy, where the sword is the wisdom that cuts through and overcomes the inner enemy of our negative states of mind.

In applying the meditation technique we are getting a better understanding of how meditation techniques can help our state of mind.

Having listened to the significance and purpose of meditation practice, we can now adopt the meditation practice for a few minutes. The meditation described here helps us to develop our concentration, so we have a clear state of mind. The object that we use is our own breath and to be able to focusing on our breath, we need to first of all adjust our physical posture to be comfortable. We set our mind so that for the next few minutes we make the determination that we will not allow our attention or focus to wander in every direction, to not become distracted as we usually do, following every thought or idea. Instead we bring our full attention and focus on our breath. Concentrate on the natural inflow and outflow of breathing through our nostrils, and develop an image of the breath, seeing the breath going in and going out, and place our full attention and focus just on the breath itself. Stay 100% focussed on the breath itself, and do not allow the mind to wander, or concentrate on anything else. In this way we will adopt the meditation technique for a few minutes.

[Meditation]

Questions: Geshe-la, you explained the bad effects of a negative state of mind in quite a bit of detail. I was wondering if having a negative state of mind would also attract negative people and energy to oneself?

Answer: One thing seems to be certain, if you have a positive state of mind you do find a good companion. People become closer to you, whereas if you have negative state of mind, you shun away good people who would otherwise be friendly.

The point is that those who are inclined to do negative acts seem to find companions who are like-minded as well, who are quite good at stealing and so forth; they seem to be able to find their own associates. For example in India, I have heard that there are gangs of bandits that belong to a society, and the nature of their being together is to go out and rob others and so forth. That is why they form such a society.

Apparently the bandit society seems to be a powerful society, where even the police and other authorities are not really able to do much to stop them. The authorities might even have a bit of riches too.

We have a similar example here in Australia with the bike society, the bikie gangs, who also seem to be powerful. But the bikie gangs here don't go out and intentionally seek trouble and hurt others. They might have some internal disputes, but it seems like they just want to go out and have fun on their bikes together.

It might be more because you have the same interest that you attract the same like-minded people.

Question: I live in a Buddhist community in which recently there has been a tragic incident of someone taking their own life. This has been a cause for many to feel very distressed and disturbed. Can Geshe-la please give some advice how best to deal with the situation?

Answer: This all relates back to my previous explanation about how the negative state of mind takes over and causes a lot of destruction. Of course the destruction is not always an external destruction, or destruction or harm to others, it can also cause harm to ourselves and it is the result of a negative state of mind that has not been appeased. This is precisely what the great Indian master, Shantideva mentioned in his work, *Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, where he says that if people can take their own life out of intense anger, then it is no wonder that they will cause others harm. By understanding that ill-effects of anger and how much destruction and harm it can cause, when someone is affected with these negative states of mind, then they are not only an object of scorn and judgement but rather an object of compassion. So it comes down to having a deep understanding of the situation and realising that it is compassion that we need to develop.

As described extensively in the Buddha's teaching, when we do not take measure of our negative state of mind and apply an antidote to overcome it, we can reach a state where our negative mind can really overpower us, and overpowering our decision making abilities to the point where some people take drastic measures such as taking their own life. So as I have been asked this question before about people taking their life, I have to say that basically it is their decision, they have made the choice that it is better to leave this world rather than to stay. But that decision whether to continue to live, or to end their life is dependent very much on their state of mind at that particular moment. If we give in completely to that negativity of the mind where it has escalated, then it can deceive us into thinking that there is no hope and no purpose in our life. When we are completely being overwhelmed by that negative situation, our judgement is completely tainted by that negativity to the point where we may take a drastic ill-conceived action. If we see others in that situation, they can be the object of our compassion, but we can also learn from them in that we need to be cautious ourselves and take proper measures to protect our own state of mind. We need to be vigilant.

When a negativity overpowers our mind and decision making powers, then it is in that moment that we have no real control over ourselves, with no ability to make rational good choices. It is as if we have no choice to make a better choice for ourselves. So we have allowed the negative state of mind to completely dominate and overpower us. We have to protect ourselves from reaching a negative state like that, where we are completely overwhelmed and overpowered by a negative state of mind in whatever aspect it manifests. We need to take measures to constantly be vigilant and constantly recognise the delusions of a negative state of mind and apply antidotes to whatever extent we can, and maintain a meditation practice in our life.

As a practical measure of what we can do now for the deceased person as well as for people who are not in that situation, then one good suggestion is to gather together and do some prayers together. This definitely has a very positive effect, not only for the unfortunate person who has passed on but also for those who are together in that community. Working together can bring a renewed harmonious relationship between each other and also sets our mind to become more positive. So prayers can be really useful and helpful in that way.

Feeling anxious, distraught and unsettled will not help the deceased person nor the members of the community. What does help is doing the prayers and dedicating those prayers to the deceased. As Buddhists we believe in an afterlife, so there are still possibilities and opportunities for the next life to be better. This is definitely a possibility, so pray that will be the case.

As Buddhists, we have certain prayers that we can say that are very effective, such as the tenth chapter, the dedication chapter of Shantideva's text. Reciting that together as a community is very effective. All the great dedications in that prayer—may they come true for the deceased. There is also a prayer called *The King of Prayers*, which is a particularly effective recitation.

From my side I will also do prayers, so the combination of both our good intentions can definitely be of benefit.

Of course, besides that, there is nothing much we can do for the deceased person at all, besides making prayers and wishing them well. So from your side and from my side that is the best result, there is nothing much more we can do for the person.

Before we end the session for the evening, we can take the opportunity again to spend a few minutes in meditation. This time we can use the sound of the Buddha Shakyamuni mantra as an object of focus for our meditation. Thus we place our full attention and focus on the sound of the mantra as it being recited, then when the recitation subsides we can then maintain that awareness and focus on the feeling of the good state of mind we have. Focussing on that for a few moments will help focus your meditation.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

*Transcribed by Su Lan Foo
Edit 1 by Cynthia Karena
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
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