
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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2 July 2014

Let us begin by sitting in a comfortable relaxed posture.

As I regularly mention, I consider gathering here as a purpose for us to find a way to gain a peaceful, happy state of mind. And likewise, if any sense of peace we have previously felt has degenerated somewhat, then we can restore that peace and happiness within our mind.

So we have some work to do. Indeed, it is worthwhile to take into consideration what we are looking for? What is our purpose in life? What are seeking to achieve? We engage in a lot of activities, but what is it that we are really setting out to achieve? That is something worthwhile for us to consider.

We are born as humans. That is an undeniable fact. While there might be various different inclinations and diverse cultures and so forth, the main thing we all have in common is striving to fulfil the purpose of life. So what is that purpose of life? What is it that we want to achieve? This is the point we need to consider.

The significant point here is that once we have looked into what we aspire to, and wish to achieve, we all have the potential to achieve it, because of the very fact that we are human. We need to remind ourselves of the incredible potential we have as humans.

When we look into what we as humans ultimately wish to achieve, it can be summarised into wellbeing and happiness. And what we ultimately as humans don't wish to experience, and strive in every way to avoid, is suffering. We all, without exception, do experience a certain degree of happiness and suffering. Thus, what we aspire to achieve is lasting happiness and to remove all suffering.

As humans, we all have a deep desire to experience happiness, the best kind of happiness, and not experience any kind of misery or suffering, regardless of status, whether rich or poor, whether famous or not well-known. Whatever status, whether learned or not, this deep rooted desire for happiness and avoiding suffering is something that, as humans, we all share.

What we are referring to here is the greatest happiness that humans can achieve. Likewise, the greatest sufferings can be removed by humans. We all aspire to achieve this. We need to remind ourselves that we have the potential. By the very virtue of being human we have that potential to achieve happiness and remove the suffering from our lives.

There are a few different ways to achieve great happiness and remove suffering from our lives. Individually we all strive in our own way to achieve happiness by being busy with our everyday lives in work and so forth.

However, we are accustomed to looking externally for ways to be happy, and seeking happiness in external things.

We are mostly preoccupied, in our time and energy, in seeking ways to find happiness externally, so we hardly

spend any time looking within ourselves and trying to investigate whether the path to happiness lies within us. We hardly pay attention to looking inward. By looking outward for happiness, rather than paying attention to our inner world, we distract ourselves from our goal, and may be actually destroying the inner solution that will make us happy.

Look into what really contributes to our inner sense of happiness and peace, and you'll find it is a genuinely relaxed and calm state of mind. However, it is very rare for us to have a real opportunity to be genuinely relaxed, calm and peaceful, because we are constantly preoccupied and busy focusing on external factors, i.e. distractions. When we are constantly busy with external distractions, we fail to get in touch with our inner state, which serves as the basis for our peace and happiness. This is our predicament. This is where we fall short in achieving a real sense of well-being and happiness in our lives—we hardly pay any attention to the real cause and conditions within. So because of this fact I try to remind, particularly the younger generation, that when you're young and vibrant, of course you need to by all means strive to achieve or accomplish the external goals needed for your welfare, to look after yourself. Externally, we do need to pay attention. However, while doing so we also need to pay some attention and spend some time in looking within, and trying to recognise the inner conditions for our well-being. This combination of outer and inner strategies is most worthwhile.

If we really wish to have a genuinely relaxed, calm, peaceful state of mind, then there is no other way but to slowly withdraw our mind from external distractions and bring the focus of our mind within. Otherwise, if we give our full attention to external factors, then, while we may be able to achieve some of our external goals and achievements, such as securing a good job that earns a good income so we can get a good, fancy house and other material objects, the question here is whether we will be happier with all of that.

Some people have confided in me that after achieving a certain amount of material comfort, for example a nice house, they look back and find that they were much happier when they were living in a more modest, simpler place. And while a better house was meant to give more joy and happiness in this person's life, somehow they felt less happy in their new fancy big house. Likewise, some people have mentioned to me that when they didn't have that much money, and were just making ends meet and living in a very simple way, they were happier. But after accumulating a bit of wealth, they feel like they have lost the happiness they once had. Suddenly that sense of joy and happiness is gone, and so they question that if all of this money is meant to bring more happiness in their life, then why is this not happening? We need to consider these points. This example is proof that our happiness and well-being do not rely on external conditions, but rather we need to focus within.

But you must not misinterpret what I am presenting here. I'm not saying that money or wealth is not necessary in life. Of course we need to have money—we need to have a certain amount of wealth to secure our well-being. Particularly for the younger generation, study is important to secure your external well-being. Even though some younger people are dedicated and want to come to my teachings, I have encouraged them to pay more attention to their studies. It is better for them to study rather than coming here and listening to the talks. While we need to rely on external conditions for our survival and well-being, the

main point is in the danger of thinking that our happiness lies only in external achievements, resulting in our focus being directed entirely on accomplishing external wealth. But then we may reach the point where having achieved all of that, we still lack a sense of well-being and happiness, to the point where we may start feeling distressed.

We put so much time and energy in achieving wealth and material gain with the aim of finding happiness. But when we don't experience that happiness, we experience turmoil and distress in our mind. This is because we have neglected to look within ourselves, or to pay attention to our inner conditions. As mentioned previously, the true causes and conditions for a genuine sense of mental well-being and happiness lies within ourselves rather than externally. If we fail to pay attention to that, then we will be chasing happiness in the wrong place.

Our well-being can be put into two categories: physical and mental well-being. For our physical well-being and happiness we need to maintain our good health. That is easy enough for us to manage. We have the means and ability to look after our health. Our mental happiness relies on having positive states of mind such as genuine kindness. That is also within our means. We have the basis of all of these positive states of mind, such as genuine kindness and consideration for others. The more we develop a positive mind, for example, developing genuine kindness within ourselves, the more our genuine sense of inner well-being and happiness increases. This is all achievable for us. We have the capacity. This is why I emphasise these points, for you to give them consideration.

When we take these measures to look after our physical and mental well-being, then when we reap the positive results. We'll feel joyful in our mind, and then that will give us a determination to live long. We should aspire to have a long life because there is reason. If we are feeling well physically and mentally, then life is a joy. So naturally we would want to live as long as possible. Otherwise, the alternative consequence is clear. If we do not feel well physically and feel miserable mentally, then we start to lose a sense of purpose and joy in life. This may result in losing the will to live. These are significant points that we need to take into consideration.

I take the initiative to look after myself physically and look after my health. But I spend most of my time working on developing and further establishing the positive states of mind within myself. So I feel that I am taking responsibility for myself and as a consequence I feel good. Physically and mentally I feel strong and healthy. Taking care of our health really does have an impact on our well-being. We need to ensure that we are careful what we eat, and take things in moderation, even something such as our teeth. It is clear that when I take the initiative to clean my teeth well, brush them well and pay attention to the hygiene of my teeth, then there are less problems with the teeth. I've learnt this through my experience of having to go to the dentist.

The main point again is that our well-being relies on our body and mind, so it is up to us to make that happen by taking care of our body and mind. We need to take measures to look after our physical body by maintaining all the right conditions for our health, and take care of our mind by further developing and promoting the positive states of our mind. When we are not well we rely on a doctor. However, what I have discovered through my own experience is that half of that well-being depends on us. When we are not well,

half of it may be the advice we receive from the doctor, however the other half relies on our own initiative, on our own will to get better. This self-responsibility also applies to our mental health. The real doctor for our mental health is us.

We are entirely in charge of our mental state, because our negative ways of thinking contribute to our mental unrest. Therefore it is a matter of changing our way of thinking, and changing our attitude. This is all within our reach. We can change our ways of thinking, and our attitudes. When we recognise a negative attitude, there are ways to change that way of thinking. But it's up to us.

The ultimate technique for bringing mental well-being is meditation. Meditation is a method to help change our ways of thinking from negative to positive. We also refer to meditation as a mental transformation, where we transform our negative states of mind into more positive states of mind. Our mental turmoil is based on disturbing conceptual thoughts. These negative conceptual thoughts cause us distress and mental turmoil. We need to transform and change our negative thoughts to restore a sense of happiness and well-being.

Attachment is an example of a negative or a disturbing conceptual thought that causes us distress, particularly strong attachment. When a strong attachment dominates our mind, the consequence is distress. The attachment in our mind relates to a particular object. We can feel so much sorrow and so much distress when we obsess about an object we are attached towards.

The first step is to understand that attachment is a problem. The way to overcome that is by withdrawing our focus from the object of attachment, and focus on an object that either counteracts that attachment, or a neutral object that does not cause attachment to rise. We can use that object as an object of meditation, where we place our entire focus and attention on it. Familiarising our mind with either a counter or neutral object will eventually release us from the pangs of attachment. It gives a genuine sense of relaxation in our mind, a real sense of well-being.

Meditation involves familiarising ourselves with a better way of thinking, by choosing an appropriate object and focusing on it.

Furthermore, the object of the meditation is not an external object but rather a mental image. Therefore the meditation object is referred to as an inner object. Typically, the inner object is a virtuous object which, when focussed on, causes virtuous or positive states of mind within us. When we become familiar with this technique of focusing on the inner object, then we can easily recall the object when we are affected by negative states of mind such as attachment. But when we are not meditating, when we are out and about, we may of course come into contact with objects of attachment and anger and the like. When we are faced with an object of attachment, when we either see it or it comes to memory, we recognise the attachment as a cause of distress, and we can immediately apply a familiar meditation technique. The more mental training we have in applying a meditation method, the easier it becomes for us to access and use it. It is there at our disposal.

Obsession is focusing on an object that typically causes us increasing distress. The more we focus on that object, because it is causing us distress, the more we will end up experiencing more and more pain and difficulty. We don't know how to get out of that vicious circle. However, the

point here is that access to this meditation training will be to our advantage. While there are so many factors that cause us distress, we have to acknowledge that as ordinary people we will have attachment arising periodically, as well as anger and so forth. However, the point here is that if we apply the appropriate meditation technique, it will become easier for us not to become completely dominated, or influenced by, attachment or anger. We will be able to detect the faulty state of mind of attachment more easily, and then quickly apply the appropriate meditation method to overcome it.

We need to recognise what states of mind are peaceful. How do we cultivate the mental conditions that contribute to a happy state of mind? And then how do we apply it in our daily life? These are reasonable points we need to contemplate.

We will now engage in a short meditation session. Again, readjust your physical posture to be comfortable and upright. To get the most benefit out of this meditation, we need to concentrate and not allow our minds to follow the normal distractions of our life, whether they are thoughts or memories or surrounding objects. We fully withdraw from all of those preoccupations that we normally allow our mind to follow. Bring our full attention and focus within, then apply your attention and focus on the chosen object for our meditation, which for our purpose of meditation now, is our breath. Place your complete and full attention on the natural breathing. We imagine seeing our breath coming in and going out, and place our attention and focus just on that and on nothing else. This is what is called an inner object, having a mental image of our breath and focusing on that mental image of the breath coming in and going out, just being fully aware of the breath coming in and going out. *[meditation]*

Question: Is it OK for me to eat fish as I was told it is needed to for my health?

Answer: Consider taking care of your health. Since meat or fish is freely available, it might be better to have it.

If you go a little extreme to the point of neglecting yourself and suffer later and develop a sense of regret about not eating meat, then that is not a very pleasant state of mind to be in later on.

It seems the predicament you have is whether it is a negative act to eat meat or not. There are different theories, and different ways of looking at it. Of course, generally speaking if one could safely stick to a vegetarian diet, then that might be preferable from a virtuous deeds point of view.

However I have heard that fish is good for health. I personally don't take fish, but I've heard that it is healthy.

Apparently it's light, not so heavy. Good for the constitution. The Tibetan term for fish is basically water radish. Since we have a precious body, we need to take care of it. It is wise to listen to advice that a doctor or nutritionist gives us. When we are healthy and strong, then it is possible that we use our life in a meaningful way, a virtuous way. Having a life where we have all the conditions to be born as a human is very rare. It is very difficult to obtain a human life with good conditions. But we have great potential.

As I mentioned previously, on the basis of having good health physically and mentally, if we then can utilise this to lead a more meaningful life, a way of life where we can engage in some virtue, then there is purpose to our lives. If we feel determined to live a long life, it is rightly a good state of mind to be in.

Thank you for the question.

Your question was more practical in relation to health whether it is OK to eat meat, to eat fish or not. But some people bring up the question as whether it is negative to eat fish and other meat. That is a more complicated question.

Sometimes a question may not be so straightforward. A question can bring up more doubts and other questions. With our minds, sometimes there is no end to questions and doubts that may occur. If we do not allow reasoning to take place, then whatever answer is given may not seem satisfactory anyway.

The truth and reality of our situation is that we consume food to sustain ourselves, and there is no food that we could consume that would not have caused to some harm to others. Even vegetables cause so much harm to so many animals, which are killed in the process of eating vegetables. That is a fact and reality. So if we go to that extreme, then we would have to maybe resort to not consuming anything. We would not then be able to survive.

There are some people who do not drink milk because their reasoning is that it would harm the calves, and the cows would be deprived of milk.

I'd like to show my appreciation for you paying great attention to what I had to share. I have tried to share whatever I have with the intention that it will be of some practical benefit in your life. So it is with that intention that I have shared whatever words I have. And you likewise have listened attentively. Thank you.

There are so many different ways that we can benefit others. Even to the extent of just saying nice words, or showing a nice gesture and smiling. Even to that small extent, there are ways to benefit others. When your actions bring joy to someone's mind, to someone's heart, then that is a benefit. There are unlimited ways of how we can benefit others. Keep in mind that we should not limit ourselves in the ways we can help others. There are so many practical ways that we can benefit others.

Those who were here for the session last night, particularly the study group students, would recall that one of the pieces of advice that was presented in Shantideva's text is that when someone comes into your personal space, look up at them with a smile and nice gestures, and welcome them saying how good it is that they are here. Don't forget this practical advice for helping others.

This advice is in response to what to do, and how to act and engage someone who comes near you. Before we end the session for the evening, let us again spend a few minutes to take the opportunity to meditate. This time we use the sound of the Buddha Shakyamuni mantra. As we hear the chant of the mantra, we place our full attention and focus on the sound. And then as the recitation subsides, try to maintain your focus on the residue of the nice feeling or sensation that we get from the sound of the mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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