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# 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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While it may be relatively easy for us to adopt a comfortable posture, if our mind is not as settled as our physical posture, then our meditation will not contribute to a genuine sense of calmness within us. Therefore the training that we adopt here is a technique to relax and settle the mind, whilst we are physically settled.

Acquiring a settled or a genuinely relaxed state of mind, requires some training. Unfortunately it doesn't come about naturally, because we are mostly habituated to having a very busy state of mind, a mind that is dispersed in every direction with lots of random thoughts that we follow. This then brings about unnecessary worries, anxieties and stress. So, in short, allowing the mind to disperse completely in every direction causes all of those shortcomings and we find that our state of mind is not restful, relaxed and calm. While initially it is difficult to apply this technique or training to settle the mind, when we become familiar and acquainted with it, we begin to realise that when the mind is settled and focused, it naturally brings about a more relaxed, calmer mind. So, to that extent, it is worthwhile to adopt the training.

In simple terms, that is what meditation entails. It is a technique where we train our mind to be focused within. First of all we settle the physical body and then the mind. With the mind contained within rather than being completely dispersed externally, then, based on that, one chooses an appropriate object to focus on and, for whatever duration is possible, one maintains one's single-pointed focus on that chosen object. So that is what meditation entails. The benefit one gains by adopting this technique is that the mind is able to become settled and focused. As a consequence it becomes more relaxed and calmer and one has a more joyous and happy state of mind.

We all have the experience of a mind that is very busy and distracted. This is not something that is foreign or obscure to us. When we pay attention to our state of mind we will all notice that our mind can be very, very busy with many different things. It goes off in many different directions following many different distractions. What we might fail to notice though, is the connection between the distracted mind and a mind that is unsettled and distressed. So when we do further investigation we will begin to notice that a very busy, hyperactive and distracted mind leads to a distressed mind, a mind that is not settled and relaxed and lacks peace.

When we employ this technique of bringing our focus within and settling the focus of our mind on a particular object then, as a consequence, we will find that the mind becomes quite relaxed, calm and settled. When we experience that we would then begin to notice for ourselves that there is a great benefit in applying the technique. We will be able to acknowledge to ourselves that this technique that we call meditation actually does bring about a genuine

sense of inner relaxation, calmness and peace within us. When we have that experience for ourselves, for whatever duration it may last, we will be able to see the real benefit of the training.

Furthermore, we will be able to see that we have the potential or the means within ourselves to create a genuinely relaxed and calm atmosphere within us. Calmness and peace is within our reach. It is not something gained from external sources but something that is developed within us. When we begin to see for ourselves that we do have that potential to attain a peaceful state of mind, it gives us a sense of empowerment. Indeed our happiness is within our reach and in our own hands. That understanding is very empowering and beneficial. When we begin to understand that, we will begin to acknowledge that our own mind has the ability to induce that real sense of wellbeing within us. And when we acknowledge and notice that for ourselves, we will begin to see that it is a great shame if we don't make use of the great potential that we have.

Of course, what I am saying are my own observations and what I consider to be the benefits of the training and practice of meditation. From my own observations I find that when we get in touch with the inner ability that we have to induce a genuine sense of calmness and relaxation within us, we can begin to consider that ability as a genuine, inner, unflinching companion. It is unflinching, because it will be at our disposal at any time and it will assist us in any kind of difficult situation we might face. When we are able to utilise that inner potential that we have, it becomes our unflinching companion and saviour when facing difficulties and problems. Furthermore it becomes a companion to assist us in adopting a more positive way of thinking that helps us to gain a genuine sense of inner wellbeing. So that is how I would consider it to be an unflinching companion

So when we take the initiative to recognise this positive potential or state of mind within us and further develop it, then even if we find that we are not surrounded by external friends, this inner companion or friend will come to our aid at all times and help us. It will help us to be able to deal with any kind of hardships or difficulties that may arise, because it is within us and is at our disposal at any time. We will find that it supports us and helps us to be able to deal with situations, to assess things properly, and to make the right choices in life. It becomes very beneficial in so many different ways for our own wellbeing in life.

By adopting this training we are intentionally and purposely gaining more control of our mind so that it will become more settled and focused. When we have a settled and focused mind we will then be able to develop a clearer understanding of what is useful and what may be harmful to our wellbeing. And when we have that clear understanding of what is useful and what is harmful it will be easy for us to take the initiative to adopt what is useful and to try to avoid and discard what is harmful to us. So it is in this way that the meditation technique becomes a practical aid to our wellbeing. As I said earlier, this training to develop inner strength and clarity is something that will be very beneficial in our life.

Having presented this summary of what meditation entails and how it practically helps us, and how it helps to strengthen our state of mind, it is good for us to consider these benefits before we adopt the meditation technique. Thinking this over makes it more reasonable and more

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meaningful for us to apply the technique. Having considered that, we can now take some time for our meditation practice.

So let's realign our body to be in an upright, but comfortable posture. Having adopted this appropriate posture the object that we will focus on in our meditation will be our own breath. If you are already familiar with a particular object to meditate on then make use of that. However, adopting our breath is generally a very good object to focus on.

To reap the full benefit of meditation practice, it is said that it is necessary to undertake meditation with a good motivation, basically a good intention. The good intention we can adopt here is, 'May the time and energy that I spend in meditation now become a means to benefit and serve others'. If we do this practice with such a motivation or intention it becomes very meaningful and worthwhile. For the purpose of our meditation now we need to generate the commitment to ourselves that, 'For the next few minutes I will not allow my mind to be distracted in every direction.' This means that we intentionally withdraw our focus from any kind of thoughts, memories or objects, and place our focus within.

Having brought our attention and focus within, we then intentionally place our attention and focus on the chosen object, which for our purposes will be our breath. That means that we place our full attention and focus on the natural rhythm of our breathing, the natural inflow and outflow our breath. We basically just focus on the breath, every in breath and out breath, being fully aware of that and just keeping our attention and focus just on that. To again use simple terms, when our mind is not anchored to something it has a tendency to go off and be dispersed in every direction. So the focal object basically serves as an anchoring point. We are anchoring the attention or focus of our mind to our own breath which will stop it from going off in every other direction. So that, in simple terms, is what meditation is, training to keep our focus and attention on a chosen object. So we will spend the next few minutes just focusing on our breath. (*Pause for meditation.*)

#### **4.2.2.1.2.3. The way to train the mind in the stages of the path of beings of the great scope**

##### **4.2.2.1.2.3.2. The actual paths**

##### **4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2. How to develop an awakening mind**

##### **4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1. The stages of training the awakening mind**

##### **4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.2. The way to train the mind in equalizing and exchanging self and other**

##### **4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.2.1 Reflecting on the benefits and shortcomings of exchanging and not exchanging self and other**

##### **4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.2.1.1 It is logical to exchange self and other if one [wants to] quickly accomplish the two welfares**

We can now spend some time discussing the text. We have now covered the subject of how to develop the mind of enlightenment or bodhicitta with the Seven Point Cause and Effect technique. Having covered that we now come to the point where it explains how to generate that mind of enlightenment with the Exchanging Self with Other technique.

The sequential way of practising this technique would be to first familiarise oneself with the earlier Seven Point Cause and Effect technique. That technique includes first meditating on equanimity towards all beings, then generating the recognition of all beings as having been one's mother, then remembering their kindness, then generating

the wish to repay their kindness, then generating great love and then generating great compassion for all beings. So in that way one has trained oneself to the point of generating great love and compassion towards all other beings. It is at that stage that one can adopt this technique fruitfully.

The text explains that this training of exchanging self and others is based on the teachings of the conquerors' child known as Shantideva. So the teaching in the text is a presentation based on his instructions.

The first subdivision of the text is, Reflecting on the Benefits and Shortcomings of Exchanging and Not Exchanging Self and Other. The second subdivision is, Teaching the Potential to Develop that Mind If One Becomes Acquainted With It. The third is, The Way to Exchange Self and Other: The Stages of the Meditation".

The first of these three subdivisions has three further subheadings. The first is, It is Logical to Exchange Self and Other if One [Wants to] Quickly Accomplish the Two Welfares". The two welfares mentioned here are the welfare of oneself and welfare of other beings. So if one wishes to fulfil that quickly then it is reasonable to adopt this practice.

A verse from the works of Shantideva is quoted in the text under this heading. In his work *Engaging in the Bodhisattva's Deeds*, it says:

Whoever wishes to quickly protect  
Self and other  
Must exchange self for other,  
Practise this excellent secret.

I will explain a little bit of the meaning of the quoted verse. The quotation says, 'whoever wishes to quickly protect self and other'. Protecting refers to protecting oneself and others from the fears, the shortcomings and all the miseries, or what we call the sufferings, of cyclic existence. So if one does develop a strong intention of wanting to free oneself and others from all the miseries of cyclic existence, then one must engage in the practice of exchanging self for other. This practice is referred to here as the 'excellent secret'. It referred to here as a secret because it is a practice that would not be presented to the faint-hearted, those who are not really capable or those who might not have enough courage in their mind. It is only presented to those who would have enough courage to adopt the practice.

What is being presented here is a practice of exchanging self and other. What that practice consists of will be explained in more detail later. But to just give you an idea, the practice does not suggest that one should literally exchange oneself for others, either in circumstances or body or so forth. That is not what is being explained here. So what is the 'exchange' then? It is an exchange of attitude. Our normal attitude would be one that consists of primarily focusing on one's own welfare, our own needs being the centre of our focus or attention. Most of our energy and time would be spent taking care of our own needs, fulfilling our own wishes and hopes, for our own happiness and gratification and trying to remove our own difficulties and problems. While doing this, we neglect the welfare and happiness of others and the need for others to be free from suffering. Now that kind of attitude is something you would be familiar with. To further develop one's mind and bring about the welfare of other beings, we need to exchange that attitude of focusing primarily just on oneself, and one's own needs, to one of focusing on others' welfare, others' needs, others' happiness and the need for others to be free from suffering. So this is the real exchange that is presented here.

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The text will also present the shortcomings of just focusing on oneself, or what is termed here as 'self-cherishing'. The faults or the disadvantages of cherishing oneself and the great advantages and benefits of cherishing others will be explained in detail further, and we can leave that for later. However, what is important initially is for one to understand what this process involves. How do we actually adopt this attitude of exchanging self with other? That is very important.

At this point it is appropriate to clarify a common misinterpretation that many people seem to immediately make. When the faults or disadvantages of cherishing oneself, and the benefits and advantages of cherishing others are initially presented, many people seem to immediately come to the wrong conclusion, or misinterpretation, that the text is suggesting that they should neglect their own needs, and not have any concern for their own welfare. They think the text is saying they must just focus on others and completely ignore one's own welfare. Those who come to that the wrong interpretation then have the question or doubt, 'How am I going to take care of myself then? How am I going to look after myself if I completely ignore and neglect my own welfare and needs?' That is a misinterpretation. What is being suggested here is that completely fulfilling one's own needs and ultimate welfare is done by cherishing others. If one cherishes others and thinks about others' needs then one's own ultimate needs and benefits will be fulfilled.

A great Tibetan master from our tradition, Lama Tsong Khapa, has made a very pertinent point. Put in very simple terms, he says that when working for others our own welfare is fulfilled as a by-product, or on the side. This point has been emphasised by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in his teachings. In one particular teaching he emphasised this point a few times, saying that we need to derive a great understanding from this statement and that there are a lot of reasons for one to really consider this significant point. Indeed, when we consider this point we can logically see the reason that if one truly works for others' welfare then one's own welfare will not be neglected (*Geshe-la chuckles*).

We can give a very simple example of how that would be true. If, for example, an individual goes out of his or her way to help ten people, then naturally those ten people would be very appreciative of his or her help and concern for them. With that appreciation they will naturally be close to this individual and so this person has gained ten loyal companions or friends. That individual will not be deprived of friends and thus not be lonely and will help himself when there is need because of the companions he has gained.

The main reason that it is worthwhile to consider thinking about others' welfare is presented by Shantideva himself in the verse where he says that the need to experience happiness and not wishing to experience any kind of suffering are completely equal—the same for others and oneself. So one should contemplate that and familiarise oneself with that thought from the very beginning. What Shantideva has presented is the very logical reason why we need to consider having genuine concern for others. The basic reason is that others wish for exactly what we wish for, which is happiness and not to experience suffering. So that, in itself, should be a sufficient, simple reason to consider others' welfare.

This whole training and practice is primarily a practice of taking others' needs into consideration and thinking about others' welfare and wishing to benefit others. It is really a practice of generating, promoting or further developing that sense of care, love and compassion for others. It is a practice where we take the initiative of taking others' welfare into consideration because, as mentioned previously, we can think 'if I don't wish for any misery for myself then it is the same for others. So, just as I wouldn't appreciate any harm being inflicted upon me, I should not inflict harm upon others because they would not appreciate that. Just through my own experience I can vouch that it will not be comfortable for others'. So that intention would prevent one from intentionally harming others.

On the basis of refraining from harming others, one further reasons 'just as I would really appreciate it if others were kind and nice to me, likewise if I were to be genuinely kind and nice to others it will be appreciated by them. So there is a reason for me to be kind and considerate to others'. When we train our mind with that thought, we derive practical benefits. For example, if we put this into practice in a committed relationship between two people, we will see how it contributes towards a good relationship with the other, because one's intention would be to only help and not to hurt the other. When you have a genuine intention of not hurting but only wanting to help the other, they will begin to notice and appreciate that as well and then they can then take the initiative to offer that sort of concern to oneself. In that way we can see the practical benefit of this even in a committed relationship between two people. Based on that sort of beginning in a relationship between two people, one can then extend that concern further. So this is how one engages in the practice.

Furthermore when we adopt this practice or attitude and develop genuine consideration for others' benefit and welfare it will contribute to a genuine sense of our wellbeing. At the very least, because we have no intention to harm others, we will naturally have a strong affinity and feeling of closeness with others. We can see for ourselves how that then brings about a great sense of relief, solace and peace in our mind. Then, when others start to openly appreciate one and show their gestures of appreciation to us that can further promote a sense of wellbeing and happiness within us.

Now we can see that this not only true amongst us human beings, but is also prevalent in the relationship between a human and animal, such as those who have pets or dogs and cats. We can see clearly that when an owner shows genuine care, concern and love for their pets the response that they get is real, genuine appreciation. What you get in return for your genuine concern for them is a genuine sense of affection from them, which then gives one fulfilment. Of course when you first started to take care of a dog and a cat, it may not have been completely altruistic and thinking about their welfare, 'They need to be cared for.' It might have been more like, 'Oh, I need a companion to fill a gap and have someone around.' Nevertheless, even with that motive having taken the initiative to own a dog or a cat and then having taken good care of it, when the pet show a real affection towards you then you can see that this really does give us a genuine sense of satisfaction too. So, in this way we can see the practical benefit.

So we need to take into account that these attitudes are very worthwhile to develop and take the initiative to develop an attitude of taking into consideration others' welfare and

wellbeing. Based on one's own reasoning and experience and then relating that to others we need to take the initiative to care for others. Caring for others means taking the initiative to help them, alleviating any kind of misery or suffering that they may be undergoing, and bringing about genuine happiness and wellbeing. When we take that initiative, as mentioned previously, even animals can recognise and appreciate that gesture. When you show that kind gesture to fellow human beings who have the same intelligence and the same capacity to return that affection, there is no question about how it will be appreciated. Taking that initiative will then have incredible, unimaginable, benefit for oneself.

So contrary to it being a practice that will neglect one's own wellbeing and welfare this actually is the best way to fulfil one's own ultimate welfare and wellbeing, and bring about genuine happiness within us. I personally consider that this attitude of cherishing others and thinking about others' welfare, which means thinking about alleviating suffering and bringing about happiness in others, is the real spiritual, or from a Buddhist point of view Dharma, practice and the most precious attitude and state of mind.

This attitude of cherishing others and taking others' welfare into consideration is the real panacea to overcoming the agony of just focusing on oneself. That mind of just cherishing oneself serves as the very root or core of all our misery. So the moment we think about others' welfare and genuinely consider others' wellbeing and welfare we move away from the self-centredness of focusing on oneself. Then, when the grip of that self-centredness is loosened, the pain and agony that comes from that self-centredness is naturally relieved as well.

Other traditions have an equivalent of this technique when they generate strong, unwavering single-pointed faith in God. While Christians themselves may not traditionally say that having faith in God is an antidote to and the means of overcoming self-cherishing, His Holiness the Dalai Lama has taken the initiative to explain this. He has said that in other traditions such as Christianity that in the moment someone whole-heartedly surrenders completely to God, this naturally releases self-centredness.

Focusing just on oneself brings about a tight state of mind. An analogy is that when one has a strong focus and self-centredness it may come out in the form of holding onto one's own opinion very strongly. When someone else suggests something one responds immediately saying, 'No, I can't agree with that. I can't accept that because it doesn't agree with what I wish for.' The moment that we oppose someone else's suggestion and the more they try to present it and the more we say, 'No, I told you.' the stronger we will feel that tightness and discomfort within us. But the moment we can let go of that and say, 'OK, I accept that, I agree with you.' we get a sense of complete calmness and release within us and that is because we are letting go of that strong self-centredness.

We can conclude here for the evening. The following passages in the text will explain in much more detail the shortcomings of cherishing oneself, what it is to cherish oneself, and how to overcome that, and the benefits of cherishing others. However for now let us just again reflect upon our own experience, and the truth that when we genuinely consider others' welfare our own welfare and needs will not be neglected, they will actually be fulfilled.

So, to that extent, it is may be worthwhile that we consider adopting this practice.

I would like to again thank you and show my appreciation for having paid such good attention to what I have to share. My own intention of sharing what I know is that it will be serve as some benefit for you and that you might derive some meaning from it. I share this with that intention and you in return have paid great attention and focus on what I have been saying. So I really appreciate that, thank you.

I thank you for paying such good attention as it is because of your attention that I am able to share what I have to share. This serves as a reminder to me. I present to you the very things that I need to focus on and try to practice myself. So there is a reason that I share this with you. It would be unfair or unjust to suggest a practice to you but then fail to put it into practice myself (*Geshe-la chuckling*). So it is good reminder for me too.

This, of course, follows what our kind teacher, the Buddha, mentioned in his own words. He advised that one should put into practice what one preaches or presents to others. This followed on from earlier advice on how to benefit others. First one benefits others by being generous with material things and so forth. By being generous you naturally draw others close to you. Then having drawn others close to you, you utter nice and pleasing words. By speaking nice pleasing words others will start to pay more attention to what you have to say. Then one presents the real purpose, which is the practices and their meanings. The Buddha then advised that one should practice those very meanings that one has presented to others, because if one were to fail to do that it will be of no benefit for the other. Others would not take heed of one's word if one doesn't follow them oneself.

We can see that a similar practice is also found in the Christian tradition. We can see that they go out and help others first by meeting their material needs and being generous and kind and then slowly they present the doctrine.

Before we conclude the session for the evening, let us again take an opportunity to spend a few minutes in meditation. This time the object that we focus on can be the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra being recited. As we hear the sound of the chant we first put all our attention and focus on the sound. Then, when the recitation subsides, we can just maintain an awareness of that nice feeling that we gain and put our attention and focus on that for a few moments.

*TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA*

*Transcribed by Lan Foo  
Edit 1 by John Burch  
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe  
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