
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual we can spend some time in meditation.

You will need to adopt a comfortable posture and ensure your state of mind is at ease to have an effective meditation. This combination of genuine physical and mental relaxation will definitely give you the opportunity to experience some peace.

The opportunity to acquire a peaceful state of mind is something we all naturally possess. Since we already have all the good conditions to attain a peaceful state of mind, we need to ensure we do not lose this great opportunity. You may think you do not have all the good conditions right now to secure your tranquillity, and if that is the case, you may need to consider how you can obtain those conditions. In fact, this would be a very worthwhile deliberation for you to do.

The reason why this deliberation is worthwhile is because there will come a time in your life when you will not be so busy with external activities to acquire your physical needs, so you will have to access and rely on your internal conditions instead. If you have utilised the busy period of your life well, you will greatly appreciate the good internal conditions you have developed. This is because the training to secure your peaceful state of mind will be most important for you when you no longer have a demanding schedule. Sometimes, however, we go through life from one busy moment to the next and endure that total preoccupation without deriving a sense of real happiness, wellbeing and peace. If we continue in that way we will experience a sense of emptiness and have an anxious state of mind when we no longer need to be busy. [*Geshe-la says in English that this period will feel very long and will be very lonely for you. You will feel restless, and you will not know how to fill that gap in time and the lack you feel within yourself.*] So, the true purpose for your leading a busy life is to secure your sense of happiness and to remove your unwanted suffering.

Since you can use your busy life to help acquire the necessary conditions for your happiness and to minimise your suffering, you need to determine whether what you do currently really contributes to your physical and mental wellbeing. Otherwise, when you no longer have external reasons to be busy, you will find it very difficult to find the means to obtain inner peace. Of course we all need to engage in external work to secure good conditions for our wellbeing, but the most important conditions we need to develop are internal.

There is no doubt that your busy external life has contributed to your wellbeing because you do not go hungry, are clothed, and have adequate shelter from the

cold and heat. You have acquired good external conditions for your general physical health and existence because you have engaged in various activities and endured hardships to secure adequate material resources. However, the external achievements you have obtained for your physical wellbeing do not necessarily contribute to your inner contentment. Many highly prosperous people have shared with me that their material success in life has not made them feel settled inside and they are not genuinely happy. This attests to the truth that relying solely on external conditions for your wellbeing does not necessarily contribute to your inner peace, even though you may engage in those external activities with that intention. So, your external conditions may be exceptional when you retire from your working life, but if your inner conditions are lacking at that time, those external conditions will not sustain or contribute to your mental happiness.

This is why making a genuine attempt to acquire the conditions for a relaxed body and a relaxed state of mind is essential for your overall wellbeing. The combination of a relaxed body and mind is crucial because it looks after the external and the internal aspects of yourself. You may be quite familiar with physical relaxation already but you may not be familiar with how to genuinely relax your mind. You may find that you can adopt a relaxed posture but you do not really feel relaxed because your state of mind is not peaceful. If this is true for you, it is because a relaxed state of mind does not come about effortlessly.

The reason why your mind cannot genuinely relax is because it is constantly distracted with external stimuli and focused outwards. When your mind is primarily focused on external distractions, what Buddhism refers to as “negativities” can easily arise, which cause your mind turmoil. Your mind will automatically make connections with external objects and the type of connection that is made determines what kind of experience you will have. When the connection between your mind and an object causes your mind to have unwanted and unnecessary speculations, the result is an overly active and chaotic mind. This mindset is what Buddhist teachings refer to as a “superstitious” mind and it is what destroys your inner peace. The teachings recommend meditating to cultivate and maintain a calm state of mind.

The meditation technique involves choosing an appropriate object to focus on as a way to not allow your mind to be influenced by objects that cause it disturbing thoughts. Since disturbing thoughts cause your mind to be tumultuous and affect you negatively, meditation is a suitable measure to take, because it prevents disturbances arising in your mind. The technique is not to choose a random object to focus on, because the object chosen may contribute to afflictive thoughts arising, and this would defeat the purpose of mediating. In fact, someone who is obsessed with an object of attachment is single-pointedly focused on that object and it causes agitation in that person’s mind so that it is not settled or calm. So, choosing an object that does not cause afflictions to arise in the mind is important. The natural result of focusing on and familiarising yourself with an appropriate meditation object is that your mind will become tranquil. However, this positive effect of meditation is a gradual

process, so you should make your meditation attempts moderate initially and then gently increase your practice.

Simultaneous to your meditation practice, you can conduct a regular internal investigation of your attitude during your daily life and learn to recognise when your mind is in turmoil and what is causing that turmoil. This way, when your mind is uneasy, you can remind yourself to meditate on an appropriate object, which will make your practice more serious and consistent. Doing this will also be a way to encourage yourself to have a persistent practice so you do not give up easily when meditating is difficult.

Meditating is difficult because we are very familiar with distracted and disturbing states of mind so they readily arise. These types of mindsets, which Buddhism refer to as “delusions”, cannot be immediately stopped. I know some people who lament that, even after many years of meditating, their minds are still agitated and unfocused so delusions still occur in their minds. However, giving up meditating because it is hard is not a good reason to stop your practice. The practice takes persistence for results to be gained and despite the difficulties you may encounter, meditating is worthwhile when an effort is made and you are patient in acquiring the positive results. If you think about the positive benefits of meditation, you will find it easier to endure hardships in your practice. When delusions do arise in your mind and you are thrown off balance because you are affected negatively, you can remember that the very reason you employ meditation practices is to overcome these afflictions so that they do not overpower and control you. The recognition that a delusion is arising and will cause you trouble if you allow it to dominate your mind is part of your meditation practice. If you see a delusion and recognise it as a fault, you will be able to overcome it so that it does not overwhelm you. I find this practical approach very useful and, as I have shared with you in the past, when a delusion like anger arises in my mind, I immediately think: Geshe Doga be careful, anger is arising! Reminding yourself of the pitfalls of the delusions is a handy way to not let them completely dominate you. People have told me that this approach has helped them too, so it is an effective method to deal with negative mindsets when they arise.

You can see a big difference between someone who meditates and someone who is unfamiliar with the technique and has no training at all. A person who is unfamiliar with meditating is not able to prevent negative mindsets harming him or her, and is defenceless against the negative consequences the delusions cause. A person who has not been shown this mind-training technique is often not even able to see that the disturbing thoughts are a fault. Whereas a person who has a regular meditation practice is able to take its positive effects into everyday life so that wherever he or she goes the beneficial effects are experienced. Meditation is not something that assists us only when we are doing the practice, it also provides us with benefits when we are at work, with our friends and families and when we are faced with difficult situations. The significance of meditating is that it protects your mind while you are meditating and also outside your practice in your daily affairs. This is why

meditating is the supreme means for securing your inner peace.

We can now engage in the meditation practice. This meditation technique involves bringing your focus inwards and placing it solely on an appropriate and chosen object. This means you intentionally withdraw your attention from all external distractions and sever your attention from all internal distractions. Internal distractions are random thoughts that occur to disturb your focus. Their volume can overwhelm and disturb your mind by causing it agitation. Meditating counteracts this kind of superstitious and busy mindset so that your thoughts subside and your mind naturally quietens so that you can experience a tranquil effect. So, for the next few minutes, bring your attention inwards and focus one hundred percent on the object of your meditation, which can be your breath.

[Pause for single-pointed breathing meditation.]

We can use the remaining time for any questions you may have.

Question: I wanted to know what Geshe Doga thought about visiting lamas giving Vajrayana vows on a two-week visit. The lam rim texts encourage students to examine a guru and themselves thoroughly prior to making any commitments so my concern is how this can be done in such a short timeframe and is it a reflection of the Dharma being watered down for westerners?

As you have mentioned, the lam rim texts clearly explain the necessary qualities of a teacher and, likewise, the necessary qualities of a student who wants a teacher, so qualities are needed on both sides. Despite this, at this time and age, painstaking and scrupulous adherence to the details of this process is hard. Nevertheless, the checks and investigations that have to occur between a teacher and a student before a relationship is formed are currently generally applied.

Specifically in this matter, the lam rim teachings describe the approach for intelligent students to take and the approach for students with a dull intellect to follow. The intelligent student is advised to thoroughly investigate and check, but sometimes too many years can be spent in this way so there is no move forward for that student. In fact, some teachings explain that those of dull intellect might have an advantage because they use their faith and don't spend too much time searching for a teacher—these students of faith are able to find a master and receive the teachings which could be an advantage over an intelligent student who might take a long time to find a teacher because they are too busy endlessly investigating.

If your question is asked in relation to your own choices, you will need to make a personal decision. You do not have to attend just because the event has been advertised. Your decision whether to go is a personal choice and up to you.

Clarification sought from person querying: I think these kinds of teachings are a serious business and it seems that a two-week visit is not following the teachings purely so perhaps the teachings are being diluted for western culture...

I think taking an overall and general perspective on this might be helpful. The teachings are being given because

there has been a request for the teacher to come and teach. As you say, the teachings and practices are important, so I wonder if it is valid to say that the event is not significant because, after all, there are those who have requested the teacher to teach. If there is a teacher and there are students who will receive the teachings, there are benefits to be derived. That is not to say that some people who attend the event may misinterpret or misuse the teachings, but that is something that may occur irrespective of whether the culture is western or Tibetan. Not everyone can practise at one hundred percent, so there are different situations in every circumstance.

There does seem to be a western trend of attending something just because it is advertised. If there is a particular event—teaching or otherwise—people get excited and want to go. So, really, it comes down to your own personal choices and practice, and it is hard to correct, judge or really speak for others. Your query reminds me of a question His Holiness the Dalai Lama was recently asked by a Chinese group in New Zealand. They told His Holiness that many self-proclaimed teachers visit China and give teachings and initiations but do not seem to have intact qualities, so they asked what they could do to prevent these visits happening. His Holiness said that because it was occurring in China there was nothing he could do personally to stop it, but they could investigate and check the matter themselves in order to take the right measures. His Holiness further commented that there are false teachers out there who are motivated by fame, money or, in worst-case scenarios, women, so there are charlatans that need to be avoided.

Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way* states that a disciple's mind needs to be imbued with these three qualities: intelligence, non-bias and an eagerness to put the teachings into practice. These qualities are necessary in students to enable them to see the qualities of the teacher. If students do not have these qualities they will not be able to discern who an appropriate teacher is or even detect a teacher who has qualities. The quality of "intelligence" that Aryadeva has indicated as essential in a student encompasses what is known as "discriminative wisdom", which is an understanding that arises through thorough analysis. Buddha himself taught his disciples not to follow his teachings out of mere faith in him but to systematically examine and test each teaching, and, if after their investigation what he said was true and useful for them, to adopt the teaching themselves. So, Buddha himself has emphasised that the power and responsibility of ensuring something is of value rests with the individual.

Sometimes people who have a connection to me and consider me to be a kind of guide for them, ask me if they should go somewhere or attend a particular teaching. I never say they should not go because whether they go is up to them to decide. They are an independent person. I do regularly emphasise the necessity of using your own wisdom in all matters, and this applies to spiritual development as well material gain. In fact, the best way for you to check whether something is worthwhile for yourself is to use your own intelligence—your discriminative wisdom. This personal investigation protects you from being misled by others. Similarly,

parents often worry about their children being persuaded by others who are bad influences, but if a child is taught while growing up to use their own mind to analyse whether a situation is good or bad, that child will not be easily swayed by someone else. This approach is practical.

The question was good and relevant, but I cannot give you an answer that serves as a definitive solution.

[Geshe-la says in English he cannot decide and everyone laughs. He says that sometimes people ask his opinion because they think he has clairvoyance, so he tells them he is not clairvoyant, but they can tell him what they are thinking so the situation can be discussed. He says without discussion, there are just orders. Geshe-la says that a mother or father may be similar in this respect. The mother might say she does not like this and the father might say he does not like that, but this approach with a child prevents conversation and choice, which sometimes is not useful. Geshe-la further adds that all discussions must take place when everyone is calm because there cannot be a meaningful conversation if the minds involved are agitated.]

So, on that note, we can again adopt a relaxed mind and meditation posture. Then, having withdrawn our minds from all distractions, we can focus solely on the sound of the mantra to be recited, which will be Buddha Shakyamuni's name mantra. We can place our entire focus on the recitation and when it subsides, we try to maintain our attention on the calm or blissful feeling we experience. That will serve as our meditation purpose for now. So, regardless of what is going on currently in your life, at least for yourself, right now, you can benefit from adopting this practice.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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