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# Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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In order to spend some time for meditation practise, we can now sit in a proper relaxed posture. As we adopt a comfortable posture, the most important thing to consider is that what we are attempting to achieve is a genuine calmness and tranquillity in the mind, and genuine mental happiness. When we really think about it, ultimately what we are striving to achieve in whatever we do, is to gain some real mental stability and happiness. Therefore it is really worthwhile for us to consider how we can achieve that and maintain it.

In fact, our innermost unfailing companion and friend is mental happiness. I am not saying that we should not rely on external friends, as we do get benefits from associating with external friends. However no matter how close we may feel to external friends, they cannot accompany us whenever we go, and cannot be with us at all times. Whilst once we have established it, our mental happiness is that which will be with us at all times, wherever we go and whatever circumstances in which we may find ourselves. That is why we can consider mental happiness as our innermost unfailing companion and friend.

Once we have established a positive and happy state of mind within, if we protect it and not lose it, then external friends can be an extra complementary contribution to our wellbeing. Whereas if we have lost the inner positive state of mind and happiness, then even if we were surrounded by many external friends, we will not really derive the benefit from that, because the external friends will not be able to suffice for bringing us genuine wellbeing. These are significant points to consider.

Furthermore, when we are able to maintain a happy and clear state of mind, then that naturally will contribute to getting more external companions and friends. In other words, because of our happy and joyous mind, others will naturally be attracted and drawn to us and enjoy being in our company. If we were to lose that happy and clear state of mind, and replace it by a troubled and chaotic state of mind, then others will naturally start to distance themselves from us. Even if others were not distancing themselves from us, regardless of whether they actually distance themselves from us or not, we would start to feel alienated. This is a true sign of an inner sense of lack of confidence and an unhappy state of mind that makes us perceive or project that others are distancing themselves from us.

We are all striving to be happy, that is something with which we can all agree upon. Whether we are consciously striving for happiness or not, that is what we are searching for. However it seems to be elusive. So if we are

not able to experience happiness, then there must be something wrong in our approach.

Actually we all naturally possess a certain level of happiness and clarity. Thus, our responsibility is to maintain whatever level of happiness and clarity we already have now, and further develop and promote it within ourselves. When we utilise our clear state of mind, that can then help us to further develop a sound wisdom – particularly the wisdom or intelligence of being able to distinguish between what is beneficial and what is harmful to ourselves. That discriminative wisdom is something which can assist us in every aspect of our life.

In summary, what we all wish to ultimately achieve is a genuinely happy and peaceful state of mind, and we already have a certain degree of happiness and peace within ourselves now. In order to maintain, protect and further develop that, a supreme method or technique is meditation. When our happiness starts to decline, that which can replenish it is meditation.

To explain this further, if we come across someone who says 'I am not happy, in fact I am really feeling unhappy', and if we know and have access to the technique of meditation, then we can present it as a means to restore their happiness.

Having mentioned that the sense of happiness and peace in our mind which has declined can be restored, the relevant question now is how can that be restored? Why does it decline in the first place? These are significant points to really contemplate.

Now if we were to really understand this fully, we need to look into what causes the mind to be unrestful. If we lack a sense of peace and happiness in our mind, what is causing that lack of peace and happiness in one's mind? While we instinctively wish to be happy, what are the means that we have been using thus far to achieve that?

While we do have the wish to achieve happiness, what we fail to do is spend some time investigating the inner causes and conditions to achieve happiness and peace within. We seem to spend most of our time, at times a hundred percent, of our energy and focus outwards on external conditions and factors. When the mind is completely immersed in external stimuli, that is how the mind becomes completely distracted, so we have neglected to look within.

The object on which we focus is something that we need to take into consideration. When the object itself causes us distress, then if we were to relate to and make a connection with that object, it is no wonder that the effect we experience is a distressed and unhappy state of mind.

When we spend most of our time and energy interacting with external conditions, believing that they will be our source of happiness, that is when we end up getting more distracted and confused, and it is a cause for us to experience a lot of distress and inner turmoil. If we fail to recognise the real cause and conditions for our happiness and wellbeing, which lies within, then naturally we won't experience the positive results of happiness.

If we were to change that situation, and begin to focus inward, to the point where we are spending at least fifty percent of our time and energy looking within, while still

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maintaining fifty percent establishing good external conditions for ourselves, then as a consequence, we would be developing the inner conditions for happiness. Such an individual being would be significantly more settled, and more in tune with their real wellbeing. They will not be someone who is easily distressed and depressed, because of the time and energy spent looking within. For someone who is spending a hundred percent of their time developing their inner qualities, there is no question about them having a real genuine sense of wellbeing, peace and happiness, but even if fifty percent of our time were to be spent looking inward, there would be a significant benefit.

In summary, if we were to spend some time establishing inner conditions for our wellbeing and happiness, then as a consequence, while not losing those inner conditions when we exert ourselves to spend time and energy in acquiring external conditions (because we have not completely neglected our inner conditions), we then reap the benefit of achieving significant good conditions for our overall wellbeing. While we still need to depend on external conditions for our livelihood, we are also spending time developing our inner conditions. Such an individual will have a genuinely good outlook on their life, and will begin to establish a real inner source of wellbeing. That is something which is really beneficial at all stages of life.

Normally we may not pay much attention to this fact, but if we were to be really sincere and look at our own state of mind and conditions for our wellbeing, we would notice that when we are in a happy state of mind, we enjoy what we do, such as eating and drinking. If we are having a meal, it will taste much more delicious when we are in a happy state of mind, whereas if we are feeling a little bit down or depressed, even if the same meal is provided, we will not enjoy it as much. Where does the difference lie? The meal is the same – there is no difference in the quality of the food which is provided. Why, in one circumstance, does it seem to taste really nice and delicious, and we enjoy it, and in another circumstance, we don't seem to enjoy the same quality of food as much, and don't derive as much pleasure from it? That goes to show that it is dependent on our state of mind and our attitude. If we were to pay attention, we would begin to notice and reflect that if we are in a happy state of mind, we are able to enjoy things much more, and take greater pleasure even in the normal things in which we engage.

To give a further illustration, for example, if two people were having a meal together when both are in a happy state of mind, then when they have that meal together, it can be really enjoyed, whereas if both were a little bit on edge and agitated, then having a meal together will not be as enjoyable. Now, if one is agitated and unhappy, but the other is able to maintain a sense of joy and happiness, then the positive effect of the one who is in a joyful and happy state of mind will be felt. Even though there is some unease having the meal together, it will not be totally uncomfortable.

*[Geshe-la says in English: "Half maybe, half feeling better."]*

The earlier illustration shows that our joy and happiness that we experience does not depend so much on the external conditions or objects, but rather on inner conditions, which are positive qualities that can be developed. When that is secured, then a genuine sense of wellbeing of happiness, and tranquillity prevails within the mind. Consequently there is a real sense of joy and pleasure in whatever we experience, whatever we do. These are really significant points. Having mentioned all of this, what is the technique and how can we achieve a genuine sense of wellbeing and happiness within? How do we promote those good inner conditions and good qualities? It is through the practice of meditation.

What has been described so far, in relation to the earlier two points, is how to establish a genuine sense of happiness and wellbeing within oneself, and when the sense of happiness and joy within declines, how to restore that.

When we follow a mind which is completely focused on external objects, then one is naturally neglecting to look at our inner conditions.

By focusing outwardly, when the mind becomes completely immersed in external distractions, then because of the connection we make with the external distracting object, then that naturally appears to our mind, and our mind becomes preoccupied with all of these discursive thoughts and the appearance of so many different distracting objects come to mind. That is what causes the mind distress. Because the mind is making a connection with so many objects that are completely illusive, rather than contributing to our wellbeing it causes us more and more confusion. Being preoccupied with external objects is what causes the mind to lose a sense of happiness and joy within. So we can adopt the meditation technique, which is a training of the mind to focus on an appropriate meditation object, and by placing our full attention and focus on that inner object, it severs the connection with all the distracting objects which cause us distress. We withdraw from the focus on these external objects and thus by the sheer virtue of focusing on the appropriate meditation object, it causes our mind to start becoming released from a lot of the distress and distractions that preoccupies our mind. That release itself then naturally helps the mind to start feeling more elated, joyful and happy, and starts restoring a sense of happiness and peace in the mind.

To simplify what I have mentioned earlier, the point is that there are times when we would all experience a sense of mental anguish, for whatever reason, and when we really investigate, we will find that it is because we are relating to a certain object, either through memory or by recalling it or by seeing that object, it is in relation to making a connection with a certain object or situation that causes us to feel that anguish. Now, if we were to sever the connection with the object that causes anguish, so that we don't pay attention to it, and don't focus on it, then naturally our mind will be released from that anguish. This is how the meditation technique works.

Having mentioned the meditation technique and how it helps us, now we can spend some time in meditation, readjusting our physical posture to be in an upright, but

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relaxed and comfortable posture for meditation. Then mentally we make the decision and commitment that for the next few minutes not to allow the mind to wander off and follow every whimsical thought, recalling all sorts of objects, but to bring the entire focus within, and place it on the meditation object, which for our purpose now can be our own breath. Based on the natural rhythm of our breathing, we pay full attention to our breath, being fully aware of each breath coming in and going out, and just place it on that and nothing else for the next few minutes, knowing that we are engaging in the training to release ourselves from mental anguish and distress. Therefore we apply this meditation technique to the best of our ability for the next few minutes.

*[Pause for single-pointed breathing meditation.]*

That will be sufficient for now, I have to wake you up from your deep meditation, sorry about that!

So as we have attempted in our short session now, it will be highly significant to spend some time in meditation in our daily life. This is the best way to take care of oneself, to really nourish and look after our mental wellbeing, establishing the causes and conditions for our mental happiness and sense of joy within, and to really promote and nurture that, by constantly spending significant time and energy acquiring those good conditions within ourselves. This would be highly significant as we will then be able to address the real causes of our problems and difficulties in our lives. When we think about whatever problems or difficulties we have, it is basically problems or difficulties which a human would be facing – we are not alone, every human would experience certain kinds of difficulties and problems. Every problem and experience that we have as a human is man-made, it is not made by anyone else, no-one else is causing the difficulties and conditions for ourselves, it is produced by humans. What that means is because the very problems that we face are created by humans, which means the method to solve it is also within the capacity of the humans. When we reflect upon it in our own personal life, we need to address ourselves in such a way that, whatever difficulty or problem I am experiencing now, is something which is a problem that humans face in general. For every problem that a human faces, there is a solution and method to overcome that, and as I am a human being, I naturally have the capacity to overcome all those problems and difficulties. If the problems that I am experiencing are the very problems that humans have created, which by default also means that humans can solve it, and since I am a human being, I also have that ability. This is the way then to address any issues and difficulties that we are going through. That will help us to be encouraged, that we do have the capacity and means to overcome any problem that we would be imagining to experience. There is no problem that we would be experiencing that cannot be resolved or solved. Thinking in this way will help us to really maintain our sense of self-worth and dignity as a human. What helps to maintain this is the practice of meditation. Meditation is a mind training technique which helps and further promotes and develops this inner capacity and ability we

have. This is how we need to understand the significance and benefit of meditation in simple, practical terms in our everyday life. If we can spend some time – even a few minutes a day – developing our meditation technique and practice, it will only contribute and help towards our wellbeing.

With the remaining few minutes we have, if there are any questions, I am happy to answer them.

*Student:* How do I keep a pure view of a guru, if the advice from two or more gurus is contradictory?

*Geshe-la:* In relation to contradictory advice, we have to look at the circumstances. For example, one teacher giving contradictory advice to the same person would be unthinkable, that would not occur, but when advice is given in general, then some of the advice may relate to certain students, which will be beneficial for them, while for other students it may not be related. This is one way, when taking general advice into consideration, one needs to take the circumstantial conditions into consideration, to see how it integrates, whether that advice is useful or not, contradictory or not for oneself.

It is explained in the teachings that advice, when presented, is to be in accordance to the level and capacity of the person to whom it is presented. Such advice presented to certain students or disciples in accordance with their mental capacity and constitution, may not necessarily be advice which has to be applied by someone else at another time, which may not be suitable for their state of mind.

I also shared a particular account about advice I had to give after a certain teaching at one time, when a student came up to me later and was finding it very difficult with the advice about having to overcome attachments. When that was related to me, I said to that individual, "It is okay to have small attachments", [Geshe-la laughing] and at that time that person was really relieved, "I can manage that."

In the teaching, I was explaining in detail the ill-effects or faults of attachment. Afterwards what was then understood was that all attachments should be overcome. When we were having tea in the dining room, the young lady came up to me and expressed how it seems to be very difficult to overcome all attachments. When I gave that particular advice to her, she said to me, "Oh, you are very kind, thank you very much." [Geshe-la chuckling]

In order to really guide and help others, it is explained in the teachings, that you would need to have clairvoyance – it's indispensable. The Buddha said, to really benefit others, you have to know the level of their mind, and their mental constitution, and then you can give appropriate advice for them at their level.

At that time, for example, when I gave the advice to this particular individual, it helped her mind to maintain a good view of the Dharma, whereas if I had completely objected to that, then I might quite possibly have caused her to lose faith in the Dharma and feel like it is not for her at all and completely give it up.

This could be a good suggestion for when you relate to others, to take into consideration what their immediate circumstances and needs may be. Even though you may

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have a broader view that it might not be helpful in the long run, however temporarily if that is something which is most beneficial for that person, then it is good for you to take that into consideration, complying with their immediate needs and wishes, and relate to them in that way.

So if there is one more question, we can address that.

*Student:* What are the three suchnesses in the last verse of the *Praises to the Twenty-one Taras*?

*Geshe-la:* The three suchnesses could be related to the three states of beings (small, medium and great) but also can relate specifically to three types of liberation.

The three liberations will then be three paths for three different beings, that which leads them to their actual state of liberation, will be the 'suchness', that is my understanding. [*Geshe-la chuckling*]

What was your query? Some people want to know something just for the sake of knowing the number.

*Student:* I want to know what I'm saying when I say the prayer.

*Geshe-la:* If someone is really interested, it should be in relation to the whole body of the practice, not just looking into one or two details.

The *Praises to the Twenty-one Taras* is not to be taken lightly, because it encompasses a lot of deep meaning.

Before we end the session, let us again spend a few minutes in meditation, focusing on and really observing the breath, and as we hear the recitation, just maintain that awareness. Then when the recitation finishes, just maintain that awareness of a good sensation or feeling within ourselves. In that way, it will suffice for our meditation.

*TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA*

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