
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

འཇུག་རྒྱུ་རྒྱུ་ལམ་རིམ་འབྲིང་བ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

26 November 2014

As usual we can spend some time in meditation.

There are many reasons why you would engage in a meditation practice. One of the main reasons is because you would want to benefit and not hurt yourself. This wish is true for all other living beings as well—just like you all living beings wish to benefit and not harm themselves.

Despite this universal wish, we spend most of our time focusing on our external conditions as the source of our happiness instead of examining ourselves internally through meditation, which would be more valuable. In fact, our default attitude is to regard external conditions as the sole contributor to what helps and what hurts us; we hold this belief so strongly that we are convinced our external conditions are the reason our minds are either in a happy or an unhappy state.

If we reflect on what is external to us, we can see that certain external things do contribute to our welfare however some external things cause us more harm. Yet a thorough investigation will show us that we are busily fixated on the external, and spend our lives constantly trying to avoid unfavourable external conditions and acquire advantageous ones instead. If we were to ask ourselves whether our preoccupation with the external world has enabled us to have real joy and avoid suffering in our lives, we would have to admit that, although we have had successes, our overall accomplishment in achieving happiness has been moderate. Indeed, our focus on the external has meant we have neglected our internal worlds so that we have failed to acquire positive inner conditions and minimise negative internal states. In truth, this way of living our lives has had a detrimental impact on our ability to cultivate genuine happiness.

Occasionally our positive external conditions come about with ease and without any particular design by us, and sometimes our adverse external conditions naturally subside so they do not cause us harm. This, unfortunately, is not the case with our internal conditions—our good internal conditions are not effortlessly acquired without our endeavour, and our destructive inner conditions do not recede naturally without our exertion. We can clearly see and acknowledge this for ourselves when we analyse the state of our minds. Moreover, when we check our minds, we will find that our mindsets can be generally categorised into being either happy or unhappy, and usually our minds are in an unhappy rather than a happy state.

Meditation aids this type of self-analysis; it is a technique that facilitates your ability to identify which internal

factors contribute to your happiness and which internal conditions contribute to your suffering. The more you practise meditation, the clearer and more exact you will be at identifying factors that benefit or harm you. This discrimination is essential for you to increase the positive internal conditions that aid your wellbeing and decrease the negative internal conditions that contribute to your unhappiness. Through this process, you can lessen the intensity of negative emotions that hurt you and eventually reach the point where you can overcome damaging mindsets completely. After all, the less your mind is dominated by negative attitudes, the more you can increase your positive internal qualities. This approach to self-care establishes the positive conditions for your mind to be genuinely happy more often and to be despondent on less occasions—an inevitable outcome for a person who meditates regularly.

So, the more you make an effort to meditate, the more familiar your mind will be in adopting positive qualities and the less opportunity there will be for negative states of mind to arise. Your state of mind will naturally become predominantly happy when you overcome mindsets that cause you discomfort and angst, and you will consequently be a genuinely calmer and gentler person because of your meditation practice.

We can see then that meditation essentially serves two purposes: to overcome negative states of mind and to establish positive states of mind. When positive internal qualities, or what Buddhist teachings refer to as “virtues”, are adopted and established, the mind is protected from negative mindsets—what Buddhists call “afflictions”, so the mind is free to experience genuine states of wellbeing and happiness.

If, however, you believed that external conditions were responsible for your happiness and put all your energy into acquiring and cultivating them, the effort of your pursuit would probably cause you physical and mental unrest, and your body and mind would become agitated and troubled. Someone who adopts a spiritual practice, on the other hand, would not have this problem because an earnest spiritual seeker devotes his or her time to developing internal positive qualities and removing adverse afflictions from the mind. This person would further benefit from the natural by-product of having improved external conditions as a consequence of cultivating his or her good internal qualities. In other words, spiritual seekers that focus on improving their internal conditions will not be deprived of good external conditions necessary for their wellbeing. While people who devote their entire time and energy in acquiring good external conditions are likely to suffer physically and mentally, which would be the opposite effect they intend for their wellbeing.

There are many invaluable benefits in adopting positive states of mind. If we can understand and really appreciate the benefits of a virtuous mindset, we will cherish the need to develop positive attitudes. I have spent a lot of time investigating and really thinking about what the real causes and conditions are for my personal wellbeing, and it is because of this analysis, contemplation and experience of some of the benefits

myself, I feel confident in sharing my understanding with you. I am relating these thoughts to you because I have given them much contemplation and have tested the ideas out myself. As this is the case, I believe there is some value in you considering what I am relating to you.

I have found that a good way to check my state of mind and to be watchful when a negative state of mind is about to arise is to caution myself by thinking, *Geshe Doga be careful. A negative state of mind is starting to take over here, so you must be very alert now.* Conversely, when I see a positive state of mind has arisen, I congratulate myself and think, *OK. That is good. You have done well.* I have shared this technique in the past and many have confided in me that it has been very helpful for them too when they have put it to use. I find this personal practice works well because it reminds me in my everyday life to be more vigilant and wary of how my mind influences my thoughts and actions.

If you adopt this measure of reprimanding yourself when you notice you are being influenced by a negative state of mind and congratulating yourself when you adopt a virtuous mindset, you are pointing a finger at yourself rather than at others. Doing this encourages you to look honestly at yourself instead of blaming other people, which is a real practice and challenge because you are actively working to transform your mind. There is a great difference between pointing a finger at someone else and saying he or she is angry versus pointing it at yourself and checking your own state of mind, because you can change and transform your own mind. We all have the ability to use the great positive potential in our minds. Of course, our minds have a negative or destructive potential too so we need to distinguish between them so we can adopt and utilise the positive potential our minds are capable of.

The potential of the mind is not limited to humans; the power of the mind can be witnessed also in animals. Animals display great abilities, like, for example, ants, which somehow know and are attracted to sweet substances even from great distances away. I often wonder what part of their mind is detecting the food and drawing them towards it. I don't think a human has the ability to detect a sweet substance in another room like ants do! Thinking about the different cognitive abilities ants may have is amusing. Likewise, all animal species have their own distinctive faculties to survive and sustain themselves, which comes from the utilisation of the cognitive power of their minds. Thinking about the potential of the mind in this broad sense shows us the immensity and power a mind has.

Of course, the human mind has the greatest potential of all because it has the ability to discriminate between the internal conditions conducive for happiness and the negative states of mind which cause suffering. The ability to distinguish and apply knowledge learnt is referred to as "wisdom" in Buddhist teachings.

Wisdom is a sort of analytical or discriminative intelligence unique to the human mind. Animals do have a small degree of this kind of intelligence to protect themselves from adversity and acquire better external conditions, but it is mainly limited to their basic survival.

Humans, however, can go beyond basic survival strategies to establish conditions to develop genuine happiness and remove suffering from its root, so this type of intelligence is a special ability unique to humans. We can remember this and use it as a means of encouragement for ourselves—although we share basic similarities with animals, our intelligence, and therefore potential, is much more extensive.

So, identifying, increasing and protecting the internal conditions for your happiness while recognising, decreasing and overcoming conditions which cause you misery and suffering is achieved by meditating. If you can relate to this simple introduction of meditation and recognise its practical benefits for yourself, you will probably more readily adopt the technique. I intentionally leave complicated descriptions or explanations about meditating aside so you can apply the method more immediately in your daily life in a manageable way, which would be the most worthwhile method for you to adopt as a practice.

Since the practical benefits of regularly meditating have been outlined, we can now meditate. We regularly use the breath as the object to focus on in our meditation sessions together. Focusing on the breath is said to be particularly helpful in overcoming a discursive and scattered mind – a mind that is easily distracted is more likely to be influenced and follow negativities, but meditating on the breath naturally settles and calms the mind.

An example of how you can use this style of meditating to help yourself is when anger arises. When you think about an object that causes you anger, one of the best ways to immediately provide comfort to yourself is to not engage with that object of anger by thinking about it. This disconnection of your thoughts from the object that is causing the emotion to arise will enable the anger to subside. You can use your own experience to see how this works by deliberately not thinking about a person who irritates you. The moment you bring that person to mind, anger will arise for you, but not concentrating on that person enables you to not get caught up and carried away with the negative emotion of anger. Of course, this is not a technique to teach you how to repress your emotions. Rather, the method of redirecting your focus is a way to lessen the negative emotion so that your mind is not completely overwhelmed and made ineffective.

The technique of gently redirecting your focus to the breath in order to settle your mind can be used for all types of negativities and distractions that cause your mind to feel despondent, weighed down or anxious. Your mind will be completely distracted and follow negativities if it is not tranquil and balanced. Therefore, training yourself to place your attention and focus on your breathing pattern is teaching your mind to be calm and steady in order to better weather negativities when they arise. Ultimately this training will lead you to sever the arising of all afflictions in your mind through completely distancing it from attitudes and ways of thinking that disturb it. A mind completely focused on the breath cannot harm itself through cultivating disturbances, and a mind fully harnessed to the breath

will become more attuned and familiar with single-pointed concentration, which will make it clearer, brighter and more subtle. The individual can then experience a genuinely relaxed mind. However, the focus on the breath must be one hundred per cent because otherwise the mind will become distracted and affected by the negativities, which will not enable the mind to genuinely relax. So, the emphasis on this type of meditation is to have a full and committed focus on the breath for the duration of the meditation session.

When we establish an authentic and dedicated focus on the breath, we will experience the benefits of meditating because our minds will become clear, settled and more relaxed. We can then gradually increase the duration of our practice. Otherwise, if your mind is half-focused it will be half-distracted, so not many real benefits will be derived. In fact, meditating in a distracted way will exhaust your mind and the practice will have negative rather than positive consequences. This is not because meditating does not work, but because the technique has not been followed accurately. A lack of dedicated focus will prevent you from obtaining real value from the practice.

So, we can now readjust our physical postures in order to be comfortable, relaxed and attentive. We then completely distance ourselves from our usual preoccupations by bringing our attention within and focusing one hundred per cent on our breath. This internal focus enables us to let go and withdraw from all other thoughts, objects and forms of distractions. Thus, for the next few minutes, we can try to maintain our breath as our sole focus. [*Pause for meditation.*]

That will be sufficient for now. Are there any questions?

Question: What do White Tara's seven eyes symbolise?

Geshe-la: That is a profound question! White Tara's additional five eyes symbolise the five wisdoms. These five wisdoms encompass the understanding and knowledge of seeing all existence, so White Tara's extra eyes represent her knowledge of everything in its entirety. That is my interpretation, because there is a description of the five wisdom eyes that enlightened beings are endowed with, which means that enlightened beings have the ability to see all existence in its entirety. With that understanding, the significance of White Tara's additional eyes has a profound meaning, because they indicate her enlightened state. So, the five eyes chiefly represent there being no obstruction whatsoever in White Tara's knowledge. Normally, when our human eyes are closed, we are prevented from seeing and observing things around us, but all of White Tara's five wisdom eyes are open so they denote her ability to know everything in its entirety at all times without any obstruction.

Since White Tara's five additional eyes symbolise the five wisdoms, they necessarily also represent the five Buddha families, known as the five dhyani buddhas. The five dhyani buddhas each signify one of the five wisdoms. You can look up what the five wisdoms are and investigate how they are depicted as the five Buddha families. [*Geshe-la points to his hands, feet and forehead and says in English, "One, two, three, four, five. The five wisdoms*

are here," so that it is clear where White Tara's extra eyes are and symbolically placed.]

That was a good question because it initiated a discussion of the five wisdoms. Even hearing about the five wisdoms or being curious about them is said to be very good because it leaves a very positive potential in the mind.

There's another aspect of Tara known as Cittamani Tara. When you do the Cittamani Tara practice, you invoke the five dhyani buddhas by visualising them within yourself. That is a personal practice I do regularly myself—since it is a personal practice, I have some understanding about it. Tara is one of my personal deities or practices that I do. She really looks after, cares for and protects me.

This prompts me to relate a story about someone from Laos who came to see me and asked me to safeguard a Buddha statue, which he had inherited from his ancestors, while his house was being built. He told me "Buddha looks after me very well, so I too look after it very well and give it offerings in the mornings after I wake up". When the man left the statue with me, he wept and was very emotional, which is an indication of his remarkable level of veneration and faith. Of course the statue of the Buddha is not the actual Buddha in reality, but when you respect a representation of the Buddha and see it as the actual Buddha, the faith you have affects you in a very positive way so that you do receive the blessings. This is similarly so with other images of deities, such as Tara. While the actual image may not be the actual deity, how we relate to the representation and develop faith that it is the actual deity is to the extent to which we are able to receive blessings. The positive effect of faith is considered to be of paramount importance in Buddhism. Other traditions, such as Christianity, also highly value this quality.

Anyway, the main point discussed tonight was in relation to the practice of meditation. So, just to reiterate, meditating is an important and valuable activity because it is the best way to develop your wisdom. You can increase your inner intelligence based on your personal insights and experiences simply through having a regular meditation practice. Wisdom is a precious asset to have because you need it for every activity you engage in. If you use your own wisdom to analyse and investigate a situation's pros and cons prior to engaging in an activity, then, your decisions will be based on sound reasoning and obtaining your goals will be more likely. You can also get suggestions and feedback from others and use a combination of advice and personal wisdom to conduct your activities, but be careful not to rely completely on what others say because that is a habit that will not serve you well. Instead, you can practise accumulating information from your own experience and reliable sources, and then make decisions based on your own wisdom. This way of conducting yourself is a firm and more successful way of handling your affairs. Otherwise, if you listen to everyone else's many and varied opinions, you might become confused and not be able to accomplish much.

There is a very nice lady in South India known as the "mirror lady", who looks at a mirror when you ask a

question and describes what she sees. A man I know, asked her whether a business venture he was considering would go well. The mirror lady checked her mirror and said that it indicated the business would go well, because she saw a white horse that disappeared behind the mountain. This person later related to me that the mirror lady was clear about what she saw and what she thought it meant, but what she described did not feel auspicious to him—the white horse seemed favourable, but it moving to be behind a mountain was symbolically discouraging to him so he did not proceed with his business idea. As it turns out, his not engaging in the venture was positive because he could have lost a great deal.

Anyway, some students from Tara Institute have seen the mirror lady and I have been to see her too. I saw her in relation to whether to come to the West, or stay at Sera-Je monastery in India. I had already made up my mind prior to seeing her, but I visited her anyway. She told me that both options would be very good for me to do, and said she saw a tree laden with lot of fruit in her mirror. She advised me that while both locations would be beneficial to stay in, the West may be better for me in terms of prosperity. I am not sure, but I think she may have meant in terms of receiving nice meals! [*Everybody laughs.*]

I have heard that two western nuns tried to accomplish the art of checking the mirror. One nun could see the images, but could not interpret them, and the other nun could not see the images, but was able to interpret them, so they worked together as a team. Unfortunately though, they did not get along well, so their partnership had to end! [*Laughter.*]

Rituals and prayers need to be done before looking in the mirror, but only someone who has the seeing ability can look in the mirror and interpret it with any accuracy. If you do not have that sort of eye, no amount of prayers and rituals can substitute for the skill. [*Geshe-la says in English that Isobel, who used to live at Tara Institute has the eye, so there is no need to go to India, you can see Isobel instead! Everyone laughs.*] This was a side track and although we had no intention to gossip about others, somehow it seems like we have. The teachings do say that out of the ten non-virtues, gossip is the least grave negativity, but it does waste the most time. [*Geshe-la chuckles.*]

This reminds me of my village in Tibet where the community got along very well together. In the evening they would gather and spend hours talking and telling funny or sad stories. Geshe Sonam Thargye, who was born in the same village, has told me how he would go to my sister's place and stay there all day talking, having tea and enjoying their leisure time. This was a happy time spent for them. We don't seem to have this tradition so much in the West, which is a shame.

Before we conclude for the evening, let us again spend a few minutes focusing on the sound of the mantra to be recited, which will be Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. When the recitation subsides we can try to maintain a focus on the nice feeling we get from the residue of the sound. That can suffice as a short meditation for us.

Transcribed by Kim Foon Looi
Edit 1 by Tanya Simmons
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version
© Tara Institute