
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

འཇུག་ཀྱི་ལམ་རིམ་འབྲིང་བ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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As usual, it would be good to spend some time in meditation. One way of understanding the purpose of meditation, is that it serves as a technique for gaining control over one's own mind. Here, controlling one's mind refers to having control over the afflictions in one's mind. Thus training one's mind with a single-pointed meditation involves withdrawing one's focus from afflictive and distracting objects, choosing a virtuous meditation object and placing one's entire focus on that object, and then maintaining that focus for as long as possible. In this way, since we are not allowing our mind to focus on distracting objects, the afflictions in our mind naturally subside, and we experience a sense of tranquil calmness. This is definitely possible, because it is delusions, or afflictions in our mind, that cause turmoil. So when these become dormant and we are not influenced by them, and as a result of that, we experience a temporary calm and happy state of mind.

With this meditation technique we also begin clearly identify and recognise that the real cause for our problems are the delusions within our own mind. It is the negative states of mind within that cause us real harm and great misery. This may not be apparent to one right away, but when we do an honest internal investigation with the aid of meditation, it becomes clear that this is the case. Thus, as explained in the teachings the real troublemaker is not outside but lies within our own mind, and overcoming the troublemaker within is equivalent to overcoming all external trouble makers. Indeed, once we gain control over our own mind by not allowing the afflictions to be in control, we are beginning to deal with the real cause of our troubles and mental anguish. As we gain more control over our own mind and emotions, we become less vulnerable to external harms, to the extent that they will not be able to harm one any longer. In this way we will also be able to detect the faults and qualities within one's own mind.

As presented in the teachings, the posture for meditation is to sit erect with a straight back—the spine needs to be straight like a pile of stacked up coins. The specific benefit of sitting in straight posture is said to help straighten out the subtle channels within our body allowing the subtle wind energy to flow well. This, in effect, will help one to have a fresh and clear state of mind. On a practical level, sitting straight will help one to overcome sleepiness during meditation. With the legs, the suggestion is to sit in either a full lotus crossed leg posture or half-lotus posture. One may wonder what the term half-lotus posture means. It actually means the normal posture that we sit in, but most importantly, a posture that we are comfortable with.

With the hands, the suggestion for the meditation posture is to have our right palm on top of our left palm and the thumbs touching to form a triangle and place that on our lap. When you place it on the lap right in front of you in a natural position it naturally aligns with our navel and that is

said to have a specific effect. The specific benefit of adopting this hand gesture and placing it in on our lap at the navel centre is said to be that the thumbs are the ending of channels within our body. They are not nerve endings, but rather energy channels ending at the tips of our thumbs. When that channel ending at the thumbs is placed at the level of the navel, it helps induce a sense of love and compassion in our heart. The posture helps to regulate good energy flow in our body. So that has a very specific purpose.

More specifically, according to the explanations in the meditation manual the specific channels are linked to the awakening mind, the Sanskrit term for which is bodhicitta. This is the most altruistic state of mind that can be developed, and is based on love and compassion. So this altruistic mind, called the awakening mind, which is based on love and compassion is easier to induce when one puts this hand gesture at the navel centre. So it does definitely have some significance.

One's shoulders should be left in a parallel, natural posture. Not crouched and not spread out too much, but in a natural position.

With the head, the advice is to have our head slightly bent forward, so not too high up or too much forward but just slightly bent. Placing our head correctly is said to help prevent one of the main obstacles to meditation, excitement and distraction, occurring in the mind.

With the eyes, the advice is not to have the eyes too wide open because that can again cause distractions. When we see external stimulus it will cause the mind to become distracted. So the eye lids are slightly lowered but not completely shut, because that can cause drowsiness. That would be like darkness falling and this can cause the mind to go into a drowsy and lax state, and at a more subtle level what is called 'laxness' will occur. So the correct measure suggested in the meditation manual is to position the eyes as if we were actual looking we would just see the tip of the nose. That doesn't mean we focus on the tip of the nose, but we just have our eyes set lower so that if we were to look we would barely see the tip of the nose. Basically we just have some visibility right in front of us.

The earlier instruction was not to have the eyes completely shut. Initially having the eyes completely shut may seem conducive for meditation, because it seems to shut you off from the external world, and one might feel, 'Oh, yeah, this is conducive for meditation'. But if one were to do long term meditation it is said that having the eyes completely shut will bring about the onset of darkness, and cause drowsiness and sleepiness. So that is the instruction.

The right measure then is to just have the eyes slightly open where you can, if you were to look, see the tip of your nose. The Dalai Lama has mentioned in jest when he gives instructions on meditation to westerners that you might not have much problem with that because having larger noses you will be able to see the tip of your nose easily. Now, of course, some have said it is not really common for all westerners to have big noses. He just mentioned this in jest.

The main point is that one should not worry too much about having to see the tip of one's nose. Especially for someone who has a small nose, it might be a problem if you think you have to see the tip of your nose. It is only given as a measure. The main instruction is that you just see whatever it is in space in front of you, and being just barely able to see that would be the right measure.

With the jaws and teeth, the instruction is to have the jaws in a natural position, not with the teeth clenched or the mouth too open. So the jaws are in a natural position. The mouth is not completely open as that can cause dryness in our mouth and when the mouth becomes completely dry it again becomes difficult to meditate. Having the mouth completely closed, can cause too much moisture in our mouth. So we have just a bit of open. The instruction for our tongue is to place the tip on the upper palate behind the front row of upper teeth. Placing the tip of the tongue there prevents too much saliva forming in our mouth.

When we really think about these instructions and try to adopt that posture we will find it is really conducive to meditation. We will find that just adopting the posture brings an onset of calming the mind down. So we can see the benefit of that.

That covers what is called the seven-point instruction of meditation posture.

Now, in relation to our state of mind, we need to also ensure a positive state of mind, a positive intention, for doing the meditation practice.

Next comes the identifying the object that we are going to meditate on. The object that one chooses for one's meditation needs to be an object that one is familiar with. If not, one needs to first familiarise oneself with the object and really get to know that object well, and then it will become suitable for one's meditation.

Whatever object one may choose to use, it needs to be a conducive object, and one needs to familiarise oneself with it. If it is a physical object familiarising means to really see the features, colours and shape of the object and to be able to form a good vivid image of it, so that one can bring it up in one's mind. In the actual meditation one is not focusing on a physical object, but rather the mental image of that object. When one has that clear image in one's mind then that is the object that one focuses on. In the meditation practice one needs to place one's full attention and focus on that object and maintain what is called a 'single pointed' focus.

One of the main internal tools that helps one to be able to maintain focus on the chosen meditation object is called 'mindfulness'—a more literal translation would be 'remembrance'. Because the object that one is focusing on is the one that one familiarised oneself with earlier, with good familiarisation we will be able to have a constant remembrance or mindfulness of that object. Being mindful of the object that we have chosen to focus on will help us to maintain our focus on that object.

It is then explained that when focusing on the object one should have a clear and bright state of mind, as opposed to a drowsy and unclear mind. One has to have an intense focus on the object.

Having identified the object of our meditation, it is further explained that one needs to have a single-pointed focus on that chosen object along with a clear and bright state of mind. There are two tools to help us hold the object in our mind and be able to focus on the object properly. The first, mindfulness, was mentioned earlier. Mindfulness is that which holds the object in our mind. Constantly recalling the object helps one to be able to maintain focus on the object. While one is attempting to keep one's focus on the object, due to previous habituation, our mind might start getting a little bit distracted and wander off again. When the mind wanders off then we have to apply the second essential tool

for a good meditation. This is called 'introspection', but everyone may not readily relate to that word. Introspection is a state of mind that does an internal investigation checking whether one's mind has become distracted, and wandered off or not. The part of mind that does that checking or investigation is what is called 'introspection'. So it is a specific state of mind. Unlike mindfulness, which is a mind that maintains remembrance of the object, introspection has a specific job of checking whether the mind has become distracted and wandered off, or not. If one finds the mind has wandered off then one places it back on the meditation object.

The proper meditation is to have a single-pointed focus on the meditation object within a clear and bright state of mind. We need to identify here the two main obstacles to achieving that. The main obstacle or obstruction to being able to maintain a single pointed focus on the object is distraction. Distraction is one of the main obstructions to being able to focus well on the object. The second point was to have a clear and bright state of mind. What obstructs a clear and bright state of mind is called 'laxity', a mind which is even more subtle than drowsiness and prevents our mind being very clear; our focus lacks intensity. So that is the obstacle called 'laxity'. One needs to be free of these two obstacles to be able to maintain a single pointed focus on the object.

Having gone through the specific instructions of the meditation technique, particularly in relation to our physical posture and state of mind, and specifically discussing how to maintain our focus on the chosen object, the essential thing, as explained in the instructions, is to bring the object to mind again and again whilst one is meditating. I don't know if the translation from the Tibetan really works in English, but it means recalling the object again and again in one's meditation.

What we use here as the object for our meditation is our own breath. We use the breath to place our focus and attention on. So, based on that, we will now adopt the meditation technique, focusing on the breath single pointedly. (*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

4.2.2.1.2.3.2.2.1.2.1.3. The difficulty of accomplishing buddhahood if one does not exchange self and other

In the last session where we discussed the text, which would have been some time ago, we were discussing the explanation of the benefits of the practice called Exchanging Self with Others. In the text there is a quotation from an Indian master, Shantideva, and we read those quotations and we went through the explanations of that.

What is presented from here on is how one should consider self-cherishing as basically a form of being self-centred and that being self-centred is the doorway to all sufferings, and being other-centred is the basis of all excellence and goodness. So what is being suggested in the text is that we need to contemplate how being self-centred is the cause of

all one's suffering, while one focusing on others' wellbeing that causes us happiness. So how reasonable does that sound?

It is easy to misinterpret what is being explained here. When it suggests that one should overcome self-centredness or self-cherishing that could be easily misinterpreted as saying one should not care for oneself. That is not, of course, what is being presented here.

Those I have associated with for long time confess to me they find that what really obstructs them from being a little bit more generous and helpful to others, even their relatives, is strong self-centredness. They confess that because of self-centredness they find it very hard that to whole heartedly give to or assist others. They are confessing something that they feel is true. When they approach me directly they confess this to me and ask, 'Why is it that one has this natural strong self-centredness? What kinds of methods are there to maybe overcome that?'

I then attempt, with my limited English of course, to try to explain that to them. What I have suggested as a way to overcome that strong self-centredness is to try to think how others are the same as oneself, that we are equal in wanting happiness, and not wishing to experience any kind of suffering or misery. If one can start to recognise that and embrace this reality of how, whoever it may be, any other living creature or being, just like oneself equally wants to be happy, and just like oneself equally does not wish to experience any kind of suffering or misery, then it will help. Reflecting on that quite a bit and familiarising oneself with that will then start to open one's heart a bit more to others. When one begins to recognise that and starts to think about the others' welfare a true sense of love and compassion begins to manifest or generate within one.

Generating a mind of genuine concern for others' welfare and thus inducing love and compassion for them is followed by a wish to benefit the other, and extend one's help to them in any possible way. The way one generates the mind of wishing to benefit others is, as the great master of our tradition Lama Tsong Khapa has said, by contemplating and wishing others to gain happiness, and to be free from any suffering or misery. When one generates that mind of genuinely wishing others to be happy and free from suffering, then the mind of wishing to benefit them will naturally arise. And, as Lama Tsong Khapa emphasises, if one cannot generate that wish for the others to be happy and free from suffering, then the mind of wishing to benefit the other will not arise. He made a very significant point here as a practical way and practical means to generate what is called love and compassion towards others with an intention or wish to benefit the other and how that arises.

This is something that we need to consider in our everyday life in relation to our immediate relations. As I regularly emphasise, while we can develop a grand wish for others, in general, to have happiness and to be free from suffering, we need to practice that in the immediate relationships in our life, such as our companions or relatives and so forth. We may be dealing with these immediate relationships on a daily basis. If we can begin to extend a genuine recognition of their need to be happy and free from suffering, then the intention to help them to achieve happiness and be free from any kind of misery will naturally occur, and one's wish to benefit them in any way will occur. One's understanding of what their needs are will be much more profound.

In turn, when one extends that genuine concern for others, others will recognise and appreciate that. When they realise that one is taking a genuine initiative for them to be happy and free from suffering, then the appreciation from their side will naturally mean that they will begin to cherish us too. They will begin to hold us dear and that is what fosters a genuine relationship and understanding between individuals or groups and so forth. This is something that I emphasise regularly.

I normally describe the best external friend that one could have as someone who takes a genuine initiative to benefit and help us. One needs, of course, to generate that state of mind towards others. We need to take the initiative to generate that mind of wishing to extend genuine help to them. When one sees them deprived of happiness one wishes them to be happy and does whatever possible to make them happy. When one sees them experiencing any kind of suffering, one generates the immediate wish to relieve that suffering from them. When that comes about quite spontaneously and naturally, one has what is called a genuine concern that is based on genuine love and compassion towards them.

This is something that I have personally experienced in my early years of associating and living with other monks. Even in times of strife and difficulties, we had that very good companionship of really helping each other out. When we were deprived of wellbeing and happiness, we took the initiative to help each other out. This is definitely the benefit that it brings about. The genuine sort of companionship and friendship that it brings about is something that I have had definite experience of. It is based on that personal experience that I feel I can share and emphasise this point.

So what is called 'love and compassion' towards someone is basically the wish for them to be happy and free from suffering. Based on that, when one has the wish to benefit them then the wish to harm them will definitely naturally disappear. There is no way of intentionally wanting to harm someone who you want to benefit. That cannot occur, it is mutually exclusive. Therefore a genuine relationship between individuals, companions, friends, is based on a genuine mutual concern for each other. That is why I regularly emphasise that in companionship one needs to ensure that the main binding factor is a true sense of love and compassion, as opposed to mere attraction and attachment to each other.

The understanding that a relationship based on attachment can be harmful may not be apparent right away. When we consider anger we can see that it definitely destroys a relationship. A relationship that is based on anger towards each other will immediately bring about conflict, and there is no way that you can sustain a relationship based on anger. That is something that is clear and quite obvious. The Buddhist term attachment refers to just mere attraction to the other, physical attraction and so forth, and no real sense of bonding. When a relationship is based on such an attachment then while initially it may seem that there is some affection and bit of bonding, when there is a real hardship and a difficult situation occurs then the person who initially said that they love you and so forth will start to drift away, and will not be there to help you. We can see how attachment has failed the relationship. It has not helped foster and bond the relationship, and has failed to maintain the relationship. When attachment is replaced with a genuine sense of concern for each other, based on love and compassion, then when there is strife, difficulties, and

hardship the individual who has genuine concern, love and compassion will be even more eager to help you, and relieve you of those sufferings and difficulties, and wish you to be happy. That is how one can see the true value of companionship, or relationships that are based on true, mutual love and compassion.

Non-violence is the basis of the Buddha's teachings. We can see that when we adopt the mind of love and compassion, which is the wish to benefit others, it naturally stops violence, meaning a harmful intention towards others. Any harm to others is completely stopped with that. So, as the Buddha said, when we generate love and compassion it needs to start with our close relationships. In practice it is said that we need to start with our close relationships and then we can start to extend further towards strangers and then possibly extend our love and compassion towards enemies. A very practical approach has been presented in this technique.

We may assume that we have genuine love and compassion for those who are close to us but if, in fact, we find ourselves harming them, then that is a clear sign that we haven't mastered love and compassion for those who are close to us. Therefore the practical advice is to first practice love and compassion with those who are close to us, and then we can extend it further to strangers, enemies and so forth. This, of course, requires some training. It is something that may not come readily, and if it doesn't come readily it means that we need to further develop our love and compassion. Again, on a practical level, if we actually start harming and using violence towards those who are close to us, then how can we ever imagine and think that we can truly benefit others? This is why we need to, as the practical advice has suggested, adopt it with our close ones first.

We can relate this to the main point mentioned earlier about those who have confided that they recognise self-centredness as a fault that prevents them from being open-minded and considerate to others. The way to overcome self-centredness is, in brief, further work on developing love and compassion. When you develop love and compassion towards others then that will naturally reduce self-centredness.

If a genuine sense of love and compassion is lacking then that is when the intention to harm each other arises. When a harmful mind arises then, regardless of whether someone lives in the same country, belongs to the same culture, even belongs to the same religion, there is conflict and harming each other. This is something that is occurring at this very time. When I asked about a certain conflict I was told, 'Oh, yes, they are from the same country, they belong to the same culture, and they actually have the same religion'. But when you find that they are hurting each other that is clearly because there is no true sense of love and compassion amongst them. That is what is causing them to hurt each other in a conflict. So the value of love and compassion is unequivocal, something that is most valuable in fostering good intentions towards each other.

The optimum way to overcome self-centredness is extending that genuine sense of concern based on love and compassion towards others. The more one generates the sense of love and compassion, the more just focusing on one's own wellbeing and happiness will naturally reduce, and one will start to embrace others' concerns and so forth. Thus generating love and compassion towards others is the most valuable practice I can recommend. When people ask me

what is a Buddhist practice, or Dharma practice my answer is someone who takes a genuine concern for others' welfare, and extends themselves wholeheartedly towards benefiting others. That is a real Buddhist practice, that is real Dharma practice. That is how I answer the question.

Just to give an example of the power of love and compassion and how it fosters an incredible bond, I refer to something that I saw on Channel Seven recently. The other day they were showing someone who had apparently cared for and nurtured a crocodile when it was very young. Now the crocodile is a fully grown adult, and when he held it and grabbed it, it was putting its feet on the man's face and showing a strong bond and fondness. It was quite an incredible sight to see; normally everyone would be afraid of crocodiles. It would be hard to imagine a crocodile showing affection towards a human, but this is what happened.

This shows that even animals that are normally considered to be a little bit stupid and so forth can recognise those who extend true love and compassion towards them. They recognise that and develop a trust. A crocodile kissing someone's face is not something we would normally consider possible, but it came about through fostering that genuine relationship and a trust between the person and the crocodile when it was young. When I see instances like this, and of course there are many other instances of animals responding to human's affection and returning that affection, it gives me a sense of encouragement. If animals can recognise the value of true nurturing and caring it is definitely something that we humans can adopt. It helps to remind me that every attempt to develop love and compassion is not in vain, and does not go to waste, but has great value. The time and energy spent in developing love and compassion is most worthwhile.

Before we conclude the session for the evening, let us again spend a few moments in meditation. This time we can focus on the sound of Buddha Shakyamuni's name mantra being recited. As we hear this recitation we just keep our focus on that sound and then when the recitation subsides just maintain that awareness for a few moments.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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