Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe 29 April 2015

As usual we may spend some time for meditation. Meditation can be understood as a training for one's mind. Many things we need to adopt and learn in life require some training; likewise, meditation is specifically the training to adopt a positive state of mind.

While there may be many different types of trainings for the mind, meditation is particularly the technique that helps us acquire a peaceful mind.

We can categorise training into three main types – physical, verbal and mental. Of course we can achieve a lot through physical training, such as gaining more physical strength and even becoming so accomplished that we become quite famous. Likewise through verbal training, we can acquire great achievements in terms of our speech. We can also achieve a lot through mental training. In fact it is good to note here that physical and verbal training also rely on the mind. We make the decision to engage in physical training or verbal training as a result of an intention in our mind, which enables us to willingly adopt the discipline to engage in the physical or verbal training. The main point here is that whatever we do really comes back to the mind.

People spend many hours of training and lot of effort in training for their particular sport before they can enter and win competitions. With their success achievement they then become quite well-known and because of their training famous sportsmanship. If we were to ask them why they expended all that effort in training, they would say their ultimate aim is to seek some wellbeing for themselves; happiness, really. While the immediate driving force might be fame or a passion for the sport or activity, the ultimate intention would be to gain some happiness. Whether that is achieved or not is another matter altogether.

It's the same for verbal training. Those who want to sing professionally have to train a lot. Famous singers do not become famous overnight. Apparently they have had to put a lot of effort into training their voice. In that way, they can achieve fame.

Likewise with mental training: when people exert themselves in mental training, they can gain lot of knowledge and become a doctor, a famous lawyer, or even the Prime Minister. The main point here is that whatever we wish to achieve involves training, so putting effort and time into training is a worthwhile way of achieving the goals we set for ourselves. What I especially hope to do here is to encourage the younger generation to take a keen interest in their studies and the trainings they

need to achieve a satisfying life for themselves in the future. Of course, the middle-aged and older generations can also benefit from this point because there are still a lot of training opportunities for them to engage in.

If we go back to the specific training of meditation, the aim is to gain happiness in one's mind. What we are training to achieve is a genuinely happy and calm state of mind. Just like everything else we seek to achieve, this involves training. Training simply means that the more one acquaints oneself with the means of achieving one's goal, the more likely it is one will actually achieve it.

Going back to the earlier examples of people who have trained their mind by gaining more and more knowledge – and thus more status later on in their lives – we mentioned the Prime Minister and others held in high esteem in our society, such as professors. They are held in such high esteem because of what they have achieved through their training. Whether their training has actually provided them with genuine happiness and peace of mind is another matter. The main point here is that in our society, they are definitely regarded with high esteem. They have achieved something significant through the effort they have put into training.

It is the same for our training in meditation – it is a way for us to achieve a peaceful and calm state of mind. The more we acquaint ourselves with the technique, the more likely we will be to gain a genuinely calmer and happier state of mind. Of course, the training involves understanding what states of mind oppose an otherwise calm and peaceful state of mind. We need to recognise and identify the states of mind that prevent us from experiencing peace and happiness and then eliminate those destructive states of mind.

Since what we seek to achieve through meditation is a genuinely calm and peaceful state of mind, we need to recognise that it is worthwhile to take up this training and really invest in it. Training the mind in meditation involves deliberately looking into oneself and checking up on what is preventing us from having a peaceful state of mind. When we recognise the disturbing factors known in Buddhism as the afflictions - we make the determination to do everything possible to reduce and eventually overcome all afflictions. We can make a personal commitment not to follow these disturbing states of mind, saying to ourselves: "I am not going to allow my mind to follow these disturbing emotions even for a moment". We recognise that the real disturbing factors preventing us from experiencing peace lie within ourselves, rather than externally. With that recognition and understanding, we then apply the meditation technique, even if it's just for a minute or two. If we can allow ourselves to settle the mind and focus on an appropriate meditation object even for a few moments, we will experience the immediate result of a more tranguil, calmer state of mind.

When one begins this training of the mind, adopting meditation as a daily practice, one is embarking on a journey of achieving something unique for oneself. One starts to develop inner wisdom, which enables us to clearly discern between the positive and negative states of mind. With this ability, we can clearly distinguish

between positive states of mind, which contribute to our wellbeing, and negative states of mind, which are destructive and which disturb our mind. That deep insight is specifically referred to as analytical wisdom, because it enables us to distinguish between what is useful and what is destructive to oneself. Then we can develop the positive states of mind and begin to eliminate the negative states of mind.

The next time we feel disturbed, rather than immediately pointing the finger outwards and trying to find fault and blame externally, we can take the initiative to look within and ask: "Okay, what state of mind could be contributing to this disturbance? What has caused my mind to become agitated, restless and disturbed? What could be causing that?" If one takes this approach sincerely and honestly, one will be able to detect something within the mind that makes one vulnerable to being disturbed. So the fault does not lie outside of us but within. One will gain this invaluable insight from the practice of meditation. At this point, when one is able to realise that the real enemy is not outside of us, we will have made real progress. Normally we blame those outside of us saying they are the ones causing all of our problems, this is why one is agitated and disturbed. Instead we should be able to detect the enemy within – the negative states of mind are the real cause of disturbance in one's mind.

So in the process of training the mind with meditation, the more we are able to work on our mind to subdue the inner causes of disturbance, the more external things will not be able harm us. This is contrary to how we normally evaluate a situation where one is agitated and disturbed. We are habituated normally to immediately looking outside and blaming something outside. We tend to ask: "What is causing me this disturbance? Who is at fault? Something external is causing it."

Because of this habituation, we never really stop to think that the real cause of disturbance is within us. When we adopt the training of looking within ourselves and recognising the causes of disturbance – the negative states of mind – this mere recognition already defuses the intensity of that particular negative state of mind. As we work further on our mind, we will find that the more we are able to subdue this negative mind, then even when there is an external situation that could agitate us, we will not be as vulnerable as we would have previously. That is the positive effect of having worked on one's mind.

It is not normally apparent to us that our mind could be in an agitated and disturbed state. However if, for example, one were to verbalise whatever thought arose in one's mind and started telling people exactly what was going on in one's mind all the time, I'm pretty sure people would start thinking you'd gone crazy! [laughter] If only positive, good thoughts were going on in your mind, then people would appreciate it. But if we are honest about what is going on in our mind most of the time, if we shared that with others, people might be shocked. The point here is that we are normally obsessed with many irrelevant and disturbing thoughts that are not really conducive to our wellbeing and that churn over and over in our head.

Some students have confided in me that when they started worrying about unnecessary, random things, at some point after these concerns and worries had started going round and round their mind, the mind became agitated. Because of this agitation in the mind, when they went into the outside world, everything appeared in a dark light. People didn't appear appealing or supportive or nice. These are individuals who have honestly shared their own experience with me – they are recognising that internal turmoil and agitation causes one's very perception to see things as being hostile to oneself. It all starts in the mind.

These are significant points that others have shared. It is up to each of us to see if this is true for oneself or not. When we do this internal investigation, we can really learn lot about ourselves. There is so much to learn about what goes on in our mind. Through this internal investigation, we begin to recognise for ourselves that there are certain states of mind and patterns that we need to overcome and discard, as they are not useful to us. Then there are certain other states of mind that we may have failed to notice, that are actually positive, and that we need to further develop.

Thus it is through this internal investigation, which is part of our mental training, that one begins to recognise certain positive states of mind one needs to further acquaint oneself with, and which can become stronger and firmer. Then there are other states of mind that are destructive and not useful to one. Rather than familiarising the mind with these negative thoughts, one makes the decision to minimise, defuse it and ultimately discard such states of mind.

That sort of personal initiative enables one to make clear, sound decisions in one's life. Whatever activity we need to do – following the right direction in one's life and making life choices and so forth – we can make the right choices by having that clear, internal recognition of what is useful and meaningful versus what is detrimental to our wellbeing. That decision will then be made on the basis of a clear understanding, the analytical wisdom that comes from the inside. Therefore there is a great advantage to oneself in being able to direct one's life in a more meaningful direction.

This inborn wisdom helps to clear away one's doubt: it is doubt that hinders us from moving forward. The very nature of doubt is that it pulls us in two directions: "Should I be doing this or should I do that?" On one day you may think: "I am going to do that". Then the next day you think: "No actually that was not a good idea, maybe I should do that". Then one keeps going back and forth, and may end up not making any good decisions and choices or, even worse, making wrong choices. Because it is doubt that hinders our progress, when we find methods to develop our own clear wisdom and intelligence, this will naturally help one to clear away doubts and make the right decisions. We can then move forward and gain what it is that we need to achieve. I am sharing these points with you because I feel they will be useful throughout your life.

So having cleared away doubts, the decisions and choices one makes will be firm and stable – unlike the situation

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we mentioned earlier where one keeps shifting back and forth between options. Our decisions will have been made from our own clear understanding. This is a significant point: you are the best person to know what is right for you, what decisions you must make. You are the ultimate authority because others don't really know your mind, unless they have a high level of clairvoyance. At best they can give you some good suggestions but they can't read your mind, so to rely on others to make decisions for us is neither practical nor suitable. No one other than oneself knows what is going on within one's mind, what one's aspirations are, and so forth. It is oneself that recognises the negative states of mind others don't need to point them out to you if you have already taken the initiative to recognise them yourself. One needs to be able to recognise a positive state of mind, and understand that the decisions made from that positive intention will be sound, rather than needing to rely on others for input. The point here is that one needs to take the initiative to make the right decisions oneself.

If one were to rely on others for advice in making one's decisions, then ideally it would have to be someone who could read one's mind, and who, without you having said anything, would be able to know your doubts and questions and direct you in the right direction. But we find that is not really the case, is it? With most people we encounter, we have to tell them what is going on in our mind and what difficulties we have in our mind and so forth. Based on that, they may give some advice. But then it is questionable whether we are able to accurately relate everything that is going in one's mind to another.

One lady in an earlier class mentioned that she works in counselling. She mentioned that, if we were able to know exactly what is going on in the client's mind, what their needs were and so forth, then we might be in a better position to help them. But they are not going to tell us exactly that they want or what exactly is in their mind. It is not customary in our tradition to relate all the secrets in one's mind.

If one has a secret one is not really capable of sharing with others, one has sole ownership of it. Especially if it is causing real distress or trouble for you, because you are not ready to share it with others, ultimately you have to deal with it yourself. Others are not able to know exactly what is going on within you, so what you are left is to work with it yourself. At this point, we can also understand the advice the Buddha has given when he said: "One is ultimately one's own protector and ultimately one's own enemy as well". This is a significant point that we need to understand. When one takes the initiative for one's own development and really works on oneself, one becomes one's best friend and protector. Whereas if one allows one's mind to be influenced by negativities, one becomes one's enemy. This is the main point.

With this advice in mind, I often remind myself and point the finger at myself saying: "Remember you are your own enemy or your own friend". When I point to myself like this, it is really helpful for me.

When one's mind is imbued with love and compassion, the mind naturally becomes very calm and relaxed.

Conversely, the moment anger arises it immediately disturbs an otherwise calm and peaceful state of mind. Therefore when one takes the initiative to embody love and compassion within one's heart and in one's mind, one is being one's best friend, because one is providing the means for a genuinely peaceful and happy state of mind. Whereas when one allows anger to overpower one's mind, one is allowing oneself to be one's enemy. In fact an enemy is defined as that which destroys one's peace and happiness and gives one suffering. Since that is how we define an enemy, if anger destroys our peace of mind and gives it distress then it has got to be one's enemy.

To clarify, there is a difference between that which *gives* one suffering and that which *causes* one suffering. The difference is that what *causes* us suffering is little more distant; in other words, the suffering will arise a little later. On the other hand, that which *gives* suffering relates to the immediate suffering one experiences. To use an analogy, the seed would be the immediate cause for the shoot – the shoot is the immediate result of the seed – whereas the fruit comes much later. So the seed is not the immediate cause of the fruit.

One will see the real purpose of what is to be achieved when one actually engages in the practice of meditation. Regularly thinking about these points and analysing one's own state of mind will help one to attain a significant goal. Having explained some of the benefits, now we can actually engage in formal meditation practice.

First we re-adopt our physical posture to be relaxed, sitting upright but comfortable. We need to also ensure we have a clear state of mind, so we need to withdraw our attention from all other distractions, temporarily leaving aside all other agendas and thoughts, and bringing our focus within. Having brought the focus within ourselves, we then actually place it upon the breath, which is the meditation object here. Just mentally observe the breath coming and going out naturally, and spending a few moments on that. [Pause for meditation]

Before we conclude for the evening, just maintain that awareness. This time we can shift our focus to the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra. While that recitation is going on, keep your focus on the sound, and when the recitation stops, just focus on that residual pleasant sensation or feeling you get for a few moments and that will suffice for meditation.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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