
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment



Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual we can spend some time in meditation. To do this you can make yourself comfortable, and your posture relaxed.

Meditating is a technique that enables your mind to be acquainted with positive states in order to overcome negative ones. Therefore, the main reason for you to adopt a meditation practice is so you can train your mind to become more familiar with constructive mindsets. You can lessen and eradicate disturbing, dull and unclear mindsets through training your mind to be positive. The more you accustom your mind to positive states, the better you will be at transforming your negative attitudes, thoughts and moods. Thus, you will reach a point where you can easily combat and overcome negative states of mind.

When you understand this main purpose of meditating and adopt the practice, you will appreciate how this type of mind training restores and protects your mental happiness. Your practice will help you to overcome destructive states of mind that cause you inner turmoil. The disturbing attitudes will naturally weaken and lessen because of your acquaintance with positive states of mind.

So, meditation is essentially a mind-training technique to acquaint yourself with positivity and de-familiarise yourself with negativity. The practice enables you to better recognise the states of mind that are useful to you and those that are not. The process is gradual and progress is incremental, but even initially recognising which states of mind you need to cultivate, and which states of mind you need to distance yourself from, can bring you great clarity and fulfilment.

Meditation enables you to clearly see the negativities in your mind so that you can apply antidotes to minimise their disruption. The practice of deliberately counteracting negative states of mind weakens the harmful mindsets, so that they become less powerful, and more peaceful mindsets can naturally emerge. If you are not happy, the prime reason is not because of your external situation, but because your internal conditions are preoccupied by negative thoughts and attitudes, which are causing you inner turmoil.

Understanding that the real trouble maker is internal is acknowledged even by ordinary people I meet when I go out. A man, who is not Buddhist, recently said to me, "The real difficulty is here in my head. The thoughts in my head are what cause my problems." So even people who are not engaged in a meditation practice are able to be honest with themselves, and acknowledge that the real trouble is caused in the mind, and is not entirely the fault of external circumstances.

Once you correctly identify that the real troublemaker and cause of your problems is within yourself in the form of negative states of mind, then it becomes easier to tackle and overcome your difficulties by applying antidotes. Unless you recognise and identify that your negative states of mind are

causing you mental turmoil, you will always blame external conditions for causing your problems. If you truly believe that external conditions create your difficulties, there will be no end to your problems, because your external conditions will never be perfect. You will always have some reason to feel distraught if you concentrate on your external conditions, because there will always be something that is not quite right. This is true for everyone. The famous and common, rich and impoverished, all have never-ending external problems. So, if you allow your external conditions to dictate your sense of wellbeing, your problems will be unceasing and you will never be at ease. However, if you recognise that the problem is internal, and that it is possible to have control over your own mind, then, you can manage and overcome your problems.

A contemporary example I often give is the harmony and joy a couple experiences in the beginning of their relationship. Initially the relationship is pleasant and everything seems to go well. However after some time has passed, some sort of discomfort and inner dissatisfaction arises between one of the pair or on both sides. When that happens, the real problems begin and the otherwise harmonious relationship becomes troubled and there is conflict. If you analyse this situation carefully you will see that the problems occur because of the inner afflictions rather than because their external conditions have changed.

For this reason I regularly emphasise to those in a committed relationship the need to really acknowledge the value of a harmonious partnership. If there is no cause for either party to be distressed because external conditions are sufficient for them both to be sustained well, then, it is good for each of them to acknowledge that fact so the main thing for them to do is to keep their good relationship going and find a sense of joy in each other. Otherwise, if either party looks for another source of satisfaction, a rift will happen and the relationship will go off track. There will be conflict as soon as one side has ideas or thoughts of finding happiness elsewhere, and eventually there will be intentions to hurt the other through words and acts. So, in order to prevent harmful intentions and actions from occurring, the couple needs to value the relationship that they have and promote its harmony, right from the beginning of their relationship.

I do not share these points lightly. They are significant and worth considering. I have been here for many years and have seen many instances of relationships that have soured. The committed relationship goes very well initially and everything is good between the couple, but then the inner afflictions arise. In a family situation, dissatisfaction occurs in the mind of either the mother or father and he or she starts to seek another relationship to resolve the inner dissatisfaction. This disrupts the family union, and a lot of difficulties, problems and complications occur, especially if there are children and some wealth is involved. I have seen many incidents like this occur between couples, which is why I am relating to you how these ruptures happen. If you want a good life with your partner, you have to respect the other person's needs and promote your harmonious relationship. This helps you to generate a sense of wellbeing and it creates a pleasant atmosphere in your home. You then will have a mind that is settled and can adopt a spiritual life. You can only really do spiritual practice when you are settled internally and your family life is stable.

So, meditation is a technique to gain real control over your mind. The aim of the practice is to have command over the direction your mind takes and subdue its disturbing

tendencies. Meditation is not just about having a focused mind because focus is the means rather than the ends. You could have a focused mind during your formal meditation session but afterwards have a troubled and chaotic mind, which would not serve you well. Some people have honestly confided in me that this is the situation they find themselves—they have meditated for years and have reached a point in their practice where they can maintain a focus on a chosen object for a significant amount of time, even hours, without being distracted, but as soon as they finish their formal meditation sessions, they get angry and upset by their external situations. This clearly indicates that their meditation practice has not targeted overcoming the afflictions by applying the appropriate antidotes.

So, it is important that you periodically analyse and check your state of mind and have a dialogue with yourself when a certain thought or attitude arises. You can acknowledge and congratulate yourself when a positive state of mind arises. You can think to yourself, *Okay, this thought is good. It will benefit me, and the more I familiarise myself with this positive thought, the more it will contribute to my wellbeing and happiness.* You can also caution and encourage yourself when a negative state of mind arises by thinking something like, *Okay, this is the mind which will cause me disturbance and turmoil. By allowing myself to think this way my discomfort will escalate and it will just cause me more and more trouble. I need to distance myself from this way of thinking and generate a more positive attitude.* By identifying your positive and negative states of mind, you can see them for what they are, and have control over what will contribute to your inner wellbeing by not allowing negative mindsets to take over. This practice of familiarising yourself with positive states of mind and de-familiarising yourself with negative states of mind is how you can establish a stable, clear and joyful state of mind.

You can analyse your state of mind at all times. The process is not one that can only be done while sitting rigidly in a meditative posture. You can analyse and check your mind while you are sitting, standing, walking or engaged in any other activity. The whole point of this type of analysis is to honestly investigate the state of your mind, and distinguish between positive and negative mindsets.

You can also investigate your states of mind and see which ones are beneficial and which ones harm you and others. Anger, for example, is a state of mind that disturbs you and others around you. Its disadvantages can be established if you sincerely think about the consequences of anger—how it harms relationships, escalates and worsens conflict, and destroys your inner peace. If you clearly identify the disadvantages of anger, you will be more inclined to apply an antidote to it, such as compassion. Meditating on compassion and familiarising your mind with its qualities naturally weakens and diffuses anger.

So, this is how you train your mind. You think about the advantages of subduing mindsets that cause you and other people harm, and you appreciate the value of cultivating positive states of mind that benefit yourself and others, like love and compassion. Of course, at our level, we may not be able to prevent anger from arising altogether because we have not yet reached the stage where we have complete control over the state of our minds. Nevertheless, through diligent practice, we can reach the stage where anger does not even arise and we are not victims to its harmful effects, and, even as beginners, we can prevent reactions resulting from intense moments of anger that cause great destruction and harm.

You know you have understood the meditation practice well and have gained the full benefits of the practice when you promote and further develop your positive states of mind, and distance yourself from negative states of mind so that they lessen.

A couple of weeks ago I was in St Kilda and a few people who I am acquainted with came up to me to say hello. A young man of about twenty greeted me and I observed to him that he was a happy person and that was a very, very good thing. I said that it would be good for him to keep his happiness and hold it as something very precious. The young fellow acknowledged that he was happy and my observation made him joyful. I regularly emphasise in our sessions that the most valuable asset you can have in your life is a happy state of mind. If you recognise that as a fact, you will do everything possible to protect your happy state of mind so that it does not decline, and find the means to develop and increase it. Your happy mind is something for you to value deeply and hold very dear. This young fellow acknowledged this when I mentioned it to him and became exuberant about the necessity of safeguarding his happy mind. I do not know if he will follow the advice I gave him to hold his happiness as very precious and to look after it, but he was quite struck with the acknowledgement that he was a happy person and came back afterwards to re-emphasise how his happiness was very good for him, which shows that he had really thought about its value and that it was sound logic for him.

The main point being emphasised is that a meditation practice is the method to gain control over your mind so that it is not completely dominated by negative mindsets. When you can counteract negative thoughts and emotions, you will have gained control over your mind.

So before our session ends, let us spend some time in meditation.

First, we need to choose an appropriate object to focus on. Your mind naturally cognises and holds on to things anyway, so meditation is about choosing an appropriate object to keep your mind focused on. Generally the meditation object would be one where the mere act of focusing causes your mind to become calm and relaxed. If the object causes your mind agitation and disturbance, then, it would not be a suitable meditation object. Therefore, any object that causes you a genuine sense of relaxation and calm, and settles your mind is fitting.

In our meditation sessions here, I usually suggest you use your breath as the object of your focus. Before you begin, you can make a commitment to yourself that for the next few minutes you will not allow your mind to wander or be distracted from your breath, but instead you will intentionally withdraw your focus from all other objects that you might otherwise be preoccupied with, such as thoughts or external things. Then, you can bring your focus inwards and place it on the natural in-flow and out-flow of your breathing. When you focus really well on nothing but your breath, your mind will naturally settle and a genuine sense of personal wellbeing will arise in you. So, for the next few minutes, we will do this practice. [*Pause for single-pointed meditation.*]

That would be sufficient for now. Please raise your hand if you have a question.

Question: How can I be patient with someone who is offensive towards a younger person who I have great affection for?

Geshe-la: In this scenario, if you do not know the person well, you would probably be out of line to say something about their behaviour and if you did say something it may not help anyway because the person would become more aggravated and tell you that it is none of your business. If the person is someone you are connected to or you associate with, then, that is different and there may be some room for you to address the issue, but you could not tell a stranger that he or she is being offensive – the person would just say, “It’s none of your business”, and what response could you have to that?

However, in all cases, you would need to understand the context fully before you judge whether the person is harming the younger one. The situation could be that the older person is presenting useful advice to the younger one in a forceful way because the older person is experienced and is sharing his or her knowledge to make the younger one cautious. From the outside, the tone or the reprimand may appear offensive but the approach may simply be a way to get the younger one to listen and to be of genuine help. There are many situations we do not have a clear understanding about so we cannot jump to conclusions.

In a work environment, for example, a skilled worker who has been in the job for many years may share his experience with a new apprentice who has not worked for such a long period of time. The way the older, more experienced worker imparts his or her knowledge will depend on the person. Some people are capable of communicating very smoothly and can give advice in a gentle manner, but others might not have that skill so may seem tough and have a rough approach in sharing their knowledge. Nevertheless, the older worker gives his experience to the new apprentice, and the apprentice understands that his or her understanding is increasing through the exchange, which is acceptable in the situation. Whenever we encounter an elder person seemingly being harsh to a younger person, we need to consider the context because their relationship or their connection may mean that the communication is necessary.

The reality is that a person who has gone through many hardships and difficulties has built-up significant experience in understanding various situations. Generally speaking, they are gentler in their approach when they impart their knowledge to others because they see that the others are struggling and know from their own experience the difficulties that are being faced; they are more compassionate in their approach because of their experiential understanding. Whereas those who have reached a high status without having to go through the step-by-step process of reaching that high status, may not be as gentle in their approach. An example of this would be a general in an army who has been made a general because of who they know rather than what they know. This general would not have had to work hard for the position or have gone through the process of working through the ranks to gain the position, so he or she might be more arrogant when dealing with subordinates and have less compassion for them and their difficulties. On the other hand, a general who had to work from the ground-up to reach his or her position would have more compassion for those that are junior because he or she would have gone through the same hardships.

So, in a work environment, a more senior worker may point out that something has not been done correctly by a junior worker to help the less experienced person become more skilled at the job and this would not be bullying. I was at the

bank recently and a young bank clerk was having trouble opening a drawer. A more senior bank clerk saw and came over to help her and said, “I’ve had trouble with that before”, and gently showed her how to release the drawer. I reflected on that situation and thought that if the older clerk had not had experience in opening the drawer and knew it could be tricky, she could have ridiculed the younger clerk and said, “You can’t even open a drawer!” However, the older bank clerk didn’t do this, and was kind and gentle to the less experienced clerk. This is an example of a person who had faced and overcome a problem, and then kindly helped another person who faced the same difficulty.

Sometimes these types of situations can be difficult to see or deal with, so, no matter what, being careful of your own state of mind must be your most important consideration.

Before we conclude for the evening, let us again take the opportunity to spend a few minutes in meditation. This time the object of our focus can be the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni’s name. When we recite the mantra, we can place our entire focus on the sound itself and, when the recitation subsides, we can focus on the calm feeling left behind. This will suffice as our meditation.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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