
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

འཇམ་གུང་རྒྱལ་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 we can spend some time for meditation. For that purpose, we adopt a comfortable, relaxed posture. Likewise, it would be good to try to adopt a relaxed and calm state of mind. When we adopt a comfortable and relaxed posture, as well a relaxed and calm state of mind, that combination will benefit oneself.

When we refer to the self, or I, or me, we have in mind an individual being who wants to experience a sense of calmness and happiness and wellbeing. So we need to consider what brings about overall wellbeing for the self, which is dependent on the wellbeing of one's physical body and mind.

The natural inclination of the self or 'I' is that it naturally wishes for happiness and does not wish to experience any kind of misery or suffering. And it is the physical body and the mind which needs to assist the self to experience wellbeing and happiness and alleviate suffering.

We can think of our body and mind as the servants of the 'I': indeed the 'I' is meant to be the master that commands the physical body and mind. But, in reality, our situation is often the reverse: we are like slaves to our body and our mind. When the wellbeing of the body is not good, the individual self suffers, and has to serve the body. We work hard to maintain this body: we feed it, clothe it, find shelter for it. So we need to investigate for ourselves whether our physical body is contributing to our wellbeing or not.

Likewise, the mind does a lot of thinking and entertains various thoughts. Again, the individual self needs to investigate all of that thinking the mind goes through, to ensure it actually contributes to one's wellbeing.

This process of analysis is significant, because it will contribute to one's wellbeing. The process involves checking the body—for example, what we consume—and also checking whether our mind, or way of thinking, is contributing to our wellbeing or not. When we take the initiative to do this analysis sincerely, we will develop an inner strength, along with an intelligence or wisdom that comes from deep insight and understanding. This wisdom is what will help us make the right choices. If we just go about consuming various foods and drinks mindlessly, we might find that a lot of what we consume is actually harming our health, rather than contributing to our wellbeing. Likewise, a lot of random thoughts enter the mind, and if we don't analyse properly and just follow those thoughts, we might find the resultant ideas we form, and decisions we make, bring more disturbance and turmoil to the mind. So when we use this deeper intelligence or analysis to really suss out whether certain

thought patterns contribute to one's wellbeing or not, that very process will help us understand more clearly which thoughts are beneficial and therefore should be adopted.

When we start to develop this deeper intelligence it will assist us to make good decisions that improve one's life. It will encourage us to engage in actions that contribute to the betterment of oneself and others. When we really utilise this inner wisdom, we become more confident about making the right decisions. Of course, this doesn't mean we should not rely at all on others' suggestions. To a certain extent, we need to listen to different points of view but, ultimately, when we have our own inner wisdom, we can make the final decision based on whether we find an action to be beneficial or not. Thus our wisdom will benefit our life, whatever we may do.

Further, when we make that inner wisdom more acute and stronger, it will help us arrive at the right decision without being caught up too long with lingering doubt. Doubt is what obstructs our decision-making; we don't follow something through because our mind wavers, thinking 'Should I do this or should I do that?', going back and forth and wasting a lot of time and energy and preventing us from making a proper decision. There is a Tibetan saying that goes like this 'You cannot sew with a two-headed needle'—which is an analogy to illustrate what happens when you have two different ways of thinking in your mind. You can never really accomplish your goal because you keep wavering between different options. Maybe these days, with new technology, there might be two-headed needles [*laughter*] but the two heads would still have to stem from one source.

If one's mind keeps wavering with doubt about any activity one wants to accomplish, that in itself can become a bad habit. The great Indian master, Shantideva, has advised us that, before engaging in any activity, first do a thorough analysis to check the pros and cons. If one finds the activity is beneficial and that one has the ability, then engage in it and follow it through. If you find you don't have the ability, or it is not really worthwhile, then it is best not to start that activity at all. Shantideva further mentions that if you decide to do an activity and don't follow it through but keep putting it off, that in itself can become a bad habit. We find this is true for many people who may start one course but give that up and become interested in another course, then don't follow that through either. When that becomes a habit, one may never be able to see anything through completely.

The main point, as I emphasise regularly to the younger generation, is to really take heed of this advice and try to apply it in one's life. Relating this advice back to studying, it might take five years for you to complete a course. Yet there are some who start and after barely a year say 'Oh no, it is too hard, it is too difficult', then they leave that study aside. In that sense, finishing a course will be hard to accomplish. So when we apply this method of first analysing thoroughly to check whether the benefits of an action outweigh the disadvantages, then we should really try to see it through to the best of our ability.

Relating back to an earlier point, it is through having a relaxed body and a clear state of mind that one will be

able to use one's wisdom in the best way. A relaxed body that does not have too much tension and so forth naturally contributes to one's health and wellbeing; our physical health can be much better when our body is relaxed. Indeed, when we find the time to really relax, it definitely contributes to one's physical vitality and energy—I have experienced this myself.

When we adopt techniques that relax the body, we start to experience a sense of wellbeing or physical happiness. Similarly, we can generate mental wellbeing. The primary function of the mind is to think. We generally classify our thinking patterns or attitudes into two categories: positive ways of thinking, and negative ways of thinking. When one does a sincere and thorough analysis of one's mental state, one may notice that certain ways of thinking contribute to disturbance in one's mind, and are thus classified as negative. These thoughts cause the mind to become agitated and disturbed, so that one lacks a sense of peace and happiness. We may also notice certain other states of mind, which we classify as positive. Adopting these ways of thinking brings about a calmer state of mind, where there is less agitation, turmoil and disturbance; the mind naturally experiences a sense of ease. This is what we refer to as mental happiness. When one has a relaxed body and mind, one experiences physical and mental happiness.

The mind becomes agitated from following unrelated, disturbing thoughts. We can bear that in mind when we have a hard time going to sleep. One may be in a comfortable bed with all the conditions for a good night's sleep, but find oneself deprived of sleep. Rather than just getting frustrated and upset, we can take a moment to observe what is going on in one's mind, what kind of thoughts could be depriving us of sleep. That process of calmly and sincerely looking at our mind is in itself a meditation, because we are observing our own thoughts, looking within and bringing our focus within the mind. So that, in itself, will reduce the anxiety in our mind, and the mind will naturally start to become calmer and more settled. Then we will be able to get a good sleep. You might try this out next time you have trouble sleeping.

Thus when we are able to secure a relaxed body and a relaxed state of mind, this naturally brings about a calmer, peaceful state of mind, and we experience a sense of wellbeing and happiness. Now, what disturbs our calmness and peace is a mind that is uncontained, completely scattered in every direction: a mind that becomes disturbed by going after every thought. So when we begin to notice this, we can try to contain our mind. If we could have a less chaotic, less busy mind and focus it within, that would definitely contribute to us feeling calmer and more peaceful. At this stage, one might ask 'Is there any method by which one can contain one's mind and focus within?' Even raising this significant question is a positive result of our analysis and wisdom. As I have mentioned previously, when we use our own intelligence, we will start finding out for ourselves the means for securing our betterment and wellbeing.

It is at this juncture that one is introduced to the practice of meditation as the best method to contain one's mind. Of course, the next significant question would be 'What is

meditation and how does one apply it? Are there any particular mental conditions we need in order to practice meditation?'. The mental tools required in the practice of meditation are mindfulness and introspection. These two states of mind, mindfulness and introspection, are the most essential, conducive tools for our practice of meditation.

In talking about conducive tools or conditions, we can consider that, first, whatever activity one wishes to accomplish is bound to require contributing conditions for it to be accomplished and, second, there will be some obstructions. This is natural: whatever we want to achieve has conducive factors that help us accomplish our goal, and obstructing factors that prevent us from achieving it. Meditation is no different: there are certain conducive conditions we need to apply and obstructions that we need to remove. If there were no obstructions, we would be able to easily accomplish our goals without any hindrances, but because there are hindrances or obstacles, we need to be ready to face them and see them as a challenge. Whenever difficulties arise, if we immediately resort to thinking 'Oh, now it's difficult, I can't do it anymore', we will get into the habit of walking away. Every activity naturally has its own obstructions, but if we don't face them and find means to overcome them, we will never be able to accomplish our goals.

Regarding the mental tools of mindfulness and introspection, mindfulness is described as the function of remembering an object, in this case remembering what we call a virtuous object, the object of meditation. In order to focus on the meditation object, we need to recognise it. To take an example, if we were told to pick out a certain person, we would have to have a good description of that person to be able to recognise them when we see them—their height, their shape, the colour of their hair, facial features and so forth. If we are given a good description then, when we see that person, we are able to say 'This is the person'; we immediately recognise them. Similarly when we adopt the meditation technique, first of all, we need to clearly identify the object we are going to focus on, whatever it may be. Then, having identified that object well, we apply mindfulness as a means to remember it, to constantly bring that object to mind. The meditation technique requires us to eventually be able to develop a single-pointed focus on the chosen object; this means a mind that is not distracted by other things but maintains a complete awareness and focus on the chosen object.

Thus, constantly remembering the object is applying mindfulness. Introspection, on the other hand, is another state of mind: a state of mind that is a vigilant and that periodically checks whether we are focused on the object or not. It is a separate state of mind, a sort of subtle background investigation of whether we are maintaining our focus on the object or not. If we notice that our mind has become distracted and has wavered off the object, we bring our focus back to it. So the function of introspection is to be aware of distractedness and bring the mind back to the object. If the mind is already settled and focused on the object, one does not need to do anything more, just leave it like it is. To give an example, if there is any danger of a thief coming to steal our possessions from our

house, we will have to always be vigilant and look at the security of the house from every angle so the thief isn't able to enter. Introspection is similar: in order to protect oneself from the thief [i.e. the distractions], one has to maintain a constant vigilance and ensure the thief doesn't get inside. This is how we apply introspection in protecting the mind from wavering and allowing distractions to enter.

While these are the two conducive factors or tools for developing meditation, the two opposing or obstructing conditions for our meditation are laxity and excitement. Laxity is a state of mind where the sharpness of our focus starts to wane and the mind becomes dull; then it goes into a type of sleep mode. Even at a subtle level, when the mind starts to become dull and the object is not very clear, laxity is occurring. So we need to protect our mind from becoming lax. At the other end of the spectrum is an excited mind. Excitement arises when the mind starts to waver and goes off in another direction, rather than maintaining the focus on the object.

While we become familiar with applying the two tools of mindfulness and introspection during our meditation practice as a means to maintain our focus on our chosen meditation object, we can also use these tools after we come out of our meditation session, when we are out and about in our normal daily life. In fact, this is where it becomes crucial to have mindfulness and introspection. If we use mindfulness and introspection to check how one is conducting oneself through one's actions of body, speech and mind, we can ensure that our behaviour is positive. This is most important for our wellbeing. When our meditation practice helps us be mindful and vigilant of our activities of body, speech and mind in our daily life, that is when real transformation starts to take place. Our usual behaviour starts to become more positive. That is the real benefit to derive from meditation practice.

When we begin to understand these tools of mindfulness and introspection, we can see how these essential tools for staying focused in our meditation practice also benefit one outside of the meditation session, in our daily life; our acquaintance with applying mindfulness and introspection becomes essential for us to ensure we are engaging in positive conduct at all times. This is how we can see the real benefit of this practice.

So having mentioned all of that, now we can spend some time for meditation. Let us begin to readjust our physical posture into a relaxed and upright position. While ensuring that we have a comfortable, relaxed posture, we need to also check that we have a positive state of mind in doing meditation practice by generating a positive intention for doing the practice. From within this conducive physical posture and positive state of mind, we adopt the meditation technique as mentioned previously—applying mindfulness to the object on which we have chosen to focus, which here is our own breath. Of course, if you are familiar with other positive objects, you can choose any object that you are familiar with.

When we use our natural in and out breath as the object, we just imagine seeing the breath coming in and going out. We then place our full awareness on that [mental image of the] breath, making a commitment not to allow

the mind to go after any other kind of thoughts that may arise but rather keeping our full attention and focus on the breath itself: this is the application of mindfulness. Then we constantly maintain that awareness constantly, making sure we are completely focused on the breath. That single-pointed focus on the meditation object is called single-pointed concentration: in simple terms, it is maintaining complete awareness of that chosen object and nothing else. This is how we train our mind to develop a profound concentration. So, for the next few minutes, we will bring our full attention just to the breath and maintain our full awareness on that. *[Pause for meditation]*

While maintaining a focused mind and keeping our physical posture in this natural state, we can now shift our attention and focus to the sound of a mantra we will recite, which is the name of Buddha Shakyamuni. As we hear this recitation, we can now try to keep our focus on the sound that we hear and maintain awareness of that sound. Then, when the recitation subsides, focus on the absence of that sound and just maintain that awareness for a few moments. In this way, we will spend the next few minutes again in meditation.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

*Transcribed by Su Lan Foo
Edit 1 by Mary-Lou Considine
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
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