

Training like an Adult

October 1, 2007

Training the mind is like training yourself to master a sport. Part of the training is focused on the practice sessions, i.e., what you're doing right here as you're meditating, as you're here doing walking meditation, the skills you want to work on, because we are working on skills.

A while back, I was talking to a group of meditators from a different tradition, pointing out the connection between the teachings on karma and the practice of meditation, emphasizing that the Buddha's teachings on karma are centered on this issue of skill, which is why they're directly connected to the practice of meditation. They looked at me with blank looks, and later told me that the kind of meditation they had been taught was that there is no such thing as good meditation or bad meditation, that you just allow yourself to be with whatever is there. So we had to back up. We talked about the whole issue of developing the path. You try to develop right view, right resolve, all the way down to right concentration. There's right concentration and wrong concentration, just as there are right view and wrong view, right mindfulness and wrong mindfulness. The *right* and *wrong* here are defined specifically by what works and what doesn't.

So when you're meditating, certain things will work and other things won't. You want to find out how to bring the mind to stillness where there's a sense of ease in the stillness. The effort to train is not all sweating and forcing yourself, wearing yourself out. It's learning how to train in a way that actually increases your energy, increases your strength.

This is why we work on concentration, learning how to bring the mind to stillness. A large part of that is learning how to talk to yourself as you meditate: when things are going well, how to encourage yourself; when things are not going well, how to encourage yourself, pointing out the fact that things are not going well but at the same time not in a way that gets you down. When you're encouraging yourself that things are going well, you have to learn how not to get complacent. This is important, because the attitude you bring to the meditation has to be one of simple pragmatism: what's working, what's not. When things don't work, you've got to strengthen yourself to find the resolve and the ingenuity to figure out other ways that might work.

This connects with the other part of the training. Just as athletes are training not only during their practice sessions, but also in terms of what they eat, whether or not they smoke or drink, in whatever else goes on outside, in the same way, the

life of your mind outside of your formal meditations is an important part of the training as well.

The Buddha talks about contentment, being content with little, and about restraint of the senses, because this is how the mind feeds in the course of the day: It feeds on sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas. When he talks about restraint, he's putting a curb on the mind's feeding habits. And of course, the mind is bound to resist. Right here is a good place to learn how to talk to yourself: when the mind is resisting a training. You can treat the mind like a child, give it rewards when it's doing well, punishing it when it's not doing well, or you can treat it like an adult, simply pointing out results of what you're doing: Is this what you really want?

Treating it like a child leaves it as a child. Occasionally, there are times when you do have to give rewards, do have to mete out punishment of one kind or another, but that can't be your only approach, because it keeps the mind as a child. Praise and blame, as we all know from when we were children, often get meted out in an unfair way: sometimes too much praise, sometimes too much blame. We've experienced that with our parents, and it's amazing how the mind just picks up from where our parents left off.

What you've got to learn is how to watch what you're doing and evaluate the results. When you look at something in a certain way, what are the results? And look at *why* you're looking at it that way. If you're looking at it for the sake of attachment, for the sake feeding your anger, exactly how you are feeding? What nourishment do you get out of looking at it that way? And what are the drawbacks? The same way with how you listen, and a lot of this applies to how you think. What thoughts does the mind like to feed on? What nourishment does it get out of them?

Even the thoughts we don't like to think keep coming back, coming back, which means that there is part of the mind that really likes the process, finds some satisfaction, finds some gratification in that thinking. You've got to look into why, what is this, and then look at the drawbacks.

In other words, instead of treating the mind like a child, you treat it like an adult who's trying to learn a skill. You simply point out: "Okay, this is working; this is not working. This is worth it; this is not worth it." When you train the mind to feed in this way outside, then when the time comes to meditate, again, the dynamic in the mind is more of an adult dynamic. You don't beat the child down when it's not doing well, saying "My gosh, you're hopeless. You're never going to get anything right." That kind of attitude closes off all the doors. Or if you praise it by saying, "You're a rock star, you're better than the other kids in the

class,” the Buddha doesn’t encourage that type of thinking at all. We’re not here to compete with one another. We’re trying to compete with our old selves. If there’s any competition at all, that’s where the competition has to be.

We’re not here to please anybody. In all my years with Ajaan Fuang, I never heard of him praise me to my face. I found out later he had been saying nice things behind my back sometimes, but never to my face. He didn’t want to encourage me in the idea that I was doing anything in the practice to please him. When he closed off that door, what was left of me? Just the fact, “Well is it working? Is it not?”

In other words, he was forcing me to grow up. As meditators, it’s good for us to grow up as well. We’re doing this because we suffer and we’ve found the path that helps put an end to that suffering. That in and of itself should be reward enough. We don’t have to compare ourselves with other people.

The Buddha talks about what he calls the person with no integrity, who compares himself, saying, “My jhāna is better than their jhāna, I’ve attained this; those other people haven’t attained this level.” Instead, the Buddha says, we should remind ourselves of what he calls non-fashioning even with regard to these skills. In other words, we’re not trying to make a self or create a self around our virtue, around our restraint, around our renunciation, around our concentration, or around our wisdom. We’re doing these things because they work.

So learn how to look at what you’re doing, learn how to read the results of what you’re doing, starting from the outside on in. This way, you have a complete training: the training you do while you’re here in your practice sessions, and the training when you’re out living the rest of your life. They all come together. They all train us to be adults, to learn to look at the mind and deal with the mind simply in terms of what’s working, what’s not working in putting an end to suffering, giving rise to the path that’s right—not because somebody said so, but simply because it really does work. That’s how we master the skill. We master it as adults.

So try to keep this perspective in mind.