

Why We Train the Mind

May 9, 2009

Two of the chants we chanted just now, taken together, explain why we practice: the one talking about how the world is swept away, things don't endure, offers no shelter, and then, "May I be happy," in the midst of all of that uncertainty, all of that danger, the danger of our own craving, the danger of looking for happiness in things that slip away. This is why we turn around and look at the mind, because this is where there's hope for something solid and sure.

Of course, when you first look at your mind, there's nothing much solid or sure about it. You make up your mind to do one thing, and five seconds later you've changed your mind and are doing something else. As the Buddha once said, there's no simile to compare with how fast the mind can change—and the Buddha was a master of similes. Even the twinkling of an eye is slower than the way the mind can change.

But it can be trained. That's the important point.

When you've reached the point where you see how doomed to failure the quest for happiness outside is going to be, that's when you can put energy into practice.

There's a passage where the Buddha says that conviction in the practice is conditioned by suffering. You see that things are really bad. He doesn't say that all life is suffering. That's a misrepresentation of what he had to say. But there is suffering in life. And most of the things that we really pin our hopes on tend to fall apart very easily. When you've had enough of that, you say, "Maybe there's another way out, another way to happiness." You start looking inside, looking into this practice of training the mind through generosity, through virtue, through meditation.

You see that you really can change the direction of the mind to look for happiness in new places, to look for happiness in new ways—like we're doing right now, focusing on the breath, getting the mind to stay in the present moment, so that we have a good solid place to look at its thoughts, or a good solid place to look at whatever arises at the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind.

Cultivate this sense of being very steadily aware, mindful, alert, and ardent. Those are the three qualities you work on when training the mind. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind, as when you keep the breath in mind. Alertness is watching what's happening with the breath. When it comes in, where do you feel it? When it goes out, where do you feel it? In what ways is it

comfortable? In what ways is it not? What can you do to change it? That's a quality called evaluation: taking stock of the breath and exploring the potentials that the breath energy has. This flow of energy in the body: It's not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's the flow of energy as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Where does it feel good? Focus on that and see if you can stay there.

Ardency is what helps keep you there. Ardency is another term for right effort. Right effort has many aspects. As the Buddha said, it starts by generating desire to do away with unskillful mental qualities and generating desire to develop skillful ones. The quality of desire there is important, and there are lots of different ways you can fire that desire. One is looking at the drawbacks of not having a concentrated mind, of not being mindful, of not being alert. As the Buddha said, we're a slave to craving, and craving is a huge blind monster that thrashes around. When we're a slave to craving, we get pulled along wherever the craving goes, as it fastens on this object as being desirable, that object as being disagreeable. There's usually very little rhyme or reason in those choices. It's just likes and dislikes, and it doesn't want to be questioned about why.

So sometimes focusing on the drawbacks of an unfocused or uncentered mind can give rise to the desire to put more energy into the practice. Sometimes you need a more positive motivation, as when you see the good that can come from a centered mind, the good that can come from a mind that develops discernment. But this is an important part of developing right effort: this ability to generate the desire.

This ties in with two emotions that should be central to the practice. The first is *samvega*, a feeling of urgency, realizing that there are dangers in the mind that you've got to learn how to overcome, and if you don't, you're putting yourself to all sorts of trouble. And it's not just you. Look all around you. Everybody who hasn't trained his or her mind is in the same boat. And it's scary. The word *samvega* is related to the word terror, a strong sense of how dangerous things really are.

But then it's coupled with *pasada*, a sense of confidence that there is a way out and you can manage it. *Samvega* on its own turns into depression very easily, into negative mind-states. *Pasada* on its own tends to be complacent. But if you put the two of them together, they can keep you on the path. That's one element of right effort, generating desire.

Then you have to figure out exactly what effort is required right now. Right effort is not just letting go; it's not just any one thing. There are lots of different kinds of right effort. There's the effort to develop, as when you develop more mindfulness, develop more concentration. There's the effort to let go of unskillful

qualities in the mind. There's the effort to prevent unskillful things from arising in the mind. For example, you know that you're going to be in a situation where you tend to be angry or you tend to lose it, so you prepare yourself, learn how to think in advance so that you don't lose it.

Thinking is a central part of the practice. You don't just sit here and go: "note, note, note," or "accept, accept," or "just be in the present moment." Sometimes you actually have to plan ahead. Learning how to figure out what is the appropriate kind of effort right now: This is where discernment forms an essential part of right effort.

As the Buddha noted, there are some problems in the mind that go away when you simply watch them with equanimity. Other times, you have to fabricate, as he says, an effort, or fabricate an intention to do away with them, or to develop whatever is needed.

So that's the second part of right effort: figuring out exactly what kind of effort is needed right now. For example, with the four noble truths, you want to comprehend suffering, which means watching it to develop a sense of dispassion for whatever is causing it. When you see what's causing it, then you let the cause go. You develop the factors of the path and ultimately you want to realize the end of suffering. So there are different duties and different approaches that can be appropriate at any one time. Try to figure out what's appropriate right now. That's an important part of the practice.

Then, of course, there's the *amount* of effort you want to put in. Sometimes it's very delicate, very precise. Other times, it requires using a lot of strength. You've probably heard the story of a young monk named Sona, who was very delicately brought up. He was practicing very hard, doing walking meditation till the soles of his feet split and were bleeding all over the place. He got discouraged. He said to himself, "I've put in all this effort and yet I still haven't received any results. Maybe I should disrobe and just make merit as a lay person."

The Buddha read his mind, appeared right in front of him, and asked him, "Are you planning to disrobe?" He replied, "Yes, sir, I was thinking about it." The Buddha asked him, "When you were a layman, you played the lute, right? What happened when the string was too loose?" The sound wasn't good. "How about when it is too tight?" The sound wasn't good. It had to be just right. "In the same way, the Buddha said, you take the five faculties in the mind and you tune your level of energy first."

It's like tuning five strings on a guitar. First you tune one string and then, once that string is tuned, you tune the other ones to it. In this case, you tune the level of energy that you can put in, and then you tune the level of your conviction, your

mindfulness, your concentration and discernment around that. That's how you practice.

In other words, you look at how much you can put it, and make sure that your conviction is proportionate to that. Somedays you'd like to have awakening at the end of the meditation session but your energy just isn't enough to get you there. So you've got to tune the level of your conviction, tune the level of your mindfulness to what you *can* do.

As time develops, you find that you can start putting more energy in. So you ramp up the conviction, you ramp up all the other factors. Then there are times when there's going to be setbacks. So you tune them back.

So right effort doesn't mean just a middling effort, it means appropriate effort, appropriate to what you can handle—and appropriate to the task.

As I said earlier, as the Buddha pointed out, there are some problems in the mind and all you have to do is to look at them and they go away.

Others require a lot of effort. You have to work with what are called different kinds of fabrications. There's bodily fabrication, which is the breath; verbal fabrication, directed thought and evaluation, in other words, how you narrate and analyze the problem to yourself. Then there's mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions. "Feeling" here doesn't mean emotion. It means the feeling tone that you focus on with regard to that issue—pleasant, painful, or neither. Perceptions are the mental labels or images that surround an issue—for example, the way you perceive the breath and how it relates to a particular unskillful emotion.

If anger comes up, ask yourself: "How am I breathing in response to that anger?" You can weaken the anger by the way you breathe, so that it doesn't have such a stronghold of the body. Anger can feel overwhelming because the way you breathe has set off different hormones in the body, making the anger seem stronger and longer-lasting than it actually is. So you bring your perception of the breath into consideration, and you also look at your perceptions of the situation. If you see yourself as a judge sitting on a bench, passing judgment on the people below you, that can actually increase the level of your sense of righteous indignation. The Buddha recommends that when you see someone you're angry about, they've done something that angers you, think of yourself as a person walking across the desert. You're not a judge sitting in the comfort of a bench. You're walking across a desert: tired, hot, thirsty, trembling. You come across a little bit of water in the footprint of a cow. So you do what you can to get that water, even it means squatting down and slurping it up.

In other words, you don't think of your pride. You don't think of what other people are going to think. You realize that you need the water of other people's

goodness, even people who've angered you, if you're going to maintain your goodness. That's an important perception to keep in mind.

So these are the different kinds of fabrications that you can bring to a particular unskillful emotion: the way you breathe, the way you narrate and analyze the issue to yourself, and the perceptions you hold in mind.

These are the different facets of right effort: generating the desire to do the skillful thing; figuring out what the skillful thing is and how much energy you have to apply to it, or how much energy is needed if you're going to get results. That's when your practice has a chance to succeed. The mind can be trained this way. And when the mind is trained, the Buddha said, it brings happiness.

One of the interesting things about the Buddha's teachings is that a lot of the central terms are not defined. He never defines the mind; he never defines happiness. Even with stress and suffering, he just gives examples, but he doesn't define what it is. He's teaching us a skill. It's not just a body of knowledge to be memorized or system of thought to be talked about.

In the old days, they talked about two kinds of knowledge: scribe knowledge and warrior knowledge. Scribes liked to have things defined. They wanted the kind of knowledge they could write down in words. Warriors needed skills. They had to master archery. They had to master horse-riding, all kinds of different things. In that case, mastery doesn't depend so much on definitions as it does on getting a feel for things. And as with any skill, the more you master the skill, the more your sense of the different elements of the skill begins to grow and develop. So you don't want to hem it in or confine it by set definitions.

In the same way, as you follow the Buddha's training, your sense of your mind begins to change as you train it. Your sense of happiness begins to change as you get more and more adept at finding a happiness that's more refined, more reliable. Your sense of stress and suffering gets more and more refined as well.

Even in deep stages of concentration, you began to realize there's stress. As the Buddha said, when you get into a deep level of jhana and you've mastered it, you begin to look to see what in this state of jhana, in terms of the five aggregates, is still stressful, inconstant, empty? That way, you'll be able to get rid of your attachments and find a happiness that doesn't have to latch on to anything at all.

So your sense of your mind expands. Your sense of happiness expands. Your sense of stress gets more and more subtle, which is why the Buddha doesn't define these terms. He wants you to find out about them on your own.

You train your mind for happiness. And what it means to train the mind and what that happiness is going to be, you can find out only by doing the training. But the suffering you already know, at least the grosser forms: That's what gives a

large part of the impetus to getting started on the training and sticking with it, seeing it through to the end.