

## *Even Animals Can Be Trained*

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There's a passage in the Canon where a nun comes out of the forest, having spent the day trying to meditate. She sees an elephant, and the elephant has a trainer. The trainer says to the elephant, "Give me your foot." The elephant takes his right foot, curls it over to his left side, and turns the bottom of the foot up, so that the trainer can use that as a step up onto the elephant's neck. The nun reflects, "Even animals can be trained. Why can't I train my mind?" And with that thought, her mind became still.

This is a theme you see throughout the Canon. The Buddha talks about trained animals—trained horses, trained elephants—as images for what we're doing as we practice, especially as we're practicing concentration. A trained horse. It's well bred, so it's beautiful, but it's also fast and strong. The beauty represents the beauty of a monk's virtue. The strength represents the right effort that's needed for concentration. And the speed represents discernment. You have to remember that we're trying to get the mind to settle down, and it requires some discernment in order to get it settled down right, because you're trying to keep the mind in a certain limited range: just the body sitting here, the breath coming in, going out. You're also trying to make sure that your thoughts don't go running out any more than a few inches outside the skin. In other words, you're trying to stay here with the energy body and you're putting aside a lot of other thoughts. This requires more than force of will. It also requires discernment.

Sometimes the mind will rebel. Here again, the Buddha uses the image of an elephant. You take a wild elephant out of the forest. You have to tie it to a stake. The elephant, of course, is going to resist. So you do what you can to make the elephant happy to be there by the stake. You give it good food. In those days, they would actually play the flute and sing to the elephant to try to get the elephant in the right mood. When the elephant would finally accept the food, that's when the trainer would know, "Okay, the elephant's going to survive. It's going to be able to learn the training."

It's the same with the mind: When you can find a sense of pleasure with the breath, then you can be trained. Try to forget about all the other pleasures you're not engaged in, because as the Buddha said, when you're getting the mind into right concentration, you have to keep the mind secluded from sensuality. This doesn't mean that you deny it pleasure. We have the pleasure of sitting out in a quiet spot. There's the sound of the crickets in the background. It's pleasant. No,

“sensuality” here means your thoughts about sensual pleasures, planning for sensual pleasures, wanting to see sights like this, hear sounds like that, taste flavors like this, thinking about the food you may want to eat. Try to put all those issues aside. They’re off territory.

Think about the Buddha’s definition of right mindfulness, which is basically his set of instructions on how to get the mind into right concentration. You focus on the body in and of itself, and you put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Any thoughts about the world—what you want out of the world, how you’re upset about the state of the world right now: You’ve got to put those aside. He also says you have to keep the mind in its proper territory: the body in and of itself—in other words, how you’re experiencing the body directly right now. If your thoughts wander away to things outside, he says it’s like a monkey wandering into an area where human beings have set traps. You’re bound to get caught in the trap.

So you stay here. Of course, the mind will want to find pleasure someplace. You can’t deny it that. The Buddha discovered that himself. He’d gone through six years of austerities, trying to deny himself every sort of pleasure, finally realizing that, literally, he was going to die if he kept that up. Then he thought of a time when he was younger and had spontaneously entered the first jhāna—with a sense of refreshment and pleasure that had nothing to do with sensuality at all.

Something inside him said that this is the path. It was only one factor out of the eight that form the path, but it was the beginning for getting on the right path.

So the grass and other food that you offer to the elephant correspond to the sense of well-being that you get as you stay with the breath—which means that you should focus on what kind of breathing feels good right now. You can experiment with longer breathing, shorter breathing, faster, slower, heavier, lighter, deeper, more shallow. Try to see what rhythm and texture of the breathing feels good. Some places will tell you that a good rhythm to start out with is about 5-6 seconds in-breath, 5-6 seconds out-breath. Try that for a while and see how it feels.

And think of the breathing as a whole body process. When the Buddha talks about the breath, he doesn’t list it as a tactile sensation. He lists it as one of the one of the properties in the body itself. And these properties, he says, can extend throughout the body. In this case, the in-and-out breath is one part of the wind property, which is basically the energy flow in the body.

Think about it. The air comes in and out, and there’s a tactile sensation as the air passes into the nose, down into the lungs. But it’s the energy flow in the body

that allows the air to come in, go out: That's what you want to focus on. You might ask yourself, when the impulse to breathe in starts, where does it start? And you may notice that it starts several places all at once. Well, choose whichever of those spots that seems easiest to stay focused on. Then think of the energy flowing smoothly out from that spot, so that there's no obstacle, nothing getting in the way.

And try to notice where in the body you're especially sensitive to the flow of the energy. For some people, it's right around the heart. For other people, it's near the stomach. For other people, it's in the throat—whatever spot feels really good when you breathe in right. Try to satisfy that part of the body. When that gets satisfied, you get more and more interested in the breath, because the sense of pleasure really does go to the heart. It feels really good having a nice energy flow in that part of the body. You're trying to get the mind to settle down, just as you're trying to get that wild elephant to be happy to stay in the city, where it can be trained. Here you're feeding it grass and water so that it'll be happy to stay here.

There's another passage in the Canon that tells of an elephant trainer who came to see the Buddha one time. He commented that elephants are plain enough. It doesn't take too many hours to figure out all the different ways in which an elephant might be tricky. But a human being? The human being, he says, is a tangle.

Which is one of the reasons why it's so much more difficult to train the mind than it is to train an animal. But the basic principles are still the same. Give the mind something it likes so that it will stay here, because it's when it's staying here that you can observe it. And observing it, you can begin to do something about the problems it creates.

People have noticed something interesting about the way the Buddha organizes his teachings. He's got the four noble truths, and one of the truths is the truth of the path: the noble eightfold path. But then you look at the noble eightfold path and one of the eight factors in the path is the four noble truths, under right view.

Which means that those two teachings contain each other. And the fact that they contain each other has a message. When you see the path as part of the four noble truths, you realize what it's for. It's for the sake of ending suffering. And it's meant to do that by attacking the cause. So as we get the mind into concentration, we're not here just to enjoy the food and the water. We get the mind to settle down so that we can begin to see: What is it doing that's causing suffering? In particular, what kind of cravings is it engaging in that lead to suffering? It's the cravings that we're going to have to attack. You can't attack suffering straight on.

You have to attack the problem at the cause. Otherwise, it's like having a boat that's full of water, and you just keep bailing the water out, bailing the water out, without fixing the leak. It'll still be full of water. But if you can find the leak, then you can stop the leak. Then you can remove the remaining water, and there you are: The boat is fixed.

Or like going into your house, seeing that it's full of smoke. If you just try to put out the smoke without finding the fire, you can get rid of smoke, get rid of smoke, but it keeps on coming and coming, coming. You've got to find the cause. You locate the fire and put it out, and the smoke will dissipate on its own.

So we're getting the mind into concentration so that we can understand craving and abandon it. That's the lesson we learn by putting the noble eightfold path in the context of the four noble truths.

But when we put the four noble truths in the context of the noble eightfold path, that's to remind us that we've studied these truths, we've learned about these truths, not for their own sake. They're supposed to serve a purpose: putting an end to suffering through putting an end to craving. When they've served the purpose, then we're going to set them aside.

The Buddha's image is of taking a raft across the river. You're on this side of the river where he says you've got the dangers of your attachment to the aggregates and sense media: the way you identify things on this side of the river as your self. And then they turn on you.

But then there's the other side of the river, where you're safe. There's no nibbana raft or nibbana yacht to come and pick you up to take you there. You have to make a raft out of things you can find on this side of the river—the twigs and branches, which stand for the aggregates—and you hold on to the raft as you paddle your way across. Then, when you get the other side, you put it aside. That means putting *all* the factors of the path aside, including right view. We're going to be moving beyond right view to an actual experience where there is no suffering. That's where we're headed.

But in the meantime, how are you going to get there? Right view is made up of perceptions and thought fabrications. Right concentration is made up of all five of the aggregates: form, feeling, perceptions, thought fabrications, and consciousness. But these are things eventually you're going to have to go beyond. You'll have to learn how to stop clinging to them, but first you have to cling to them in a way that gets you across.

In this way, you're taking the ordinary, everyday functions in the mind, where it has feelings and perceptions—the labels you put on things—thought constructs or thought fabrications, where you put thoughts together, and your

consciousness, which is aware of all these things. These are things that you're engaged in all day long. But now you're trying to make something special out of them. You're turning them into a path. This includes all your views and resolves, and all the activities of the mind. Think of them as a path, taking you someplace—a raft taking you across the river.

So when you hear people say that the Dhamma is all about letting go, yes, it's about letting go, but there're certain things you've got to hold on to, in order to let go properly. If you let go in the middle of the river, you get swept away. If you let go and you're still on this side of the river, you never get anywhere at all. So there are things you have to hold on to, knowing that someday, when you get to the other side of the river, you put the raft aside. But for right now, you hold on to the breath. You hold on to your ability to get the mind into concentration, because this is the only way to get across.

This is why we train the mind to begin with. As the Buddha said, the untrained mind is resistant. You try to get it to do the things you want it to do, and it'll do something else. But when you realize that you're causing yourself suffering, that's when you begin to be more willing to listen to the Dhamma, and the mind gets a little bit more pliant, so that you can train it. As you get the mind deeper and deeper into concentration, you get more sensitive to what the mind is doing. Your standards for what counts as well-being, what counts as good food for the mind, get raised. You used to feed off of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations. Now you're feeding off of the refreshment and pleasure of right concentration. You're raising your standards for what you'll take as food. That makes the mind even more pliant, more amenable to training.

After all, who's doing the training? The Buddha gives you instructions, telling you that this is how you do it, but you've got to do it yourself. So you have to be willing both to be trained and to do the training. This is where it's different from training an elephant or training a horse. In those cases, the person who's the trainer and the animal being trained are separate beings. Here it's your same mind doing the training and being trained. Which can create difficulties, but it can be done.

That's the whole message of the Buddha's teachings. We can train the mind to a point where it no longer creates any suffering. Other people have done this and they're reliable people. You can tell yourself: If they can do it, you can do it, too.