The Benefits of Mental Training

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The mind is the most important thing we have, because it’s what shapes our lives, our intentions. Every intention in the present moment is a factor that shapes our lives, and our intentions, in turn, are shaped by our attention. The way we look at our perceptions, the kind of questions we ask about them, and the views we make up out of them. This is what shapes our experience. And because it’s such an important factor, we really ought to take good care of it. And yet, for the most part, we don’t. We turn the mind into a slave to other things—a slave to desires, a slave to anger, a slave to greed, anger, and delusion. It’s because we’ve realized the importance of the mind that we’ve come out here to train it. In order to shape those factors and train them in the right direction, direct them where we really want them to go. A lot of this is based on realizing the importance of training the mind and how careful you have to be. Sometimes the slightest slip-up can get the mind off on the wrong track for a long time. But there’s always a possibility for coming back, bringing the mind back in line, bringing it back onto the track that you want it to go. And when you have slip-ups in your practice, it makes you all the more appreciative of how important it is to keep constant watch over the mind. This is why mindfulness is so important. Mindfulness is what keeps watch. It comes together with alertness—remembering where you want the mind to go and then actually making sure that it goes there. But for it to really settle, it requires concentration. So you focus it on one spot. Concentration is an aspect of the path that often gets overlooked. Everyone says, “Well, let’s do the concentration and then get on with more important things, with higher things.” But it doesn’t work that way at all. If we get the mind concentrated, it requires insight, it requires mindfulness. The longer and more solid your concentration, the more you can practice concentration in any circumstances. It requires a lot of mindfulness, it requires a lot of discernment, to see exactly what it is that sets the mind off, to see what it is that needs to be done in order to protect it. Fortunately, we’re in a place where there’s not that much disturbance. But even so, there still are some disturbances that can’t be avoided. When there is a disturbance, either from other people or just from sounds outside, or whatever the issue, you’ve got to look and see, “Well, what is knocking the mind off balance? What’s keeping it from getting concentrated?” All too often, we blame the thing outside. But it’s often because we don’t understand our reaction to that thing, what we’re doing to that particular input. That’s why we focus on the outside. We should focus more on the inside. John Chah has a nice comment. He says, “When sounds come and bother you in the meditation, realize the sounds aren’t bothering you. You’re bothering the sounds.” In other words, you’re resisting them. You’re making up a commentary about them. You’re getting all tied up in that particular sound. When the sound isn’t doing anything at all, it’s just striking your ears and then going away, there’s no reason why it has to come. It’s the mind that goes out to deal with the sound. That’s the problem. When you see that, okay, you’ve gained an insight into the mind. Then you use your ingenuity to figure out ways so that it doesn’t have to happen again. That’s where the practice of concentration really does lead immediately to discernment. Because if you weren’t trying to keep the mind concentrated, at that time, it was just going to follow the drift or whatever came along. You wouldn’t learn anything. But it’s when you’ve got something that you want in the mind and you’re working to maintain it, then you’re very sensitive to whatever comes along and touches that state of concentration. So it’s important that you try to maintain mindfulness, try to maintain at least some measure of stability throughout the day. That’s how concentration turns into discernment, how it turns into insight. Seeing what’s going to come along and shake it up, what’s going to come along and create waves. So when things are really quiet, try to get the mind as centered as possible, at the same time being mindful and alert. And then when circumstances aren’t so optimal, okay, just watch the mind and see what happens. Why does that state of mind have to be affected by what people say, what people do, what you do? You’ll notice that some of your own actions are the big culprits, starting with physical actions you do and then things you say and then the things you think. As you get closer and closer into the mind, things get more and more subtle. But it can be detected when the mind is still. And you’re determined to keep it still. Often we overlook the function of determination in the practice. We’re told, “If you try too hard, it’s going to get in the way.” Well, that’s true. But exactly how hard is too hard? And what kind of effort is misdirected? This is what you have to look into. The effort to keep the mind centered and still in all situations. That’s not excessive effort. Try to keep it centered. And if it doesn’t get centered, okay, watch. See what’s disturbing it. And again, look for the disturbance coming from within. Those are the disturbances you can do something about. Instead of thinking, “Well, I wish I were someplace else where it was even quieter and more disturbance-free than where I am right now.” That in and of itself is a disturbance, shaking up the stability of your mind. You say, “Well, here I am. This is where I am. This is where my mind is going to be. And even though it may not be ideal, still I can work with it.” When you have that attitude, then you can learn from anything. And you gain some very interesting insights into the way the mind plays tricks with itself, the way it disturbs something. The way it disturbs sounds, the way it disturbs memories, the way it disturbs itself, basically. That’s the big issue in life. Why is it that the mind keeps disturbing itself? You’d think if it really wished itself well, it wouldn’t do that. But there’s a lot of ignorance in the mind, because it’s not looking at itself. It’s looking at things outside. Then a lot of strange things happen in the mind. A lot of unskillful things happen in the mind, because we aren’t really looking at cause and effect within ourselves. So remember, the big issue lies within. All the big issues lie within. When you look for them there, you’ll see them, because they’re right here. It’s only because we hide them. We hide them from ourselves that we don’t see them. Ignorance is an act of ignoring that goes on in the mind. It’s not simply just a big empty space or an absence of knowledge. There’s the intention to ignore certain things and to focus outside. We’ve got to change that. We’ve got to make our intention to focus inside. See what’s going on in the mind. What is the mind doing to disturb itself? Because even when it’s in the most ideal circumstances, it can still disturb itself. All its baggage from home, all its baggage from the past, and then when you sit down to meditate, it opens it up in front of you and pours it out. So here it all is, and you can spend all your time looking over it. So you have to watch out for this, what they call the big culprit, which is the mind’s own way of creating issues for itself that it doesn’t really have to create. It’s making up stories for itself when it doesn’t really have to make up stories or listen to stories. So the practice of the Dhamma means you focus inside. Focus on what’s happening in the mind in every circumstance. That way, everything you do becomes part of the practice of the Dhamma. Even when you’re washing dishes, sweeping up the roads, washing your clothes, whatever, when you keep your focus turned inwards, then it all becomes a practice of the Dhamma. And it makes the training of the mind really possible. Because so much of the time we spend our time hoping to train the rest of the world, “I want this to be this way, I want that to be that way.” We’ve got to learn how to turn around and straighten out this instigator inside. Once that’s straightened out, then you’ve started, you’ve gotten at the beginning point of all things, and everything else will have to fall in line accordingly. Even when things outside don’t fall in line, it’s a result of past karma. But the mind doesn’t have to take the results of past karma and turn them into new bad karma, new unskillful karma. It takes whatever comes and turns it into the Dhamma. And that’s when you see the real benefits of having trained the mind.

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