Training the Trainer

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One of the difficulties in training the mind is that the mind is both the trainer and the trainee. Or to make another comparison, it’s both the doctor and the patient. When anger arises in the mind, it’s the mind that has to conquer the anger. When greed arises, still the mind has to conquer the greed. So you’re pitting one side of the mind against the other. Many times it’s when you least feel like doing the training. It’s when you need it the most. Or when you seem to lack the strength to battle a particular mind state. That’s when you really need to battle it the most. The mind state seems to take over. In other words, the sickness not only keeps you sick but also pushes the doctor out of the room. So you have to keep reminding yourself that no matter what comes into the mind, it doesn’t totally take over. Or at least it doesn’t have to totally take over. Keep in mind the image of the committee. There are lots of people in there. And you have the choice, even if someone’s shouting at the top of their lungs, you don’t have to listen. You don’t have to believe them. You may have to listen, but you don’t have to believe. And you can choose to ignore them. Pretend like you don’t understand English. Pretend like you don’t know the meaning of certain feelings or certain patterns of feelings that you tend to associate with an emotion that you’ve just got to get out of your system. Take an inquisitive stance to these things. When there’s a tight feeling in the middle of your chest and you feel you’ve just got to act it out, ask yourself, “What exactly is this feeling? And why do you have to identify it with anger?” Why do you have to identify it as a feeling that you have to get out of your system? And when you begin to take apart a lot of the mind’s assumptions in this way, you find that those patterns begin to lose their power. But it’s not only when you’re in the thick of things that you have to develop this ability to see through things. This is why we practice meditation all the time, in preparation for the times when it’s difficult. We’ve got to develop habits. The doctor habit has to get strong. The trainer habit has to get strong. And the trainer and the doctor have to be taught to be discerning in how they approach things. In other words, if they’re constantly repressive, then the mind is going to rebel. The trainer in your mind has to be taught to be sensitive and to have a whole toolkit of different approaches for use at different times. Again, it’s just like a doctor. If any doctor knew only one medicine or how to treat only one disease, he would never get certified as a doctor. You have to realize there are lots of different diseases, and even each disease has different ways of being treated, depending on the whole complex of factors. So when we’re meditating, we use the breath as our basic tool. But there are lots of other types of meditation as well that you have to be familiar with, that you have to be practiced in. In the days when the mind doesn’t want to stay with the breath, you can switch over to metta meditation, contemplating the body, contemplating death. Any of the topics for recollection or reflection that are set out in the texts. These are all useful techniques, and they’re all useful tools. And it’s good to have your hand in all of them. So when the time comes when the mind is really abstract-pressing, it just doesn’t want to cooperate at all, you have lots of different ways of probing it and getting at the problem. And when you find a technique that works, you remember it. So although we use the breath as our home base, that’s the technique we want to be most skilled in, because it’s the basic technique. It’s the one that underlies all the rest. But there are times when it seems like you can’t get to that particular medicine. It seems a little bit out of reach. Well, there are other things you can think about, other things you can contemplate, to counteract whatever the obstreperous mind state is. Always keeping in mind that you don’t have to identify with that mind state, no matter how much it’s shouting at you. You don’t have to believe it. You don’t have to say, “Well, this is me.” This is just an event in the mind. And if you have trouble looking at it as an event, then you can argue with it. When it says, “This has to be that way, that has to be this way,” you say, “Oh, well, how about the opposite way?” And if it seems stubborn, well, you can be stubborn, too. Stubborn in not understanding it, stubborn in not giving into it. This is where mindfulness is important, because mindfulness keeps reminding us about the path. We often think of mindfulness as being alert to the present moment, and that’s one of the aspects of mindfulness. But mindfulness is also the ability to remember, to keep things in mind. To remind yourself that you are on a path. The question is, which path are you on? Sometimes the mind, when it’s really resistant, will say, “Well, don’t give me any of that path stuff. I just want to do what I want to do.” Well, what you want to do, that’s a path, too. Ask yourself, “Where is it going?” Many times it’s a path you’ve been down many times before, and you know that goes nowhere good. So always keep this point in mind, that the way we live is a path. And it’s up to you to choose which path you want to follow. Because each time you do an action, it creates this little pathway in your mind. We all know that habitual actions get easier and easier to do as they become more and more habitual. These little neuron pathways are cleared to the point where they become more and more the mind. And for some reason it seems like the mind is really good at clearing unskillful pathways. So we counteract that habit by trying to develop more skillful ones whenever the opportunity arises. This is why we can’t be complacent. There are days when the meditation goes really well and you just kind of let it ride. You’ve got to realize that one of the days when it goes well and those are the days you really have to meditate hard. Because you’ve got that opening to develop those new habits. Of course, the days when it doesn’t go well, those are the days you have to meditate hard, too. At the very least, just fighting off whatever it is that’s getting in the way of your practice. The Jhana Mahābhū used to say, “It’s better to fight and lose than not to fight at all.” Because when you fight and lose, at least you begin to notice, you can analyze, why you lost. And that gives you some ideas for how to fight the next time around and then the next time around. We all want to just win our battles. And if there’s a battle that comes up that we don’t like, that we lose, well, maybe that’s something we just don’t want to deal with. That’s the way we’re trained to be ever since we were little kids. We’re pushed into the areas where we’re already good and told, “Well, you don’t have to worry about the areas where you’re not too good because somebody else can specialize in that.” But in the mind, when you’re dealing with the mind, you’ve got to specialize in everything. You’ve got to learn how to work hard at the things that you are not necessarily good at right from the beginning. For many of us, this is a real problem. We’ve never really had to do this, and so we don’t know how to encourage ourselves, how to put ourselves in the right mind state, the right frame of mind, for developing a skill in an area where we may not be necessarily talented. We like the cloth that comes from success, and so we want the successes that come easy. Sometimes the really meaningful ones are the ones that come hard. So you train yourself in all areas. When I first went to stay with Ajahn Fuang, he said, “Being a meditator means being skilled at everything you do, not just sitting with your eyes closed, but in taking this approach your whole life. How can I deal with this person in a skillful way? How can I deal with that person in a skillful way? How can I deal with this particular task in a skillful way?” You develop the qualities of being observant, and the willingness to learn from your mistakes so that you’re not afraid to take on difficult tasks. You don’t get discouraged when success doesn’t come right away. You learn how to keep plugging away, plugging away. So what this comes down to is, as a meditator, you’ve got to learn both the habits of being a good teacher and the habits of being a good student, the habits of being a good doctor and the habits of being a good patient. Good patients take their medicine. They tell the doctor exactly what’s going on, whether the disease is getting better, whether the disease is getting worse. They try to work on their endurance when the pain gets great, and they’re good in obeying instructions. When the doctor says, “Avoid this kind of food,” they avoid it. As for the doctor, the doctor has to learn not to be discouraged by the conditions of the disease. In the Vinaya, when they talk about being a good person to look after someone who’s ill, they also say that you don’t get disgusted by spittle and urine and excrement. Well, the mind has its spittle and its urine and excrement, too, as we all know. You have to learn how not to get disgusted by these things. Not that you like them, but that you’re still willing to plug away at the practice when it seems that that’s all there is in the mind, is urine and excrement. Remind yourself what it means to be excited by a challenge. When things are difficult in the mind, say, “Ah, here’s a chance to tackle something really big,” and not get upset when the results don’t come immediately. The really good doctors are the ones who like to get engaged with difficult things, things that don’t respond immediately to what they thought was going to work the first time. They find it challenging. They find it exciting. That’s the kind of doctor you have to be with your own mind. So when you learn to be both a good doctor and a bad doctor, and a good patient, you find that there’s nothing that really gets you down. Even when things are difficult, even when things look really tough, you know there must be a way out. Because, after all, there are other people who’ve gone down this path before you, and many of them have had the same problems you have, if not worse problems, and yet they were able to muddle through. Even though none of us like to muddle, we’d rather not look back on our practice and say, “Well, there’s a lot of muddling around.” Well, a lot of times it’s the muddling that allows us to come up with new techniques, new approaches. At the very least, we learn. If something’s not going to work, at least we’ve tried it. We know that it doesn’t work. And so we move on. This is what recollection of the sangha is for. If you’ve never read the Therigatha, the Therigatha, they’re good texts to read, talking about the different monks and nuns who had lots of problems, and their practice, and yet were able to overcome them. There’s a verse about a leper. There’s a verse about an outcast, a woman who was old and feeble, a woman who could hardly walk. Yet their minds never gave up their fighting spirit. There’s one about a blind monk, who apparently the story behind the verse was that he had to depend on other people to show him the way along a road. Yet he realized that the person who was offering to help him was unscrupulous. And so he said, “Okay, I’ll go alone, even if it means crawling.” But he won’t give in to the demands of unscrupulous companions. You’ve got to have that kind of fighting spirit. That’s what makes good doctors. It makes good patients. It makes good meditators. Even if you get knocked down, you do your best to get up as quickly as you can. And if it takes long to get back up, well, you still get back up. That’s your determination. John Munwin said, “The one thing you really have to preserve as a meditator more than anything else is your determination not to keep losing, losing, losing all the time.” Even if you lose out now, you determine, “I’m not going to lose out again.” There will have to come some day when you win. There will have to come some day when the mind is totally free from disease. And that’s the point where both the doctor and the patient can put down their burdens.

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