Higher Training, The

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The practice can be analyzed into three kinds of training. The formal terms are training in heightened virtue, training in the heightened mind, and training in heightened discernment. So it’s not just an ordinary training. It’s a heightened training. Because we all have virtue. We all have good states of mind from time to time. We all have discernment from time to time. The trick is to raise them up to a higher level. And when they get raised to a higher level, we find ourselves more and more sensitive to what we’re doing. You might call it sensitivity training, but it’s a different kind of sensitivity. It’s being sensitive to your actions. This is why we have the precepts. If you didn’t have precepts to run up against, you’d find your actions just going with the flow. Whatever you felt like doing, whatever you felt like saying, just go ahead and do it and say it without too much thought, aside from what you can get away with or what’s acceptable in your particular circle of friends. But when you’re given standards to apply from the inside, watch for your actions. Make sure you don’t go against the precepts. And the hardest precepts, of course, are the ones that deal with speaking. Not lying, not being abusive in our speech, not being divisive in our speech. And the hardest of all is not engaging in idle chatter. When you have these standards against which to measure yourself, you start seeing yourself more clearly. The temptations to act in ways or speak in ways that go against the precepts suddenly run up against this wall. Or you can compare them to a mirror. You suddenly see yourself much more clearly than you did before. Or you can make a comparison with a dam built across a river. Often we don’t know how strong a particular river is until we try to put a dam across it. And you suddenly see that some of those deep currents down the bottom of the river are a lot stronger than you might have imagined. You wouldn’t have known that unless you had the dam. You could have looked at the surface of the river and it might have seemed placid. But when you put the dam in, you find it getting washed out. You realize there’s something a lot stronger going on there than you’d imagine. This makes you sensitive to what’s going on in the mind. And to levels that you might have missed before. So practicing the precepts is a form of sensitivity training. Developing concentration is even more so. When they talk about the heightened mind, what they’re talking about is raising the mind to states of heightened concentration, or developing what they call an enlarged mind, when your awareness is still but fills the whole body, focused but enlarged. To get here, you really have to be sensitive to what’s going on in your mind, sensitive to the breath, sensitive to the movements of your mind, how the movements of your mind affect the breath, how the movements of the breath affect your mind, what you can do to improve things, and how you can develop your standards of what’s an acceptable way of dealing with your mind. In other words, on the one hand, you get more sensitive to what you’re doing, but on the other hand, you also have higher standards as you get more sensitive to very subtle levels of stress, subtle levels of unskillfulness that would have gone right past you if you were just thinking in terms of the precepts. But when you’re suddenly thinking in terms of keeping your mind solidly with the breath for long periods of time, you start seeing these other movements as well. And you have to figure out ways to deal with them. After all, what is the purpose of developing sensitivity if it’s not to pick up on problems that you might have missed before, and also to come up with solutions you might have missed as well, and then judge the results of your solutions, see if they’re good enough. This is where you have to become your own teacher. You have to become your own mainstay. Many of the times, when we’d like to have clear-cut instructions in the meditation, we just do X, Y, Z, and the results come out this, this, and that. It’s a sign that you’ve done it right. And then you say, “Well, what if this happens?” And you want to hear the answer, “Well, then do this.” And, “What if that happens?” Well, you do that, and you go armed in the meditation with these answers. But they may not be the answer. They may not teach you sensitivity. They may not teach you ingenuity. As many, many ajahns in the forest traditions say, if you get used to having all these answers handed to you on a platter, you never develop your own discernment. You never develop your own sensitivity as to what works and what doesn’t work. And if you don’t develop your own sensitivity, how are you going to develop discernment on the higher levels? Without your own sensitivity, discernment simply becomes a kind of programming of the mind. You’re taught to think, “All things are impermanent. All things are stressful. All things are not self.” And then you try to program your mind to see things that way, squeeze it into a mold that somebody else gives you. That’s not discernment. That’s an act of will. The discernment comes from being more and more judicious in what you do, more and more judicious in how you judge your actions, and more ingenious in coming up with solutions where your old solutions no longer work. When I went to stay with Ajahn Phuong, there were many things that he just would not explain, starting with cleaning up his hut, where things were supposed to go. He’d never say, “If I put something in the wrong place, he’d let me know.” But he wouldn’t tell me where the right place was. And I learned I had to use my powers of observation. And I had to be very subtle about it, too. If I came obviously staring at him to see where things went, he just would turn the other way and go in his room. But if I’d glance out of the corner of my eye, I’d see, “Oh, this goes there. That goes here.” I had to start learning to depend on my own powers of observation. It was funny how deprived and ill-treated I felt when I was treated that way. Why couldn’t he be up front with the answers? Well, for the obvious reason, if he answered every question, if I made a mistake, it would be his fault, because I was depending on what he had told me. And I had also learned not to depend on myself. I wanted to get by without having to use my own powers of observation. The purpose of all this, of course, was not to play a game, but to develop the willingness to watch, to develop the willingness to make mistakes, to experiment, to see what works and what doesn’t work. If it didn’t work, okay, he would let me know. And as a result, I became a lot more tolerant of being dressed down in front of other people. But when I realized that even getting dressed down, I was learning something. It was an opportunity to learn, which is much more important than maintaining my sense of pride or whatever. So you trade your pride in, and you get knowledge. It’s a good trade. You trade your laziness in, and you get knowledge. It’s a good trade. You get not only knowledge, but you get a greater willingness to be responsible for your actions. This principle carries over into the meditation. Because as you’re sitting and meditating, you can’t expect to have someone sitting there holding your hand and telling you, “Now you do this, and now you do that.” You’ve got to learn how to hold your own hand. That’s why your right hand is in your left hand on your lap right now. When things come up in the meditation, you’ve got to learn how to use your own ingenuity. This is where real discernment comes—being ingenious in what you do and having high standards and judging the results, and being willing to test them again and again and again. So you finally get to the point where you don’t have to ask a lot of questions. You develop your own sense of sensitivity as to what works and what doesn’t work. This is what we’re talking about—heightened discernment. The Buddha’s teachings on inconstancy, stress, and not-self are just the beginning. You have to work with those and see where they take you. Instead of thinking of the meditation as a process of reprogramming your mind, it’s more of a treasure hunt. The Buddha says there’s something really good out there, and this is how you go about looking for it. This is how you test it with your intuition. When you find something, you think it might be the treasure. If it’s real gold, then it has to be like this, this, and this. If it doesn’t meet with those standards, well, it’s not real gold. That’s all he tells you. He gives you a technique for searching and standards for judging. In the course of the search and the course of the judging, you begin to get a more refined sense of how to search and a more refined sense of how to judge. That means you’ll find the gold. You recognize it for what it is. When you get there. This is why there’s so much in the meditation that’s not explained. Partly because there are a lot of things you can’t explain. There’s so much that’s subverbal. But even with some things that might be explained, it’s better to find them yourself, to make your own discoveries. In that way, it becomes not a question of imposing the dharma on your mind, but of developing good qualities you already have—your powers of observation, your powers of sensitivity, your powers of good judgment—bringing them to bear on the mind. So the mind gets a greater sense of peace, a greater sense of insight, a greater sense of freedom, as these powers get more refined. So this training in heightened virtue, heightened concentration, heightened discernment, is not something that’s imposed from the outside. It’s something you apply to yourself. Remember, you’re here voluntarily. No one’s pushing you here. There’s an internal motivation. Well, you take that internal motivation and you see how far it can go.

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