Training Like an Adult

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Training the mind is like training yourself to master a sport. Part of the training is focused in the practice sessions, i.e., what you’re doing right here as you’re meditating. As you’re doing walking meditation, the skills you want to work on. Because we are working on skills. A while back I was talking to a group of meditators from a different tradition, pointing out the connection between the teachings on karma and the practice of meditation, emphasizing that the Buddhist teachings on karma are centered on this issue of skill. And they looked at me with blank looks. The kind of meditation they’d been taught was simply that there is no such thing as good meditation or bad meditation, that you just allow yourself to be with it, whatever’s there. So we have to back up and talk about the whole issue of developing the path. You try to develop right view, right resolve, all the way down through right concentration. There’s right concentration and wrong concentration, just as there’s right view and wrong view. There’s right mindfulness and wrong mindfulness. The right and wrong here are defined specifically by what works and what doesn’t work. So when you’re meditating, certain things will work and other things won’t. You want to find out how to bring the mind to a sense of stillness, where there is a sense of ease in the stillness. Instead of sweating and forcing yourself and wearing yourself out, it’s learning how to train in a way that actually increases your energy, increases your strength. This is why we work on concentration, learning how to bring the mind to stillness. A large part of that is learning how to talk to yourself as you meditate. When things are not going well, how to encourage yourself. To point out the fact that things are not going well, but at the same time not to discourage yourself. And when you’re encouraging yourself and things are going well, you have to learn how not to get complacent. This is important. It’s the attitude you bring. It has to be one of simple pragmatism—what’s working, what’s not working. When things don’t work, you’ve got to strengthen yourself to find the resolve and the ingenuity to figure out ways that might work. So this connects with the other part of the training. Just as athletes are training not only in the sense of what they’re doing while they’re in their practice sessions, but also in what they eat and whether or not they smoke or drink or whatever else goes on outside. It’s your life of the mind outside of your formal meditations. That’s an important part of the training as well. The Buddha talks about contentment, being content with little. He talks about restraint of the senses, because this is how the mind feeds in the course of the day. It feeds on sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, and ideas. When he talks about restraint, he’s putting a curb on the mind. The mind’s feeding habits. The mind, of course, is bound to resist. Right here is a good place to learn how to talk to yourself when the mind is resisting a training. You can treat the mind like a child, giving it rewards when it’s doing well, punishing it when it’s not doing well. Or you can treat it like an adult, simply pointing out, “These are the results of what you’re doing. Is this what you really want? Is this what you really want?” Treating it like a child leaves it as a child. Occasionally there are times when you do have to give rewards or you do have to give punishment of one kind or another, but that can’t be your only approach, because it keeps the mind as a child. Praise and blame, as we all know when we’re children, often get out and meet it out in an unfair way, sometimes too much. Too much praise, too much blame, whatever. We’ve experienced that with our parents, and it’s amazing how the mind just picks up from where your parents left off. What you’ve got to learn how to do is learn how to look at what you’re doing and look at the results. When you look at something in a certain way, what are the results? Look at why you’re looking at it in that way. If you’re looking at it for the sake of attachment, for the sake of feeding your anger, for the sake of attachment, exactly how are you feeding it? What nourishment do you get out of looking at it in that way? And then what are the drawbacks? The same way with how you listen. A lot of this goes to how you think. What thoughts does the mind like to feed on? What nourishment does it get out of it, even the thoughts that we don’t like to think? If they keep coming back, coming back, there’s part of the mind that really likes the process. Find some satisfaction, find some gratification in that thinking. You’ve got to look into why, what is this, and then look at the drawbacks. In other words, instead of treating the mind like a child, you treat it as someone who’s trying to learn a skill. You simply point out, “This is working, this is not working, this is worth it, this is not worth it.” So when you train the mind to feed in this way outside, and when the time comes to meditate, again, the dynamic in the mind is more of an adult dynamic. You don’t beat the child down when it’s not doing well. You don’t say, “Oh my gosh, you’re miserable, you’re never going to get anything right.” That kind of attitude closes off all the doors. Or you praise it by saying, “You’re better than the other kids in the class.” The Buddha doesn’t encourage that kind of thinking. We’re not here to compete with one another. We’re trying to compete with our old selves versus any competition at all. That’s where the competition has to be. We’re not here to please anybody. All my years with the Chan Fung, I never heard him praise me to my face. I found out later that he’d been saying nice things behind my back sometimes. But never to my face. He didn’t want to encourage in me the idea that I was doing anything in the practice to please him. When he closed off that door, what was left to me? Just the fact, “Well, is it working? Is it not?” Otherwise, he was forcing me to grow up. As meditators, it’s good for us to grow up as well. We’re doing this because we’re suffering. And we’re finding that the path helps put an end to that suffering. That, in and of itself, should be reward enough. We don’t have to compare ourselves with other people. The Buddha talks about what he calls a person of no integrity, who compares himself to others and says, “My jhana is better than their jhana. I’ve attained this. Those other people haven’t attained this level.” Instead, the Buddha says we should remind ourselves that the Buddha talks about what he calls non-fashioning, even with regard to these qualities. We’re not trying to make a self or create a self around our virtue, around our restraint, around our renunciation, around our concentration, around our wisdom. We’re doing these things because they work. So, learn how to look at what you’re doing. Learn how to read the results of what you’re doing, starting from the outside on in. In this way, you have a complete training—the training that you do while you’re here in your practice sessions and the training when you’re out living the rest of your life. They all come together. Their all-training is to be adults, to learn to look at the mind and deal with the mind, particularly in terms of what’s working and what’s not working, and putting an end to suffering, giving rise to the path that is right, not because somebody said so, but simply because it really does work. That’s how we master the skill. We master it as adults. So try to keep this perspective in mind.

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