Conditioning for the End of Conditioning

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As you try to train the mind, you find there are lots of minds. This is part of the problem, but it’s also part of the solution. The problem, of course, is that not everybody is on board. This part of you wants to meditate right now, and there may be another part that has other ideas. And still another part, and another part. And so you have to strengthen the part that does want to meditate. But it’s not just a matter of brute force of will. As the mind is training itself, or as you might say, one of your minds is training your other minds. This is where you can take advantage of the fact that you have many minds. If you had just one mind, one self, in there, how could it train itself? If it was already bad, it wouldn’t have to be bad all the way. You’d have to depend on somebody else. And even then, you probably wouldn’t be willing to take the training. If your one mind were already good, you wouldn’t need the training. But given that you have many minds, you’ve got some skillful ones in there and some unskillful ones. And they can observe one another. What you want is to get a really skillful observer in charge and train it. And just as your unskillful minds have been conditioned by who knows how many lifetimes of greed, aversion, and delusion, in the very beginning your skillful observer is only relatively skillful. It has to be conditioned, too. But this is a special kind of conditioning. In some places the Buddha talks about the customs of the noble ones. In others he talks about conviction in karma. Specifically, he talks about the fact that there are four types of karma. There’s karma that leads to good destinations, karma that leads to bad, karma that leads to mixed destinations, and then the karma that leads to the end of karma. You might say the conditioning that leads to the end of conditioning. And it’s the Eightfold Noble Path. The two big factors of the path are right view and right concentration. Right view is what lays out the path and right concentration is what lays out the picture. This is the way things are. And particularly, this is how cause and effect act in the mind. This is probably one of the Buddha’s most useful insights. In fact, when he talked about his awakening, he boiled it down to the shortest formula. It was a formula for causality. When this is, that is. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. When this isn’t, that isn’t. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that. In other words, this and that is actually the same word in Pali, yidam. So when this is, this is. From the arising of this comes the arising of this. He’s talking about things that are immediately apparent. And you’ve got two different causal principles operating there. It was the Buddha’s ability to see all the complexity of the mind. The complexity of karma, the complexity of suffering, the complexity of happiness. He realized that it all comes down to these simple formulae. And the formulae, because they interact, explain why things look so complex. But they also show that there’s a pattern. And it’s a relatively simple pattern that just gets more and more ramified. And they also show that when you’re going to be looking for causes and effects, you don’t have to look behind the scenes. Just look at what’s apparent, what’s immediately available to your awareness, and you’ll have everything you need. So this is part of the training of your observer mind, the mind that’s in charge of the training. You don’t have to work out all the complexities. The Buddha said if you try to work out all the complexities, you’ll go crazy. But you can’t hold to that basic principle that if you act on skillful intentions, the results are going to be good. So make sure your observer really believes this, is fully convinced. This is part of the conditioning that leads to the end of conditioning. And hold on right there. Years back, I had a student who was a talented meditator, but then she had a stroke. And she really had to fight back from the stroke. And after many months, she was beginning to get well enough so she could go to Dhamma talks. I was invited to the place where she was. It was going to be the first Dhamma talk she’d heard since she’d had the stroke. So I asked her what theme she wanted. She said, “Faith.” I knew it was going to be difficult, because “faith” is the “f” word in Buddhist circles, especially modern Buddhist circles. But I realized that that was what had kept her going, even though things looked pretty grim and bleak. When she had her stroke, she was able to make her way back. Through her faith, that was going to work out. It was going to work out because she made it work out. That’s what had happened. So that night, I gave a talk on faith. And you could feel the negative energy coming from the room, except for one spot, from her. So I focused on her. And so there may be parts of the mind that have negative attitudes toward faith. They’re teaching on karma. But don’t focus on them. Focus on the one voice inside that still has conviction that if you’re going to get out of your suffering, it’s going to be through your actions. The nature of human action is such that it can do this. Even though you may have lots of bad karma in the past, that doesn’t have to be deterministic. Think of Agulimala. He killed all those people. But he also had some goodness. The Buddha saw that in him and was able to bring it out. So when things look bleak, remember, you do have some goodness, and it matters. And whether you’re able to get out of your bad mood quickly or slowly, just hold on to that conviction. And do what you can to nurture that conviction that your actions aren’t going to make the difference. And then you can train your observer, or train the trainer, even further, from mundane right view to transcendent right view. If there’s suffering, it’s something you’re doing. Not only the cause is something you’re doing, but the suffering itself is something you’re doing. That’s a pretty radical insight on the Buddha’s part. We tend to think of suffering as the result of something that comes at us. But here he says it’s in the action, in the clinging to the aggregates. And the reason we do that is also from within. When he talks about the origination of suffering, the word he uses, samudena, is one he uses almost exclusively to describe causes that come from within the mind. This means that the suffering itself is something you can watch, and the causes are things you can watch. This relates back to that when this arises, or from the arising of this comes the arising of this. If you’re looking for the cause of your suffering, you don’t have to look too far. It’s right here. Again, there’ll be parts of the mind that don’t want to hear that. They’d much rather lay the blame outside. But where does that get you? You’d have to have a perfect world before you can put an end to suffering. And that does seem likely any time soon. But the Buddha’s saying it’s within your power to make a change, a change from creating suffering to creating the path that leads to the end of suffering. So even though there may be times in your meditation where this doesn’t seem very likely, still, this is the conditioning you need. Of course, ultimately we’re trying to get beyond conditions, but the whole insight of the Buddha’s path is that you can, through fabrication, reach the unfabricated. The path is the highest of all fabrications. It’s the highest of all conditioning. Because it leads out. Every other type of conditioning just circles back in, circles back in. But this is the Buddha’s jnanica dhamma, the dhamma that leads out. So try to condition as many parts of your mind as you can to have conviction in these principles. Then they can train the other parts. So these many minds become more and more one, more and more united around the one thing that they all have in common to begin with, which is the desire for happiness. But this time they can be all trained to see that this is the path to happiness. They really were. And that’s what can bring them to unity.

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