Training Your Moods

September 16, 2023

Remember while you’re meditating that you’re training the mind. You’re giving it a task to do and making sure it sticks with it. We call it training for two reasons. One is that it is a skill that you’re working on here, the skill of staying with one object with a sense of well-being. Developing skillful qualities in the mind and abandoning unskillful ones. The question of skill will develop. Your ability to do this well will develop over time as you commit yourself to doing it, reflect on the results, make adjustments, and do it again. Reflect again. Do it again. The other reason it’s called training is that there are parts of the mind that don’t want to do this. There are parts that rebel. The image the Buddha gives is of a wild elephant that you’re trying to train. You tie it down and it’s going to fight. It doesn’t want to be tied down. It thinks about its pleasures back in the forest, back in the wilderness. It doesn’t like being trained. So you have to make it see that there are advantages to accepting the training. In this case, as you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, focused on the breath, you’re trying to breathe in a way that feels good. You’re trying to notice which parts of the body are sensitive to how the breathing feels. A lot of people like to focus on the nose, but that’s not a very sensitive part of the body, especially with regard to the breath. It varies down in the chest, down in the abdomen, in the throat. So choose a spot where you’re sensitive and try to please that spot. In other words, give it the energy it needs, the energy that feels good, gratifying, as you breathe in, as you breathe out. So the mind will see that. It’s a good place to say, a good thing to be doing. And you talk to yourself about this. Remind yourself that the pleasure that comes from concentration has very few drawbacks. It’s not like the pleasures of the senses. The pleasures of the senses can get you intoxicated. They can lead you to do all kinds of things that you would later regret. But nobody ever killed over the pleasure of jhana. Nobody ever stole, or had illicit sex, or lied, or took intoxicants. It’s a blameless pleasure. It’s the pleasures of sensuality that get people to break those precepts. And the more you think about the breath energy in the body, the more you realize that it’s connected with the health of the body and the health of the mind. So it’s good for the body to be breathing well. And when you give the mind a good place to stay in the present moment, it’s going to be in a much better mood. And it’ll be more and more inclined to want to understand why it would want to go away from this. Because there still will be parts of the mind that want to go back to their old pleasures. You’re in a position where you can question those parts of the mind. Learn to see how it is that they trick you, how it is that they deceive you. One particular temptation is a bad mood. There are parts of the mind that really enjoy being in a bad mood. But you have to realize that this is the kind of pleasure that the present moment is the pleasure that a dog gets when it digs up something that’s dead and rotten and it rolls around in the dead, rotten thing. There’s part of the dog that likes it, but what does it really gain? The mind likes its bad moods, but what does it really gain? Sometimes there’s a sense of being victimized, and you can roll around in that. Or there’s a sense of superiority. You see other people behaving in ways that you don’t like, and you realize that they’re not up to your standards. You roll around in that. But here you’ve got a much better pleasure, a much better way of finding well-being. So your mind can think more and more in terms of what it wants to do. Ways of thinking, ways of talking to yourself, really are for your long-term benefit. So you don’t go just by your likes or dislikes. Your discernment has a chance to make the decisions. It also has a chance to understand the things that would pull you away. This should be one of the most fascinating things in the world, how the mind can lie to itself. Now you can start seeing into that, understanding that, learning how to not be fooled by its lies. So try to cultivate this sense of well-being with the breath. It’s an essential part of the training because it helps you change your allegiances inside, change your sense of how well-being can be found. And a well-being that lasts. As with any training, it’s not just a matter of the formal training, but there’s what you do with the rest of your life as well. Here you might think of the training of athletes. Their training is not just a matter of what they do when they’re in the gym or on the playing field. It’s also how they live their lives. They have to stay away from certain kinds of food, certain kinds of activities. In the same way, as you’re going around through the day, remind yourself that that too is a part of the meditation. After all, the word for meditation in Pali, bhavana, doesn’t mean sitting with your eyes closed. It means developing. You’re developing good qualities. And that’s something you can do anywhere. Even down in the kitchen, out in the orchard, anywhere that you go as you go through the day. This is where the Buddha recommends restraint of the senses. For most of us, when we hear that term, we think of blinders on our eyes, plugs in our ears. But that’s not what the Buddha’s talking about. He wants you to understand how you engage in your senses, because it’s going to have a huge impact on how you engage with your mind as you sit here with your eyes closed. When you’re meditating, you’re trying to clean out the mind, adjust its understandings, overcome its likes and dislikes as part of the training. And so you can’t just let yourself go. As you get up and leave the meditation, you’re going to train the mind then as well. And it’s the same sort of thing. There are tasks that you wanted to do, but you also have to compensate for whatever difficulties there may be. You see something that you find really attractive, or you see something that it’s very easy to get yourself upset about, and you ask yourself, “Who’s doing the looking?” It’s your likes and dislikes doing the looking. It’s your greed, aversion, and delusion doing the looking. And as you use those things in the course of the day, you’re strengthening them. Whereas when you’re training the mind, you’re really serious about the training, and you have to weaken them. So when you’re looking, you ask yourself, “Why are you looking? What are you looking for? When you’re listening, what are you listening for? What’s directing your attention?” Because, as you’ll notice, if you look carefully at the process of engaging the senses, it’s not that everything out there is going to be attractive. It’s not that everything out there is going to be unattractive. You tend to focus on certain details. Why do you focus on those details? Aren’t there other details you could focus on? As you ask these questions, you get more and more sensitive to the fact that, say, greed doesn’t come simply because you’re sitting around doing nothing, perfectly innocent, and then something excites your greed from outside. Oftentimes the greed starts inside, and then you go out and look for something that would satisfy the greed. The anger can start inside. You want to find something to get worked up about. And then you go out and look and find something that would fit the bill. Why is that? Maybe you can find this interesting. You need a place where you can watch it near again. You’re trying to develop a sense of well-being. The Buddha says that you want mindfulness immersed in the body as your center as you go through the day. You can be doing many kinds of things. You can be reflecting on the body, as the chant we had this morning on the thirty-two parts of the body. Or you can be working with the breath. As you go through the day, it may be too much to ask yourself to be conscious of each in- and out-breath. But you can be sensitive to the quality of breath energy throughout the body, the general feeling tone of ease or tension, openness or tightness. If it’s tight, think of it opening up, loosening up, relaxing. If you’re feeling tired, what kind of breath energy would give you more energy? There are potentials here in the breath, potentials in the body, that you can tap into. And these will be your reward as you train your mind through restraining how you look, how you listen, how you think about things. So that you can attach yourself from your moods. Because of all the senses, it’s the mind that’s the big troublemaker. Your eyes don’t make trouble. Your ears don’t make trouble. It’s the mind. Again, it’s looking for a certain mood, looking for a certain satisfaction. But why? If you can have a sense of well-being inside, then it’s easier to tap into that. You separate yourself from your moods and understand the process of how they get formed. You begin to realize that what the Buddha taught about fabrication is a really applicable lesson right here. Because your mood is composed of what? The way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself, the perceptions you focus on, the feelings you focus on. In other words, bodily, verbal, mental fabrication. So when a mood begins to take over the mind, when it begins to direct things inside, it asks, “Who are you? What are you made of?” Can you go back and create a different mood by breathing in a different way, talking to yourself in a different way, focusing on different perceptions, focusing on different feelings, the sense of well-being that comes with a breath? It makes it easier to step back from your moods and look at them from this perspective. It’s in this way that the training becomes a complete training. Not just for a couple hours during the day. It’s the whole day. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, our practice tends to fall into times. We have a time to eat, a time to talk, a time to work, and then there’s a little bit of time for meditation. If that’s the case, we’ll never get to see what’s timeless. We have to make our practice timeless. In other words, whatever you’re doing, it’s always time to meditate, always time to train the mind. And in that way, there’s a momentum that builds up. Because the meditation doesn’t get chopped off as soon as the chime rings and we get up. It continues. And that attitude of stepping back from your moods, stepping back from your attitudes, and contemplating what’s working, what’s not working, what really is for your long-term welfare and happiness, and what’s just the quick fix that’s going to cause trouble down the line. It’s then that the practice really progresses and the training starts to show its real rewards. The rewards that come from really understanding your mind and seeing through all of its tricks. There’s a passage in the Canon where an elephant trainer comes to see the Buddha. He says, “Elephants are easy. You take an elephant, you ride it a couple of leagues, and in that time you learn all the tricks that that elephant has, all of its deceits. But human beings, he said, those are hard. It takes a lot more to see through its deceits, but it’s not impossible. So take advantage of the Buddha’s training so you can get your mind to stop lying to itself, stop causing itself trouble. So it really does get a genuine understanding of what well-being is and how happiness can be found. That’s what this training is for.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2023/230916_Training_Your_Moods.mp3>