

## *Wisdom Through Training*

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When you focus on the breath, know when it's coming in and when it's going out, and keep watch over your mind at the same time, noticing if it's staying with the breath or not. If you catch it slipping off, bring it back. Slips off again, bring it back again. Slips off ten times, a hundred times, bring it back ten times, a hundred times. You're training the mind, trying to develop its powers of mindfulness, its powers of alertness, and its ability to stick with one thing over time, so that the practice can begin to have an effect. If you stay for a while and wander off thinking about this, that, and other thing, then come back and check up a bit later and wander off again, you're going to miss a lot, and in particular you're going to miss the chance to get the mind trained, to strengthen these qualities of mind.

The Buddha once said that the difference between a fool or a wise person is that the wise person understands that the mind needs to be trained. It's important because the basis for our happiness comes from training the mind. The fool doesn't understand that. Why is it wise to train the mind? Because so much of your happiness depends on the mind's keeping itself under control. Even if things are going well in life, even though circumstances outside are perfectly fine, if your mind isn't well trained, you can create suffering. When the mind is trained, then even though things maybe going poorly outside, it doesn't have to suffer. The mind is what makes all the difference in the world.

This is how you start: with very simple things like generosity and virtue. The act of being generous develops good qualities in the mind. The determination to realize what principles of action you want to follow because they're harmless and the things you want to avoid because they're harmful and then sticking with that: That virtue develops good qualities in the mind as well.

You need to be sensitive to the power of your actions, which means you have to start with those qualities of mindfulness and alertness, because you have to keep your principles of behavior in mind, and you have to be alert to make sure your behavior doesn't overstep them. That's beginning meditation right there.

As you sit down and say you're going to stay with the breath continually for the hour, that really requires mindfulness and alertness—and it's in the practice that you understand what mindfulness and alertness are. You can read about them in the texts and gain a certain amount of understanding about them that

way, but only by putting them into practice and trying to develop them can you really get a sense of the range of their powers.

The texts talk about three levels of understanding: You start with the understanding that comes from memorizing and reading the texts, or listening to talks like this. The next step is to think about what you've read or heard, to get an idea of how all these elements of the path fit together, and how they should be applied to the purpose of the path, which is to find an end to suffering, understanding that suffering is something your mind creates for itself. Even though there may be pleasant and unpleasant things outside, the mind suffers from its own misunderstanding and cravings, so we have here a path of practice that helps cut through those misunderstandings and develops an inner sense of well-being that helps to weaken the cravings that cause you to go out and look for happiness in things that cause suffering. This is what study is about: You listen and you think.

But you don't really know the truth of these things until you put them into practice and see the results actually coming. The Buddha makes this point in one of his discourses. He talks about a man going into an elephant wood to find a bull elephant. He starts seeing footprints in the elephant wood but if he's a skilled elephant hunter, he doesn't immediately jump to the conclusion that he's found the big bull elephant he's looking for. Even though the footprints may be big, he said, there are dwarf elephants with big feet. Those might be their prints.

But he goes on. The big prints could be those of the elephant he's looking for. He follows the big footprints and he finds scratch marks high up on the trees. And again he doesn't immediately come to the conclusion that it's a big bull elephant, because there are tall females with tusks, and they can leave scratch marks, too. It's only when he gets to a clearing where he actually sees the big bull elephant standing there: That's when he knows he's found his elephant.

In the same way, when you're practicing, even as you begin to get preliminary results in the practice—you follow the path of virtue and generosity, and you find it gets good results—still, it doesn't not prove that the Buddha was awakened. You start meditating, develop strong states of concentration, you can even develop psychic powers from the meditation, but that, too, isn't proof. As the Buddha said, these are just footprints and scratch marks. The real proof is when you begin to see that there's something inside the mind that's free from suffering, there's a dimension in the mind that's not touched by time and space, and you've reach that dimension through your own actions, through training the mind. Once you've reached that dimension, that's when you know for sure that the Buddha knew what he was talking about.

So the proof of the teachings lies in the results you gain from them, but to gain the results, you have to give them a fair test. That requires putting a lot of time and energy into the training of your own mind. Fortunately, this is not a risky gamble. After all, the more mindful you are, the more alert you are, the more you've good qualities of the mind to carry over into any areas of your life that you want to apply them to. It's not automatic that simply by meditating you're going to be able to deal with life better. You also have to consciously bring the qualities you've been developing in your meditation to bear on your life.

I know some meditators who will sit very quietly for a while and then as soon as they get up from their meditation, they drop it entirely and go back to their old way. It's like someone who goes down to the gym and exercises, lifting weights, but then comes back home and doesn't lift a finger to help around the house at all. Even though he's a lot stronger and can lift heavy things, he doesn't. It's a real waste.

You want your practice to be continuous. After all, the training of the mind is not just an issue of sitting here with your eyes closed. Your need for these qualities of mind doesn't occur only while you're sitting here with your eyes closed. You need these qualities of mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment at all times, because the possibility for the mind to create suffering is there at all times as well. In the course of the day, someone may say something or do something that can set you off, and if you're not careful, you can create a lot of harm, simply by giving in to your old ways.

You've got to realize that you're practicing restraint here as you meditate. In other words, there's often a temptation to wander off thinking about this, that, and other thing. You've got a whole hour nothing else to do, you can think about your plans for tomorrow or the next day, you can think about work, you can think about all kinds of stuff. But you realize that that doesn't really accomplish anything, doesn't make any big changes in the mind. After all, it's easy to spend your time thinking for hours about something you're going to do and then change your mind in the flash of an eye. But if you spend the time restraining your mind from wandering off like that, you really are putting it to work here. You come out and you realize you've strengthened something in your mind. You've developed something in your mind. You've trained your mind so it can be more self-reliant. It can depend on itself more.

We talk about taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, but what that means is taking them as examples so that we can develop their qualities in the mind, and those qualities that we develop in the mind are our real refuge.

There's another statement in the Canon: The self is its own mainstay. But you can be your mainstay only when you train yourself, when you train your mind. In other words, once you make up your mind that you're not going to do something, it's only when you've trained your mind that you can really abstain from it, especially it's something you like doing. It's only when the mind is well trained that you can convince yourself that you don't want to do that. You see that even though you like doing it, it's going to give harmful results, and you have not only the will power but also the understanding, the strategies to help keep you from doing things that you know are going to be harmful even though you like them. That requires training, but it's only then that you can really rely on yourself.

The same for things that you don't like doing but will give good results: It takes not only will power to do them, but also the intelligence of a good strategy, knowing how to cajole yourself, how to reason with yourself, so that you can talk yourself into doing the things that you don't like to do but you know that over long term are going to give good results.

These are all very basic principles, but in practice they require a fair amount of training. This is why the training, why the development of these qualities of the mind is where real discernment, real wisdom comes in. Anybody can read, anybody can think, but it doesn't necessarily lead to real knowledge. It's when you take what you've learned and you put it into practice: That's when you gain knowledge from the practice, as with any skill.

Ajaan Lee gives the analogy of a basket maker. The teacher can tell you that these are some of the various weaving patterns, these are some of the tricks of the trade, but then you sit down, and your first basket is not going to look like your teacher's basket. You can go to the teacher for some advice but you've also got to use your own powers of observation. Watch yourself while you're weaving the basket and see how you can make your fingers move the way they should, how you can move the material in such a way that the basket starts looking better, the weave is more even, the basket has a nicer shape. You learn a lot from your own actions. This is where a lot of the learning comes from practice.

You look at the ajaans in the forest tradition: They didn't study that much. Some of them were actually barely able to read, yet they took what they learned and were very serious about putting it into practice. They learned by watching themselves in action, to see what worked and what didn't work, to catch any subterfuges in the mind, any ways the mind was being dishonest with itself. That's how you develop your powers of observation—and you've found an inner refuge that no amount of reading, no amount of study can bring.

This is how you become your own refuge, how you become reliable: You learn how to watch what you're doing, watch the results, and then figure out ways of doing it better. That's how the mind can train itself. Sometimes you hear that the human mind is so defiled that it can't possibly lift itself out of its defilements. Actually, though, you've got lots of minds in here, you've got lots of selves in here. Your various senses of identity are more than many; your mind states are more than many. And fortunately, they can observe one another. Some are not especially observant, but some can be very observant. It's because you're multiple like this that one part of the mind can train another part of the mind. You help one another along.

It's as if there's a committee in here, and you're learning to get the committee to work together. If one member of the committee notices that another member of the committee is causing suffering, you can all agree that you want to put an end to suffering, and you can talk to one another. That's how the mind observes itself, that's how the mind trains itself, learns to be its own refuge.

So you get some help from outside, but a lot of the learning comes from your ability just to look at yourself in action, using your powers of observation to become more and more skillful in what you do. This is a very simple principle when you talk about it, but it takes a lot of time and patience, very careful powers of observation, to really put it into practice and to master these skills: how to speak, how to think, how to act in such a way where you're not causing suffering. That's what the Buddha's teachings are all about.