

TRAINING THE DOG

Alan Zundel at the HeartAwake Center, April 28th 2007

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I thought I'd start with the basics, and give a variation on one of the first talks I gave here in Eugene, 'The Aims of Meditation'—three aims, tying it in to three stages of the spiritual life, and comparing this to training a dog. This is the new part. *[laughs]*

Three aims, briefly, people have in coming to meditation. Usually the first aim that most people have is simply calming the mind, finding a practice that can help them settle, feel quieter or more peaceful inside. When the mind is really busy and active you get the sense that there must be a better way than this kind of anxiety and distractiveness. Once you discover that there's a sense of peace that you can find in yourself, meditation is a way of reinforcing that, bringing that more into play, so your mind can slow down a little bit, calm down. And that's the big draw for most people, particularly initially.

The second stage is a little more active. This is the stage of coming to self-knowledge, where you're not simply focusing on a subject that's supposed to keep your mind tethered by coming back to it repeatedly and continually, but you watch where your mind is going and try not to get sucked into it. Sometimes the practice is to label thoughts or pictures or feelings that come up—'oh, this is a memory of such-and-such, or this is a thought about tomorrow's job that I have to do, or this is a feeling of resentment I have toward somebody over something that hasn't been resolved.' Whatever's passing through your consciousness, you label it, you take note of it. Another technique that's similar to that is simply just watching, just watching without putting labels, just watching what happens without getting drawn into it and drawn away by it. This is self-knowledge, seeing what comes up in your mind and being more attentive to it, instead of just letting it take you over being aware of it as it's happening.

The third stage, which not everybody is interested in but some people get bitten by this bug, is awakening. You want to come to some state of changed, transformed consciousness. That's a little harder to talk about, but it's an aspiration that I think is well worth shooting for, and really brings the rest of it into focus, what it was all about.

I'm going to talk about these three aims as three stages and compare it to training a dog. You ever owned a dog? Your mind is like a dog, an untrained dog, before you begin meditation or practicing a spiritual life. An untrained dog will just be all over the place; anything that comes along will distract it, it'll run after it. The mailman comes to the door, and it's over scratching at the door and barking. If someone comes in, they're jumping up and down. If a cat or a squirrel goes by the window they're running, knocking things over. They go around the house getting into things, knocking over the garbage and poking their nose in chewing on stuff. If you leave the closet door open they're in there sniffing for your scent, chewing up your shoes.

They're just all over the place, and that's what the mind is like; it just rambles all over. Whatever happens to come up within its field of awareness it pursues. Or it has its favorite pastimes, like going back to the garbage [*laughs*], which for a lot of us is emotions and resentments and anxieties; that's the garbage can, we keep going back to that, a very attractive place to go and to sniff around in. This is the mind, it just flits here and there, and pursues its own preoccupations irregardless of the kind of effect it's having on the household around it. It can cause strains with the people it's living with and cause a mess in the house, and that type of thing; that's also what we're like when we allow our mind to lead us around, these emotional states or these various thoughts that come and we pursue them without regard to where our life is really heading or who we're trying to become.

So the first stage of training the dog, then, is to get the dog's attention and get it to calm down, forming a bond with the dog. Often this entails sitting with the dog, petting it and calming it down. First getting it to the point where it's paying attention to you, and has this calm space. When something happens—that squirrel's out in the yard and it runs over to the window—you've got to take the dog back over, calm it down, and bring it back to pay attention to you.

This is meditation in the sense of calming the mind. You're setting aside a time and a place where you can bring your attention to something—for some people it's a image, like of Christ or the Buddha or something, or even a concept such as peace or loving-kindness going out to the world, or what I usually recommend because it's neutral in content is just paying attention to the breath. And whenever you find your mind running over to the window, or running over to smell the garbage or something, you bring it back to sit with you. That's what that meditation practice is all about, repeatedly and continually bringing it back, bringing it back, bringing it back—calming it down to the point where the dog can sit with you for a while and remain fairly calm. It may get distracted repeatedly, but you can keep it fairly calm and that's a benefit in itself.

Okay, so the second stage, self-knowledge, is when you're going to take the dog for a walk. You put it on a leash—the metaphor becomes a little strained here because this can be part of meditation practice too, so you're not actually walking around. But it is similar in the sense that this is something you can practice even when you're not meditating. It carries over from your meditation practice to your day-to-day life—this attentiveness, this awareness. Now compare this to having the dog on one of these retractable leashes that you see now, where it can play out for a bit and then you can stop it and reel it back in. So when you take the dog for a walk and it gets distracted or runs after something, you catch it; you stop that leash and you slowly bring it back in.

This is what it means to be meditating and paying attention to your thoughts. But the difficulty is, when a thought or a feeling or a memory or imaginary picture of the future or something comes that's very attractive to you, what usually happens is that you get drawn right into it, then you're following along into that daydream or into that process of thought, or immersing yourself in that feeling, and you're not paying attention to your master at all.

You're just going after it; you're out there, somewhere, running off. And it's the master's job, then, to stop you and say 'oh, wait—I was supposed to be paying attention to these things and not just getting immersed in them and following along with them.' You draw it back a little bit, and then continue with the walk. So the master is gradually becoming aware of the things that the dog is particularly distracted by, and can see them coming. 'Oh, there's that squirrel, the dog's going to run after it; before runs out and gets way out into the neighbor's yard, we'll stop it before it gets that far.' Gradually you're learning the process of seeing things as they arise in your mind and getting to know your own mind, getting to know your own thought processes, what types of thoughts are particularly distracting for you, what types of feelings seem to continually recur and catch your attention, what memories perhaps want to surface and really trouble you. So you're becoming aware of these things, and you're learning to let them be and pay attention without running after them—so they can be whatever they are and you're not like that dog running after it. The dog still is aware, the dog is still paying attention to what comes up, but gradually it's learning 'don't run after it; stay on the walk.' The leash keeps it in line.

As I said, that's something that you not only do in meditation, but it can carry over to your day to day life. Mindfulness. As you're going through life you suddenly become aware, 'oh man, I really went off into that thought or that feeling; you know, when somebody said something I didn't like and I was just out there. It brought up a memory of something and I was just not myself—or maybe I was too much myself.' [*laughs*] However you want to think of it. But then you gradually become aware, 'yeah, that's the types of things I do when I lose my sense of who I really am. I've become more aware of it, and as I see it happen I'm less inclined to run after it. I'm a little more allowing it to be without fully losing myself in it.' Okay, this is training the mind to be attentive.

So you're going for a peaceful walk with your dog now. The dog occasionally runs after things, but you're able to keep it in tow and it's becoming calmer and calmer and able to keep its attention on you and your desires, as well as the distractions of the world around it. That's what you're looking for, your attentiveness is on your interior quiet, true self, and not just your mind and where it wants to run off to.

The final stage—not final in the sense that your life doesn't move on after this point, but the only one that I feel confident talking about—is this awakening, which in the analogy with the dog is when you let go of the leash. Because now the dog is so much in tune with the master, with the true self, that it doesn't run after things. Or if it starts to run after things, all it takes is a little signal from the master and it stops and comes back. It knows its place; it knows what the master requires of it. It's just so attentive to the master that if the master decides to pause, it pauses with him, if you decide you're going to turn this way instead of the usual route, the dog notices that and just turns with you. The dog becomes very much 'at one' with the master that was training him. There's no longer this sense that you have to control the mind, the mind has now lost its independence and has become incorporated into the master.

And really what awakening is, is that sense of awareness that you are not the dog—this is

where the metaphor becomes pretty mixed up—but at the beginning of this process because you're so much in your mind, you are the dog. You're not even necessarily aware that a master is present within. That master is part of who you are, but as this process unfolds you become more and more comfortable with, 'yes, this quiet place feels more like me, even though when I'm in my mind I recognize that as the familiar me that I've always known.' There comes a point where that snaps, and you turn around and say, 'I am not who I thought I was. I *am* this calm self, I am this presence. I am this, if you want to call it, higher self that has its own way to live in life, and I am not the dog that's running around any more, I'm at one with the master.' And at that point there's really nothing further to be said.

[*pause*]

I don't have a clever way to tie this up to finish it [*laughs*], but I guess that's sufficient.

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