

## **Training the Puppy**

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When I first started meditating 46 years ago I had no idea what I was doing. I went to a Zen retreat and learned a few things about sitting still but that was about it. It was pretty clear that the whole point was about learning how to stop thinking, which seemed like a pretty good idea to me because a lot of my thinking at that time wasn't pleasant. I was sometimes anxious, fearful, self-conscious, and depressed. I figured that if I could learn how to stop those kinds of thoughts I'd be happier and more peaceful.

Well, it turns out that it doesn't quite work like that.

But it took me years to figure that out. In the meanwhile, the whole point seemed to be mental mastery. I found this to be an appealing idea, in a heroic kind of way. Here I was, tossed about by the turbulent streams of my mind, and I was learning something that would put me in charge, conquering all delusion and suffering. It was sort of like an image of John Wayne in a monk's robe, fierce and indomitable, in a showdown with all those unruly thoughts. Surely he would tame them all!

The work was hard and frustrating. Though I didn't understand it at the time, I was actually using my father as the model for self-control. He was a stern taskmaster and disciplinarian. He would challenge me – always, I'm sure, with the very best of intentions – challenge me to achievements consistently beyond my developmental level. I'm sure he was trying to inspire me to reach ever higher, but the result was that I would nearly always fail. And my failures were always met with more disappointment than consolation.

My father didn't often express tender feelings, but he was quite comfortable expressing his disapproval. When I misbehaved, he would snap his fingers and call me to stand in front of him. Then he would fiercely look me in the eye and tell me

what I had done wrong and why it was unacceptable, and then he'd spank me until I couldn't sit down.

And I naturally internalized all of this in my self-image of incompetence and failure, always judging myself by an impossibly high standard. And so when I started meditating, it was this internalized version of my father that was called into service, not really John Wayne. The harder I tried to stop thinking, the wilder my thoughts got, and the more I felt like a failure. It wasn't fun; it didn't feel very good, but I did experience an increase in stability and concentration that did help a little bit, so I kept on trying.

Eventually, though, I gave up trying to stop my thinking. I'd heard about states of joy, white light, and bliss, and decided that they sounded like more fun than trying to be the boss of my mind. And I did experience some success in learning how to stabilize my inner turbulence by focusing on certain states of mind. But, although they were pleasant, I eventually realized that this was a dead end, too. As soon as I stopped meditating, the turbulence would immediately return. I found reality annoying. This kind of meditation was more like a drug than a true spiritual path.

I eventually learned that there were gentler ways to go about the project, ways that didn't use my authoritarian father as the model. I read Jack Kornfield's book, *A Path with Heart*, and it introduced a new way of thinking about meditation.

He said, "When we first undertake the art of meditation, it is indeed frustrating. Inevitably, as our mind wanders and our body feels the tension it has accumulated and the speed to which it is addicted, we often see how little inner discipline actually have. It doesn't take much time with a spiritual task to see how scattered and unsteady our attention remains even when we try to direct and focus it. While we usually think of it as 'our mind,' if we look honestly, we see that the mind follows its own nature, conditions, and laws. Seeing this, we also see that we must gradually discover a wise relationship to the mind that connects it to the body and heart, and steadies and calms our inner life.

"The essence of this connecting is the bringing back of our attention again and again to the practice we have chosen. . . For some this task of coming back a thousand or ten thousand times in meditation may seem boring or even of

questionable importance. But how many times have we gone away from the reality of our life? . . . If we wish to truly awaken, we have to find our way back here with our full being, our full attention.”

Kornfield quotes St. Frances de Sales, who said, “What we need is a cup of understanding, a barrel of love, and an ocean of patience.” This is something quite different from what I got from my father.

de Sales continued, “ ‘Bring yourself back to the point quite gently. And even if you do nothing during the whole of your hour but bring your heart back a thousand times, though it went away every time you brought it back, your hour would be very well employed.’ ”

Kornfield took it from there with a real-life, down-to-earth example. He said that, “In this way, meditation is very much like training a puppy. (That’s where we get the title for the service today.) You put the puppy down and say, ‘Stay.’ Does the puppy listen? It gets up and it runs away. You sit the puppy back down again. ‘Stay.’ And the puppy runs away over and over again. Sometimes the puppy jumps up, runs over, and pees in the corner or makes some other mess. Our minds are much the same as the puppy, only they create even bigger messes. In training the mind, or the puppy, we have to start over and over again.”

Kornfield concludes, “When you undertake a spiritual discipline, frustration comes with the territory. Nothing in our culture or our schooling has taught us to steady and calm our attention. One psychologist has called us a society of attentional spastics. Finding it difficult to concentrate, many people respond by forcing their attention . . . with tense irritation and self-judgment, or worse. Is this the way you would train a puppy? Does it really help to beat it? Concentration is never a matter of force or coercion. You simply pick up the puppy again and return to reconnect with the here and now.”

And then I studied with the Zen Master, Thich Nhat Hanh. His approach reinforced these ideas. He says that thoughts are not the enemy. Thinking thoughts is what the mind does, just like the stomach digests food. So we don’t try to eliminate anything. We learn to be mindful of simple things at first, like our breath. And when we can give our undivided attention to our breath, we find that

everything else changes, too. We find that there is a gentle kind of non-judgmental concentration that doesn't involve any force, strain, or beating up on ourselves.

It's amazing how we do things to ourselves that we wouldn't do to a dog! We have learned what works best in training animals: positive reinforcement. When we give them praise and encouragement, food and love, they respond eagerly to our wishes. More and more, this understanding is becoming the new norm in our culture: you don't beat the puppy.

And it's not just pets and puppies, though. We now have ample research to show us that what we've learned about dogs is true for people, too. Positive reinforcement is absolutely the most effective strategy for shaping behavior.

My experience with my father can serve to demonstrate the outcome when negative reinforcement and punishment is used as the primary way of shaping behavior. His message to me was absolutely clear: he never said he loved me; he never even said he liked me, although I'm sure he did. It just never occurred to him that telling me those things would be as useful as punishing me. And so the strongest, clearest message I ever received from him was his anger and disapproval. Sure, I tried hard to obey, but I internalized his message and grew into life as a victim, dominated by insecurity and depression. This is what happens when you beat the puppy.

Even though we know that positive reinforcement works better than punishment, we as a society still haven't figured it out. Our criminal justice system is a monument to our willingness to destroy the lives of those whose behavior we disapprove. We call it breaking the law, and believe that it must be punished. But where is the cup of understanding, the barrel of love, or the ocean of patience in that? We're beating the puppy instead, blind to the fact that we're actually creating more suffering for those we punish as well as everyone around them.

And it's not just our criminal justice system, either. How many of us live lives where the most relevant milestones in our day are the things of which we disapprove, which make us angry or annoyed? How many of us criticize others who we think may have misbehaved? What would happen if we lived from a center of

understanding, love, and patience instead? The prophets of all the ages have given us the answer to that, over and over and over again: it would be heaven on earth.

Even simple experiences can bear this out. Last week, as I flew nonstop back from San Francisco, I needed to use the rest room on the plane. As I made my way down the aisle, a flight attendant blocked my way and told me, with stern demeanor, that the seat belt light was on and that I wasn't allowed to be up. She insisted that I sit down and wait in an unoccupied seat. I instantly responded with a flush of shame and guilt and felt like a naughty little boy as I sat down.

She could have been kinder and gentler with me, expressing concern for my discomfort as well as concern for my safety instead. If she had, I might have felt a warm human connection instead of a rejection that activated all those old feelings of persecution from my childhood.

When people are kind and positive to us, we tend to feel happy. Our self-reliance increases. I consider it an indictment of much of traditional religion in that it seeks to make us behave in certain ways out of fear of punishment. Hell is just a bad idea. And hell is where we are living already if our lives are dominated by irritation, anger, and annoyance. We would be much better served if we focused on achieving heaven on earth rather than avoiding hell.

I invite you to consider how different it feels when you're doing what you love instead of trying to avoid what you fear or dislike.

After all, this is what church is really for: we say that our core values are compassion, nurture, and justice – aren't these really positive values? Church gives us a place to retrain our misguided impulses and experience the affirmation and approval that is missing elsewhere in our lives. And when we bring anger, disapproval, criticism and judgment into our church, we are missing the point of what church is for. Church is where we learn *not to do* those things. We come together to affirm, promote and appreciate what is good, rather than to criticize and attack what we don't like. Our Mindfulness Practice group meets every Tuesday evening at 7 pm to cultivate our ability to be fully engaged with the present moment, the only time when our hearts can feel the power of each others' authentic presence.

But whether we meet with that group or not, all of us can practice loving and mindful speech as a means to live our core values.

Thich Nhat Hanh offers some guidance for how we can do this in his mindfulness training on mindful speech:

He says, “Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I am committed to cultivating loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I am determined to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy, and hope. I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain and not to utter words that can cause division or discord, or can cause the family or the community to break. I am determined to make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.”

This is excellent advice, although it can be pretty hard to follow. I know it is for me. I’m still learning. I still live from my father’s model more than I would like. I do my best to limit giving voice to criticism, but I know that I also fail to express thanks, appreciation, and love as often as I would like.

So I would like to close by acknowledging how grateful I am for each and every one of you in this congregation: Thank you. I’m glad I’m here. I love you. And I couldn’t do all this without your help.

May it be so.