

(Ti) Sikkhā Sutta

The Discourse on the (Three) Trainings

[The training of moral virtue, of mental concentration and of wisdom]

(Aṅguttara Nikāya 3.88/1:235)

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2008

1 The three trainings: a summary

The Buddhist spiritual life is often described as the “three trainings” (*ti, sikkhā*), that is, basically (in a practical worldly sense), the training of the body and speech, the training of the mind, and the training in wisdom. The “three trainings” model leads us from our *present* state, through a *cultivated* state, into a *liberated* state (“higher mind”), albeit a temporary one, that is, until we attain sainthood.

The real training (*sikkhā*) begins on our attaining **streamwinning** (*sotāpatti*),¹ when we have let go of the idea of self-identity (that this body is a permanent entity), we have gone beyond superstition (finding life’s solutions and solace in external things), and have full wise faith in the Three Jewels (that is, our own willingness and urgency of attaining spiritual liberation). Then, we are “**trainees**” (*sekha*), undergraduates in the university of wisdom, working towards being a spiritual graduate, a “non-trainee” (*asekha*).

Spiritual development progresses more or less in the above sequence, that is, social training, mental training, and wisdom training. *Social training* begins with an immediate external environment conducive for spiritual training: we can either look for such an environment (such as a Dharma-spirited monastery) or work at it (such as using a suitable time of the day in meditation or solitary retreat). The principles of social training are found in the five precepts,² which essentially keeps us from harming ourselves, others and the environment. Another important aspect of social training is the true-hearted friend (*suhada mitta*).³

Mental training is where we internalize wholesome qualities and work towards focussing our internal stillness into some level of clarity. This training begins with sense-restraint or guarding the sense-doors, that is, constantly reflecting on the true nature, especially impermanence, of various sense-input as they arise.⁴ All this actions conduces to the letting go of sense-desires, ill will, restlessness and remorse, sloth and torpor, and spiritual doubt (that is, the five mental hindrances).⁵ Once all the five hindrances are overcome, we attain deep mental focus, even dhyanas.⁶

An important form of mental training is to spend daily or periodical quiet time—a sort of solitary retreat (*paṭisallāna*)—with yourself. This is often done by the Buddha himself and the early saints. We will discuss how to do this below [3].

When our mind is calm, it also clears up, so that we begin our *wisdom training*, that is, a presence of mind that is ever ready to respond positively and effectively to situations as they arise. The calmest mind arises immediately after a stint of dhyana or deep concentration. With this truly still mind, we look deeper into the nature of impermanence, so that we are able to directly see true reality. As long as we have not awakened, we should maintain present-moment mindfulness so that we are constantly reminded of the impermanence that pervades our world.

If we want to cultivate wisdom, some level of mental focus is needed. Mental focus can only arise from a conducive environment of moral virtue. However, as clear from **the Ti Sikkhā Sutta** (A 3.88),

¹ See **Entering the Stream** = SD 3.3.

² See **Sāleyyaka S** (M 41/1:285-290) = SD 5.7.

³ The dynamics of evil friendship (*pāpa, mittata*) and true friendship (*suhada, mittatā*) are listed in **Sigāl’ovāda S** (D 31.15-26/3:185-188) = SD 4.1.

⁴ See **Nimitta & anuvyañjana** = SD 19.14.

⁵ See **Pañca, nīvaraṇa** = SD 32.1.

⁶ See **Dhyana** = SD 8.4.

this sequence is a matter of emphasis, rather than a mutually exclusive progression; for, all three trainings facilitate one other.

In a number of places in the early canon, we are shown how the three trainings are integral parts of the noble eightfold path, as represented in this table:⁷

Factor	(aṅga)	Training (sikkhā)	(khandha)
(7) Right view	<i>sammā diṭṭhi</i>	} <u>III. Wisdom aggregate</u> (the clear mind)	<i>paññā khandha</i>
(8) Right intention	<i>sammā saṅkappa</i>		
(1) Right action	<i>sammā kammanta</i>	} <u>I. Moral virtue aggregate</u> (the body and speech)	<i>sīla khandha</i>
(2) Right speech	<i>sammā vācā</i>		
(3) Right livelihood	<i>sammā ājīva</i>		
(4) Right effort	<i>sammā vāyāma</i>	} <u>II. Concentration aggregate</u> (the calm mind)	<i>samādhi khandha</i>
(5) Right mindfulness	<i>sammā sati</i>		
(6) Right concentration	<i>sammā samādhi</i>		

(D 2:312; M 1:61, 3:251; Vbh 235)

Table 24.10c The noble eightfold path

2 Sutta summary and comments.

2.0 THE HIGHER TRAININGS. The (Ti) Sikkhā Sutta (A 3.88) is about the three “higher trainings” (*adhisikkhā*), which can be alternately translated as the “training in terms of moral virtue, training in terms of the mind, training in terms of wisdom.” In this latter case, the emphasis is on *the practical training* aspect as against the theoretical moral virtue (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), wisdom (*paññā*). Traditionally, the “higher training” (*adhi,sikkhā*) leads to the attainment of absorption (*jhāna*), and to non-return or to arhathood.

2.1 HIGHER MORAL VIRTUE. The three higher trainings are usually given in the context of monastic training. Thus, **the training in higher morality** (*adhisīla sikkhā*) refers to keeping to the monastic code (Pāṭimokkha) and other related rules, and living a morally exemplary life [§2]. This lifestyle is found today in the bona fide forest monks who still, for example, keep to the rule of poverty (not handling money) and simple monastic life.

On a simpler *non-monastic* level, that is, for lay practice, there is “training in moral virtue” (*sīla,-sikkhā*), regulated by *the five precepts*, and some level of mindfulness (*samādhi,sikkha*).⁸ However, the higher moral training (*adhi.sīla,sikkhā*)⁹ also applies to the laity, especially when he keeps to the celibacy rule (such as keeping to the eight precepts).¹⁰ Such serious lay practitioners are effectively training themselves for the path of sainthood. A famous example here is that of the layman Mahānāma.¹¹

Right action (*sammā kammantā*) consists in the “negative” moral conduct of not destroying life, not taking the not-given, and not committing sexual misconduct, and the “positive” moral conduct of the respect for life (lovingkindness), for the property of others (compassion), for the body (equanimity), for truth (altruistic joy), and for goodness (all four divine virtues).

⁷ For a detailed discussion, see *Sīla samādhi paññā* = SD 21.6; also **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16) = SD 9 Intro (10d).

⁸ On the 5 precepts, see **Velu,dvāreyya S** (S 55.7/5:352-356) = SD 1.5 & **Silānussati** = SD 15.11 Intro (2.2); see also **Layman Saints** = SD 8.6.

⁹ Traditionally, ie, in the Suttas, this training refers to of *both* the laity *and* the monastics, that is, those who have not attained the path, or not yet become streamwinners, etc.

¹⁰ “The 8 precepts” (*aṭṭha,sīla*) comprises abstention from killing, from incest, from lying, from strong drinks, from untimely meal, from entertainments and adornments, and from high seats and luxurious beds. For details, see **(Tad Ah’) Uposatha S** (S 3.70.9-17/1:211-213) = SD 4.18.

¹¹ See **Sekha S** (M 53/1:353-359) = SD 21.24.

Right speech (*sammā vāca*) comprises communication that abstains from falsehood, from tale-bearing, from harsh words, and frivolous talk, that is, communication that is truthful, unifying, pleasant, and wholesomely beneficial.

Right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*) consists in earning a living in keeping with the five precepts. Ideally, work here is not merely a means of economic support, but also of personal development and true-hearted friendship.¹² Right livelihood is the Buddhist economics of living joyfully within our means and appreciating the being of others through our generosity.¹³

The foundation of the Dharma-based spiritual life (*dhamma, cariya*) is moral virtue. The streamwinner, for example, is said to be “accomplished in moral virtue” (*sīla, sampanna*), defined as follows, for example, in **the Pañca Vera, bhaya Sutta** (S 12.41):

He is accomplished with moral virtue dear to the noble ones,¹⁴ unbroken, untorn, unmixed, spotless, liberating, praised by the wise, untarnished, giving rise to concentration.¹⁵

On a higher level of spiritual training—that leading to non-return or to arhathood—the description of the moral virtue of such saints is as follows, as given in **the (Ti) Sikkhā Sutta** (A 3.88) [§2]:

Here, bhikshus, the monk is morally virtuous, lives restrained by the rules of the monastic code [Pāṭimokkha], possessed of proper conduct and resort,¹⁶ seeing danger in the slightest faults, trains himself in the training-rules he has undertaken.¹⁷ (S 3.88.2/1:235) = SD 24.10c

Although this description of moral virtue is that of a monastic, the lay practitioner bound for non-return or for arhathood, would in spirit be a true renunciant, even though the monastic rules do not apply to him.

2.3 HIGHER MIND. The training in higher mind (*adhicitta sīla*) refers to meditation (*bhāvanā*) leading to the dhyanas [§3], which is a training expected of the monastics, or at least highly recommended for them. For the laity, this is **the training in concentration** (*samādhi sikkhā*), that is, keeping constant mindfulness (*sati*), especially in the perception of impermanence (*anicca saññā*),¹⁸ which may or may not lead on to dhyana. Monastics who are unable to attain dhyana, too, should take this simpler level of training.

2.3 HIGHER WISDOM. The training in higher wisdom (*adhipaññā sikkha*) refers to the direct understanding of the four noble truths in all their modes, such as demonstrated in **the Dhamma, cakkā-**

¹² On true-hearted friendship, see **Sigāl’ovāda S** (D 31.21-26/3:187 f) = SD 4.1.

¹³ On right livelihood, see SD 37.

¹⁴ “Moral virtue dear to the noble ones,” *ariya, kantāni sīlāni*. The noble one’s moral virtue is explained at **Vism 7.101-106/221 f**. SA says that the noble ones do not violate the five precepts; hence, this virtue is dear to them (SA 2:74).

¹⁵ S 12.41/2:68 = SD 3.3. *Akhaṇḍehi acchiddehi asabalehi akammāsehi bhujissehi viññūpasatṭhehi aparāmaṭṭhehi samādhi, saṁvattanakehi*. Clearly, this description of moral virtue also applies to the once-returner (*sākadā-gāmi*). See also **Cundī S** (A 5.32/3:36). Cf UA 268. For details, see **Vism 1.143-161/51-58, 7.101-106/221 f**.

¹⁶ *Go, cara*, lit “a cow’s habitual path or pasture.” Here it refers to 2 aspects of the renunciate’s life. In the Canon, it refers to places that are regarded as suitable for collecting almsfood (V 2:208). In this sense, *agocara* refers to places that are unsuitable for renunciates as resort (whether for alms or otherwise) (D 1:63 = It 118; M 1:33, S 5:187; It 96; cf Dh 22). In Comys, *go, cara* refers to places suitable for meditation (Vism 127). We can also take *go, cara* here in a psychological sense of *ārammaṇa*, ie, sense-objects. In other words, one “possessed of proper conduct and resort” can also incl the meaning “accomplished in proper conduct of body and of mind.”

¹⁷ *Idha bhikkhave bhikkhu sīlavā hoti pātimokkha, saṁvara, saṁvuto viharati ācāra, gocara, sampanno anumattesu vajjesu bhaya, dassāvī samādāya sikkhati sikkhāpadesu*. As at **Ajjhatta, bahiddhā, saññojana Puggala S** (A 2.4.5/1:64, 2-4). Here, the moral virtue is that of a monastic. Novices would observe the 10 precepts (*dasa, sīla*), which are an expanded version of the 8 precepts [2n] with the 8th precept on abstaining from having anything to do with money (on which see **Money and Monastics** = SD 4.19-23).

¹⁸ See esp the 10 discourses of the **Okkanti Saṁyutta** of the Saṁyutta (S 25), eg (**Anicca**) **Cakkhu S** (S 25.1/-3:225) = SD 16.7.

p.pavattana Sutta (S 56.11).¹⁹ Elsewhere, this realization is referred to as the destruction of the four influxes (*asava*),²⁰ which is equivalent of the attaining of arhathood, which is of course the goal of the monastic life.

3 Solitary retreat: spending time with yourself²¹

The Buddha's message is very simple: if we do not help ourselves, who can? Religion is all based on stories and our idea of imaginary things in which we must have faith. But the stillness of mind is something we can all experience, if we spend some quiet moments alone meditating, say watching the breath, or listening to a short sutta reading, or simply just sitting.

When your mind is calm, it becomes clear. In that clarity, you will notice there are destructive patterns of behaviour and wholesome patterns of behaviour. Getting angry, showing hate, feeling depressed, can be a destructive pattern of behaviour, but they are symptoms of deeper habitual tendencies, which we need to bring up to our conscious level so that we can heal them.

Spend some quiet time and question such habitual patterns. Simply ask *why*, then some answer will appear in your mind; ask *why* again, and so on, until you come to understand what is really going on. This final part, you have to find out for yourself.

Then there is the wholesome pattern that you should notice in yourself. It makes you feel really peaceful and happy. And it is not dependent on anything outside of yourself; for, then it that peace and happiness would be dependent on something else. Seek for the non-dependent peaceful happiness within yourself. Where does it come from? Seek and you will find it—in your heart.

You can be emotionally independent: be truly happy.

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¹⁹ That is, as theory, practice and realization for each of the truths (S 56.11.7-12/5:421 f) = SD 1.1.

²⁰ Such as **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16) & **Anubuddha S** (A 4.1): see §4n under the heading, “The four noble truths.”

²¹ Based on Piya's weekly reflection, “The Chickduck,” dated 8 Oct 2008.

The Discourse on the (Three) Trainings

(A 3.88/1:235)

1 Bhikshus, there are these three trainings. What are the three?

- (1) The training in higher moral virtue (*adhi, sīla, sikkhā*).
- (2) The training in higher mind (*adhi, citta, sikkhā*).
- (3) The training in higher wisdom (*adhi, paññā, sikkhā*).

2 And what, bhikshus, is the training in higher moral virtue?

THE PURITY OF MORAL VIRTUE. Here, bhikshus, the monk is morally virtuous, lives restrained by the rules of the monastic code [Pātimokkha], possessed of proper conduct and resort,²² seeing danger in the slightest faults, trains himself in the training-rules he has undertaken.²³

This, bhikshus, is the training in higher moral virtue.

3 And what, bhikshus, is the training in higher mind?²⁴

RIGHT CONCENTRATION: THE FOUR DHYANAS.

(1) Here, bhikshus, the monk, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome mental states, attains and dwells in **the first dhyana**, accompanied by initial application and sustained application, accompanied by zest and happiness, born of solitude.²⁵

(2) With the stilling of initial application and sustained application, by gaining inner tranquillity and oneness of mind, he attains and dwells in **the second dhyana**, free from initial application and sustained application, accompanied by zest and happiness born of concentration.

(3) With the fading away of zest, he remains equanimous, mindful and clearly knowing, and experiences happiness with the body. He attains and dwells in **the third dhyana**, of which the noble ones declare, “Happily he dwells in equanimity and mindfulness.”

(4) With the abandoning of pleasure and pain—and with the earlier disappearance of happiness and displeasure—he attains and dwells in **the fourth dhyana**, that is neither painful nor pleasant, and with mindfulness fully purified by equanimity.

This, bhikshus, is the training in higher mind.

4 And what, bhikshus, is the training in higher wisdom?

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS. Here, bhikshus,²⁶

²² *Go, cara*, lit “a cow’s habitual path or pasture.” Here it refers to 2 aspects of the renunciate’s life. In the Canon, it refers to places that are regarded as suitable for collecting almsfood (V 2:208). In this sense, *agocara* refers to places that are unsuitable for renunciates as resort (whether for alms or otherwise) (D 1:63 = It 118; M 1:33, S 5:187; It 96; cf Dh 22). In Comys, *go, cara* refers to places suitable for meditation (Vism 127). We can also take *go, cara* here in a psychological sense of *ārammaṇa*, ie, sense-objects. In other words, one “possessed of proper conduct and resort” can also incl the meaning “accomplished in proper conduct of body and of mind.”

²³ *Idha bhikkhave bhikkhu sīlavā hoti pātimokkha, saṃvara, saṃvuto viharati ācāra, gocara, sampanno anumattesu vajjesu bhaya, dassāvī samādāya sikkhati sikkhāpadesu*. As at **Ajjhatta, bahiddhā, saññojana Puggala S** (A 2.4.5/1:64, 2-4). Here, the moral virtue is that of a monastic. Novices would observe the 10 precepts (*dasa, sīla*), which are an expanded version of the 8 precepts [2n] with the 8th precept on abstaining from having anything to do with money (on which see **Money and Monastics** = SD 4.19-23).

²⁴ The foll section as at **Samādhi Bhāvanā S** (A 4.41.2/2:45) = SD 24.1.

²⁵ These are the dhyana-factors: *vitakka vicāra pīti sukhasa ek’aggatā*, respectively. On the omission of “one-pointedness of mind” (*ciṭṭassa ek’aggatā*) and “concentration” (*samādhi*) here, see **The layman and dhyana** = SD 8.5.

²⁶ **Mahā, parinibbāna S** (D 16), however, has a “three trainings” pericope (D 16.1.12, 1.14, 1.18, 2.4, 2.10, 2.20, 4.4, 4.12): see SD 9.16.1 n. The same pericope is found in **Anubuddha S** (A 4.1/2:1 f). In both cases, however, the pericope says that *moral virtue* richly supports *concentration* which richly supports *wisdom*, which in turn liberates the mind from the influxes of sense-desires (*kāma’āsava*), of existence (*bhav’āsava*), of views (*dīṭṭh’āsava*), and of ignorance (*āviññ’āsava*) (D 2:81×2, 84, 91, 94, 98, 123, 126) = SD 9; A 4.1/2:1 f. See esp **Mahā, parinibbāna S** (D 16) = SD 9 Intro (10d) (three trainings). **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2), however, gives *both* 4-noble-truth formula and the 4-influx formula (D 2.99b/1:83) = SD 8.10.

a monk knows as it really is, “This is suffering”;
he knows, as it really is, “This is the arising of suffering”;
he knows, as it really is, “This is the ending of suffering”;
he knows, as it really is, “This is the path to the ending of suffering”;²⁷
This, bhikshus, is the training in higher wisdom.

These, bhikshus, are the three trainings.

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²⁷ These statements on the 4 noble truths, and the destruction of the 4 influxes (*āsava*), are also in **Sāmañña-phala S** (D 2.99b/1:83) = SD 8.10.