



51 – The Training stage of our journey – the journey to freedom

From crisis response to cultivated life

“Just as the ocean has a gradual shelf, a gradual slope, and a gradual inclination... in the same way, this Dhamma and discipline has a gradual training, a gradual performance, and a gradual progression.” ~ Gotama (The Buddha)

“If you walk the path, you will arrive; if you do not walk the path, you will not arrive. The path does not walk itself.” ~ Ajahn Chah

Opening the operating manual

Welcome to the ‘Training stage’ of our RAFT to Freedom journey. We have travelled far to reach this point:

1. **Recognise:** We faced what was happening, named the patterns, and got honest about the cost. We surveyed the dangerous shore and ‘Recognised’ that life is often painful, difficult and disappointing – and this cannot be avoided by any of us! We also glimpsed a far, Safe Shore, where by gathering skills and changing perspectives, we could lessen our suffering and by extension, the suffering of those around us! (Chapters 01–21).
2. **Abandon:** We practised letting go – again and again – of the habits that fuel craving, aversion and compulsions. We bailed the water of craving and threw the cargo of ill-will overboard (Chapters 22–33).
3. **Freedom:** We began to taste real relief: a steadier mind, clearer choices, moments of ease that proved change is possible. We raised the sails, leaned to spot and navigate the ‘Hazards’ and felt the wind of the ‘Seven Supports’ filling them (Chapters 43–50).

Now in this ‘Training stage’ of our journey, we move into learning what to do, day by day, when life happens. We start following a clear set of instructions – not as rules to *be good*, but as practical guidance for becoming steadier, kinder, and freer over time. We open the ‘Operating Manual’ of Gotama's ‘Middle Way

Programme'. In Gotama's fourth realisation, he saw that Freedom can be cultivated: not a lucky accident or a one-time breakthrough, but the natural result of practising a practical, accessible programme.

In this Training stage, Mindfulness expands from *what is happening* (body, feelings, mind) to *what it means in practice*: we learn to recognise the patterns and principles that shape experience and the conditions that change it.

Gotama's fourth realisation is that there is a path of practice that leads to the ending of suffering. Having seen the reality of suffering, understood what fuels it, and tasted that it can cease, he then recognised a method for making that cessation dependable – a trainable way of living and taming the mind (traditionally expressed as the Noble Eightfold Path). This is why it belongs at the heart of the Training stage: it turns insight into a workable programme. It says, in effect, 'Freedom is not just something you glimpse; it's something you can cultivate – through repeated, ordinary practices in how you see, choose, speak, act, relate, and steady the mind.'

From glimpsing Freedom to living it

In the 'Freedom stage', we learned to recognise the 'still point' – the clean interval: the quiet gap, between a trigger and a reaction, where grasping and pushing are absent. The task of the Training stage is to expand that interval from a *moment* to a *method*. In a sense, we move from *recovery* as a crisis response to *discovery* as a way of life. The fleeting *states* of Freedom we tasted in the previous chapters must now settle into enduring *traits* of character.

The Secular Buddhist teacher Stephen Batchelor, puts this shift into very plain terms. The still point is real – but it's not the finish line. It's the space in which a different kind of life becomes possible, and the Training stage is where we make that possibility repeatable. We don't wait for Freedom to arrive; we practise the conditions that support it – until the path is no longer something we consult only in emergencies, but something we steadily live.

The difference between a map and a voyage

We can look at a map of Paris and know where the Eiffel Tower is, but that is not the same as walking down the Champs-Élysées. Until now, we have been

studying the map of the human mind. Now, we must walk the territory. Finally, we commit to a programme of training, training the body, heart, and mind by adopting a structured programme in the service of wellbeing. While this workbook explores Gotama's 'Middle Way Programme' (The Noble Eightfold Path) as our primary 'Operating Manual', the principle of the Training stage is universal.

If you want extra 'planks' alongside RAFT, it can help to know there are plenty of programmes out there that train the exact capacities that make wellbeing (and life in general) steadier and more fulfilling. Some are mindfulness-based (like MBSR and MBCT), some weave mindfulness with ethics and care (MBEL), some focus on building a kinder inner relationship (Mindful Self-Compassion, Compassion Cultivation Training, CBCT, Compassion Focused Therapy), and some are more overtly psychological – values-and-meaning approaches such as ACT, or practical skills toolkits like DBT. Many of which we have explored in the scientific perspectives sections of previous chapters. There are also positive-psychology 'flourishing' programmes (PERMA, Positive Psychotherapy, Well-Being Therapy, the Penn Resiliency Program) that are less about fixing what's broken and more about strengthening what supports a good life: connection, meaning, resilience, gratitude, and steadiness.

And of course, some people also add a fellowship or peer community, examples include; the 12 Steps, SMART Recovery, LifeRing, or Buddhist-informed groups like Refuge Recovery and Recovery Dharma – not as 'the whole raft', but as extra crew, extra bearings, and a bit more wind in the sails on hard days. Underneath it all sits the same broad human training: learning to see clearly, to live ethically (in the simple sense of 'less harm, more care'), and to stabilise attention – the old threefold shape you see in the Eightfold Path, but expressed in thoroughly modern language.

We have uploaded a pdf with an extensive list of resources in our downloads section on the Raft2freedom website.

Protocols and powers

Until now, much of our effort has been reactive – responding to leaks, storms, and immediate dangers. Now, our raft is stable. The Operating Manual provides the standing orders for the voyage. We are no longer drifting; we are using the wind and currents to move steadily toward the safe shore. The 'Creative Powers'

(Noble Desire, Courageous Energy, the Heart's Compass, and Fearless Investigation (Chapters 20 – 24)) now function as a coordinated system. By enacting Appropriate Perspective, Intention, Speech, Action, Livelihood, Effort/Application, Mindfulness, and Collectedness, we ensure that our raft does not just reach the safe shore, but that we arrive in good condition.

How to practise: training on the journey to Freedom

Training on the journey is how Freedom becomes dependable. It isn't about getting it right all the time; it's about building the habits and conditions that make wise choices more likely – especially when we're tired, triggered, or uncertain. The Middle Way Programme doesn't promise guarantees; it offers practical principles we can apply in real life, again and again, until they become our default way of navigating.

- ★ **Give the voyage a rhythm (a container):** Choose the simple routines that keep you on course – a daily sit, a weekly group, a morning reading, a gratitude list, an evening review. Not rigid rules, just steady timbers. Without some kind of hull, whatever you learn sloshes straight back into the sea.
- ★ **Lean into the gradual slope:** The ocean floor deepens a little at a time, and so does this journey. No one becomes an expert Navigator in a week. Look for the small signs the training is working: us come back quicker, regret less, steady sooner, soften more often.
- ★ **Steer by the next right action, not the weather:** Earlier stages taught us to feel what's here and name it honestly. Now you add something crucial: we train what we *do*. Even if kindness or courage isn't showing up in the forecast, you can still make the next skilful move. Often the heart follows the helm.
- ★ **Read the dashboard (Mindfulness of Principles):** Don't only notice the mood – recognise the pattern. Is this a hindrance rolling in? A wholesome factor rising? A sense-door trigger lighting up? Then choose the response that changes conditions: cool, energise, simplify, widen, investigate, connect.
- ★ **Sail with an *ethics of uncertainty*:** Most days we won't see the distant shore. That's normal. We don't need the perfect choice; we need the harmless one – the small step that points away from harm and towards freedom, taken right in the middle of the fog.

★ **A 10-second navigation check (when we can't see the whole route):**

- What choice reduces harm right now?
- What choice increases steadiness (rather than agitation or collapse)?
- What choice supports connection (to people, values, practice, or help)?

Self reflections

1. When I practise, does it feel like paying for my past – or like strengthening for a life I actually want to live?
2. How does the word Train land in my body compared with Try or Wish – and what kind of commitment does it quietly ask for?
3. In moments of confusion or wobble, do I default to panic and self-blame – or do I look for the ‘Operating Manual’ (a principle, a practice, a next step)?
4. Do I imagine freedom as ‘doing whatever I want’ (freedom to), or as the steadier freedom of being able to choose well – even under pressure (freedom from)?
5. Where do I feel myself forcing outcomes (striving) – and where am I cultivating conditions (training), one small repetition at a time?
6. When I can't see the far shore, am I willing to take the next right step anyway – the one that reduces harm, increases steadiness, and supports connection?
7. What changes when I shift identity from “I am broken” to “I am learning” – and how does that shift affect my dignity, patience, and courage?

Journaling prompts

1. **The trait log:** List three qualities you admire in others (patience, honesty, steadiness, courage and so forth). For each one, write one small, repeatable action you could practise this week to *train it* – something you could do even on a hard day.
2. **The ‘still point’ in action:** Describe a recent moment when you stayed more balanced than usual in the middle of a conversation, conflict, or stress. What helped you hold that *still point* – and what nearly tipped you over?
3. **Programme inventory:** Write down the core principles of the programme or path you're following (Steps, Path Factors, wellbeing commitments,

personal values). Then map each one to RAFT: does it help you ‘Recognise’, ‘Abandon’, taste ‘Freedom’, or ‘Train’?

4. **From state to trait:** Describe a moment of freedom you tasted recently – however brief. What were the conditions that made it possible (sleep, support, honesty, boundaries, meditation, movement)? What one daily practice would most reliably recreate those conditions?
5. **Operating Manual:** If you were writing a one-page ‘Operating manual for my life’, what would your first three navigation guidelines be? (Keep them simple, kind, and practical – more like helm commands than moral slogans.)
6. **The crew check-in:** Imagine your inner *crew* this week: energy, confidence, attention, mood, body, motivation. Who’s doing their job? Who’s overworking? Who’s missing at their post? What would help the crew cooperate just a little better tomorrow?
7. **Vow of practice:** Write a short aspiration for the next seven days – one or two sentences you can live with. Make it weather-proof: something you can keep even when you’re tired, triggered, or unsure. For example: “I will pause when triggered and choose an ‘Appropriate Response’ – as best as I am able”

Supporting material: scientific and philosophical perspectives

For those interested in the scientific and philosophical underpinnings of Training, the following overview highlights some key connections.

- ★ **Neuroscience:** Freedom becomes more reliable through learning: repeated practice changes brain networks involved in habit, attention, and emotion regulation. Neuroplasticity means the brain is not fixed; what we practise becomes easier to access and more automatic. Training in pausing, mindfulness, and restraint is associated with stronger regulatory control (often linked with prefrontal systems) and reduced threat reactivity (often linked with amygdala responses), creating a wider gap between impulse and action. Practice can also reduce the stickiness of rumination and self-referential looping (often linked with default mode activity), making it easier to return to present-moment awareness. A simple learning principle underpins this: “neurons that fire together wire together” – each time a

trigger is met with a skilful response, that pathway is reinforced and becomes more available next time.

★ **Psychology:** Lasting change is supported by structure and repetition, not just insight or intention. Much compulsive behaviour functions as short-term coping for distress, overwhelm, or disconnection; training provides alternative coping skills that are healthier and more sustainable. Behavioural activation captures a key mechanism: action often comes before motivation – small, planned steps generate momentum, self-trust, and reinforcement. Modern recovery work also emphasises recovery ecology: outcomes improve when supportive conditions are in place – routines, community, accountability, and reduced exposure to high-risk triggers – so change is not dependent on mood or willpower alone. Over time, skills generalise: what is practised in calmer moments becomes available under pressure, making steadiness portable across real-life situations.

★ **Philosophy:** The chapter rests on a practical view of human change: we become, in significant part, what we repeatedly choose and rehearse. Aristotle’s idea of *Hexis* frames virtue as a stable quality of character formed by habit rather than a single heroic act. Pragmatist philosophy adds a clear test: a path is justified by its consequences – does it reduce suffering and increase the capacity to live well with others? On this view, training is neither self-improvement theatre nor moral perfectionism; it is the steady cultivation of conditions that support clarity, decency, and freedom in the middle of ordinary life.

Remember to remember

Gotama's fourth realisation is the map that turns a longing for Freedom into a route you can actually follow. It reminds us that liberation isn't a rare gift granted to the lucky few, but a craft that can be learned, practised, and refined by everyone. By embracing training, the Navigator shifts from simply surviving the storm to learning how to steer in all weathers. The inner posture changes: less “Why is this happening to me?” and more “What’s happening here – and what helps?” That is the quiet pivot from being at the mercy of conditions to working skilfully with them. The journey stops being an inspiring idea and becomes a set of steady commitments: how we speak, how we act, how we earn, how we relate, how we attend, how we correct course when we drift.

With the Operating Manual in hand, each moment becomes usable. A rough patch is no longer proof you're failing; it's information – signals about fatigue, stress, loneliness, craving, reactivity, or the stories the mind is rehearsing. Instead of arguing with the weather, we learn the adjustments that keep us on course: simplify, pause, cool, energise, widen, investigate, reconnect. Each return to the principles is a form of strengthening. Each small choice in the direction of harmlessness builds trust, because it shows we can navigate without perfect clarity. In time, training changes what feels possible: the Safe Shore comes closer, not only as a future destination, but as a way of travelling – more often steady, more often kind, more often free.

“You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems.” ~ James Clear

“This teaching and training has one taste: the taste of freedom.” ~ Gotama

Sutta References

★ **Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11): Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion**

- *Summary:* The foundational discourse where the Buddha defines the Fourth Noble Truth as the Middle Way Programme. It outlines the eight factors and states that this path is to be developed (*bhāvetabba*).

★ **Gaṇaka Moggallāna Sutta (MN 107): To Gaṇaka Moggallāna**

- *Summary:* The Buddha uses the analogy of a horse trainer to describe his method. He explains that the path to awakening is a gradual one, moving step-by-step from ethical conduct to sense restraint, mindfulness, and eventually deep insight.

★ **Mahācattārisaka Sutta (MN 117): The Great Forty**

- *Summary:* Explains that the factors of the path do not work in isolation. Appropriate View runs ahead of the rest, and Appropriate Mindfulness and Appropriate Effort circle around every other factor to keep them on track. This describes the integrated nature of the Training.

[RAFT to Freedom](#) © 2025 by Dr Cathryn Jacob and Vince Cullen

is licensed under Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International.

