

A Culture of Restraint

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The Buddha once compared sensory input to being like a flayed cow with no skin. Everywhere the cow goes, insects bore into its flesh all the time. Our senses are constantly picking up information: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body. And on top of that, the mind is its own sense. It picks up all kinds of ideas. The question is, how are you going to find any peace in the midst of all that? And the answer is: You have to be selective.

The Buddha talks about restraint of the senses as an essential part of meditation. We often think of meditation as what starts as soon as you sit down and close your eyes, but actually it's going on all the time. The word for meditation, "*bhavana*," means to develop. You should stop and look: What are you developing in your mind?

When you follow certain trains of thought, you develop the habits that go along with them. You create ruts in the mind. When you give free rein to anger, you create an anger-rut. When you develop mindfulness, you create a mindfulness-rut. The next time you get anywhere near those patterns of thinking, the mind falls into the rut and goes along with it. We're doing this all the time. They've done study after study to show how selective our process of perception is. It happens on many levels. Some of it's conscious, some of it's not, but the upshot is that even before you sit down to close your eyes, you're already in a process of developing.

The question is, is it developing the same thing the meditation is meant to develop? Are you developing calm or are you developing turmoil? Are you developing mental stability or are you developing restlessness? Look into this all the time. Everything you do, everything you say is a process of developing something. It's laying down ruts in the mind, so what kind of ruts do you want? We're trying to work on good ones as we sit here with our eyes closed, but if the rest of the day you're working on other kinds of ruts, it's a struggle.

When you look at things, what are you looking for? Who's doing the looking? Is lust doing the looking? Is anger doing the looking? If these things are doing the looking, they create the ruts for more anger or more lust to keep on doing the looking. So throughout the course of the day, be careful of what you look at.

This doesn't mean you can't look at good-looking things. It's just that when you see something good-looking, you have to remind yourself that there's another side to it as well. When you see something you really hate, remind yourself that there's another side to it as well. As Ajaan Lee used to say, "Be a person with two eyes." The same applies to your listening, what you smell, what you taste, what you touch, and especially what you think about.

It's a common pattern that when you're sitting here meditating, you try to keep the mind under control but then as soon as you get up, it's back to its old ways—just wandering around anyplace it wants to. And that way you're being inconsistent. If the mind is going to go someplace, you have to ask yourself, "Why are you going there?" It's like that old slogan from World War II: "Is this trip really necessary?" Where are you planning to go? What are you planning to bring back? Be deliberate in your thinking. The Buddha's not saying not to think. He's just saying to have a sense of why you're thinking, what it's going to accomplish. The same holds true with the looking and the listening: Have a sense of why you're looking at something, what you're going to accomplish by looking at it. Why are you listening to certain things?

All of this is part of the meditation, part of the developing, because you're creating the environment in your mind and you want to make sure you're creating the right environment. Get your priorities in order. This way the meditation is less an attempt at a little island of calm in the midst of whirlpools. It's more a part of an ongoing process—realizing that the mind needs to be trained, and that the training is a full time process.

Even when you're out in the world—not just here at the monastery—you've got to look at where your mind is going, what it's picking up. In particular, notice what it's picking up because there are all kinds of bizarre messages out there. As soon as you turn on the TV, pick up a newspaper, pick up a magazine, the question should always be, "Why do these people want me to believe this?"—so that you don't fall for the messages, for the unstated values.

If this makes you a stranger in your surroundings, well, fine. Sometimes it's good to be a stranger, not to pick up everything. One of the advantages of going to Thailand was just that: No matter how much I was absorbed in the culture, in the language, there was still part of me that was an outsider, and that outside perspective was always important. Sometimes it helps you keep your sanity, because that outsider perspective can be your guide inside, your inner teacher.

The Buddha talks about the traditions of the noble ones, or the customs of the noble ones. To practice in line with these traditions is to make you a person with one foot in two different cultures. The noble ones look at material things and say, "Remember all the suffering that goes into just providing food, clothing and shelter, so don't get all wrapped up in having lots of food, lots of clothing, a big house. Remember that those things have their drawbacks." The world out there is saying, "Buy, buy, buy," but the noble ones are saying, "No." Listening to the noble ones helps keep you bicultural. When the media push all kinds of materialistic values on you, there's a part of you that can say, "No." You're not sucked into those things, and as a result the mind is more independent, has a lot more peace. It can keep its values straight even in crazy societies like ours.

There's a phrase in the *Dhammapada*: the people who see shame in what's not shameful or see no shame in what is shameful. A part of the world looks at the values of being moral, having principles, not fighting tooth and claw to get lots

of belongings, and see *that* as shameful, as something to be embarrassed about. That's why you've got to get out of that culture. This is why we need the culture of the noble ones. That voice of restraint inside is going to be your protection. Learn how to listen to it, to strengthen it, so that restraint in day-to-day life augments the restraint of your meditation. You're trying to focus on one thing, and you can stay there because you're used to exercising restraint in a healthy way: knowing how much you can rein the mind in, when you have to give it a little extra leash, so it doesn't feel too confined, too cooped up, but at the same time knowing how much is too much—this is something you have to learn over time.

So think about the environment you're creating in your mind, the environment that allows the mind to settle down, the values that allow it to settle down, so that when disturbing thoughts arise you don't immediately go with them. You can look at them and say, "That's not a thought I want to follow." When you're used to saying No to things already, it's easier to say No to them when you're sitting here with your eyes closed focusing on the breath. And vice versa: When you've got your eyes open you can remind yourself, "I've been able to overcome this thought before. I've been able to say No to it, and I haven't died."

This way you can maintain your mental health, and the meditation really does become an ongoing process of developing—developing the skillful qualities you want: mindfulness, alertness, a sense of calm, a sense of wholeness and wellbeing in body and mind. As the Buddha said, "The mind well trained brings happiness." It needs to be well trained because it's always doing things, so make sure that what it's doing is in line with where you want to go.