

The Bridge to Concentration

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Restraint is a practice that bridges two parts of the training: virtue on the one hand, and concentration on the other. Ajaan Lee talks about restraint as the middle level of virtue beyond the lowest level of virtue, which is just practice on the level of the precepts. The middle level is when you start gaining some control over your sense doors. You have to be careful about how you look at things, how you listen and relate to all your other sensory input. You begin to see certain ways that you relate to sounds and sights, etc., that give rise to greed, anger, and delusion in the mind.

So you've got to learn how to relate in different ways. If you don't, these things take root in the mind and then grow. Every time you look in those unskillful ways again, it's like adding fertilizer to these unskillful roots. The unskillful plants growing in your mind take over, and then when you sit down and meditate, you've got to do a lot of jungle-clearing to get them out. So it's best to stop them as soon as they get planted—or even better, before they get planted.

So think of restraint as you go through the day as part of your meditation practice. When you listen to somebody say something you don't like, think, "This is going to lead to all kinds of unskillful states in the mind if I'm not careful." Make it a top priority to focus on what's going on in your mind and try to control whatever unskillful states arise. When you have that sense of priorities, it's a lot easier to meditate, because you're not cluttering up the mind, you're not indulging an unskillful habits that then have to be unlearned when you sit down and close your eyes. If you go back and forth, allowing unskillful things to sprout while your eyes are open and then you try to cut them down when your eyes are closed, it's just a constant weeding process. It never gets done, because you've planted more weeds in the course of the day and then you've got to pull them out when you meditate.

The important thing is learning how not to plant them. And you do that right here where you focus on things that you see or hear. One of the big issues is what other people say. You're at a monastery. We don't have a policy of what some people call noble silence or what the Buddha called dumb silence—in other words, where nobody talks at all. But we do try to maintain right speech, and yet sometimes we're not all that successful. So it's good to remember when people are

talking, you have to be careful about what they're saying, whether it's worth taking in or not.

This is another aspect of restraint. This also means that while you're talking, you have to be careful about what kind of impact your words will have on other people. When the Buddha talks about restraint, it's not only about having restraint over what comes into the mind from outside, but also about having restraint over what goes out through your words, your actions, and your thoughts. Before you say anything, think of the impact it's going to have on the people around you, especially when you know that these are people who are meditating: Their minds are in a very tender condition, just coming out of meditation, say, or getting ready to meditate. Be careful not to say things that are going to give rise to greed, anger, or delusion.

And be careful not to engage in speculation. When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, I remember one night when I was talking with one of the young Thai monks. I was a young American monk and had lots of opinions about things. The next day, Ajaan Fuang really took me to task. He said, "Do you really know those things you're talking about?" And I had to admit that I didn't, and a lot of my opinions were speculation. He said, "Well, why clutter up other people's minds with your guesses? 'It might be this; it might be that.' Maybe that stirs them up and doesn't help them at all."

So you have to be careful about your opinions before you express them: "Do I really know what I'm talking about, or do I just *think* I know what I'm talking about?" That's really hard to see. So the best rule is: Don't say anything unless it's really necessary. That way, you help not to clutter up other people's minds. And if you have a thought that you know is not necessary, you're not going to speak it, you're not going to say it to anybody, why even think it? That helps you cut through that thought, the influence that thought's going to have in your mind. If there are certain topics you don't talk about, after a while you stop thinking about them, because the thoughts don't lead anywhere. That helps to quiet the mind down.

So try to keep talking to a minimum. Talk about what's necessary, what's useful. The Buddha's test for what should be said is, one, do you know that it's true? Two, if it's true, do you know that it's useful right now? And three, if it's true and useful, is this the right time and place to say those things? In a community where people are training their minds, there's not all that much that's really necessary to say. There a lot of issues where this is not the proper place, not the proper time to talk about them.

So try to cut your talking down to an absolute minimum. In the texts there's a story where the Buddha had to leave a large monastery because the monks had split into two big factions. Basically what the split came down to is what nowadays would be that one monk didn't flush the toilet and another monk came and found out about it, saw him, and reprimanded him a little. But then from there, it spread throughout the community and turned into a huge controversy to the point where the whole community was are ready to split into two. The Buddha tried to talk sense into the monks but they wouldn't listen to him. They basically said, "You just sit aside, be the Buddha, and be quiet. We'll take care of this."

So the Buddha left. He went to visit some monks who were living in a forest who were headed by Ven. Anuruddha. And as Anuruddha told him, "We live like milk mixed with water." In other words, they mixed very easily. Whatever chores they had to do together, they wouldn't speak unless it was really unnecessary. Even simple things like asking for someone else's help, say, to lift a jar of water or something: They wouldn't even speak for that. They'd just make a sign with a hand, and the other person would come over and help. Every five days they would stay late up into the night, discussing Dhamma. That's the ideal community. In other word, you're not dumb. You don't maintain total silence, but you talk only when it's necessary. You talk about things that are really helpful, things you know about.

You're here not only to look after your own concentration and to have respect for your concentration. Have respect for other people's concentration as well. Other people here are trying to keep their minds quiet. They're trying to keep as little greed, anger, and delusion as possible from infiltrating their minds. So avoid expressing things that would stir them up, especially in a community like this, where people are meditating good part of the day. Their minds are very sensitive.

Try to show restraint both about what's coming into your senses and what's coming out through your mouth and your actions. The more skilled you are in restraint, then the easier it'll be when you meditate, the easier it'll be for the mind to settle down. You're not placing a lot of irritants into the mind or into anybody else's mind. There'll be less garbage, less underbrush to clear away.