

Restraint

July 25, 2021

Today's the beginning of the Rains, and it looks like we may actually have some rain this year. This is the time of year when the monks make a determination to settle down for three months, stay in one place, and try to encourage one another in the practice. The tradition was that at the end of the Rains the monks would go their separate ways, practice off in the woods, practice off in the wilderness. Then they would come back together for the next Rains and give one another encouragement and instructions again. Traditionally, it has also become a time when lay people decide to make a determination, too: Whatever kind of goodness they want to develop, they give themselves three months to do it.

So look at your life: What kind of goodness are you lacking? Use this opportunity to try to make up the lack. It could be in terms of generosity, virtue, or meditation. In terms of generosity, you may ask yourself: What kind of generosity are you still weak in? Probably the most important form of generosity is forgiveness. It's often the hardest, so you have to look into why. What pride is keeping you from being forgiving? What offended sense of honor is keeping you from being forgiving? Is it worth holding on to? If it's getting in the way of your goodness, is it really worth it?

Or you can look at your precepts. Are your precepts in good shape? If so, how about that other form of virtue, which is restraint of the senses? This is something where we could all use some work, because we're always taking in information. We tend to gobble it down, without really paying much attention to what's good for us and what's not. And also: Who's doing the gobbling?

When you're looking at something, what's the purpose? Is the purpose in your best interest, or is it in the interest of greed, aversion, and delusion? If it's the latter case, then you're not really the one looking. Greed is looking. Anger's looking. Delusion is looking. The more they take charge of the looking, the stronger they get, the more they get in a position of power inside the mind, where they're in charge. Then when the time comes to meditate, it's hard to push them out of their

seat. So don't let them take the seat to begin with.

Each time you look, ask yourself—why? Each time you listen—why? All of the senses—why? Of course, this comes down to the most important sense over which you're trying to keep control, which is the mind. Because the nature of the eye is if there are forms to see, it's going to see them. The nature of the ear is if there are sounds to hear, it's going to hear them. But the real question is: What are you doing with them? Are you paying attention or are you not? If you are paying attention, why? And when you do, what are the results when you bring these things into the mind?

In other words, take some responsibility for how you use your senses. They're not just a playground. They're openings out into a dangerous world—a world that has a lot of potentials, a lot of good things, but also a lot of things that could be very harmful. So you've got to be very selective in how you engage the world. If you find that you're looking at something in a way that gives rise to greed or anger, is there a different way you could look at it? If you can't think of a different way of looking at it, then just don't look for it for the time being.

This is going to give rise to a sense of feeling hemmed in. The things you used to be able to do, you can't do anymore, and there will be part of the mind that objects—which is why restraint of the senses leads straight into meditation.

The Buddha says that when you're restraining the senses, it's like having six different animals on leashes. You've got a crocodile. You've got a jackal. You've got a dog, a bird, a snake, a monkey. Now, suppose each of them was on a leash, and then you tied the ends of the leashes together in one spot, but you didn't tie it to a stake.

They would pull and pull and pull, and whichever animal was the strongest would pull all the other animals in its direction. The crocodile would want to go down to the water. The monkey would want to go up into a tree. The bird would like to fly in the air. The snake would want to go into a hole, the dog into a village, the jackal into a cremation ground. What usually happens is the crocodile's the strongest, so it pulls all the others down into the water, where they all drown.

In other words, wherever your likings are strongest, they're going to pull everything else in the mind in that direction, and that'll pull it all down.

What you need is a stake. In this case the Buddha says the stake is mindfulness immersed in the body—as when you’re focused on the breath. You breathe in and out in a way that gives rise to rapture, gives rise to pleasure, that gladdens the mind, concentrates the mind. You can breathe with a sense of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out.

This expansive sense of well-being and awareness is what gives the mind alternative food, so that it’s not so hungry to go out and feed off of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. It’s happy to feed inside. In that case, it’s easier to say No to unskillful things outside. Using your discernment, you realize that the mind needs to feed, and if you simply forbid it to feed, it’s going to go sneaking off, getting its food out of garbage cans and out of trash bins. So feed it well.

In this case, you’re using not only restraint, but also your discernment. As the Buddha said, if you’re going to make a determination, there are four qualities you need to develop, and they start with discernment. As he says, there are four types of action in the world: First there are things that you like to do and give good results. Those are no-brainers. You’re going to do them. Then there are things you don’t like to do and give bad results: Those too are no-brainers, too. You don’t want to do them at all. The ones that are harder are things that you like to do but are going to give bad results; and the things that you don’t like to do but will give good results.

And here, he said, the measure of your discernment is how well you can convince yourself to do the right thing—in other words, to forget about your likes and dislikes, and to focus on the results. So even though you don’t like to do something but it gives good results, you’re able to talk yourself into wanting to do it: finding it entertaining, finding some good reason for liking it. As for things you like to do but give bad results, you have to talk to yourself until you realize, “Okay, these are really not in my best interest. What little pleasure I get out of these things is simply not worth it.”

So discernment here is not a matter of knowing abstract concepts, like emptiness or not-self or whatever. It’s more a matter of knowing how to psych out your own mind—to convince yourself of what’s right. This applies to choosing the right goals, and also choosing the right means to the goal.

We've chosen the Buddha as our teacher. We've chosen his path as the ideal path. Now it's simply a matter of talking ourselves into following it. That's how discernment shades into truth, which is the second quality. Once you know that something needs to be done in order to attain the goal, you're true to it. You don't turn traitor and change your mind. Once you realize that something really is good, you stick with it.

That's going to involve the third quality, which is relinquishment, knowing there are certain things you've got to give up. When you take some control over your senses, it means that there's some information you're not going to get, the kind of information that would stir up the mind. But you have to ask yourself: How much is that information really worth? Is it worth getting a mind in bad shape?

Part of the mind says, "Well, I have to know." But how much do you really *have* to know? There's that phrase FOMO—fear of missing-out. Well, most of the stuff we miss out on—the latest news, the latest fashions, the latest gossip—is the kind of stuff we're going to be forgetting pretty soon anyhow. So why clutter up your mind in the meantime?

And if you don't forget it, it's even worse. It's like having a closet filled with old clothes. You can't really wear them, they're not any use, but you've got them there just filling up all this space. So ask yourself, "Why do I have to take this information in to begin with?" You can just ignore it, and you find that you can cut away a lot of needless confusion and turmoil in the mind in this way.

All this is based on calm, which is the fourth quality. In other words, you don't get worked up over the fact that you're getting control of your senses—that you're saying No to looking at certain things, or listening to certain things in a certain way. And you maintain calm, of course by again, using your discernment—because discernment has to lie behind all of these factors.

In this case, you realize, "I can keep my mind from feeling hemmed in by giving it a more expansive state." You can develop the *brahmaviharas*—starting with goodwill for everybody all over the world. Think about all the beings all through infinity, all the different galaxies, the huge universe for which you can have goodwill: "May all beings be happy." Then bring it down to the people who are

closest to you: “May these beings be happy, too.”

If you find there’s somebody you don’t find it easy to spread goodwill for, you have to ask yourself—why? After all, what does goodwill mean? It means a wish that they’ll be happy. How are they going to be happy? Your discernment tells you that it’s through their own actions. So if they’ve been behaving in a bad way, goodwill for them is a wish that says, “May they see the error of their ways. May they understand the causes for true happiness, and be willing and able to act on them.” You should be able to feel that for anybody.

Now, there may still be a part of the mind that says, “Can’t we see them suffer a little bit first?” You have to ask yourself: Do you want to have that childish part of your mind take over? And what good would be done by their suffering? There are a lot of people who, the more they suffer, the more they insist that they were right to begin with. It’s very rare to find someone who suffers and realizes that it was because of their own actions.

So may this person be like the wise horse. The Buddha says that there are five kinds of horses. There’s the horse where all you have to do is whisper the word “whip,” and it does what you want it to do. Then there’s the second kind where it has to see the whip. With the third kind, you have to touch the whip on the horse’s skin. With the fourth kind, you have to dig a little bit into the skin. With the fifth kind, you have to dig through the flesh into the bone. And sometimes even then the horse won’t do the work.

So you wish, for the sake of everybody’s well-being: May they be like that first kind of horse and realize that something would be wrong, or they just have the sense of shame, the sense of compunction, that they don’t want to do that.

Work through all the people for whom you find it hard to have goodwill until you realize that you do want to have goodwill for them, because it’s good for you. You can learn how to trust yourself more if you have goodwill for other people. You’re less likely to do unskillful things.

When you can survey the whole world and you realize there’s nobody for whom you have ill will, your mind gets more and more expansive. The same with compassion; the same with empathetic joy. There are people out there who have fortune that you don’t have, and you’re not jealous.

As the Buddha said, when you see somebody who's rich, you have to tell yourself: You've been there before. You see someone who's really poor: You've been there before, too. And as we say, we want everybody to be happy. Well, here's somebody who's happy. If somebody is happy, and you're jealous of their happiness, there's an inconsistency right there: Your wish for their happiness is not true.

And you may say, "Well, there are cases where people are doing horrible things but they're happy." They're happy because of their past good actions. The horrible things they're doing now are things for which you have to have compassion—again, may that person see the error of his or her ways.

This way, you can make your mind more expansive. Even just sitting here breathing, you can make your breath your food. Remember: You're making the breath your post and you have a sense of well-being that fills the whole body, so that you don't feel hemmed in when restraining your senses.

You can even think of the breath energy around the body. You've got a breath-energy cocoon. Is the cocoon of energy in good shape? It's your electromagnetic force field that protects you from influences outside. Put it into good shape. That way, you don't feel hemmed in. And as for the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations you have to say No to—it doesn't feel like that much of a deprivation anymore.

So all of these aspects of a good determination—discernment, truth, relinquishment, calm—come down to discernment, because they're related to the duties for the four noble truths. You realize you're suffering and you can see the cause of suffering inside, so you have to develop good qualities to overcome that cause. That's what the determination is all about: developing good qualities of the mind to have a good impact on the mind. It's in this way that you get on the right path and become your own refuge.

As I noted last night, prior to the night when the Buddha gave his first talk, the world didn't have a refuge, or its refuge was incomplete. The Buddha was there, but he hadn't taught yet. He hadn't explained the way to true happiness. It was when he gave the explanation, and someone was able to follow it and gain results: That's when the world got its refuge.

We now have someone to show us how to understand suffering and how to deal with it so that we can go beyond it. We now have that refuge. Now it's up to us to take that refuge and bring it inside—by following the example of the Buddha, following his teachings, following the example of the noble Sangha—so that we can become our own refuge.

When you learn to depend on yourself like this, that's when you can say that your determination has succeeded. And any time when you do this, you can tell yourself you're building a monument to goodness.

The world has its stone monuments, its metal monuments. We see that they last for a while, and then people decide they don't like who's being depicted and they pull the monuments down. Or even if people like the person, over time even stone gets worn away.

But a monument to goodness: That's something you know for yourself. Other people don't have to know, but you know for yourself how good it is. That's something that time can't destroy. So work on your monument inside—and that will be for your long-term welfare and happiness.