Momentum Through Restraint

June 11, 2025

Once you’ve started a meditation practice, the next step is how to maintain it and develop it. How to give it momentum. And that moves beyond just sitting with your eyes closed or doing walking meditation. It also involves how you bring the meditation into your daily life. Or you might say, bring your daily life into the meditation. Because you’re not going to develop momentum by starting and stopping. You’re trying to make it as continuous as possible. So you think about what’s the basic principle of the meditation. Which is you’re trying to get some intelligent control over your mind. So it doesn’t wander off into thoughts and emotions that are going to be harmful to you or to other people. You want to encourage the emotions and thoughts that are actually helpful, skillful. And when you’re off the cushion and off the walking meditation path, that comes down to a practice that’s called restraint. A lot of us don’t like the name restraint. It sounds like we’re being confined. But John Lee has a nice image. He says it’s like having a house. You can’t leave the windows and doors open all the time. Otherwise pests will come in. If you have anything bad in the house, it’s going to go out of the house. So you have to know when to open the doors, when to close them, when to open the windows, when to close them. That’s the basic principle of restraint. It governs two things. One, the things you bring in. Your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind. In other words, the things you focus on. As you go through the day, you look at something, you listen to something. And if you see that it’s going to create greed, lust, anger, delusion in the mind, you have to ask yourself, why are you looking in that way? Because restraint doesn’t mean that you put blinders on your eyes or plugs in your ears. It means you look at your reasons for looking and your reasons for listening. And so on through the rest of the senses. Because if you act on those reasons, then that encourages those mind states. And the more you encourage those mind states in the course of the day, then the harder it’s going to be to get rid of them as you sit down and meditate. So it’s basically a process of what’s called metacognition. You step back and you look at how you’re running your mind. This is going to be especially clear when you get on the internet. You click on something, you ask yourself, why am I clicking? What am I expecting? What part of the mind is being fed by this stuff that’s coming in? If you see that looking at things in a certain way gives rise to unskillful emotions, unskillful mind states, ask yourself, can I look at these things in another way? This is looking at certain things that give rise to greed. But you can also look at them in another way that makes them less attractive. This is why in the monastic system we have body contemplation. You can look at the body in a way that makes it very attractive. Or you’re thinking about what’s inside the body. You took all the different parts of the body out. What would you have? Maybe a mess on the floor. You’d want to run away. Yet when they’re all sewed up inside, people can get attracted. What’s going on? How is the mind talking to itself? What reasons is it giving for looking in that particular way? When you find something that makes you angry, you have to ask yourself, well, is there something that can keep me from getting overwhelmed by the anger here? In other words, you’re running your mind the same way as you would when you’re meditating. When you’re meditating, you set up a certain rule that you’re going to stay with the breath, whatever your object is. And anything else that is not related, you’re going to let it go. In the meditation, you’re not thinking so much about why you would want to think about those things. You just say, no, I don’t need that right now. You let it go. And then to keep the mind from being starved, you give it something good to focus on, which is why we work with the breath, trying to make the breath comfortable, trying to make the breath energy interesting in the body. Realizing that if you have any chronic illness, or any chronic pains, that you can use the breath energy to help alleviate those illnesses and pains. So the breath is interesting and a pleasant place to be. In fact, when the Buddha talks about sensory strength, he realizes that a lot of the reason we go out looking for sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, is because the mind is hungry, hungry for pleasure. So you give it something pleasant inside. The analogy he gives, he says, it’s like having six animals. You have a bird, a snake, a crocodile, a dog, a jackal, a monkey, and each of them is on a leash. You tie the ends of the leashes together. And if you don’t tie the ends of the leashes to a post, then they’re going to pull and pull and pull, and they’re going in a different direction. It’s the monkey up into a tree, the bird into the sky. It’s probably going to happen as the crocodile go down to the river and drag everybody else down there, and they’re all going to die. In other words, if there’s no restraint, you go after sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. Your efforts to gain some control over the mind get killed. So what the Buddha recommends is you tie all those leashes to a post. In this case, the post is your mindfulness of the body. You’ve been making it comfortable by the way you breathe. So as you go through the day, try to maintain a sense of ease in the body. It may be too much to ask to be aware of. Each in and out breath, but you can have a general sense of the breath energy in the body as a field of energy. Keep it relaxed, keep it open and wide. As you go through the day, if you see it tightening up anywhere, just relax it. Tightens up again, relax it again. That way the mind has something good to feed on. So you’re not so hungry for sights, et cetera, et cetera. That way you can look at your process of looking, look at your process of listening, get some distance from it, see it as a cause and effect process. You realize that you’ve been feeding your mind in very unskillful ways, but you can learn how to feed it in better ways. And you can go through life maintaining your sense of center, maintaining your sense of control inside. That helps give some amenity to the practice. That’s opening and closing the doors with regard to things coming in. As for things going out, this is the practice of the precepts. We abide by the precepts, not because there’s somebody who’s going to give us a reward for being good and abiding by the precepts, but it’s a training for the mind. Make up your mind you’re not going to kill, you’re not going to steal, you’re not going to elicit sex, you’re not going to lie, you’re not going to take intoxicants. You try to hold by that intention. Now that requires that you develop some good qualities in the mind that are conducive to the meditation. It requires mindfulness to keep the precept in mind, alertness to watch your behavior to make sure it is in line with the precept, and ardency to stick with this. Because there will be times when your precepts get challenged. You’re asked some information that you know that the person asking will probably abuse it or misuse it. And how do you avoid giving that information without lying? And how do you avoid the temptation to tell little white lies to make smooth things over with other people? So this digs up a lot of interesting things inside your mind. Again, you’re learning about your intentions, which is what the practice is all about. As the Buddha said, it’s through our intentions that we shape our present experience out of the raw material from our past karma. Too often we’re in the dark about our intentions. That’s what ignorance means. We’re not really clear about why we’re doing things. So take the precepts. And the Buddha took the precept on lying as the most serious. Because if you lie to somebody and give them misinformation, that misinformation can affect their behavior for a long time. As the Buddha said, it’s even worse than killing them in some cases. So you’ve got to be very careful. It’s so easy to tell a little lie. And as we start justifying the little lies and we start justifying bigger lies, we find that the value of our speech gets reduced. And we start putting up walls inside, walls of denial, which is not what you want as a meditator. You want everything to be open wide inside your mind. So even though we’re exercising restraint in this house of ours, opening the doors, letting in only the good people, letting out only good people into the neighborhood, but within the house we have a wide expansive state where everything is open inside. And that way it’s a lot easier to see what you’re doing. If you’re used to putting up little walls inside, walls of excuses, then when you’re meditating, those walls will get in the way. And again, it’s hard to develop momentum when you run into a wall here, a wall there. So you want your mind to be as open as possible. You want to be clear about your intentions because that power we have to shape our experience. If we use it in ignorance, of course, it’s going to lead to suffering, but we can use our powers of intention to create a path inside, a path in our actions, our words, our deeds, our thoughts. It can lead to the end of suffering. So in the case of restraint, it’s not just holding ourselves in, it’s being wise in how we basically run our house. And that way we create a good Dharma foundation inside. And the influences that go outside will be good influences as well. This is what we need. We are responsible for our actions more than for anything else. So we want them to be good for our own sake and good for the people around us. It’s very hard to find a secure refuge in this world. But if you can develop a secure refuge inside by being very clear about what you’re doing, why you’re doing it, and doing only the best things you can think of, you’re providing a refuge for other people too. you

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