

The Skill of Restraint

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People often ask how to bring the practice into daily life. The answer is relatively simple. It's one many people don't like to hear, but it *is* simple: restraint. There are basically two kinds of restraint. There's restraint in what you do, and restraint in how you look and listen and smell and taste and feel and think about things—in other words, restraint in what goes out, and restraint in what comes in. And both kinds of restraint require a good amount of skill.

Take restraint of the senses: There's a skill to looking, a skill to listening. You want to look at things in such a way that you're not exciting greed, anger, or delusion. You want to listen to things in such a way that you don't excite greed, anger, or delusion. And so on down through the senses. This is a skill. You want to be able to do it in such a way that you don't starve yourself of pleasures to the point where you break down and suddenly find yourself in front of an open refrigerator, scarfing down a gallon of ice cream. You need to know how to keep the mind well fed even as you're starving your defilements. In mastering this skill, it helps to have concentration as a foundation. The texts often give restraint of the senses as a prerequisite for concentration, but as is so often the case in the Buddha's teachings, the two qualities actually help each other along.

Try to notice when you look at something: Does your attention go flowing out? Do you lose your sense of the body? If you do, it's a sign that your looking isn't all that skillful. You want to be able to stay in the body as you look, as you listen, to maintain your sense of the breath energy throughout the body. If you can't, that's a sign either that you're looking for the purpose of forgetting the body—in other words, you're looking for the purpose of greed, anger, or delusion—or you're simply careless, and the sight, the sound, the smell, or the taste, whatever, happened to catch you off guard.

That's how most people look and listen and smell and taste and feel and think about things. They forget their inner center and suddenly find themselves centered outside, trying to get some pleasure from grabbing onto a sight or a sound and then elaborating on it—either to make it more attractive or to make it seem more meaningful than it actually is. If the mind is in a mood for a little bit of anger, you focus on the things that would provoke the anger and then you can elaborate on it, proliferate as much as you like.

Those are where our skills tend to be. We're great at proliferating. But if you think of input at the senses as a kind of food for the mind—which is how the Buddha sees it—you have to ask yourself: Are you preparing good food for the mind or junk food? Or poisonous food? That's the kind of cooking we're used to. We think we're cooking up great meals, but they can make us sick. So you've got to learn a new way to cook for the mind.

The Buddha counts sensory input among the four foods for consciousness. It actually includes three of the four: contact at the senses; intentions at the senses—why you're looking at these things, listening to these things to begin with; and then consciousness of the act of sensing. These three aspects of sensory input are what the mind is feeding on all the time.

The basic skill in learning new ways to cook this food is to focus on the breath and get the mind centered inside. You're actually changing the level of the mind when it's inside the body in this way. Instead of being on the sensual level, it's suddenly on the level of form, which is a higher level than the level of sensual desire. Even though there may be the desire to stay here at the level of form, it's a skillful desire because it raises the level of the mind. You're not so dependent on things outside for your happiness, so you're in a position where you can look at sensual pleasures from above.

At the same time, you're learning how to make the most of what you've already got. As Ajaan Lee says, it's like learning how to grow food on your own property rather than invading the property of others to plant crops on their land. Learn how to develop a sense of ease, a sense of fullness and refreshment right here in the body. Make that your food. Try to preserve and protect that level of the mind. That's the skill in how you look at things and listen to things: maintaining this sense of the center in the body, a sense of ease, refreshment, and fullness no matter what happens outside. That puts the mind on a higher plane—and in a much better position.

When you handle restraint of the senses in this way, you're not depriving the mind. You're simply learning how to give the mind better food, to nourish it in a healthier way, a way that's totally blameless. Sometimes you hear people talking about the dangers of getting attached to jhana, as if it were a huge monster waiting to ambush you on the side of the path. But the dangers of jhana are relatively minor. The dangers of being stuck on the sensual level, though, are huge. When your happiness is dependent on sensory pleasures being a certain way, it can lead to all sorts of unskillful behavior as you try to keep on feeding the mind the kind of sights, sounds, etc., it likes. This is why we see so much killing and stealing, illicit sex, lying, getting drunk around us in the world. All the precepts get broken because of people's attachment to the pleasures of the

senses. You don't see anybody killing or stealing because of their attachment to jhana.

So even though this is an attachment, it's a better one. And when your happiness is not dependent on things outside being a certain way, people outside have less power over you. We see this so much these days. All they have to do is wave the red flag: "There's danger out there; there are terrorists out there; they can harm us. We've got to do all kinds of evil things to stop them." That's what they tell us. If the mind's only nourishment is things outside, you're going to be swayed by those arguments. But when you can step back, and say, "No, I've got a source of pleasure, a source of happiness inside, that people outside can't touch," then you're much less likely to be led astray.

In this way, your ability to find nourishment inside is protection for the mind. The pleasures of the world outside hold a lot less poison because you're not trying to feed on them anymore. They're still there, but you can learn how to handle them more skillfully, use them more skillfully, as you try to make the mind even stronger.

For instance, there will be times in your meditation when things aren't going as well as you'd like. In cases like that, it can be helpful to go outside and look at the beauty of nature around you—the clouds, the sunset, the moon and the stars at night—to help clear and refresh your mind. There are passages in the Canon where MahaKassapa, who was one of the strictest and sternest of the Buddha's disciples, talks about the beauty of nature. The constant refrain in his verses is of how the hills, the mountains bathed in rain, and the jungle refresh him. Some of the first wilderness poetry in the world is in the Pali Canon—an appreciation of the beauties of not just nature but of *wild* nature. That sort of appreciation is part of the skill in learning how to gladden the mind.

What this comes down to is that, as the Buddha said, even something as simple as looking or listening can be developed as a skill. You look and listen while at the same time trying to maintain your sense of being centered inside. This is one of the best measurements for how much greed, anger, or delusion is lurking in the mind and pushing it around. If you catch the mind flowing out to a particular object, there you are: You've found a defilement.

Many of us in the West don't like the word "defilement." We deny that there's anything defiled in our minds and yet, when the mind is clouded by desire, narrowed by desire, that's precisely what the Buddha means. Your sense of inner awareness gets obscured and narrowed as your attention goes flowing out. According to Ajaan Lee, the tendency to flow out to things is the meaning of *asava*: effluent or fermentation. That kind of looking and listening—the kind where your mind flows out to the object—is unskillful looking, unskillful listening. If you're skillful, you can stay inside while you see and hear. When you

catch the mind in the course of flowing out, you've learned an important lesson: that there's still greed, anger, and delusion in the mind. If you want to look for it, here it is. Only when you see it can you actually do something about it. You begin to sense the danger of falling for those currents. You develop the motivation to *want* to do something about it, so that you don't have to get pushed around like this any more. You find ways of stopping the flow at its source.

This is where you find that being inside the form of the body really is a higher level of food for the mind, a higher level of happiness, a better place to be. You want to do everything you can to stay here, regardless of what happens outside. When a wildfire swoops down the mountainside at you, you want to stay right where you are. You may want to move the body, of course, but you want your center to stay right here inside the body. When disappointments come in life, you still want to stay here and not let the disappointments from outside make inroads into the mind. When a cold wave comes, a heat wave comes, you want to be able to find your refreshment, your sense of wellbeing, here in the body.

This is why restraint of the senses is not deprivation. It's actually a way of feeding the mind better food, giving it a higher level of pleasure. But you can't have everything. If you go for the more dangerous food, you miss out on the better food. You've got to make the choice: health food or junk food. In that sense, restraint *is* a form a deprivation. But it's actually a trade. You're getting something better in return.

As you go through the day, keep asking yourself that question: "What am I feeding on right now? And what is it saying about the mind? What am I learning about the mind by watching the way I feed?" In this way, the simple act of looking or listening is part of the practice. If you do it skillfully, it's nourishment for the practice. It keeps it going.

The path doesn't provide refreshment for the mind only while you sit here with your eyes closed, or while you're doing walking meditation. When you know how to exercise restraint, you can gain refreshment throughout the day. There's a continuity in the practice. When you sit down and close your eyes, you're right here. You don't have to spend the whole hour pulling the mind in like a cat on a leash, because it's already here. You've already been developing the wisdom and discernment that protect the mind, keeping it here. You don't have to cook them up fresh every time you sit down and meditate.

So think of everything you do throughout the day as a skill, including the way you exercise restraint. Sometimes that means not looking at or listening to the things you don't know how to deal with yet—like a beginning boxer who knows enough not to take on a world champion. But you won't have to go through life with blinders on all the time. You can teach yourself how to look at

things that used to set off your anger or set off your lust, but you do it in a new way, a way in which they *don't* set you off. If there's something you feel greed for, look at the unattractive side of getting: what would be involved in trying to gain that thing and keep it. If there's lust, think of the unattractive side of the human body: your own and that of everyone around you. As Ajaan Lee would say, look at things with both eyes, not just one.

And furthermore, stay centered right here while you're doing your looking so that you can check and see if, as you're looking and listening, you're really staying separate from the defilement. Or are you sneaking it in, are you flowing along with it? This is why restraint is a good check on the mind, in two senses of the word *check*: Not only to stop it, but also to keep tabs on what's actually going on. If the defilements seem really quiet while you sit in meditation, well, here's your chance to test them. Do they flow out during the rest of the day?

Restraint is what provides continuity to the practice. If you do it skillfully, your looking and listening all become part of the practice. They can keep you on the path all day long.