

Shelter Through Restraint

May 1, 2020

That passage in the chant just now—“There’s no one in charge”: A while back, I was reading someone talking about one of the lessons of the European Enlightenment, which was that there’s no one in charge. And he interpreted the meaning as: We’re free to do whatever we want. When it comes to the Dhamma, we can design the Dhamma anyway we want, nobody can say anything against it—as if our actions have no consequences. But the basic principle of the Buddha’s teachings is that our actions do have consequences, and there’s no one else there to protect us from our actions. There’s no one to save us, no one to wash our sins away. The world offers no shelter. So we have to provide shelter for ourselves.

This is the principle behind restraint. The Buddha talks about restraint in two contexts. One is about restraint in the things you bring into your mind: the things you look at, listen to, receive through all the senses.

But you’re not purely receiving, the mind also goes out. That’s the other area where we have to exercise restraint, particularly what comes out of the mind in what we do and say and think. We like to think that doing the meditation will take care of everything, and our life will get better. And in some ways it does. But the training goes the other way as well, starting with simple things like what you say, what you do, what you allow yourself to say, what you don’t allow yourself to say. The same with your actions, the same with your thoughts: All this will have an impact on your mind. As Ajaan Fuang said, if you can’t control your mouth, there’s no way you’re going to control your mind. And it’s a great way of learning about yourself, because we tend to act on impulse. We want to say something and it comes right out. Then we have to think about it later, and sometimes, if we don’t like what we did, we refuse to think about it, and in that way we don’t learn.

The Buddha talks about not neglecting discernment, and he means *all the time*. An important part of discernment is seeing the connections between things. As Ajaan Lee once said, if you see causes without the results, that’s not discernment. If you see results without their causes, that’s not discernment, either. You have to see the connection. So you have to stop and think before you say something: What’s the result going to be? If you expect any harm at all, no matter how much you may want to say it or how much you may feel like you’re going to explode if you don’t say it, tell yourself that it’s better to explode than to say something unskillful.

And of course, the fear of exploding is just one of the mind’s tricks. When you’re really angry, anger can squeeze your nerves, squeeze your blood vessels so you feel like you’re going to explode. But you can breathe through that. When you hold yourself back and not give into the impulse to say something unskillful, you’re going to learn a lot about the mind. Because the part that wants to say it will start complaining. You have to question it. The more you can question it, the closer you can get to the real reason why you wanted to say that to begin with. And you begin to realize: There was nothing good there at all.

You have to remind yourself that when the Buddha talks about goodwill, as one of the types of merit you make, there's a sutta where he lists generosity, virtue, goodwill in the body of the sutta, and then at the end of the sutta there's a little poem, and the list gets tweaked a little bit: generosity, virtue, restraint. Restraint is an expression of goodwill. We like to think of goodwill as overcoming boundaries and flowing without limit in all directions, and it does have its unlimited side ideally, but it also means that you've got to hold yourself in check, to hold yourself back from doing and saying and thinking anything that's harmful. It's not that the mind is naturally good and anything that would come out without restraint can be trusted. The mind has all kinds of potentials, and it can change back and forth more quickly than you can blink an eye. So you have to be careful, you have to be watchful. That's part of goodwill, too. And, as I said, you learn about your mind.

This principle is going to apply in the meditation as well. After all, concentration is restraint. You're holding the mind on one object. You're making up your mind not to go anywhere else. Of course, there will be impulses that want to go somewhere else, so you try to soothe them by making the breath comfortable. But then you've got to watch. You've got to protect your concentration, because the mind is used to looking for happiness in lots of ways. It likes variety. That's because the happiness it's used to is not satisfactory. It satisfies some things, but then there are other parts of the mind that are not satisfied. So you keep looking for different pleasures, and the mind keeps looking for new things to think about. And it's precisely this tendency of the mind to go out that you've got to restrain.

So you're watchful, like a spider in a web. Get the breath to fill the whole body. Get your awareness to fill the whole body. Think of it as a large web. It's all connected, it's all very sensitive, and you're sitting on it in one spot. You're going to watch for thoughts to form. You don't leave the breath, but you're looking in two directions: at the breath and also at the tendency for anything else to come up and disturb it.

Because what you'll find as you catch your thoughts more and more quickly, is that they begin with a little knot of tension in the breath, at a point where it's hard to see whether it's a physical sensation or a mental sensation. It's on the border between the two. And there will come a point where the mind says, "Oh, this is a thought about x "—either for random reasons, or because it has a particular agenda. And once that perception's been slapped on, that this is a thought, then it turns into a thought world, and then you go into the thought world. And there you are: becoming.

You learn to see this because you've been exercising restraint, keeping the mind on one object and saying No to everything else that would come through the mind. It's simply a matter of getting quicker and quicker at sensing these things. The part of the mind that doesn't like the idea of restraint feels like it's being hemmed in, but when you narrow your focus like this, you see things a lot more clearly. You stay in what the Buddha calls your ancestral field as a meditator. This is where our ancestors all stayed. By staying here, you get to see anything that would leave the field. And you begin to see why. That means you can take things apart more carefully because you're more precisely focused, and even though

there's a narrowing of the range of where the mind is going to go, it opens a world inside, a world of understanding, seeing all of the different tricks the mind plays on itself.

This is one of those cases where a habit you learn outside will be really useful inside: the habit of restraint, thinking about the consequences of your actions. After all, you could be sitting here meditating, your meditation could be just following the mind wherever it wants to go and enjoying where it wants to go, and telling yourself that that's meditation. There's no one to punish you. But you have to stop and think: You're punishing yourself. You're wasting a good opportunity.

So learn how to train the mind in the habits of restraint, reminding yourself that this is your protection. Because if the world is offering no shelter, you've got to offer yourself shelter. You've got to offer yourself protection. And this is what restraint does. It keeps you from saying things that you're later going to regret, from doing things that you're later going to regret, from spending your meditation time thinking about things that may be fun, entertaining, but that you're later going to regret. Because if anything the events of the past couple of months have taught us, it's that you can't be heedless. Things can fall apart very easily. So when the world is offering no shelter, what shelter do you have? You've got the shelter of your own good actions and your own ability to say No to unskillful actions.

So before you do anything, before you say anything, before you think about anything, ask yourself: What are the consequences going to be? Don't neglect your discernment at any time during the day. When you don't neglect it, it'll protect you, reminding you, "If you say this, it may feel good, you may want to get something off your chest, but when it's off your chest it's out in the world. And it can come back any time. When it comes back, it's not pretty." That way, you create a better environment for yourself outside, and you develop talents and skills that you're going to need as you work on the mind inside.

So don't see restraint as an imposition. It's a skill, a skill that offers shelter when there's no other shelter being offered outside.