

Freedom through Restraint

December 25, 2017

There's a phrase in the sutta we chanted right now, *vineyya loke abhijja domanassam*, subduing greed and distress with regard to the world. The word *vineyya*, "subduing," there relates to Vinaya, which is the discipline. We're disciplining the mind when we practice right mindfulness and on into right concentration. This is a part of concentration some people don't like. There's that interpretation of mindfulness as being broad, open, and accepting, whereas concentration is narrow and restrictive. And in one sense it is, because you're keeping the mind within bounds.

But the same thing applies to the mindfulness. When you hold onto the body as your frame of reference, you have to stay with the body. Anything else that's not related to the body you've got to put aside, you've got to subdue. And as you focus in, though, you find that things open up in the mind as you get to know the present moment a lot better. With the mind focused in the present moment, you see the mind a lot more clearly than you would if you just followed it as it wandered around.

This is why even though the focus may be a little bit narrow in the sense that you're not going to be thinking about just any old thing that comes into your head, still you get to know this one spot really well. So even though there's a narrowing, there's also a broadening as you begin to realize there's a whole world here. The source of everything you're experiencing in the world is happening right here in this very narrow confine of the mind with the breath together with the body. So don't think of it as restrictive.

When I first ordained, I chafed against the rules a lot. But then I began to realize the fact that we had rules as monks meant that we were free to give our whole day to the meditation. In that way, some restrictions actually opened up possibilities. If the monks weren't abiding by the rules, who would want to put food in their bowls? Who would want to support them?

It made me think of a novel by Hesse. I've forgotten the name but it was about two young monks. One of them decides to leave the monastery, to take up a life as a wandering minstrel. He has lots of adventures, but the adventures go through his life like water through your fingers. Years later, he comes back to the monastery and finds his friend, who had stayed in the monastery within the walls, now being hailed as a great saint who had found all kinds of things in his mind he wouldn't have found if he hadn't restricted his focus. So there are worlds to explore in here. As you put aside the world outside, you find that there's a bigger world in here, a more important world in here: the world of what your mind is doing right now. This is why we have to train the mind. This is why we impose duties on it.

Now, these duties are not imposed from outside. They're imposed simply by the fact that we're suffering and we want to find a way out. They're the duties of the four noble truths: to comprehend the suffering, to abandon the cause, to realize the cessation of suffering by developing the path. So, in line with those duties, we're trying to develop the path and to abandon everything that's going to get in the way of the path. You've got to keep these duties foremost in mind. Because without them, the mind just wanders around.

There's that interpretation of insight where everything is based on the three characteristics. But the three characteristics, if they're not in the context of the four noble truths, don't carry any duties. You can see things being inconstant, stressful, and not-self, and you can come to all kinds of conclusions about what you might want to do: Just let things arise and pass away. Or try to think of them appearing and disappearing in a great emptiness, without your having to do much of anything else.

Or you can decide that you want to hold on to squeeze whatever little pleasure you can from temporary things. Even though you know they're going to be temporary, you have that kind of bittersweet knowledge, "Oh, here's the pleasure that comes from it, I'll take it while I can"—as if that were any solution to the problem of suffering. There are lots of different ways you can take those three characteristics—a lot of different ways that people do. You end up wandering all over the place wasting your time.

You can even use them to impose a materialistic view on things, saying—with things arising and passing away—that there really is no self. There's really nobody there. There are just physical events, so things don't really matter. That's what happens to the three characteristics if they're not in the context of the four noble truths. Once they *are* in that context, though, then there are duties. And, in line with those duties, you know when to apply these contemplations and when not.

So you apply them right now, subduing greed and distress with reference to the world. You try to see the aspects of the world that have you attracted, that have you snared. Try to see that they're inconstant, stressful, they're not-self. They're not under your control. Why dabble in them when you can actually get the mind more under your control? This way, you feel less and less tempted to leave the theme of your concentration to get worked up over the world. That's the proper use of those perceptions right now.

So we're here to commit ourselves to a skill, to a narrowing of the focus of our intention to the point where the real problem is. As the Buddha said, all dhammas come from desire. In this case, dhammas mean all phenomena, except for nibbana. Nibbana is beyond dhammas. So what is desire doing in your mind right now? Where's it heading? Where's it going? You want to see this clearly. This is why we focus our desires on getting the mind to settle

down. That's a good desire to encourage because it's part of developing the path.

If you want to find the bliss that comes from right concentration, you've got to keep your focus right here. Stay right here. Adjust your breath so that it feels good right here. Adjust your mind so that it feels good with the breath. Anything else that comes up, you've just got to let it go. You've got to keep your focus right here. You're learning a skill, which means there are things you have to give up. As with mastering any sport, there are certain activities you have to avoid when you're in training. Or when you're learning music, your friends may be outside playing, but you've got to stick with your instrument.

But then you realize that the happiness that comes from mastering a skill is much greater, and much more lasting, than the pleasures of just wandering around, doing what you feel like doing. After all, the mind doesn't develop any good qualities just by wandering around. But the qualities of persistence and focusing your desire in the right place, paying careful attention to what you're doing, using your ingenuity to figure out what to improve, what to maintain, how to improve things: These are the qualities that lead to concentration. These are the qualities that lead to mastering any skill. They require that you give up a fair number of things. But the rewards are great.

The world of the mind, as you get to know it, becomes a much bigger, more interesting place than the world outside. Look at the world outside: How much of it can you control? You read the news: Everything is going crazy. Why clutter up your mind with what's going on out there? You've got enough clutter already in here that's getting in the way of your seeing what the mind is doing right now.

The good thing about the news in here is that you can be the person who writes the news, creates the news: One more person has found the end of suffering, carrying on the Buddha's wish. That's the kind of news you want to write. It has much more lasting value than the news outside in the world of greed and distress.

Years back, a Dhamma talk by Ajaan Maha Boowa was printed with a note at the beginning, saying that the talk was given in response to a question posed by one of the more important monks in modern Thailand. He wasn't a famous monk but he was a monk with a high attainment. Those are the important people of the world: the people who learn to clean up their minds. Their news is the really good news in the world.

So here's your opportunity to create that news by putting aside your greed and your distress around the world, learning to subdue the mind that wants to wander around at will, focusing your will on something really important, figuring out the causes of things in the mind. The more you focus here, the

more you're going to see, the more you'll see what's here to see. And that this really will be a solution to all your problems.