

## *Over the Pass*

*August 5, 2020*

When the Buddha set out the four noble truths, he made it very clear that the purpose of the path was to attack the problem of suffering at its cause. In other words, you don't attack the suffering, you attack the craving. And the attack has two forms: One is developing, and the other is abandoning, restraining.

It's interesting that in the three main divisions of the path—virtue, concentration, and discernment—everything under virtue is about abstaining. And yet, the path requires that you develop certain qualities of mind that we would call virtues in English: things like integrity, heedfulness, honesty. The Buddha says those are prerequisites for the path. So they're there, it's simply that they're not listed under virtue. Virtue is mainly a matter of abstaining.

As Ajaan Maha Boowa says in one place, virtue is a fence against the unruliness of your heart as it's expressed in your words and your deeds; concentration is a fence against the unruliness of your heart as it's expressed in the heart itself.

There's part of us that doesn't like the idea of restraint. We feel like we're being hemmed in. After all, there is an image of leaving home life, which is dusty and crowded, cramped, and you come into the open air to practice. But in the open air, you still have to be careful about what you do and don't do. This is where heedfulness comes in.

We talked the other night about Ajaan Sao staying in a malarial jungle; his being very careful about not leaving his mosquito net at certain hours of the day, not drinking the water unless he boiled it. But a lot of the ajaans talk about how, when you go into the forest, there are a lot of dangers beyond just malaria that you have to be careful about—a lot of ways you've got to keep restrained.

Ajaan Fuang told an interesting story one time: He was staying up in northern Thailand with another monk, and he had a sense that the spirits of the place were extremely strong. So he was very careful not to say anything more than was absolutely necessary. One day, he and the other monk went on an almsround, and one of the people putting alms in their bowls asked the other monk a question, and the monk responded. Something inside Ajaan Fuang said, "There was no need to answer that question." And sure enough, later in that day, the monk got really sick.

Usually, as we think about the ajaans out in the forest, part of us thinks about all the freedom they had, but when you get to the forest, there are certain rules. Ajaan Fuang said, for instance, that when you go in the forest, one thing you avoid is a rubber plantation because the trees exude a bad vapor at night. If you stay in there for a long time, you get sick. Other forests, as he said, have spirits, and they can be very unfriendly; they can take offense at all kinds of things. So he was always very strict about what you should and shouldn't do when living alone.

When I stayed in an old building we had there—we called it an ordination hall; it wasn't really an ordination hall, but looked like a very basic one—he made it very clear that if anyone came into the hall at any time of the day when I was not sleeping, they shouldn't be able to see any of my stuff. So I had to keep it all hidden away and I could bring it out only when I used it, and then I had to put it back.

All this was to teach the quality of restraint. After all, what are the causes of suffering? The cravings of the mind—which, as the forest ajaans say, are things that flow out of the mind. And you've got to cut the flow. When your mind flows toward unskillful behavior, you've got to cut the flow.

This, of course, is based on the realization the mind is not innately good. The practice is not simply a matter of letting our innate goodness shine out. The mind is innately changeable. It's capable of all kinds of things, and it can change very quickly. So you always have to be on the lookout. This is what heedfulness is for. You've got to watch out for the mind's own tendency to change. Make sure it doesn't change into something really bad. This is why we have the precepts to hold us in—the principles of not just the five precepts but also the principles of restraint of the senses.

Then we come to meditation. Here again you have your ancestral territory, where you should stay while you meditate, and then there are the areas outside where you shouldn't go. Like that image of the monkeys in the Himalayas: There are some areas where only monkeys go, other areas where only human beings go, and then there are areas where both monkeys and human beings go. Those last ones are the dangerous areas for the monkeys because they can get caught there. So the wise monkey will stay in the area where only monkeys go.

In the same way, your ancestral field here is the body in and of itself, feelings and mental states in and of themselves. Just take these things on their own terms, before they turn into becomings, so that you can hold them back.

Look at the Buddha's analysis in dependent co-arising: Right after ignorance comes

fabrication, and after fabrication comes consciousness, and then name and form. These are just events. Form is your sense of the body as you feel it from within. Name is a whole collection of mental events: feelings, perceptions, acts of attention, acts of intention, contact among these things, without any reference to whose they are. When they first arise, that's what they are: just events. But then we turn them into worlds, and we turn them into ourselves, and create becomings out of them.

This is why part of the formula for right mindfulness is putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. You don't want any reference to the world in here. As soon as something says "world," then there's going to be something in the world that you want, and you're going to take on an identity to get it.

So the narrative of you as a person, the cosmology of the world: These are all constructs that come after the name and the form. As we're meditating, we're trying to get back to just those raw materials of name and form. So when a feeling comes, it's just a feeling. Any narrative around, "What kind of person am I, having feelings like this?" or "Is this a feeling I would really like to get into?"—those kinds of narratives, you've got to drop. Because as soon as you get into the narratives, you get ignorant about what you're doing. And wherever there's ignorance, there's going to be suffering.

Whereas if you can see these things simply as events, there doesn't have to be so much suffering. You've got the breath element here filling the body. Just be with just breath element, without thinking about whose breath element it is. You can breathe in ways that give rise to a sense of pleasure. Again, you don't have to think about whose pleasure it is. It's good enough just that it's pleasure. Then you develop mind states that can stay here. Mindfulness, alertness, analysis of qualities: That's what you use for your evaluation. Just leave these things on that level, and you find there's a great lightness. You're not clamping down on things: "This is this world, and it has these things, and it has these things that I want, and this is who I am, with all the complexities of that question of who am I, what kind of person I've been in the past." Just put those aside. If you see them forming, zap them.

So if you want to attack the problem of suffering at its cause, you have to watch out for this tendency of the mind to flow into these things. We're not going along with the flow here. We're going against it, cutting through the flow.

And the paradox is that as you confine the mind to this level, there's a greater feeling of spaciousness, ease, lightness. It's when the mind is free to roam around, that's when things get

heavy, because you're dragging around all your narratives. But here you can put them aside. They don't have to confine you.

So the sense of confinement that comes with restraint is for the purpose of freedom—because after all, what are you confining? You're confining your greed, aversion, and delusion. Things that should be confined.

You might make a comparison with being in a countryside that's very desolate, and there's a range of mountains between you and a land that's pleasant to live in. The mind's used to wandering around the desolate territory, but then you're told that you're going to go to this other land. There's only one mountain pass to get there, and you have to restrict yourself to going through the mountain pass. The part of the mind that likes wandering around the desolate territory will say, "No, no, I'd be confined." But when you're fully convinced that there's something good on the other side of the pass, then you're willing to confine yourself to the path that goes over the pass and gets to the other side. You find that there's a lot more freedom on that side than there ever was on this side.

So don't regard restraint as a burden. You're restraining yourself from your unskillful habits. You're taking that flow of craving—which, as Ajaan Suwat pointed out, we tend to take as a friend—and you're beginning to see: This is not your friend at all. It's pushing you and pulling you in directions you're going to regret.

We're learning to get some control over it, bring it into bounds, so that we can comprehend it and get beyond it. Once we're beyond it, then we find that even though craving could flow in all directions, there's a very important direction where it can't flow at all. But it's a much more spacious direction.

So we're exercising restraint for the purpose of freedom. We're narrowing down our focus for the purpose of something really large.

Ajaan Lee makes a comparison. He says, "The Buddha made himself large in terms of his thoughts, his words, and his deeds. But before he made himself large, he had to make himself very small." Think of him out in the forest, first suffering through all those austerities, and who was there? There were just five other people who cared about him. Nobody else cared. And then there came a point where even they didn't care. He was all on his own. And as he concentrated his goodness until it was really small like that, then it exploded, so that it more than encompassed the entire world.

So when the restraints of the path seem onerous, when they seem to weigh you down,

remind yourself they're not always going to be a weight. And also remind yourself that anything in the mind that objects to this weight is something you've got to look into. Ask yourself, do you really want to identify with it? Or do you want to identify with the prospect of freedom that comes from getting the mind trained, getting it under control, keeping it within bounds, keeping it along that path that goes through the mountain pass? To get over that pass, you have to drop a lot of your extra luggage that won't fit through the pass. The lighter you travel, the better.

So what is your extra luggage? All your senses of becoming, your sense of who you are, your narratives. You just let them go. Try to catch the mind right at the level of name and form. Try to restrain it there. And that's when it'll open up into directions broader than you would ever have anticipated.