

## *In Restraint Is Strength*

*August 28, 2020*

The Pali word that we translate as meditation, *bhāvanā*, actually means development. And it's good to think of training the mind as a way of developing the mind. For one thing, thinking in this way reminds you that it's not something that happens only when you sit here with your eyes closed or when you're doing walking meditation.

The mind can be developed at any time. And the exercises that develop the mind are not like the exercises for the body. For the body, you can do heavy exercise only for a brief period of time. Then you have to rest. But the development of the mind can be timeless. You can do it all day long.

Think of the basic principles of right effort. You try to prevent unskillful qualities from arising. If they have arisen, you try to get rid of them. You try to give rise to skillful qualities, and when they're there, you try to maintain them. Now, this kind of effort leads naturally to right mindfulness and right concentration. But those are things you can do all day long. In fact, they get better if you do them all day long.

Ajaan Fuang's comment was that we tend to divide the day up into times: time for this, time for that, time to meditate, time not to meditate, time to do something else. And it's true that we do have other things we have to do, but we can develop the mind as we're doing them—which means that we have to keep restraint over the mind all the time. Part of us rebels at the thought of restraint because it sounds like a straitjacket. We feel suffocated. But remember the Buddha's image: Household life is confining. The life gone forth, the life where you can dedicate your life to the practice, is the open air, in which the restraint is to free you from all the unskillful things that drag you down.

So it's good to see restraint as freedom—and also as a strength. You're free not to think unskillful thoughts. You're free not to think thoughts that, after you spent a day thinking them, you realize wasted your day. You've got the freedom of being able to look back on your mind in the course of the day and realizing that you made good use of it.

Most of us are like people who get supercomputers and then use them to watch cat videos. We've got this human mind that can think all kinds of useful, amazing things. Yet look at the stuff we spend our time feeding on. Exercise of restraint is a way of lifting the mind up to some of its potential. If you find you're going out looking, listening, and thinking about things that are going to be

unskillful, you can ask yourself why. What inside you is doing the looking? The qualities of mind that do the looking and listening and thinking get strengthened each time they get used. So here's an opportunity to strengthen your discernment.

You realize that the things that clutter up the mind come from the senses. Something you've never seen, never heard of, or never thought of: It's not going to clutter up the mind. Even though there may be things that you've seen and heard or thought of way in the past, if you keep them *way* in the past, that minimizes the influence they're going to have. Look at your sensory processes as processes in cause and effect. When you look at something in a certain way, what impelled you to look in that way? What impact is it going to have on the mind? Who's doing the looking? Which part of the mind is getting strengthened by looking that way? The Buddha doesn't say not to look, just learn how not to focus on the things that are going to stir up greed, aversion, or delusion in the mind.

There are lots of things you can look at out in the world, lots of things you can listen to, and lots of things you can think about that don't stir up unskillful qualities. You're totally free to range around in those topics. Although it is true that you're putting some restraint on the mind, it's like the restraints on either side of a canal. If water is spread out over a countryside, its flow is not all that strong. But if you channel it into one canal, the current can get very strong. It's the same with the mind. You can channel the mind into thinking about things that are really useful and you find it has a lot more strength if its strength isn't spread out.

There's an image in the Canon of the mind that's engaged in the different hindrances. It's like a river course where openings have been made in the side of the river course. The current is not very strong. But if you close off those openings, the current in the main watercourse gets strong again. So when you want to think about skillful things, you really do have to turn off the unskillful channels. This means not only turning off the thoughts but also turning off your habits of looking at things in unskillful ways and listening to things in unskillful ways—engaging any of the senses in unskillful ways—because those deplete your strength. They waste your time. Otherwise, you sit and meditate, and the mind settles down, but as soon as the meditation session is over, you throw it all away. It's as if the concentration were something in your lap, and as soon as you get up from the seat, it's fallen off onto the floor.

One of the first rules of meditation is that when you leave meditation, you don't fully leave it. Try to maintain as much of the concentration as you can. As you get up and walk away after the evening session, go back to your place and see if you can pick up where you were. When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, he

arranged to have some evening meditation sessions. There were a couple of new monks there at the time. I was one of them. And one of his first pieces of advice was not to meditate only during the evening session. If you want to make progress, you carry the meditation with you when the session is over.

Of course, carrying the meditation with you means restraint. There are a lot of things you can't think about because they would destroy the center you've been able to develop. Well, have a sense of the value of this center and remind yourself what freedom of thought means from the Buddha's point of view: You're free to think skillful thoughts and you're free to not think unskillful thoughts. That way, your thinking becomes useful.

So look at the practice as an all-day affair. You're developing your mind all the time. You're exercising the mind all the time. And as you do, it builds up momentum. When you're really focused on maintaining the state of your mind, a lot of the issues that tend to come up when people live together just don't have time to come up, because you've got other more important things to do inside. Remember the bottom line here at the monastery is not the monthly budget over there on the bulletin board. The bottom line is how you're training your mind right now. How are you using your time throughout the day?

Learn to look at restraint not as confinement. It's the open air. It's a channel leading you to something really good. It may feel a little tight sometimes because you're trying to channel the water of the canal so that it goes really fast and flows really strong. But then you can think about what can be done with really-strongly channeled water. There are places up in the Sierras where they used enormous hoses during the gold rush. They would take water out of the streams and would funnel it into these hoses, and they could wear away whole hillsides of granite just from the strength of the water—because they had it focused. If you happened to touch the column of water as it came out of the hose, it would burn your hand.

So even though restraint does require that you say No to certain things, and you're placing a fence around the mind in certain ways, the placing of limits actually focuses your strength. And as I said, we've got this amazing mind that's capable of a lot of things, yet we don't get much use out of it because we let it wander around aimlessly. But when you exercise your strength, you've got a clear sense of priorities and a clear sense of values, and you stick with them. You focus your thoughts on things that really are helpful and don't waste your strength on things that would pull you away from the practice.

So see restraint both as a type of freedom and as a strength. When you have the right attitude toward the practice of restraint, you give yourself to it with your whole heart. And your whole heart will benefit.