

Intelligent Restraint

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There's a saying in Thailand: "You wait until your cow disappears, and then you build a corral for it." That's the way most of us are with our speech, our actions, and our thoughts. We do something and then we realize, "Whoops, that was a mistake." We decide we need to exercise a little restraint. But then we forget again.

This is one of the reasons why we have to work on mindfulness: to remind ourselves ahead of time that we have to be very careful about what we do and say and think. If anything unskillful comes up in the mind, you have to make sure it doesn't come out in your actions. That's one kind of restraint.

Then there's the restraint of the senses: the way you look at things, listen to things, smell, taste, touch, think. You have to be restrained in that area, too. Because if you look or listen or etcetera in the wrong way, you can bring a lot of trouble into the mind. So you have to remember.

And give yourself a foundation. The Buddha says to practice mindfulness immersed in the body—as we're doing right now: working with the breath, visualising the different parts of the body, whatever has you grounded in the body right now. Try to do it with a sense of ease.

For example, if you're thinking about the bones in the body, you can start with the bones at the tips of the fingers. Ask yourself, where are those bones right now? Do you feel any tension around them? If you do, relax it. Breathe in and breathe out, in a way that doesn't start the tension back up again, and then move onto the next joint in the fingers, and the next. The bones in the palms in the hands, the wrists, up the arms. Then starting with the toes, work up through the feet, the legs, the pelvis, the spine. You want to create a sense of well-being here. Let that well-being spread through the body, so that the mind isn't so hungry.

One of the reasons why we gobble down sights, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations without any sense of restraint is because the mind is hungry for pleasure. So you give it a better pleasure right here. And as you're grounded in the body, it changes the balance of power inside. It changes the balance of power with both kinds of restraint: in terms of what you bring into the mind, through the senses, and also what comes out, in terms of your words and your deeds.

Because they're related to another kind of restraint, which is goodwill. We usually don't think of goodwill as restraint. Often it's presented as the natural overflowing goodness of the heart. But it's restraint in a very important way. You keep in mind not only your happiness, but also the happiness of others.

That places some very strict requirements on how you're going to look for happiness. You have to make sure your happiness doesn't cause any harm to anybody else. You have to keep in mind that you have goodwill not just for a select group of people. It has to be for everybody, including people you don't like.

And why do you want to do that? Because you know that if you have ill-will for anybody, you're going to behave in an unskilful way around that person. So it's for your own protection that you develop the restraint of goodwill. You hold yourself back from looking for happiness in harmful ways.

And this motivates your other forms of restraint. The Buddha gives a simile for having mindfulness grounded in the body as a basis for restraint: We have animals—a crocodile, a bird, a jackal, a dog, a snake, and a monkey: six animals altogether. Each of them is tied to a leash and you tie the leashes together at one spot. Now, if those leashes are not tied to post, the animals will pull one another in different directions. Usually what happens is that the crocodile is the strongest and so it drags everybody else into the water, where they all drown.

So what you need is a post. You tie the leashes to a post, and pull as they might, they can't get away, so they all end up lying down right next to the post. In the same way, when you're grounded in mindfulness immersed in the body, it's a lot easier for your thoughts not to go streaming out your ears and eyes. In other words, it's a lot easier to exercise restraint over the senses. Because the important point of restraint is that sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas, the things that other people do are not the cause for your unskilful states of mind. It's the way you go out toward them—that's the problem.

This is why the Buddha says that if you want to overcome suffering, you have to learn how to look at things in terms of their origination. Now, he usually uses that term *origination* not in terms of things in general just arising and passing away. He's looking in terms of their causation, and their causation is almost always in the heart. In your mind. This is why he uses the word *effluent*. Things come flowing out of the mind. Greed goes flowing out of the mind and it finds something to land on outside. Sometimes it goes flowing out and you're not really quite sure what you want to be greedy about, so you look around until you find something to focus it on.

The same with anger. You want to be angry, so you look for something that's good to be angry about. It's not all that hard to find. The same goes for lust. All your unskilful mind states: They come flowing out of the mind. They don't come flowing in. So you've got to be careful about how you go flowing out toward their objects.

Which means that restraint in both cases is a matter of what comes out of the mind. So use goodwill to motivate yourself, to remind yourself that you do want to want to maintain your restraint.

Goodwill is also a form of mindfulness. It's something you have to keep in mind. If you forget, then you just go back to your old ways. So you have to keep reminding yourself that you don't want your search for happiness to harm anyone. Keep drumming that into your mind, because all the other forms of restraint are based on that.

Goodwill is both restraint and a form of mindfulness. In fact, all the practices of mindfulness are a form of restraint. You don't let the mind go wandering off into thoughts of sensuality, into what the Buddha calls Mara's territory. You look at just what's going on right here, right now, trying to keep in mind that you want to act only on skillful intentions. Then you provide a good solid foundation inside, so that your goodwill can be nourished—so that that intention can be nourished. That way, when things come in that would aggravate you, you remember that you have to treat them in a skillful way, and you have the strength to treat them in a skillful way.

Take, for instance, the Buddha's instructions on dealing with unpleasant words. All too often someone says something and we immediately react: "How could that person say that?" We get worked up pretty quickly. It's because you're out looking for food through your senses, and you gobble down whatever comes by. And of course, if someone gives you something nasty, you're going to gobble that down and then you're going to complain.

So first you have to provide yourself with the food of a sense of well-being, at least someplace in the body. You may not be able to maintain full-body awareness as you go through the day, but you can have one spot in the body where you're very sensitive to when things close up and when things open up inside. Try to keep that open. Refreshed. Feed on that. Then it can act as a reminder: If someone says something nasty, just leave it at the ear. Tell yourself, "An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear." And leave it there. Don't pull it in.

This is going to require practice, but it's a good thing to practice. Because otherwise, someone says something and it reverberates in the mind as if it were a gong. You hit the gong and it rings for a long time—although the mind rings a lot longer than any gong I know. It can ring for weeks and months, years, over something someone said. But if you catch things in time, just remind yourself, "There's that unpleasant sound, and that's it." Tell yourself you have better things to feed on—and good reasons not to feed on those words.

You're trying to maintain goodwill for yourself, goodwill for the other. Goodwill for everybody. And you do that best by holding yourself in check, so that unskillful things that come flowing out the mind don't go flowing out in

your actions. At the very least, hold them in. Learn how to breathe through any tension that comes up with the desire to do or say something unskillful to someone else, so that you don't carry that tension around.

In other words, you're laying down some new rules for yourself on how you engage with your senses. And keep it at that level: You're engaging with your senses. We often think we're engaging with the world. But what's the Buddha's definition of the world? The senses and the things that arise from them. When you keep it at this level, you realize it is more of an internal thing. The problem is inside. The solution can also be inside.

This is one of the reasons why, when the Buddha defines the Dhamma eye, it's defined as seeing whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation. Now, notice, he says "origination." It's not just arising and passing away. It's not a generalisation about impermanence. He's more specific. The big problems arise from within. But they can all cease if you cut the cause coming from within.

So you want to keep your focus in here. If anything bad comes out of in here, you hold it in restraint. As the Buddha said, you hold things in check with mindfulness and then you cut things off at the source with discernment. So try to exercise both mindfulness and discernment.

In Thai, when they put those two words together—*sati* and *pañña*—it means intelligence. You're intelligent in the way you manage your senses and the things that come in through the senses. You're intelligent in how you deal with the things coming out of the mind—again, through the senses or through your words and your deeds. You can avoid a lot of suffering that way.

That would be the Buddha's definition of your intelligence: knowing how to stop creating the suffering that you've been creating for so long.