

The Intelligence of Restraint

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One of the principles that distinguishes living organisms from ordinary matter is that organisms can organize their response to things outside. In other words, they can decide which things to focus on, which things not to; which things to respond to, which ones not. The higher the level of life, the more organized its response, and the more conducive to the well-being of the organism.

As we're practicing, we're actually raising our level of life—particularly in the exercise of restraint.

Think of the Buddha's instructions for a new monk. We've talked about how, in following those instructions, you create an environment for yourself that's ideal for the training of the mind, wherever you are—whether you're inside the monastery or outside of the monastery. You observe the precepts, you practice restraint of the senses, moderation in speech, looking for seclusion when you can, and developing right view. Out of those five principles, the first four deal with restraint.

Virtue, of course, is restraint in your actions, your speech—in the sense that you're not going to do anything harmful.

Restraint of the senses is where you decide what you're going to take in, what you're not going to take in; what you're going to focus on, what you're not going to focus on.

Moderation in speech, again, is further restraint of what you say. There are a lot of things you could say that would not break the precepts but they're not wise, they're not necessary, they're not called for. You realize that they don't advance the cause of your well-being, so you hold them in.

And of course, with seclusion you try to limit the extent to which you're bombarded by things outside, so that you can look into your own mind, have time to take the mind on its own terms.

All four of these are guided by right view, because right view tells you what's skillful, what's not skillful, and it alerts you to the possibility of a true happiness: something that lies outside of conditions. We're not here simply to find peace and well-being within conditions. As the Buddha said, "Nibbana lies outside of conditions. It's unfabricated." That *is* a possibility.

Now, the Buddha can't prove it to us. But what he says makes sense, and it's a tantalizing possibility. So you want to turn around and look at all your actions. To what extent are they conducive to finding that kind of well-being? As for things

that would not fall in line with that well-being, you can put them aside. This is how you create the right environment for your practice. And you raise your level of life; you raise your level of intelligence.

A lot of people think that intelligence means learning how to say clever things, or getting what you want, or showing off to other people: showing off your strength, showing off your intelligence. Genuine intelligence, though, often hides itself.

There was that contest they had between the devas and the asuras, where Sakka, the king of the devas, was saying that those who show forbearance even when attacked are maintaining themselves in the Dhamma. The asuras were saying that, “Other people will see that and they’ll think you’re weak.”

Sakka’s response was, “If they think I’m weak, it shows they know nothing of the Dhamma,” the implication being: He’s not there to impress everybody; he’s there to look after his own *genuine* well-being. He won the contest.

So it’s important that we learn to see restraint as a form of intelligence, especially when it’s informed by the four noble truths. That way, you can exercise restraint without any concern about what other people might think, because you know what you’re doing.

This afternoon, I was talking about the famous encounter that Ajaan Mun had with Somdet Mahawirawong, the senior monk from Bangkok who was not all that impressed with the forest monks. His attitude was, “What could these forest monks know? They haven’t studied as much as the monks in the city. They don’t get a chance to listen to the Dhamma like the monks in the city. What can they know?”

So he asked Ajaan Mun, “When I’m in Bangkok, I’m surrounded by wise people. And even then there are cases where I can’t figure things out in terms of the Dhamma. Here you are, in the forest. Where do *you* go to listen to the Dhamma?”

And Ajaan Mun’s response was, “I hear the Dhamma 24 hours a day. You look around you, the Dhamma’s always being displayed.” He said, “You see a leaf fall: It teaches you impermanence. You hear the birds cry, the animals cry: the principle of suffering.” (Sound of a peacock.) A peacock came in right on cue.

Somdet Mahawirawong was taken aback, and said, “Well, it shows that you know how to listen.”

But what does it mean to know how to listen? It’s basically applying the principle of appropriate attention, which, again, is right view. You could take the lesson of the impermanence of things and do almost anything you wanted with it:

“Things are impermanent, so grab onto what you can, while you can, when you get the chance”—but that’s very short-sighted.

To listen to the Dhamma, you have to listen to impermanence and everything else in light of the four noble truths. That way, you can listen to anything and it becomes Dhamma. You can relate it either to the truth of stress or suffering, the truth of the origination of suffering, the truth of cessation, or the truth of the path. Try to see: “Where does it fall here?”

Then, when you know where it falls, you can know, “What’s the duty with regard to that?” Right view teaches you about the path: the principle of right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, all the right factors of the path. You think about: How do these apply to your situation?

Now, a lot of those factors have to do with restraint. Right speech, right action: You refrain from harmful speech, harmful action. Right livelihood: You refrain from harmful livelihood. And, in terms of right effort, you refrain from engaging in unskillful thoughts and then you try to encourage the skillful ones in their place. The path teaches that you want your thoughts, words, and deeds all to fall in line with the principle of harmlessness, at the same time fostering qualities of mind that really allow you to see how you’re causing unnecessary suffering, and what you have to do to stop. It’s having you organize your response to the world in such a way that it really does conduce to your true happiness.

So always hold that principle in mind. The four noble truths are *the* framework for the path—*the* framework for the practice—because they let you know what your duties are, and they remind you of what’s really valuable in life.

Sometimes you find yourself in conflict with others. There are times when you can win and be in line with the Dhamma; other times when you have to step back if you’re going to stay in line with the Dhamma. An important part of the practice is learning when those two principles apply, with the main emphasis on restraint, because you’re going to choose what you’re going to notice about yourself, about the people around you; you’re going to choose what you’re going to do in response. You want your response to be organized so that it does help lead to the goal.

So having appropriate attention, having right view, really helps cut through a lot of other issues—a lot of other dialogues you might be having in your mind—and keeps your response to the world consistent.

As Ajaan Lee says, “Our problem as we practice is that sometimes we’re on the path and sometimes we get off the path. We develop it for a little while and then we change our minds, and then we come back again, and change our minds again; and then we complain that we don’t see any results from the path.”

It's because we're not on the path all the time. It's like taking the road into Valley Center: You walk down the road a little bit, then you wander into an orchard, and then you wander down into Cool Valley, and then you get on the road and you wander a little bit along the road, and then you find something else... If you keep this up, it'll be a long, long time before you get to Valley Center. But if you can teach yourself to stay consistently on the road, you can get there.

So, regardless of what other issues come up in your environment, remind yourself: Keep right view as your framework. Use that as the organizing principle and then make sure that your actions really do fall in line with that principle.

Exercising restraint, exercising forbearance: That's how you show your intelligence. Whether other people appreciate it or not, *you* know. As Ajaan Fuang kept saying, "We're not here to impress other people. We're here to cure the illness in our own minds, the stupidity in our own minds." When we can do that, then we've really benefited from the practice.