

The Wisdom of Restraint

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The Buddha said that he got on the right path when he began to exert some control over his thoughts. He divided his thoughts into two sorts, not based on whether he liked them or not, or really believed them or not, but based on where they came from and where they were going to lead. If they came from sensuality, ill will, or harmfulness in the mind, he knew they were going to lead to bad places. So, those were the thoughts he had to keep under control.

He compared them to cows during the rainy season. That's the time when rice is growing in the rice fields, and if the cows wander into the rice fields to eat the rice plants, there's going to be trouble. So the cowherd has to beat them and check them and keep them out of the rice fields. The Buddha would do the same with his unskillful thoughts: He'd wipe them out of existence.

Whereas if his thoughts were based on non-ill-will, renunciation, or harmlessness, then they were okay to think because he knew they were going to lead to good places—or at least not lead to trouble.

In that case, he said, you could be like a cowherd during the dry season. The rice has been harvested. The cows can't get into trouble, so they can wander where they like. But even though the thoughts wouldn't lead him into trouble, still, thinking even skillful thoughts all the time gets the mind tired. When the mind is tired, it can't control itself very well. So he realized he would have to exert some more control. Even skillful thoughts, he said, he would have to keep in check as he got the mind to settle down in concentration.

To bring the mind to concentration, you have to exert a lot of restraint. You can think only the thoughts that are connected with the breath. Any other thought, no matter how fascinating or interesting or right it may be, is wrong for right now. You want only the thoughts dealing with the breath, finding out what kind of breathing will be comfortable right now, and when you get a sense of comfort, how you can maintain it; and then, when you maintain it, how you can make use out of it, spread it around.

How you spread it around, how you're aware of the whole body, aware of the breath energy seeping through the whole body, and how you can maintain that perception: Those are things you have to think about until everything is very calm. Then you can let your thoughts go. At that point, you just have that one perception of breath, breath, breath.

Because there is a sense of well-being that goes along with it, you're rewarded

by having just that one perception. But until the rewards come, you have to exert some control—conscious control. This means that you have to look at your own thoughts not as what you “really think” or who you “really are,” or what your “real feelings” are about things, but simply as fabrications that have habitually come to the mind.

We’re here to change those habits.

This is one of the reasons the ajaans talk so much about exerting control not only over your thoughts, but also over your mouth. As Ajaan Fuang said, if you can’t control your mouth, there’s no way you’ll be able to control your mind. This is going to be an important part of the practice as you go through the day. You treat your words in the same way that the Buddha treated his thoughts: not concerned with how much you really believe them or not, how much you like them or not, how interesting or fascinating or clever they are, but simply where they come from, where they’re going to go. In other words, what state of mind lies behind those thoughts? Is it skillful? And when you speak those thoughts, what are the results going to be?

The Buddha said you should have a three-level set of filters. The first filter is: Is it true? If it passes that filter, then you put it through the second filter: Is this beneficial? Will it really be helpful to yourself, helpful to other people if you say these things? If it’s true but not beneficial, you don’t say it. But if it’s true and beneficial, then it goes to the third filter, which is: Is this the right time and place? That requires a lot of sensitivity. You have to think about the people around you: What are your words going to do for them, or what are they going to do to your words? How receptive are they? If they’re not receptive, just tell yourself that this is not the time for that. A lot of other things come into play when you’re figuring out the right time and the right place. You have to be circumspect, to look all around.

This is how you show some wisdom. The world says that you’re clever when you have lots of ideas and can say them on the spur of the moment, but the Dhamma says that you’re more clever when you learn to have some restraint over your ideas. If you have a good idea, have some restraint over when and where you say it. Ajaan Suwat made a comment one time. He said that the people who are really stupid are the ones who have an idea and have to say it right away. You actually show some intelligence when you think about, “If I say this right now, what’s the impact going to be?” Be sensitive to the response of the people around you, so that you get some feedback.

You may say, “Well, I have to be sincere to myself or true to myself,” but again the Buddha says that your thoughts and your words are not you or yours. In other

words, they don't have to be you or yours. You can choose to make them you, but is it worth it? And if you say, "Well, this is the way I am, this is my habit," then you make it impossible to practice, because the whole point of the practice is to change your habits.

The Buddha once said that if it weren't possible for people to change their habits—in other words, to stop doing unskillful things and start doing skillful things—there would've been no point in his teaching at all. He should've stayed under the Bodhi tree and continued experiencing the bliss of his awakening, the bliss of release. It's no wonder that he looked around the world right after his awakening and saw that this was going to be really hard, teaching people. But then he thought, well, there were some people who would be willing to listen and to change their habits. That's what gave him the energy to teach.

We look at all the monks and nuns who benefited, all the laypeople who benefited, but there were a lot who resisted, even the monks and the nuns. This is why we have all those rules in the Vinaya. You see the many times that people report this monk did that, that nun did this. You can imagine the Buddha saying to himself, "Why do we have to make a rule against this? People should know." But he had to make a rule. Then they tried to find a way around the rule, so he had to come up with new extensions to the rules.

But he never got discouraged, because he knew there would be some people who would take his teachings and benefit from them by changing their habits, changing what they do.

After all, that's the basic teaching of the four noble truths. What we're doing right now is leading to suffering. We can change our ways, act in different ways that can lead to the end of suffering. All the factors of the noble eightfold path are telling you: This is how you change your habits.

So we're not here to be true to our feelings. We're here to be true to our desire for true happiness. That means turning around and looking at our feelings to see: Do they fit in with that desire? Anyplace where they don't, you've got to put them aside, put them aside. Any thoughts, any words that don't fit in, you put them aside. You see it's not a question of defining who you are or getting in touch with who you are, it's more a question of: Where do you want to go? We follow the path for the sake of awakening. That's the purpose we should have in mind every time we open our mouths, even every time we think a thought: Is this leading to awakening or is it leading away? And if it leads away, why think it?

So we have to learn how to step back from our thoughts, view them as part of a causal chain. And it's a lot easier to step back from your thoughts if you don't keep saying them every time they pop into your head. You have to step back from

your words as well.

In this way, you're training the mind all the time, not just when you're sitting here with your eyes closed or doing walking meditation. The whole day is an opportunity to practice.

So remember, even though from the point of view of the world, the clever people are the ones who have lots of ideas and are not afraid to say them out loud, from the point of view of the Dhamma, you're clever and wise when you want to filter things and show some restraint. It's wise to show some restraint because it'll help take you where you really want to go.