Restraint of the Senses

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We tend to forget that the mind with which we deal with everyday activities is the same mind we’re trying to train here when we meditate. And there’s a tendency to have it in training only while we’re meditating, and to have it off-training for the rest of the time. And it doesn’t work. You let it go the rest of the time. Then it looks at the training as something it has to do only for a little while, and then it can get back to what it likes to do after you’ve finished meditating. And as a result, the lessons of the meditation, the skills you’ll pick up in the meditation, don’t have an opportunity to sink deep into the mind, because there’s this level of resistance. It’s like the permafrost up in Alaska. After the winter is over, the snow on the ground melts. But it can’t go anywhere, because underneath the surface of the ground there’s ice, and it doesn’t melt at all, even during the summer. And so the water doesn’t get to seep very far. It just stays there on top of the ground. And for a lot of us, the training is something that just stays there on the surface of the mind. It doesn’t really get a chance to seep in. But if you start working on the training all the time, and remind yourself that it’s the same mind, then the habits you bring from your daily life are going to come in and interfere with your meditation, unless you’re working on developing good habits out there as well. And when you work on applying what you’ve learned here in the meditation to your daily life, the mind begins to soften up and the dharma can seep in. So when you’re out in daily life, one of the major things that the Buddha talks about often as a prerequisite for meditation is restraint of the senses. All six of your senses—eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. And it doesn’t mean you don’t look at anything. It means that you’re careful about what you look at and what you focus on. Because all too often we think of ourselves as just passive receptors. There’s a world out there that comes in and overwhelms us. But there’s part of sensation that is the intention, where we make the connection. We bring those things in. There’s that famous line from Ajahn Chah when he says, “It’s not the sound that’s disturbing you. You’re going to disturb the sound.” You send the mind out to get involved with these things. So in the course of the day, you should look at yourself. What are the things you focus on? What are the things the mind grabs onto? And you should ask yourself, “Why are you doing this? What are you getting out of this? That should be a question that’s always there. Just the same as when you’re sitting here meditating and the mind runs off to something else, aside from meditation. You should ask,”Hey, where are you going? Where do you hope to get out of this?” And you suddenly remember, “Oops, that’s not what I wanted,” and come back. Out in daily life, it may not be quite so automatic. But as you keep this up, you really begin to see how much of this impingement, how much of this barrage that you feel coming in from outside, is actually your going out. You latch onto it. We’ve talked about the mind feeding. This is where the mind goes and feeds. So watch for the feeding habits of the mind. The things that you look at, why you’re looking at them. The things you listen to, why you’re listening. All on down the list. The things you think about, why you’re thinking about them. That little question should always be there. And you should watch. As the Buddha said, it’s usually certain details in a particular sensory image that really set you off. In other words, you don’t see the whole thing. Your mind immediately focuses on this, focuses on that, and then gets worked up many times about tiny little details. So watch out for the details that set you off. John Lee talks about there’s a point where there’s the perception of the form, and then there’s what we might call the sensory input, sensory data, and then there’s the act of perception, the sannyāsa, recognition. When the two come together, I’ve often wondered if that old question about, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” didn’t refer to this. What would happen if there were the sensory input, but you didn’t come up with your automatic like and dislike, your automatic label that you put on things? What happens if the sensory input is just allowed to be there and then just go away, without the slap between the two? Because once you’ve slapped your label on things, then the mind can really feed on them. It can build all kinds of stuff. So watch out for those things, and look for the label you place on things. In order to see this clearly, it means you have to be skilled at doing this while you meditate. Notice how you label things. Notice how the mind reacts to, or how just there is that reaction to, a little stirring in the mind. As the mind gets quieter and quieter, you really begin to see this as a little stirring. It’s hard to say whether it’s a stirring in the mind or a stirring in the body. It seems to come right at the point where they meet. Then all of a sudden you recognize, “Oh, this is a thought about that.” A lot of that is just the act of recognition, putting a meaning on something. Then all of a sudden it becomes a little world in there that you can get into. There’s liking and disliking, happiness and sadness, and all the other things that go along with worlds that the mind creates for itself. Once you see this process in the meditation, you can see it a lot more clearly outside. But in order to see the process in meditation, you’ve got to start practicing. Just watch. What happens when you look at something? Not just innocent looking, but the things that you really are looking for, the things that you’re listening for, the things that you’re smelling for, tasting for, what you’re up to get with your thinking. Again, it’s perception, sensory perception. It’s not just a totally passive process. There’s a lot that flows out of the mind. In fact, according to John Lee, that’s what the word asavatthi is all about, the effluence of the fermentations that come bubbling up out of the mind. Then you go out and you land on something outside, and then you say it was the outside data that got you all worked up. Actually, the mind was looking for something to get worked up about, and it found something convenient to focus on. So the issue is not just a question of limiting the input so you don’t get stirred up, but just watching to see how the mind stirs itself up. It’s doing the stirring. If it weren’t for those outflows, the processes of sensory input would just be really neutral. Sights would come and go. Sounds would come and go. There would be pleasure and there would be pain. But if the mind didn’t feed on these things, it wouldn’t make any difference. It wouldn’t get the mind all worked up. So the two processes have to go together. Your ability to see things clearly happening in your meditation, getting the mind still, learning how to use the breath to settle into the present moment, and then you try to take that same centeredness with you as you leave. It would be nice if you have to leave the monastery, like some of you are going to be doing soon. If you could take the whole atmosphere of the monastery along with you, but you can’t. What you can do is take the skills you’ve learned here, and one of them is how to get centered with the breath. The next step, once you’re centered with the breath, when you’re nice and quiet like this, the next step should be learning how to maintain that center as you get up for your meditation, as you walk out, as you talk to people. Don’t let your center suddenly go flowing outside. Once that center is inside, then you’re in a position where you can see the other movements in the mind, particularly those outflows, the effluents that come flowing out. If you don’t watch out, they turn into a flood and just overwhelm you. So you’re totally deluded about how your mind is interacting with things outside. You miss the fact that you’re doing the flowing out, you’re doing the labeling, you’re doing the creation of the disturbance, whereas the sensory input is just there, just sounds, just sights, smells, tastes, tactile sensations and ideas, which in and of themselves are neutral, like that helicopter. As soon as the helicopter comes, okay, all kinds of thoughts come up. Can you just let them subside? Just let there be the sound of the helicopter, and the breath is right here. The sound of the helicopter doesn’t destroy the breath. If you maintain that center of the breath and you see all the other thoughts that you tend to associate with helicopters, just go bubbling up out of the mind. But because you don’t go riding with them, it’s like the fizz in carbonated water. They just come bubbling up and then just disappear. Our problem is that we tend to ride the bubbles up. So the meditation gives this sense of being centered. It’s kind of like ballast. There’s a part of your awareness that stays centered all the time, and then you notice these other things that go bubbling up out towards the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the body. And discernment comes from your ability not to go riding with them, not to go bubbling up along with them. And that’s a skill that requires not only the sense of staying with the breath, using the breath to provide that sense of center, that sense of ballast in the present moment, but also the habits you build up, and just watching where the mind goes, what it’s looking for, what it’s trying to feed on, throughout the day. And immediately there’ll be a rebellion within the mind. It’ll say, “Hey, am I not allowed to have any fun? Am I not allowed to feed at all?” Well, what we’re doing is teaching the mind to feed in better ways. And you begin to realize that that kind of feeding is pretty miserable, when you really need sights or sounds or these other things in order to keep the mind have a sense of fullness or have a sense of something going on. It’s like the coyotes out there. Sometimes in the course of the year, when there are no persimmons and there are no avocados, you see coyote scat, and it’s filled with all kinds of stuff, plastic, rope sometimes. You wonder what they were thinking. Of course, they weren’t thinking at all. They just wanted something to stuff in their mouths. And for most of us, that’s what sensory input is, just something to stuff in the mind. And you find when you stop stuffing yourself in that stuff, then there are better things to feed on. So always keep this in mind.

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