The Dignity of Restraint

September, 2001

It’s always interesting to notice what words tend to disappear from common usage. We have them in our language. They’re in our passive vocabulary. We all know the words. But it’s interesting to notice that certain words just tend to disappear from day-to-day conversation. I remember giving a Dhamma talk several years back, and I happened to mention the word “dignity.” There was a woman in the audience who had come over from Russia, and she said she’d never heard Americans use that word. She’d learned it when she learned English over in Russia, but she’d never heard people use it. It’s good to think about why. Where did it disappear? I think it’s related to another word. It’s a word that tends to disappear from common usage, and that’s “restraint.” There’s something we can do, something we can take, but we don’t take it. We don’t do it. The opportunity is there, but we learn how to say “no” to ourselves, which, of course, is related to another word which we tend not to use, and that’s “temptation.” Even if we don’t have to believe in the idea that there’s somebody out there actively tempting us, there are things that are all around us that tempt us to give in. It’s an important part of our practice that we exercise restraint. As the Buddha says, “Restraint over the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body is good.” We also restrain in terms of our actions, in terms of our speech, in terms of our thoughts. What’s good about it? On the one hand, if we don’t have restraint, it means that we have no control over where our lives are going. Anything that comes across our way certainly immediately pulls us that way. We don’t have a strong sense of priorities, what’s really worthwhile, what’s not worthwhile, and what are the pleasures we gain by saying “no” to other pleasures. How do we rank the pleasures in our lives, the happiness, the sense of well-being that we get in various ways? There is a state of well-being in the mind that comes from being totally independent and not needing other things. That state of well-being doesn’t have a chance to develop if we’re constantly giving into our desire for this or our impulse to do that. So it’s important that we look at what’s important in life, have a strong sense of priorities, and be willing to say “no” to what turn out to be less worthwhile pleasures. As I said, if you see there’s a greater pleasure that comes from forsaking a lesser pleasure, well, begin to forsake that lesser pleasure for the sake of the greater one. It sounds like a no-brainer, but if you look at the way most people live, they don’t think in those terms. They want everything, everything that comes their way. They want to be able to practice mindfulness so it gives them even more intense appreciation for the central pleasures of life, which is something you never see in the Buddhist teachings. You have to let go of this in order to gain that. You have to give this up in order to arrive at that. We’re not practicing for more intense appreciation of sight, sound, smells, taste, tactile sensations. We’re practicing so that we realize that the mind doesn’t need to depend on these things. Even though the body requires a certain amount of food and the requisites of food, clothing, shelter, medicine, there’s an awful lot that it doesn’t need. This is why so much of his training is in learning to put that aside, put this aside, give that up. Because it makes us reflect, “Well, what are the other things in the terms of the mind that we haven’t given up yet? Our attachment to this, our attachment to that? Could our mind survive perfectly well without those things that we tend to crave?” The Buddha’s answer is yes. In fact, it’s better off that way. There is a very strong part of our mind that resists that teaching. We may give up things for a certain while, but it’s just so we can count, “Okay, I gave this up for so long. I gave that up for so long. Now I can get back to it.” That’s a typical pattern, the way a lot of people practice. Like with the rains retreat we’re in, there are a lot of vows that people tend to make. “Well, I’ll give this up for the rains. I’ll give that up for the rains.” And as soon as the rains are over, they go back to their old ways. They’ve missed the whole point, which is seeing that if you can survive for three months without those things, you can probably survive for the rest of the year without them as well. And hopefully, during those three months, you’ve seen the advantages of giving them up. So you can decide, “Okay, I’m going to continue giving them up.” Even though the opportunity comes where you could say yes, you remind yourself to say no. This principle of restraint, of giving things up, lies in every step of the path. When you practice in generosity, you have to give up things that you might enjoy. But you realize that there’s an advantage that comes from saying no and allowing other people to enjoy it. For example, when you’re living in a group, there’s food to be shared by all. There are other things to be shared by all. If you’re willing to give up your share so that other people enjoy theirs, you’re creating a better atmosphere in the group. So you have to ask yourself, “Is the sense of satisfaction I get from taking this thing worth the trade?” Begin to see the advantages that come from giving up on this level. It’s the same with the precepts. Things that you would like to do and like to say, you don’t do them. You don’t say them. Even if you feel that you might get ahead or gain some sort of advantage by saying them, you don’t say them, because they go against the precepts. You find that you don’t stoop to activities that you used to do. There’s a sense of honor, a sense of dignity, that comes with that, that you can’t be bought off with those particular pleasures or the temptation to take the easy way out. This is where dignity begins to come back into our lives. And then, when you’re meditating, the same process holds. People sometimes wonder why they can’t get their minds to concentrate. It’s because they’re not willing to give up other things. Another thought comes, and you just go right after it. This idea comes. “That sounds interesting. This looks interesting.” You’ve got a whole hour to think about whatever you want. If you have that attitude towards the meditation time, then nothing’s going to get accomplished. You have to realize, “Okay, this is your opportunity to get the mind still.” In order to do that, you’ve got to give up all kinds of other thoughts. Thoughts about this, thoughts about that, thoughts about the past, thoughts about the future, figuring this out, planning for that, whatever. You just have to put them all aside. No matter how wonderful or sophisticated the thoughts are, you just say no to them. If you’ve been practicing generosity and really been serious about practicing the precepts, you’ve developed that habit of being able to say no. That’s why generosity and the precepts are not optional parts of the practice. They’re your foundation for the meditation. So the mind’s ability to say no to its impulses has been strengthened. You’ve seen the results that come from being able to restrain yourself in terms of your words and your deeds. Now it’s the opportunity to restrain your thoughts. If you really are able to say no, then you find the mind can settle down and there’s a much greater sense of satisfaction that comes with that state of concentration than it could possibly come with, no matter how fantastic those other ideas are. You find that the satisfaction of those things just slips through your fingers as if it were never there. It’s like trying to grab a handful of water. But the sense of well-being that comes from being repeatedly able to bring your mind to a state of stillness, even though you haven’t gone all the way, there’s a sense of well-being that begins to permeate everything else. You find that the mind really is a more independent thing than you imagined. It doesn’t need to give in to those impulses. It can say no to itself. Even more so when you develop the discernment that is able to dig out the source of those impulses to see where they come from, to the point where the whole issue of temptation is not an issue anymore, because it’s nothing that’s tempting. You look at the things that would pull the mind out of its sense of stillness, out of its sense of independence, and you realize it’s just not worth it. And the sense of hunger that you, in the past, were training the mind in, which is what we do as we keep giving in to impulses. You train the mind in the other direction, and all of a sudden you begin to realize that sense of hunger that you used to like and that you used to cultivate, is really a major source of suffering. You’re much better without it. It’s important that we realize that the role that restraint plays in the practice, the role that restraint plays in overcoming the problems of suffering and finding true well-being for ourselves. You realize that you’re not really giving up anything that you really needed. You’re a lot better without it. There’s a part of the mind that resists this, and our culture hasn’t been very helpful at all, because it trains that resistance. Give in to this impulse. Give in to that impulse. It’s good for the economy. It’s good for this. It’s good for that. Watch out. If you repress your desires, you’re going to get all kinds of psychological problems. I mean, the lessons that our culture teaches us, to go out and buy, buy, buy, give in, give in, give in, they’re all over the place. We’ve got to unlearn those habits, unlearn those messages. If we want to revive our lives, we’ve got to let the words like dignity and restraint refer to, and see what they have to offer our minds.

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