The Bridge to Concentration

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Restrained. It’s a part of the practice that bridges two parts of the training, virtue on the one hand and concentration on the other. It goes beyond simply observing the precepts. John Lee talks about it as the middle level of virtue, beyond the lowest level of virtue, which is just the precepts. The middle level is when you start gaining some control over your sense doors. You have to be careful about how you look and listen and relate to all your other sensory input. There are certain ways that you relate to sounds and sights, etc., and it gives rise to greed, anger, and delusion in the mind. So you’ve got to learn how to relate in different ways. If you don’t, these things take root in the mind, and then they grow. And every time you look in those unskillful ways again, it’s like adding fertilizer to these unskillful roots. The unskillful plants grow in your mind and take over. And then when you sit down to meditate, you’ve got to do a lot of jungle-clearing to get them out. So it’s best to stop them as soon as they get planted or before they get planted. So think of restraint as you go through the day as part of your meditation practice. When you listen to somebody say something that you don’t like, say, “Okay, this could cause all kinds of unskillful states in the mind if I’m not careful.” Then make it a top priority to focus on what’s going on in your mind and try to control whatever unskillful states arise. When you have that sense of priority, it’s a lot easier to meditate because you’re not cluttering up the mind. You’re not indulging in unskillful habits. They then have to be unlearned when you sit down and close your eyes. If you go back and forth, allowing unskillful things to sprout while your eyes are open, and then you try to cut them down when your eyes are closed, then it’s just this constant weeding process that never gets done, because you plant more weeds in the course of the day, and then you’ve got to pull them out when you meditate. So the important thing is learning how not to plant them. And it’s right here where you focus on things that you see or hear. In particular, one of the big things is what other people say. Here at the monastery, we don’t have a policy of what they call “noble silence,” or what the Buddha called “dumb silence,” where nobody talks at all. But we do try to maintain right speech, and sometimes we’re not all that successful. So it’s good to remember that when people are talking, you have to be careful about what they’re saying, whether it’s worth taking in or not. This is another aspect of restraint. What this also means is that while you’re talking, you have to be careful about what kind of impact your words are going to have on other people. When the Buddha talks about restraint, it’s not only about having restraint over what comes into the mind from that side, but also what goes out through your words, through your actions, and in your thoughts. Before you say anything, think of the impact it’s going to have on the people around you. Especially these are people who are meditating. Their minds are in a very tender condition, just coming out of meditation, say, or getting ready to meditate. So be careful not to say things that are going to give rise to greed, anger, and delusion. Be careful not to engage in speculation. When I first went to stay with the Chan monk, I remember one night I was talking with one of the young Thai monks. I was a young American monk, and I had lots of opinions about different things. The next day, I remember Chan Fung really took me to task. He said, “Do you really know those things you’re talking about?” I had to admit that I didn’t. A lot of it was speculation. He said, “Well, why clutter up other people’s minds with your guesses? It might be this, it might be that.” So you have to be careful about your opinions before you express them. Do I really know what I’m talking about, or do I just think I know what I’m talking about? That’s really hard to see. The best rule is don’t say anything unless it’s really necessary. That way you help not to clutter up other people’s minds. If you have a thought that you know is not necessary, then you’re not going to speak it, you’re not going to say it to anybody. That helps you cut through that thought, the influence that thought is going to have in your mind. If there are certain topics you don’t talk about, after a while you stop thinking about them, because the thoughts don’t lead anywhere. So try to keep your talking to a minimum. Talk about what’s necessary and what’s useful. The Buddhist test for what’s “should be” said is, “One, do you know that it’s true? Two, do you know that it’s useful right now? Three, is this the right time and place to say those things?” In a community where people are training their mind, there’s not all that much that’s really necessary to say. There are a lot of things where this is not the proper place or not the proper time to talk about it. So try to cut your talking down to an absolute minimum. In the texts, there’s a story where the Buddha had to leave a large monastery because the monks had split into two big factions. Basically, what the split came down to is what nowadays would say, “One monk didn’t flush the toilet, and another monk came in and found out about it, saw it, and reprimanded him a little bit.” But then from that point on, it just spread to this huge controversy to the point where they were ready to split. The Buddha tried to talk sense into them, and they wouldn’t listen to him. They basically said, “Okay, you sit aside and just be the Buddha and be quiet, and we’ll take care of this.” So the Buddha left. He went to visit some monks who were living in the forest. They were headed by Aniruddha. As Aniruddha said, “We live like milk mixed with water.” In other words, they mixed very easily. Whatever chores they had, they wouldn’t speak unless it was really necessary. Even just simple things like asking for someone else’s help to lift a jar of water or something, they wouldn’t even speak for that. They would make a sign with a hand, and then the other person would come over and help. And then every five days, they would stay up late, end of the night, discussing Dhamma. That’s the ideal community. In other words, you’re not dumb. You don’t maintain total silence. But you do talk only when it’s necessary, and you do talk about things that are really helpful and things you know about. Because you’re here not only to look after your own concentration, however you look after your own concentration, you have respect for other people’s concentration as well. They’re trying to keep their minds quiet. They’re trying to keep this little greed, anger, and delusion from infiltrating their minds. So don’t give expression to these things, things that would stir them up. Especially in a community like this, where people are meditating a good part of the day, their minds are very sensitive. So try to show restraint both about what’s coming into your senses and what’s coming out your mouth, what’s coming out in your actions. And the more skilled you are at restraint, then the easier it’s going to be to meditate. The easier it’s going to be for the mind to settle down, because you’re not placing a lot of irritants in the mind or in anybody else’s mind. There’s less garbage, there’s less underbrush to clear away.

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