Rottweilers in the House

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The Buddha often discussed restraint as an important prerequisite for meditation. Restraint takes two forms. Restraint about what you bring in through your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. And restraint in what you let out. Through your physical actions, your words, and your thoughts. John Lee makes a comparison. It’s like having a house. Restraint means knowing when to open the windows and doors and when to keep them closed. Because, on the one hand, there are dangers outside, potential thieves, things that come into your house and steal away your goodness. You’ve got to watch out for those. And there are dangers inside. You’ve got Rottweilers in the house, and you don’t want to let them out. So you have to be very careful about how you open your windows and doors. In terms of the dangers outside, those aren’t purely external dangers. There are things outside that will aggravate greed, anger, and delusion in the mind when you bring them in. So, in other words, sometimes people come knocking on your door and you have to say no. Because you know if you let them in the house, they’re going to stir up a lot of trouble. So you have to be very careful about, for instance, what conversations you get involved in. And even on a more basic level, the things you look at and the things you listen to. Those two senses seem to have the most issues around them. You look at things that can aggravate lust, and sure enough, lust starts getting stirred up in the mind. Or you listen to things that might get you angry or upset or fearful. And there’s a tendency in the mind to want to be upset or angry or fearful. So it’s simply like adding fuel to a fire. But it’s not the case that those things outside are actually causing the fire to begin with. The fire comes from the mind. One of the reasons why restraint is so helpful in the meditation is not only that it doesn’t clutter up your mind with things that you’re going to have to throw out when you sit down to meditate. That is part of the problem. It also gets you looking at your own intentions. Why are you looking? Why are you listening? Because many times it’s not that we’re looking or listening with purely innocent motives. We’ve got our ulterior motives. We’re looking for something that’s going to aggravate lust. We’re looking for things that are going to aggravate our anger. We’ve got to stir it up. So restraint, in this sense, helps the meditation in two ways. If you do clutter up the mind with objects that are going to be aggravating, then you find that when you sit down and close your eyes, there they are. One of my students once made a comparison. His mind was like a garbage can. During the course of the day, it seemed to collect everybody’s garbage at the workplace. Then when he came home at night, he had to dump it all out. Now, some of that garbage does get thrown into you, but a lot of it is the stuff that you go around and sweep up off the floor and put in your own mind. So you have to be careful. The best way to deal with that is to have a garbage can that doesn’t have a bottom. Just let the stuff go through. In other words, there are bound to be things that you’re going to see and hear in the course of the day. But if you can learn how to look at them and listen to them in a way that doesn’t aggravate them, then that’s good. Restraint doesn’t mean that you don’t look or you don’t listen. You change your motives for looking and listening, and you change the way you look and listen. When someone says something that could be aggravating, instead of focusing on what would make you angry, they can instead simply say, “That’s that person’s karma. They’ve probably got their issues.” You don’t have to get involved. Even if they’re talking to you and you have to respond, you don’t have to get involved in the idea that they’re saying nasty things directed at you. Take yourself out of the line of fire. Or if somebody really looks good to you, think about what lies behind the skin. In other words, as the John Lee once said, learn to look with both eyes, not just at the surface. Look at what lies under the surface. In that case, your looking is aimed not at aggravating the lust, but at counteracting lust. In that kind of looking, you can look at anything. To make another comparison, as John Lee says, it’s like cooking. You know how to chop up all the things that might hurt you if you swallow them. You’ve got a blender that can pulverize everything so that no matter what, it doesn’t get stuck in your throat. When you learn how to look in that way, then you can look at anything. Look at anything and use it to advantage. If you find that you can’t look in that way yet, then you do have to minimize the amount of time you look at things that would be aggravating, either to lust or to anger. The same with the listening. If you find that you can’t control your anger when you hear something, then get away. Try to minimize the amount of unhealthy stuff that’s coming in your eyes and ears. Otherwise, it gets stuck in the mind, and then when you sit down to meditate, there it is, sitting right in the way, in between you and the breath. That’s how you deal with dangers coming from outside. As for dangers inside, you’ve got to keep careful rain on the rottweilers in your house. It’s not just the things that you say that are nasty and harsh. It’s the things you do to attract other people, to make them want to like you. You can spend a lot of time just sitting around talking with the purpose of what? Establishing that you’re friendly, which we don’t need to do here in the monastery. Everyone here is a friend in the Dharma. Take that as your assumption. And the fact that we’re all here meditating, that’s one of the best things you can do. You can show that you’re friendly, that you want to give someone the space to meditate and be quiet. We all have the same values here. To take that as establishing the fact that you’re friendly, you don’t have to waste a lot of time in idle chatter, whose purpose is simply to establish, “I’m a friendly person. You can like me.” That’s really not needed. But the other rottweilers, the things that you’re going to say that would be harsh, unpleasant to other people, you have to ask yourself, “Why?” If someone is really doing something that’s hurtful and destructive to the community, you want to be very careful in how you bring up the issue. We would recommend that monks, when they see that another monk is misbehaving, have to establish very clearly what their motives are. You’re not going to speak out of anger. You’re going to speak out of kindness. And you’re going to choose the right time. And you want to make sure you know what you’re talking about. In other words, the person really did something that was wrong, and you know that it’s against the basic principles of the community in which you’re practicing. Only when you’ve established those attitudes in your mind can you go ahead and speak. Many times that means it’s going to take a while before you can speak. That’s all to the good. Because when you come up with an issue with another person, they can tell whether you’re coming out of anger or coming out of kindness. And it will really change the way they respond. If they sense your anger, they’re going to immediately get their anger involved. That way, the two houses sitting across the street are sending their rottweilers out into the street, attacking all the passersby. And that doesn’t accomplish anything at all. So when we talk about meditating, it’s not just an issue of what you’re doing while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. It’s what you do throughout the day. You’re creating the environment in which you’re meditating. Part of it is which part of the outside environment you’re going to allow into the mind. And how you’re going to allow it into the mind, on what terms. And there’s also the issue of what you’re letting out into the environment. If you learn how to keep your windows and doors closed at the right times and open at the right times, then you find it makes it much more conducive to meditating. It’s the same principles. There are even rules in the monk’s rules about your windows and doors during the cold season and during the hot season. During the hot season, you keep everything open during the night and closed during the day. And then during the cold season, you keep your doors and windows open during the day and closed at night. In other words, you get a sense of time and place, of when to keep them open and when to keep them closed. So as you go through the day, think of yourself as a house. Your windows and doors are open. Your ears and eyes let things in. Your mouth lets things both in and out. So be careful to keep them open and closed at the right times.

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