Seclusion Through Restraint

May 25, 2012

The place we have here, literally at the end of a road, where we can sit under the trees and the trees are surrounded by chaparral, is a good container for the practice. It gives us a sense of seclusion, a place where we can put aside our normal everyday cares, and focus directly on the mind, with a minimum amount of distraction. There are some distractions. Sometimes we forget our speech is distracting both to ourselves and to the people around us, and other issues come up. It’s not a place where you have a staff working for you to put you in a cocoon. Everybody has to pitch in and work. So you’re not totally cut off from distractions, but it gives you a way to practice with a minimal level of distraction. But still, the bottom line is we’re here to train the mind. You look around you and the other people are here to train the mind. We have those values in common. And when you leave the monastery, that’s not the case. Very few people around you are going to be concerned about training their minds, or interested in the fact that you’re trying to train your mind. So you have to provide your own container for the practice, a way in which you can protect the state of your mind. And even though you may not have physical seclusion, you at least try to have mental seclusion. Maintain a part of the mind that’s not touched by the things you see and hear and smell and touch and taste. You know them. You sense them. But you want to have a sense that they’re not making inroads on the mind. This is why the Buddha recommended two particular ways of protecting your practice. One is restraint through virtue, and the other is restraint of the senses. Restraint through virtue means that there are certain activities you’re just not going to get involved with. No killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no intoxicants. You can raise the bar a bit and follow the eight precepts or the ten guidelines. The ten guidelines mainly expand on right speech, so that you’re avoiding not only lies but also divisive speech, harsh speech, idle chatter. They also provide some guidelines on the ideas you’re going to pursue in your mind. No overweening greed, no ill will. And you try to stay away from wrong views. Views such as if your actions don’t really matter, or even if they do matter, you’re not really responsible for them, or that the results don’t last after death. Those are all wrong views you want to avoid so that you can really focus on the right practice, on how important it is to be careful about what you do and say and think. This is the attitude that protects all your other virtues. It reminds you that you’ve got to pay careful attention to what you do and say and think, because it has important repercussions. At the very least, it’s going to have an impact on your mind. You’re trying to develop a state of concentration. You’re trying to be mindful. But if you do things that are harmful, it makes it hard to maintain that state. Simply the fact of deciding to do something harmful means that you’ve left your mindfulness and concentration. In other words, even though you know these things are wrong, you choose to forget for that brief moment. Then when you’ve done things like this, you don’t want to remember them. You don’t want to remember the fact that your motivation was not straightforward. So you hide that from yourself, and then you hide from yourself the fact that you actually harmed yourself or harmed other people. This is not helpful for mindfulness. It doesn’t allow the mind to settle into concentration. But if you can maintain the precepts, then when you sit down to meditate, thoughts of your behavior during the day don’t come in and invade the mind. If anything, they give you strength. You can think about the times when you were tempted to break the precepts. But you didn’t. And the fact that you’ve been working on the precept means that you’re developing mindfulness and alertness already. You’ve already been working on developing skillful mental states and abandoning unskillful ones. So it means there’s no clear line between your daily life and your meditation practice. It’s all part of the same thing. The mind can slip more easily into concentration. This is one way in which you create the container for your practice. So even though you don’t have trees and chaparral all around you, you still have a surrounding of virtue. You’re a virtue. And that’s an important protection right there. The second kind of restraint is restraint of the senses. It means that you’re looking inward for your happiness. You’re looking inward for your well-being. You don’t go prowling around looking for sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations that are going to inflame the mind. This doesn’t mean that you don’t look at all or don’t listen at all. You just notice how and why you’re looking and how and why you’re listening. Again, this is a really good practice for a form of meditation because a form of meditation focuses on your intention. So you want to look at your intention when you’re looking and listening, tasting, touching. What are you doing it for? What are you hoping to get out of it? Is it a skillful intention or not? If you’re acting on an unskillful intention simply by the way you look with your eyes or listen with your ears, it’s going to be hard to deal with unskillful intentions when you’re just focusing on the breath. Then something else comes up that seems more interesting and more entertaining. So if you see you’re looking with lust, you have to learn how to look at the other side of the object that you’re lusting for. If you’re feeling greed, you have to look at the other side of the object you’re feeling greedy for. If there’s something you hate, a person for whom you feel ill will, look at the other side of that person, the good side. Now just remind yourself that, especially when you’re dealing with people, they’re not just objects whose only existence is for the purpose of exciting your particular defilements. Because often it’s not the case that we’re sitting around perfectly innocent and all of a sudden something beautiful comes by or something disgusting comes by. We’re often out there looking for things, looking for things to lust over, looking for things to get worked up about. I mean, this is why they have talk radio. You turn it on because you want to get upset about something, riled up about something. So you’ve got to look into your intention. And if you see it’s going off in the wrong direction, either just stop yourself from following through with it or learn how to look and listen in a new way. The same person or the same object, whatever. But see the other side. Otherwise you’re wandering astray. Remember, part of the formula for right mindfulness is putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. In many cases, the world here is the world of the sensual pleasures, sensual desires. The Buddha has a couple of images to illustrate the dangers of wandering off into those particular worlds. One is about a quail that wanders away from its ancestral territory. You wonder what kind of ancestral territory quails have. Well, their ancestral territory is fields where the earth has been plowed up and there are lots of stones. One day the quail leaves the field and this hawk swoops down and catches it. It’s carrying it off and the quail starts lamenting, “Oh, if I hadn’t wandered away from my ancestral territory, this hawk would have been no match for me.” Of course, the hawk was a lot bigger. It’s probably a little put off by this snotty quail. The hawk says, “Okay, well, where is your ancestral territory?” And the quail says, “Oh, in a field where stones have been plowed up.” The hawk says, “Okay, go back to one of those places, but still you’ll be no match for me.” So the quail goes down, stands on a stone, and yells to the hawk, “Okay, come and get me, you hawk. Come and get me, you hawk.” The hawk swoops down again, and just as it’s about to grab the quail, the quail sees it’s coming at full speed, so it hides behind the stone. And the hawk crashes its breast on the stone and dies. And as the Buddha said, for a meditator, your ancestral territory is staying within the four frames of reference that we use for establishing mindfulness. If you wander away from that into sensual pleasures, the hawk’s going to get you. There’s a story of monkeys up in the Himalayas. There are areas where only monkeys go, no human beings. That’s a place where it’s safe for the monkeys to be. But there are areas where both monkeys and human beings go, and that’s dangerous, because human beings will set out traps. In this case, the trap is a big lump of tar. The monkey comes along and is curious what this tar is, so it touches it with one paw and its paw gets stuck. It touches it with the other paw and tries to pull the first paw off. That gets stuck. It uses one of its feet to push the tar away, and that foot gets stuck. Then it tries to push with the other foot. That gets stuck. Then it gets angry and bites the thing. Of course, that gets stuck too. Its mouth is stuck. Everything is stuck. And so the monkey can do nothing but just lie there and whimper. The hunter comes along, spears it, and that’s it. And so the Buddha said this is what happens to monkeys when they wander outside of their container. In the same way, as a meditator, you have to watch out for the pleasures of the senses. Sensual objects are not the problem. It’s your sensual desires for sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations. These are the things you’ve got to watch out for. So you have to be very careful. You’ve got to provide the container for your practice. You don’t have the monastery around you. You’ve got to use your restraint as your container. Your restraint becomes the acres and acres of chaparral around you. Even though there are people right next to you, you can still have a sense that you’re surrounded by your restraint, surrounded by the care with which you act and with which you look and listen and smell things and taste things and touch things. That’s your protection. So you can develop that state of mind, as the Buddha said, secluded from sensuality. That’s the first requisite for getting into right concentration. You’re not inflaming the mind with the objects that will excite sensual desires. Secluded from unskillful qualities. Anything from wrong view down through wrong mindfulness, those are all unskillful qualities. It’s through secluding the mind in this way that the mind can settle down. So if you don’t have the environment which provides you with physical seclusion, you’ve got to provide the seclusion of restraint. This is how St. John Phuong, when he was teaching in Bangkok, was right down in the central part of the city. You go there and it’d be noise all day long, from the traffic outside and whatnot. But he seemed to have a sense of being separate from all that. He could hear it, of course. He had to breathe Bangkok air. But there was a sense in which his mind was secluded. This is an attitude we want to develop as meditators. Instead of plunging into the world of the senses, part of us steps back and watches it from a wise distance. Not because the senses are bad, but because our normal reasons for getting involved with them are going to inflame the mind and make it difficult to practice. But if you can provide the seclusion of restraint that protects your state of mind, gives room for you to remember what your real values are, what’s really important in life, straightening out your own mind—because this is a task that no one else can do for you, and a task that you can’t put off some time later. Because you don’t know how much time you’re going to have, if you’re going to have some time later. But you do know that you have this moment now. As the Buddha said, you’ve got to be heedful. To be heedful means reminding yourself that you’ve got this breath right here, right now. Take advantage of it. Do something that’s going to put you further along the path. Don’t let yourself get sucked into the values of the world or the press of the demands of the world. You’ve got to put other things in front of the importance of your own mind. The mind’s got to take top priority. You’ve got to focus directly on your concentration practice here. You’ve got to develop insight. At least work on your perfections. Develop the qualities that come with generosity, virtue, and all the rest of the ten perfections. Patience, equanimity. Try to make everything part of the practice. Surround your practice with this. There’s a sense of seclusion that comes from restraint. The reasons you go out and do and say and think things are the reasons you go out to look and listen to things. Those are the things that are going to have the biggest impact on your meditation, on the state of your mind. So be very careful about that. Because without that, you have no protection.

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