Sense Restraint

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I met a monk one time in the monastery in the northeast of Thailand. He told me he couldn’t live with any of the Ajahn’s. He knew that he was too headstrong, he’d get into trouble. So he went and asked the Jhammabhaba if he were to live off on his own, what teachings should he hold to, to make sure that he didn’t go wrong. And Jhammabhaba gave him a list of three things that make sure that you don’t go wrong in the practice. There’s restraint of the senses, moderation in eating, and wakefulness. And of those three, restraint of the senses is most important. Because as you go through the day, you pick up things, the mind goes running out. And if you encourage it to go running out after anything at all, the motivation for running out gets strengthened in the mind. If you’re used to running out after beautiful sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, as you’re going through the day, and a lot of us do that, then we sit down to meditate. That’s what the mind is going to want. Memories of those things, anticipations of those things. Long inner conversation about them. This is what the Buddha calls sensuality. And it’s one of the things we have to resolve to overcome. Both because it causes suffering right here and now, and because it gets in the way of the path. You’re trying to get the mind quiet. As the Buddha says, you are secluded or withdrawn from sensuality. You pull out of those thoughts. And it’s only then that you can get into right concentration. So an important part of the practice is how you go through the day, and how you manage your senses. It’s one of the reasons why we have the precepts. Jon Swann made the comment one time that these are the precepts of going forth. In other words, you go forth from your normal fascination with sensuality, and you begin to put some limits on it. You compare the eight precepts with the five precepts. The third precept changes from no illicit sex to no sex at all. That puts a lot of restraint on all your senses. Then there’s the sixth precept, against eating in the afternoon and before dawn. Put some limits on your mouth and your tongue. The seventh precept covers a lot. No watching shows, no listening to music, no wearing ornaments or perfume. That covers the nose, the eye, and the ear. And then there’s finally the one about not sleeping on high and luxurious beds. That also puts some restraint on the body. As you hold to these precepts, you begin to realize how much you are attached to any of these things. If you start thirsting after them, you start thinking about them. It’s a sign that you’re used to thinking about them, but you don’t notice it, because there’s no restraint. But when you put restraint on yourself, then you begin to realize, OK, there is that tendency in the mind that goes flowing out. It’s like putting a dam across a river. If you watch the river flow, sometimes the surface of the river may seem very placid. But when you get down to the lower levels of the river, the currents can be really strong. And you’re not going to know that until you put a dam in. Then you suddenly find yourself face to face with some pretty strong stuff. And the strong stuff doesn’t come from the eyes, or the ears, or the nose, or the tongue, or the body. It comes from the mind. So you have to watch over your mind’s conversation about things. And you’ll find that there’s enough of what the Buddha calls “delight.” Delight is when you have a long conversation with yourself about a particular pleasure. You make it more than it really is. You become absorbed in it. But when you really realize, if you were to stop all that commentary, there wouldn’t be much. Think about all the vocabulary that goes around wine. They have whole magazines, whole books on the topic, and a very elaborate vocabulary to describe the different notes that you get. You see this especially now with chocolate. All the different notes, the fruity notes and the smoky notes, or whatever you have in chocolate. They’re trying to get you really, really fascinated with buying more chocolate. And the more you get into that, trying to taste all the different notes, the more you get sucked into this whole problem of sensuality. It reminds me of that New Yorker cartoon where a caveman is drinking from a bowl of soup that his wife has just made. He says, “I’m getting notes of woolly mammoth.” It’s just a plain old woolly mammoth taste. It hits the tongue and then it’s gone. It reverberates in the mind. That’s what you’re watching out for as you’re trying to exercise some restraint in the sense of how it reverberates in the mind. Part of it, of course, is what motivates you to look or listen to begin with. Our lust does a lot of looking. Our anger does a lot of looking. Fear does a lot of looking and listening. And the more you follow those inclinations, the stronger those things get. So we’ve got to argue with these things. This is one of the reasons why I say with the contemplation of the body, we’re not here to contemplate how beautiful it can be. We’re here to contemplate the other side. As the Buddha said, “The aggregates form, feeling, perception, thought constructs, consciousness. They have their pleasant side and their unpleasant side. If they didn’t have the pleasant side, we wouldn’t fall for them. But they have their pleasures.” When the Buddha says that all things, all fabricated things are stressful, inconstant, not-self, it’s true. But then they have their constant side and they have their pleasant side and they have their aspect that’s under your control. Those three perceptions don’t cover everything. They apply to everything, but they don’t encompass the total nature of things. So you have to ask yourself, when you’re applying your perception to something, what is your purpose? Because that’s what perceptions are. They’re representations of something that we use for certain purposes. And if the purpose is to excite lust, well, yeah, you focus on the pleasant side of things. But if your purpose is to liberate the mind, you’ve got to focus on the unpleasant side. That helps to give you a sense of dispassion and change your attitude to how much you need these things. Remember one of my more embarrassing exchanges with the Chan Phuong? When I first met him, he was talking about the needs of the body. He said, “The body doesn’t have any needs. The body can be perfectly content to die. It’s the mind’s desire about what it wants out of the body. That’s what defines our sense of the body’s needs.” So you have to look carefully. Why do you go for things? And if you find that lust is taking over, greed is taking over, anger is taking over, you’ve got to learn how to argue. See, that’s not the whole truth of things, the attractive or unattractive side. As the Chan Lee would say, “Try to be a person of two eyes, not just one.” And one of the ways of talking to yourself about all these things is to ask yourself, “Well, when I look in a certain way, what’s the result? What does it lead to?” And if it leads to more binding yourself to these things, then you’re looking in the wrong way, listening in the wrong way. So look at why you look, and also look at the results of your looking. See it as part of a cause and effect process, and that you can change your relationship to these things. When dealing with the mind, sometimes the mind gets obsessed with something. And its thoughts tend to run wild. And that’s the big danger of all the senses. This is where you have to, again, pull back and say, “Who’s doing the talking here?” If it’s not you, and it doesn’t have to be you, think of it as the result of past karma. What you’re doing right now is your present karma, and you can say, “I need to get involved.” Sometimes you can’t stop the thoughts. The pressure coming in from past karma can be really strong. But again, you can talk to yourself in a different way about it. You don’t have to identify. The storm is going to go on, let it go on. That’s some of the really strong storms we’ve had here at the monastery. When the wind and the rain are really strong, there’s nothing much you can do. You just have to hide out in your hut. Wait till it passes. But make sure you stay in the hut. Don’t go running out into the storm. If there’s a tendency to want to go running with it, ask yourself why. You’re just going to get yourself miserable. So think of your mind that way. Your meditation, in that case, is a little hut. You may want something more expansive, but this is all you’ve got right now, so you contend yourself with this, and you don’t get involved. And again, a lot of it has to do with your conversation about what you’re responsible for, and what you want out of the situation. Sometimes you want it to stop. It’s like going out into the middle of the highway. The cars are coming along, and you’re telling them to stop. They run over you. So the wise think they have an advantage to get out of the way. That’s where the real problem is. It’s not with your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, or body. It’s with the mind. There’s that story they tell in the commentary about a monk who was very proud of his knowledge of the scriptures. But every time he would come to see the Buddha, the Buddha wouldn’t call him by his name. He’d call him “empty scripture.” He was embarrassed about this. He finally realized he had to do something about it. So he went to see different monks and asked them if he could study meditation with him. Well, they knew that he was very proud, so they all refused. He finally got to this novice. The novice tested him first. He said, “Put on all your robes. You’ll walk out into that lake. Keep walking until I tell you to come back.” Well, the monk went walking, walking, walking, until he was up to his neck. Then the novice said, “Okay, come back.” He decided, okay, now his pride had been subdued. He could teach him. And the teaching was this. There’s a termite mound. There are six holes in the mound. There’s a civet cat inside the termite mound. How do you catch it? You close off five of the holes and you watch very carefully at the one that’s left open. In this case, you exercise restraint over your outside senses and keep a thorough watch at your mind. That’s the meaning of the image. So watch how your mind delights about things. It’s looking for notes of fruit, notes of whatever. Why? What are you thirsting for? The Buddha’s offering something much better to feed on. You want to maintain right resolve as you go through the day. You can pose the question, I posed the question to myself one time, of all the different factors of the path, what is most missing in Western Buddhism? And the answer came, right resolve. And particularly the resolve for renunciation. That’s really weak in our culture. That’s the big problem. So realize, have the attitude that renunciation is good. Renunciation is peace. There’s a satisfaction that comes in renunciation. It’s not a deprivation. You’re trading up. But that means there are a lot of things in terms of the senses you have to say, I don’t have to continue with this inner conversation that delights in these things. I can step back and see the processes as they happen. What leads me to focus on these things? What happens as a result? And what is the actual sensation? When you make contact with the senses, it’s very fleeting. And yet we build so many attitudes around it, so many attitudes that get in the way. And we don’t have to. And we’re better off if we don’t.

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