

## *Restraint*

*December 29, 2022*

You don't have a sense of how much your mind wanders around until you give it only one thing to think about. Then you find all these other thoughts running into that one thing and you begin to get a sense of how out of control your mind can be. So you can't leave it there. If you go through life with very little control over your thoughts, then as you leave this life, who knows where your thoughts will take you?

This is why restraint is such an important part of the practice. It's something you do while you're meditating, and it's something you do while you're not meditating. While meditating, of course, you sit here quietly. You're not going to be saying anything. You're not going to be doing anything with the body. All the activity is in the mind. You want to make sure your mind doesn't go wandering off into places where it shouldn't go.

At times when you're not sitting here, then you exercise what's called restraint of the senses. You have to be very careful about how you look at things, how you listen to things, how you go for different flavors, how you go for different tactile sensations, smells, thoughts. It's one thing to behave yourself while you're doing formal meditation, and then another thing to behave yourself when you're out in the world as before. It's like the difference between having a teacher in a room full of students while the students work on their homework, and then having the teacher leave the room—and the students start acting up. Or the difference between when the students are in school and when they leave school.

The difference here, of course, is that with little kids, you have to give them some freedom. But your mind, if it has too much freedom, can do all kinds of bad things with that freedom. Of course, we're looking to free the mind eventually, but we're trying to free it from our defilements. Up until that point, a lot of times, its idea of freedom means giving free rein to your defilements, which you don't want. So there has to be some restraint. We may feel confined by the restraint. But remember that even measureless goodwill, measureless compassion, measureless empathetic joy, measureless equanimity are forms of restraint. You develop these measureless attitudes so as to be very careful about what you do. You realize if you really have goodwill for all beings, you don't want to harm them. That means you have to say No to any random thoughts, any random words, acts that could possibly cause harm. You have to be circumspect.

A while back I was talking to a student who came to the States when she was a teenager. She learned English and became quite good at English. One day

we had a question-and-answer session, and I happened to mention that she should try to be more circumspect. She told me that in all her years in America, she had never heard that word.

That gives you something to think about. Circumspection is not something that we excel in. We don't even talk about it. We don't even give it lip service, much less actually observe it in our thoughts, words, and deeds.

But it's a very important quality. The Thai equivalent, *khwaam rawb khawb*, is Ajaan Lee's definition of one of the bases for success, the one that has to do with using your powers of discernment. And that's a lot of what discernment is. It's not just a matter of seeing distinctions or seeing connections between things; it's also seeing the ramifications of what you do. You begin to realize that things get set in motion very quickly by your decision to look at something in a certain way, or to listen to something in a certain way, so you have to be very careful.

The Buddha makes a distinction: There are certain pleasures in the world that are perfectly okay. They don't have a bad effect on the mind. But there are other pleasures that are going to wreak havoc in your mind, give rise to unskillful states, and you have to hold yourself back. The problem is often not just the pleasures themselves. It's how you approach them. There are lots of things in the world that you can look at in ways that are perfectly innocent, that have very little impact in the mind. Or you can look at the same things looking for trouble basically: times when you give in to thoughts of resentment, thoughts of nostalgia, thoughts of regret, thoughts of lust, aversion. These thoughts then go out looking for more food to strengthen their hold on the mind.

And sometimes you're willing to give in to them. That's what you've got to watch out for. If you give in to them, they become more and more habitual. There's that voice in the mind, say, when lust comes up, that tells you, "If you don't give in to me, you'll never be rid of me." And we believe it, even though giving in to it means it's going to come back.

It's the same with anger. If you don't give in to it, you believe it's just going to keep haunting you, nipping at your heels. So you might as well give in now, be done with it, indulge in those thoughts of anger. That's what it tells you. But again, as you indulge in these things, they become more and more habitual.

You have to watch out for your habits. Especially at times when the mind feels weak, when you're physically very tired or sometimes very sick, your old habitual ways are going to show up. So you should train some good habits to show up at that time. After all, as the body reaches the point where it's going to die, the extent to which you were able to depend on the strength of the body to keep yourself going will fall away. At that point, it's totally up to the

mind. The habits of the mind will come in and take over. So you want to develop good habits now, and the good habits start with how you look at things, how you listen to things, and all the way down through all the six senses.

You have to look at your engagement in the senses, and that means your engagement with the world as a whole—in terms of where you're coming from, what your motivation is—and then look at the results of engaging in the senses in that way. In other words, look at it in terms of a cause and effect, a chain of cause and effect. Don't just give in to your impulses. Don't just give in to your likes and dislikes. If you indulge in them, ask yourself, "Where are they going to lead you? And what's your motivation?"

This is where you get into that question of "What's the allure?" And then, "What are the drawbacks?" If you look in those terms, then there's the possibility that you're going to get to what the Buddha calls the escape, when you see that even though you may like certain things, they're going to cause trouble down the line. Now some of us are pretty resistant even to that realization. We say, "I don't care about the trouble down the line. All I care about is right now."

The popular misconception that the Buddha teaches you, "Well just focus on right now, and don't think about the future, don't think about the past," gives fuel to that idea. But the Buddha never taught that. He basically taught the distinction between what's skillful and what's unskillful.

Our basic motivation for doing what's skillful, he said, is heedfulness. And heedfulness does think about future consequences. It's because of heedfulness that we have a sense of compunction, realizing that we should care about the consequences of our acts. So when there's the impulse to say something or to look at something in an unskillful way, ask yourself, "Where is this impulse coming from?" Don't just give in. It's in this way that you can exercise restraint as you're going around throughout the day.

Now, as the Buddha said, to exercise restraint over the senses, you need something to hold the mind in place. You know the image of the six animals. You've got a dog, you've got a hyena, a crocodile, a bird, a monkey, a snake. You tie leashes on all of them, and then you tie all the leashes together. And if those leashes are not tied to something more solid, then the animals will just pull, pull, pull one another in different directions. The snake wants to go into a hole in the ground, the dog wants to go into a village, the hyena wants to go to the charnel ground, the bird wants to fly up into the air, the monkey wants to go into a tree, the crocodile wants to go down into the river.

And so they're pulling. Whoever's strongest is going to pull all the other ones. Usually it's the crocodile who's strongest, who's going to pull everybody

down into the water where the rest of them all drown. In other words, you tend to go for whatever you like, and it can drown your goodness.

But if you have a post and tie all the leashes to a post, the animals can pull as much as they like. If the post is really firm, they'll end up just lying down next to the post because they realize they can't go anywhere.

The post, the Buddha said, is mindfulness immersed in the body, which means that when you're meditating, focusing on the breath, you're not in a different place from where you should be for the rest of the day. This is where you should stay as you get up and leave the meditation and go back to your resting place. Continue meditating as you lie down to sleep. Stay with the body, think thoughts of goodwill for all beings radiating out from where you are.

Then, when you get up, you're right here. And you can continue to stay right here. It's important that you learn how to stay right here with a sense of ease and well-being, because often the reason our six animals go for our likes and dislikes outside is because we're hungry inside. The reason we say stupid things just to get a laugh is because we're hungry inside. We're lacking something inside. So see this sense of lack as a kind of hunger, and then realize, "Okay, I can assuage that hunger by the way I breathe." Make a survey of the body. See where there are patterns of tension you can release. Often they're on the backs of the hand, on the tops of the feet, around your eyes, in the neck, in your chest, in the pit of your stomach. Release what you can so there can be a sense of ease as you go through the day.

You can think of the image of the school. It's as if you never really leave school. You take the lessons you've learned and you carry them with you wherever you go. That's the whole idea of having a school. It's not that you have a school just to pass the tests and then be done with your knowledge. If it's a really good school, it will teach you lessons to be used throughout life. And Buddha's school, of course, is the best school. The lessons are meant to be used all the time.

I remember when I was teaching in Chiang Mai, I taught a course in the early twentieth century novel, and as part of the course I taught the kids how to do a term paper. Then, the next semester, one of the students was taking a course with another American teacher, a Peace Corps volunteer, and he had to write a term paper. He came to me and asked, "How do you do a term paper?" I said, "I taught you last time." And he said, "You expect us to remember that after the class is over?"

That's the wrong attitude toward your education, and it's the wrong attitude to your meditation. Meditation has its set of rules that you follow, not only when you're sitting here with your eyes closed. You're learning restraint, you're learning intelligent restraint, you're learning comfortable restraint:

restraint with a sense of nourishment so that you can maintain that restraint as you go through the day; keeping the mind nourished so that it doesn't go nibbling after sights, sounds, smell, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas of things that it shouldn't be thinking about.

So look at these lessons you're learning as you're meditating and realize that this is how you should be running your mind all the time. Simply that as you go out and engage with the world outside, you have to take into consideration what the world is doing, too, and how you're going to be shaping your world.

But it has to come from the same spot: your mindfulness, your alertness, your ardency right here. Try to make sure that whatever you do, say, and think is going to be skillful. And think about the consequences. Try to exercise some restraint. Try to be circumspect. Learn how to do it while you're here in the Buddha's classroom, and then continue those lessons as you go through the day.