Restraint (Saṃvara)

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 19:44

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

The topic for this month is restraint. I've written something for this talk, so I'll speak to what I've prepared—it's a bit more organized that way.

The Buddha is very big on restraint, saṃvara, and we need to know why. We need to see how it affects our sense of agency and our self-worth. A sense of agency means control—your control over your life.

Whenever I reflect on the Dharma and practice, I always go back to the starting point, where all the miseries have their root. And that, of course, is the self. This self is a relationship—a relationship with the world we find ourselves in. That world is the world of the six senses. Remember, the Buddha describes consciousness by the sense base: eye consciousness, ear consciousness. And don't forget, the mind is also understood as a sense base. This is the world we seek happiness in. Not that there isn't any happiness there; it's just that we can't maintain it. We can't trap it, simply because everything arises and passes away.

Now we know all this. We know it through our readings and listenings, and we know it through the practice of vipassanā, where we try not to get caught up in the fantasies and the stories we tell ourselves. We know that attachments and indulgence to anything we enjoy, from lollipops to intimate relations, will cause some degree of suffering or unsatisfactoriness. Yet we persist. We persist because the desires have a hold on us. And there's often also the fear that we will lose some level of happiness if we let go of what gives us happiness.

Let us first contemplate the loss of agency. This means we've lost control over some part of our lives. The desire takes over. Even when we make strong acts of will—"I will not scroll"—in a moment of inattention, there we are scrolling. Even when we're doom scrolling and we know it's cultivating despair, yet we scroll.

This used to be called a lack of self-discipline. But these days, nobody wants to hear about discipline, and it seems to have gone out of our education system. When was the last time you actually heard the words, "Have some self-discipline"? There is a connotation in the word of punishment, of course, but the original meaning comes from the word learning—a disciple. And to learn, we need to put our minds to it. We need to have self-discipline.

Here we have a situation where the ardent meditator knows they need to give up late nights to rise early and practice before setting off to work. Yet for all their determination, they still get caught up in social

media and Netflix. What they're actually doing may be wholesome, but it means they miss out on their morning practice, which they give a lot of importance to. Something has to give. And that is the role of restraint meditation.

How does it feel when, after all your effort, you don't seem to be able to get rid of a habit that you know is harmful to you and may be harmful to others? Anger is often a good candidate. It comes out as sarcasm, spite, outright rage, clever digs that spike and wound. Turned inward, it beats you up, despises you, and hammers home how worthless you are.

Here we need that alert awareness, mindfulness, that senses when the triggers come—and not indulge in the rising anger, but actually mentally park it. We're not suppressing it, but putting it to one side and then raising goodwill, laying it over. When we turn inward afterwards, at some later time, we can embrace it with a sense of care and just allow it to manifest. Some part of the heart is diseased.

Here is the Buddha's description of right effort. It's when a mendicant generates enthusiasm, tries, makes an effort, exerts the mind and strives so that immoral, unskillful qualities don't arise. They generate enthusiasm, try, make an effort, exert the mind and strive so that immoral, unskillful qualities that have arisen are given up. That's the unwholesome side.

The wholesome side balances it. They generate enthusiasm, try, make an effort, exert the mind and strive so that skillful qualities that have not arisen do so. And they generate enthusiasm, try, make an effort, exert the mind and strive so that skillful qualities that have arisen are not lost, but increase, mature and are fulfilled by development. This is called right effort.

You'll find this same structure reflected in the discourse on how to establish mindfulness. So here we have four ways through which the Buddha asks us to exercise our restraint, four pathways that give purpose to our practice of self-control.

The first is, of course, the way of morality and ethics. If what we're doing is harmful, then obviously we should restrain ourselves—harmful to ourselves, or to others, or to both. Consider someone who has decided to become vegetarian or vegan on moral rather than health grounds. Now they have a connection with the suffering of farm animals. Yet because of past habit, they may find themselves buying fish and chips, that iconic British meal.

Fish, curiously, often don't quite make it into people's definition of sentient beings. As a monk in Sri Lanka once quipped, "Fish are considered self-propelling animated vegetables." I've heard people say fish can't feel pain because they're cold—such as when our fingers freeze, we don't feel anything. But accepting that fish are sentient beings, that person may feel guilty while eating, and they avoid the feeling by eating more quickly, stuffing themselves.

The second restraint is by way of mindfulness. While eating the fish, a person who has practiced vipassana will become more acutely aware of any feelings of guilt or remorse—so much so that it almost

spoils the pleasure. This is where guilt becomes a guardian, warning us of such behavior. Where there's unskillful action, there will also follow unwholesome consequences.

Allied to this is awareness of the six sense bases. In hot weather, the shapely bodies of women and men come into view, and upon seeing, erotic feelings may arise. This is natural in the sense that it has biological conditioning. But then do we turn away and refuse to indulge, or do we linger and develop lust? Lust can become obsessive, but even at a low level, left ungratified, it leaves a feeling of discomfort and discomposure—a consequence that encourages us to restrain ourselves.

Such practice is a direct way of understanding the second noble truth, the cause of suffering:

The noble truth of the cause of suffering, O monks, is this: it is the craving which produces re-becoming, rebirth, accompanied by passionate greed and finding fresh delight now here, now there—namely, craving for sense pleasures, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming.

And it fulfills one of the right intentions—I prefer the term "right attitudes"—of the second step of the Noble Eightfold Path: namely renunciation, which is gently pulling ourselves away from indulgence and attachments. You could argue that renunciation is the whole of the spiritual path.

Finally, it is the understanding through direct experience—in our sitting practice and our ordinary daily life—of the unwholesome qualities of indulgence and attachment that develops the wisdom to practice restraint.

So *saṃvara* is the spiritual exercise of refraining from fulfilling desires that we perceive to be harmful. There's a holding back of that energy. But as always, if done with annoyance or self-hatred, with self-accusation, that would be merely suppressing it, not transforming it. Any annoyance and self-hatred will simply reinforce those very attitudes.

Instead, we wait for the desire to pass, as when we wait to cross the road for cars to pass. This allows the fuel of desire to be expended, the habit to be weakened. And the more we do this, just like any exercise, it becomes easier. The more we resist temptations, the better we feel about ourselves, simply because we've taken back control. The more we feel in charge of our lives, the more we follow the ways of skillful action, the more we feel happy about ourselves. The more satisfied and contented we feel, the more our self-worth grows. And self-worth is that deep inner feeling and knowing of one's own goodness.

One way to develop strong resolution is to fast. You'll find some kind of fasting in most religions—Lent for Christians, Ramadan for Muslims. In Buddhist teaching, it's included when a layperson takes the eight precepts and undertakes not to eat after midday. This is not to be confused with dieting for health's sake, nor with fasting as a practice of self-mortification, a kind of beating oneself up. Rather, it's to become aware of any attachment we have to eating and drinking. Feelings of hunger are one thing, but the inability to stop ourselves from immediately reacting—hence constant snacking—is quite another.

In my own case, giving up a cup of tea in the morning requires total commitment.

There's also a practice that was developed by St. Augustine. In his autobiography, he tells us that as a young man, he had difficulty restraining his lust and prayed, "Give me chastity and continence, O Lord—but not yet." That's an honest confession.

Now, there are four parts to this practice, and some of you who have been on retreat with me will know them. They are: can, ought, want, and will.

We might sometimes fool ourselves and say that we cannot give up tea and coffee. But when we look a bit closer, there's usually a "won't." So the first step is to speak gently into our hearts, directly into our hearts: "I can. I can refrain from drinking too much tea," and so forth. We can add, "for my own benefit and the benefit of others." And then we must wait. We keep repeating that gently, patiently.

You say, "I can, I can, I can do it" — especially if there's a "won't" in the way. You keep saying that until you feel it's digested. And there is definitely a knowing that one can give up tea.

Then we have to accept full responsibility. That's the next step: "I ought to — for my own benefit and the benefit of others." Once that's taken on, again, you have to feel a bit of digestion there, a bit of acceptance. Once that's done, it's normally not so difficult to get that want. "Yes, I want to do it. This is what I really want to do. It's for my own benefit and the benefit of others."

Then finally, of course, that strong, determined act of will: "I will. I will do it." When the occasion arises — will.

You can practice this with virtue as well. So: can't or won't, will.

I personally find this best done right in the morning. And if I want to get up when the bell goes, I do it before I go to sleep: "I can get up when the alarm goes." I think you'll find it really effective in everyday practice.

So what I'd like to do now is to actually do this practice and then just slide into the meditation. Find yourself in a nice meditative posture.

You can either say "I can refrain from" or "I resist the temptation to" — whatever works for you. Now, what you've got to choose is some habit that you have which you'd like to be rid of, or at least let it have less hold on you. Choose that habit or attitude.

Once you've chosen it, you just very gently repeat into your heart: "I can. I can refrain from this — for my own benefit and the benefit of others." When you're doing this by yourself, you can obviously take more time if needed.

Once you get that feeling that you can, that you can resist the temptation, then we go on to the next one: "I ought to. I ought to do it for my own benefit and the benefit of others."

Once that's been developed within us to a point where we really take on that responsibility, then we can move into cajoling the heart: "Yes, I want to. I want to refrain."

As you feel that this has really built up, we then make that act of will: "I will refrain." You can add "when the situation comes" — it doesn't really matter — but just getting that commitment.

Although this talk has been about refraining from something unwholesome, we can also use these steps to develop a virtue. In the same way, we develop a virtue that we'd like to cultivate more: "I can develop this virtue for my own benefit and the benefit of others. I ought to. I want to. And finally — I will."

And so we can begin our period of meditation.

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