

Rottweilers in the House

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The Buddha often discussed restraint as an important prerequisite for meditation. And restraint takes two forms. There's restraint over what you bring in—through your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind—and restraint over what you let out: your physical actions, your words, and your thoughts.

Ajaan Lee makes the comparison: It's like having a house, and restraint means knowing when to open the windows and doors, and when to keep them closed. On the one hand, there are dangers outside: potential thieves, things that could come into your house and steal away your goodness. You've got to watch out for them. 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. When these people come knocking on your door, you have to say, No, because you know that if you let them into the house, they'd 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, 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, upset, or fearful, and there's already a tendency in the mind to want to be upset or angry or fearful, and you're simply 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 keeps you from cluttering up your mind with things you're going to have to throw out when you sit down and meditate—although that is part of the problem—but it also gets you to look at your own intentions: Why are you looking? Why are you listening? Often it's not that we look and listen with purely innocent motives. We've got our ulterior motives. We're looking for something to aggravate our lust, to aggravate our anger, to get ourselves stirred up.

So restraint in this sense helps your meditation in two ways. After all, if you do clutter up your mind with objects that are going to be aggravating, then you find

when you sit down and close your eyes, there they are. One of my students once said that his mind was like a garbage can during the course of the day. It seemed to collect everybody's garbage at the work place. Then when he came to home at night, he had to dump it all out. Admittedly, some of that garbage does get thrown into you, but a lot of it is stuff that you go around sweeping up off the floor and dumping into 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. You can learn how to look at them and listen to them in a way that doesn't aggravate the mind. This doesn't mean that you don't look, you don't listen. You simply change your motives for looking and listening, 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, think instead that's that person's karma. They've probably got their issues and 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 directly at you. Take yourself out of the line of fire.

Or if somebody looks really attractive to you, think about what lies behind the skin. As Ajaan Lee once said, learn to look with both eyes, not just at the surface. Look at what lies under the surface as well. In that case, looking is aimed not at aggravating the lust, but at counteracting the lust. With that kind of looking, you can look at anything.

To make another comparison, Ajaan Lee said it's like cooking. You know how to chop up all the things that might hurt you if you swallowed them whole. You've got a blender that can pulverize everything, so that no matter what, it doesn't get stuck in your throat. It's when you learn how to look in that way that you can look at anything and use it to your 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 aggravate either lust or anger.

And the same with 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, because otherwise it gets stuck in your mind and then, when you sit down and meditate, there it is: sitting right in the way, 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 rein on the Rottweilers in your house, things that would cause trouble for other people. This refers not just to the things that you might say

that are nasty and harsh, but also to 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 of the Dhamma, so take that as your assumption. Given that we're all here meditating, one of the best things you can do to show that you're friendly is to give other people the space to meditate and be quiet. We all have the same values here. So take that as establishing the fact that you are friendly and you don't have to waste a lot of time in idle chatter whose purpose is simply to establish, "I am friendly person. You can like me." It's really not needed.

Another Rottweiler is the things you're going to say that would be harsh and unpleasant to other people. You have to ask yourself: why? If someone is really doing something hurtful and destructive to the community, you want to be very careful in how you bring up the issue. The Buddha recommends that when monks see another monk misbehaving, they have to establish very clearly what their motives in reprimanding him are: You're not going to speak out of anger; you're going to speak out of kindness. 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 wrong and you know that it's against the basic principles of the community in which we're practicing. Only when you've established those attitudes in mind can you go ahead and speak.

Often that means it's going to take a while before you can speak, but that's all for the good. After all, when you bring up an issue with another person, they can tell whether you're coming out of anger or out of kindness, and that'll really affect the way they respond. If they sense your anger, they're going to get their anger involved. That way, two houses sitting across the street are sending their Rottweilers out into the street, attacking all the passers-by. 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 sit 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 the issue 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.

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 much more conducive to meditating.

There are even rules in the Vinaya about your physical windows and doors during the cold season and during the hot season. During the hot season, you keep

your doors and windows open during the night and closed during the day. 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: when to keep them open, when to keep them closed.

As you go through the day, think of yourself as a house. Your windows and doors—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.