

No Happiness without Restraint

August 30, 2017

The moon is bright. There's a gentle breeze. We've got the crickets in the background. But don't pay attention to any of that. Pay attention to your breath. There are some verses in the Canon where Ven. Maha Kassapa talks about the beauties of wilderness. In fact, it's some of the earliest extant wilderness poetry in the world. But then the poem ends by saying there is no pleasure that's like the pleasure of getting the mind into jhana. So instead of letting our awareness or our attention wander around as it likes, we're going to show some restraint. Place it on one object and make the most of that one object.

Restraint is something that's not encouraged in our culture, and we suffer because of it. There's a lot to be learned by having some restraint, and then making the most of what you've got within those restraints.

Back in the 60's and 70's when Westerners started going to the forest in Thailand, the ajans there noticed that their Western students lacked two qualities: equanimity and patience. You can imagine what they would have thought of the kids now. Back in those days it was just TV and the movies. Now there's a constant barrage from all kinds of screens all over the place. And the pace has picked up. Our generation was taught to be impatient, but the current one is taught to be even more impatient, and we suffer as a result.

So we have to teach ourselves patience. If we have any children, we should learn how to teach them some patience, too. We have to teach them some restraint, because it's only within restraints that you begin to learn how to make the most of what you've got rather than expecting everything to be handed to you, everything to be explained to you, everything to be reasoned with you to your satisfaction. We place a fence around the mind and then say "Okay, within this fence find some happiness." This is how we grow. This is how we learn about things, by paying careful attention to a limited range that we're focusing on, and exercising our ingenuity in making something enjoyable out of it.

In fact, you find as you get more and more focused on the breath that the more limited your range, the more you can make of the breath. So focus your attention on one spot and try to make that spot as comfortable as you can, as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Then from that spot you can spread both the breath and your attention. Sometimes the attention goes first. Your sense of awareness begins to expand, and then the breath and pleasure follow afterwards. Sometimes the breath itself seems to go first, along with the pleasure, and your attention follows in its

wake. But whichever way it is, allow them all to expand together, so you can experience the sense of well-being that comes just by being with this comfortable breathing, and you can make the most of it.

This is how we learn ingenuity. This is how we learn to be really attentive to what's going on and to the potentials we have here. If we just look at what's already there before we've made anything out of the potential, it doesn't seem to be much. If you have no experience, you look at an egg and you can't see a soufflé. But if you have experience, you can see all kinds of things there in the egg, because you've developed skills and you've learned some restraint, focusing your attention on that one thing and trying to make the most of the potentials in what you've got.

This is a theme that Ajaan Suwat would stress again and again and again. He saw Thai people coming to America and, on seeing that all kinds of things were allowed here, losing some of the restraint they had learned back home. Everything here is permissible. And he warned them again and again: Don't forget that being an adult, practicing the Dhamma, requires restraint—both restraint in terms of what you take in and restraint in terms of what comes out in your actions—because if you live in a society where no one else is imposing restraints on you, you've got to impose them yourself.

And again, this is for your happiness. If we don't have restraint, there's no happiness. It seems counterintuitive, but if you actually learn how to practice in line with this principle, you begin to realize that it's true. Ajaan Maha Bua's term for the normal state of the mind is “unruliness.” Virtue is a fence, he said, for the unruliness in your behavior in body and speech. Concentration is a fence for the unruliness of your mind, because without restraint you can't focus on what is the big problem in life: the fact that we do everything we can for happiness and yet we create suffering. And it's because we're ignorant.

Ignorant of what? Ignorant of what we're doing—something right close to us. So we have to turn around and look at our actions. What are we doing? Where do these actions come from? What are our intentions? The more knowledge you can bring to the process, the more you understand. And to bring knowledge to the process means you have to focus your attention here and not let yourself get distracted by other things.

So the crickets are out there, but that's their cricket business. Their singing is actually their expression of suffering. The ajaans who could understand the language of animals said that most of that language is about how much they're suffering. Your issue, though, is: What suffering are you causing for yourself? So learn to bring the mind into concentration. That's allow you to focus on this issue

—and by focusing here, you can solve the problem. And when this problem is solved, then there's nothing else to be a problem.

All of this comes from learning how to restrain the mind and keep it focused on what's really important: learning how to say No to any inclination to go away some place else. Then make the most of what you've got, both in terms of finding pleasure here just with the breath and finding understanding as you watch the intentions of the mind. It's from these little things that big insights grow.