

The Dignity of Restraint

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It's always interesting to notice which words disappear from common usage. We have them in our passive vocabulary, we know their meaning, but they tend to disappear from day-to-day conversation — which usually means that they've disappeared from the way we shape our lives. Several years back I gave a Dhamma talk in which I happened to mention the word "dignity." After the talk, a woman in the audience who had emigrated from Russia came to me and said that she had never heard Americans use the word "dignity" before. She had learned it when she studied English over in Russia, but she never heard people use it here. And it's good to think about why. Where and why did it disappear?

I think the reason is related to another word that tends to disappear from common usage, and that's "restraint": foregoing certain pleasures, not because we have to, but because they go against our principles. The opportunity to indulge in those pleasures may be there, but we learn how to say No. This of course is related to another word we tend not to use, and that's "temptation." Even though we don't have to believe that there's someone out there actively tempting us, there are things all around us that do, that tempt us to give in to our desires. And an important part of our practice is that we exercise restraint. As the Buddha says, restraint over the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body is good, as is restraint in terms of our actions, our speech, and our thoughts.

What's good about it? Well, for one thing, if we don't have any restraint, we don't have any control over where our lives are going. Anything that comes across our way immediately pulls us in its wake. We don't have any strong sense of priorities, of what's really worthwhile, of what's not worthwhile, of the pleasures we'd gain by saying No to other pleasures. How do we rank the pleasures in our lives, the happiness, the sense of wellbeing that we get in various ways? Actually, there's a sense of wellbeing that comes from being totally independent, from not needing other things. If that state of wellbeing doesn't have a chance to develop, if we're constantly giving in to our impulse to do this or take that, we'll never know what that wellbeing is.

At the same time, we'll never know our impulses. When you simply ride with your impulses, you don't understand their force. They're like the currents

below the surface of a river: Only if you try to build a dam across the river will you detect those currents and appreciate how strong they are. So we have to look at what's important in life, develop a strong sense of priorities, and be willing to say No to the currents that would lead to less worthwhile pleasures. As the Buddha said, if you see a greater pleasure that comes from forsaking a lesser pleasure, well, be willing to forsake that lesser pleasure for the sake of the greater one.

Sounds like a no-brainer, but if you look at the way most people live, they don't think in those terms. They want everything that comes their way. They want to have their cake and enlightenment too, to win at chess without sacrificing a single pawn. Even when they meditate, their purpose in developing mindfulness is for the sake of an even more intense appreciation of the experience of every moment in life. That's something you never see in the Buddha's teachings, though. His theme is always that you have to let go of this in order to gain that, give this up in order to arrive at that. There's always a trade-off.

So we're not practicing for a more intense appreciation of sights, scents, sounds, tastes, smells, tactile sensations. We're practicing to realize that the mind doesn't need to depend on those things, and that it's healthier without that dependency. Even though the body requires a modicum of the requisites of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine, there's an awful lot that it doesn't need. And because our use of the requisites involves suffering, both for ourselves and for everyone else involved in their production, we owe it to ourselves and to others to keep pushing the envelope in the direction of restraint, to give up the things we don't need, so as to be as unburdensome as possible.

This is why so much of the training lies in learning to put this aside, put that aside, give this up, give that up. Developing this habit on the external level makes us reflect on the internal level: What attachments in the mind would be good to give up? Could our mind survive perfectly well without the things we tend to crave? The Buddha's answer is Yes. In fact, it's better off that way.

Still, a very strong part of our mind resists that teaching. We may give up things for a certain while, but our attitude is often, "I gave up this for a certain while, I gave up that for so long, now I can get back to it." That's a typical pattern. Like with the Rains retreat that's winding down right now: People tend to make a lot of vows — "Well, I'll give up cigarettes for the Rains, I'll give up newspapers for the Rains" — but as soon as the Rains is over they go back to their old ways. They've missed the whole point, which is that if you can survive for three months without those things, you can probably survive for the rest of

the year without them as well. Hopefully during those three months you've seen the advantages of giving them up. So you can decide, "Okay, I'm going to continue giving them up." Even though you may have the opportunity to say Yes to your desires, you remind yourself to say No.

This principle of restraint, of giving things up, applies to every step of the path. When you're practicing generosity you have to give up things that you might enjoy. You realize the benefits that come from saying No to your greed and allowing other people to enjoy what you're giving away. For example, when you're living in a group there's food to be shared by all. If you give up some of your share so others can enjoy a bigger share, you're creating a better atmosphere in the group. So you have to ask yourself, "Is the gratification I get from taking this thing worth the trade?" And you begin to see the advantages of giving up on this level. This is where dignity begins to come back into our lives: We're not just digestive tracts. We're not slaves to our desires. We're their masters.

The same with the precepts: There may be things that you'd like to do or say, but you don't do them, you don't say them because they're dishonest or hurtful. Even if you feel that you might get ahead or gain some advantage by saying them, you don't say them because they go against your principles. You find that you don't stoop to the activities that you used to, and there's a sense of honor, a sense of dignity that comes with that: that you can't be bought off with those particular pleasures, with the temptation to take the easy way out. At the same time, you're showing respect for the dignity, the worth, of those around you. And again, this gives dignity to our lives.

When you're meditating, the same process holds. People sometimes wonder why they can't get their minds to concentrate. It's because they're not willing to give up other interests, even for the time being. A thought comes and you just go right after it without checking to see where it's going. This idea comes, that sounds interesting, that looks intriguing, you've got a whole hour to think about whatever you want. If that's your attitude toward the meditation time, nothing's going to get accomplished.

You have to realize that this is your opportunity to get the mind stable and still. In order to do that, you have to give up all kinds of other thoughts. Thoughts about the past, thoughts about the future, figuring this out, planning for that, whatever: You have to put them all aside. No matter how wonderful or sophisticated those thoughts are, you just say No to them.

Now if you've been practicing generosity and have really been serious about practicing the precepts, you've developed the ability to say No skillfully, which is why generosity and the precepts are not optional parts of the practice. They're your foundation for the meditation. When you've made a practice of generosity and virtue, the mind's ability to say No to its impulses has been strengthened and given finesse. You've seen the good results that come from being able to restrain yourself in terms of your words and deeds. You've seen that restraint means the opposite of deprivation. Now, as you meditate, you've got the opportunity to restrain your thoughts and see what good comes from that. If you really are able to say No to your vagrant ideas, you find that the mind can settle down with a much greater sense of satisfaction in its state of concentration than could possibly come with those ideas, no matter how fantastic they are.

You find that the satisfaction of giving in to those distractions just slips through your fingers as if it were never there. It's like trying to grab a handful of water or a fistful of air. But the sense of wellbeing that comes with being able to repeatedly bring your mind to a state of stillness, even if you haven't gone all the way, begins to permeate everything else in your life. You find that the mind really is a more independent thing than you imagined it could be. It doesn't need to give in to those impulses. It can say No to itself.

Even more so when you develop the discernment that's able to dig out the source of those impulses to see where they come from, to the point where the whole issue of temptation is no longer an issue because there's nothing tempting. You look at the things that would pull the mind out of its stillness, out of its independence, and you realize they're just not worth it. In the past you were training the mind in a sense of hunger — that's what we do when we keep giving in to impulses: We're training ourselves in hunger. But now you train the mind in the direction of having enough, of being free, and you realize that the sense of hunger that you used to cultivate is really a major source of suffering. You're much better off without it.

It's important that we realize the role that restraint plays in overcoming the problem of suffering and finding true wellbeing for ourselves. You realize that you're not giving up anything you really need. You're a lot better without it. There's a part of the mind that resists this truth, and our culture hasn't been very helpful at all because it encourages that resistance: "Give in to this impulse, give in to that impulse, obey your thirst. It's good for the economy, it's good for you spiritually. Watch out, if you repress your desires you're going to get tied up in psychological knots." The lessons our culture teaches us — to go

out and buy, buy, buy, be greedy, be greedy, give in, give in — are all over the place. And what kind of dignity comes from following those messages? The dignity of fish gobbling down bait. We've got to unlearn those habits, unlearn those messages, if we want to revive words like dignity and restraint, and to reap the rewards that the realities of dignity and restraint have to offer our minds.