



Dignity of Restraint, by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

A word that tends to disappear from common vocabulary is 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.

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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 our way immediately pulls us into 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 well-being that we get in various ways? Actually, there's a sense of well-being that comes from being totally independent, from not needing other things. If that state of well-being 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 well-being is.

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

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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, be willing to forsake that lesser pleasure for 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 to gain an even more intense appreciation of the experience of every moment in life. That's something you never see in the teachings. The 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.

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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: Which attachments in the mind would be good to give up? Could our mind survive perfectly well without the things we tend to crave?

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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

Â 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 period, 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.Â

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--Thanissaro Bhikkhu