

# Dharmette: Freedom in Restraint

*Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on November 22, 2017*

I would like to try to talk about a topic that is perhaps not talked about much in American Buddhism, but that is central to the Buddhism of Thailand and Burma – the traditional Theravāda Buddhism that we can come out of. It's a topic that I think people can easily misunderstand. And in some ways, it goes against the grain of what many people in modern American society want, expect, appreciate, or think is important. And many people, when they hear this topic, are ready to protest as soon as they hear even the label for the topic.

So, are you ready? The wonderful practice of restraint.

Restraint is to not to act on something that you want to say, or that you want to do – not to act based on certain feelings that are coursing through us. On the surface, this seems to go against the grain of what Buddhism should be about: to be free – if to be free is to be allowed to let whatever we want to do, whatever we want to say, whatever we feel have free reign. The freedom to express, the freedom to do – but I think that what's more profound than the freedom to do, which in America sometimes gets overdone, is freedom from. Sometimes people want to feel like they should be free to do whatever they want at the expense of other people's pain.

But in Buddhism, the freedom one is looking for is a freedom from. It's freedom from compulsion, freedom from addictive behavior, addictive thoughts, addictive speaking. Freedom from blurting out unreflectively whatever you are thinking about. Freedom from being obsessive; freedom from the impulses that might cause conflict and tension – or at least hurt – in the world around us. And so, to find freedom from these things is still genuine freedom, but it means that we're in charge, rather than our compulsions being in charge.

So, in Theravādan Buddhism, there's a tremendous emphasis on restraint. And one of the places where this is most emphasized is around the five precepts. The five ethical guidelines that people live by are understood to be guidelines of restraint: to restrain from killing people. So if you're inclined to kill people, it's pretty wise to restrain yourself from that. If you're inclined to take what's not given, then it's pretty wise to restrain from that. If you're inclined toward sexual misconduct, it's best to refrain from engaging in that. If you're inclined to lying, it's best to refrain from lying. If you're inclined to intoxicate yourself, it's best to refrain from that.

And some of you may notice, that for some people it's really hard to refrain from some of those topics. There are such powerful drives, which have so much authority and command, and which can get the upper hand, that a lot of damage gets done in the world because of them. And I suspect that half the news we read in the newspaper is about people who didn't practice restraint around something to do with the five precepts. So, it's a good thing to have some restraint around those at least.

But the ability to restrain, the ability to not have to say or speak gives a person a lot of power. And so, rather than something that diminishes us and makes us somehow worse, the idea of restraint or refraining in Buddhist practice is meant to actually enhance our personal power, our personal ability, in a way that we can be much more effective in the world – much more effective in the things we want to do, and to fix the things we want to change in the world.

And so, to refrain. One of the common guidelines in Buddhism around restraint is to learn to have the ability to refrain from saying and doing things that will cause harm. Or cause more problems than not. Some people are going to gatherings during the holidays. I heard yesterday on the radio about how difficult some family gatherings are going to be around politics. But is it necessary to talk about politics at family gatherings? What is the compulsion to do so? Is there a place for restraint? Are you going to solve the political problems of the country by being in arguments and insisting you're right? Or is this actually going to cause more harm? Or is there more benefit to find a way to restrain from being compulsive?

One of the things we're doing in meditation practice is – and we don't say this too publicly – it might sound like publicity for mindfulness meditation – but one of the things we're learning to do is in fact restraint. And sometimes you see, and restrain yourself. No one would come, right? But in fact, that's partly what we're doing. We come here to sit still and meditate, to sit down and be quiet. And we don't act on every impulse we have to move, to change, to adjust our posture. When you meditate, every time you have an itch, you don't scratch. Every time that you want to change your posture, you don't change our posture. You might change your posture, you might itch a scratch, but not every time. If it occurs to you to say something, you don't say it.

If your mind wants to wander off and think about plans for the year 2025, you get really clear about what you want to do that day on November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2025. It's probably not the best use of your time in meditation. So we learn to restrain ourselves from going off into those kinds of thoughts: “Not now,” and we come back. And so this constant refraining is going on: come back; I'm not going to go into that; I'm not going to get involved in that; I'm not going to do that. Restraint. Refrain. And the advantage of that is that then in meditation we can begin settling on ourselves. We can begin checking and see what's really going on here. What's driving me? What's motivating me? What's really happening is some deeper way? Can I settle down, relax, and sit back in a sense, observe myself, know myself better, know the situation better?

And then because we restrained ourselves, at certain point, we see the situation better, we know ourselves better, and then we're in a much better position to act or to speak. But if we make a habit of speaking and acting on every impulse we have, our society would be a mess. Luckily, most people restrain the impulses they have.

But can we do it in such a way that we don't feel limited. We don't end up living a life that's inhibited. We're not restraining ourselves because of being afraid. We're not restraining ourselves because we've been told, “You can't do that.” But rather, we restrain ourselves to feel like we become more ourselves, to be enhanced,

to become freer, to be more a kind of presence for life in a fuller way, so that we're more grounded in who we are. And in doing so, then wisely and clearly speaking up. Or acting if we need to act.

But if the restraint is only about making ourselves smaller, like we don't count, I don't think that's healthy for anyone. But if restraint is about how I count – how important this is – there are more important things here than surface reactions, than my reactivity to what's happening in the moment. Let me restrain here, so I can touch in with myself and be with myself in some deeper way. And you feel the benefits of that. This is great. And then maybe the practice of restraint is something you want to do.

So we learn about it in meditation. We learn about it in the ethical life that we live. And then having that as a string, then hopefully, we develop the wisdom to know when in our lives it's appropriate, healthy, and beneficial to practice restraint. And when practicing restraint is in fact an expression of freedom.

You're using your choice to not give in to impulses that you don't want to give into, that you don't feel good about. So, I would argue that if, for example, if a person has a habit of swearing, and it just comes so natural to swear all kinds of terrible words, are they free? If that so, swearing just comes out compulsively, and every other sentence has a swear word. Or do they become more free when they choose not to say those words? I would argue they're actually freer when they've learned to restrain those words. So, in restraint there is an act of freedom – asserting freedom as opposed to losing freedom.

So, the practice of restraint. This is certainly worth thinking about. And perhaps it's something that we can borrow a little bit more from the Asian Buddhist tradition. Maybe there's a good reason why it's a big part of that tradition.

And if you hated it this talk, you can tell me. You don't have to restrain yourself [laughs].  
So, thank you.

