

Restraint

Rev. Eido Frances Carney

Olympia Zen Center

June 22, 2011

Last week we were talking about Appetite, we said a few things just to recapitulate. One is that the Buddha's Teachings are universal. If the Buddha's Teachings are true, we can find them everywhere. I also said that because we are Westerners it's helpful to look into our own Western literature, and our own Western mythic base, in order to see these Teachings, to connect with stories and metaphors that are familiar to us. I spoke about Raven and the origin of appetite.

I want to go a bit further in this book TRICKSTER MAKES THIS WORLD about the Trickster archetype. Then I want to take this question of appetite a little bit further. An obvious one is the subject of restraint. If we have these enormous appetites as humans – we can't help but have appetite, because we have to eat – it's appetite that gets out of hand that is the problem. So, how does the practice of restraint then work?

A couple of stories then to illustrate restraint. These stories are all so very complex and there are numerous aspects to them that I'm not going to go into. I just want to emphasize the aspect of restraint.

The story is about Hermes, one of the Greek gods. You might actually be familiar with Hermes. His name means something like the spirit who lives in stone. If you go into the mountains, sometimes you will see at the trailhead a pile of stones that will have been added onto by the people who've gone on the hike ahead of you. This practice comes from Hermes. You are actually honoring the Greek gods when you place another stone. You honor Hermes who's going to protect you on your hike. Hermes is the protector of wayfarers, he is also the messenger to the gods, messenger to Zeus. He is a protector of merchants. The word merchant also relates to Mercury, the messenger in the Roman Pantheon who is the same character. We have Hermes in

our midst actually, we just don't know that that's the origin of putting the stones in the stone pile as you start on the trail.

Hermes is the son of Maya and Zeus. Maya was a consort and not a wife of Zeus. She has an interesting story. She didn't live very well, and not in luxury like the gods. She was rather poor, and yet Zeus has made a dalliance with this woman, and Hermes is the fruit of that encounter. The very first day that Hermes is born, during the night he sneaks out of his cradle and goes on an adventure through the night. He comes upon a turtle and he says, "This is most interesting!" He invites the turtle into a cave, and sees the great use of this turtle shell. He kills the turtle and uses the shell by turning it into the beautiful music instrument, the lyre. He immediately plays this absolutely gorgeous and intoxicating music.

He takes the musical instrument and goes further afield, and enters the pasture where Apollo keeps his herd. Hermes looks around and thinks, "This is pretty nice!" He steals the herd of the best cattle that belong to Apollo and leads the herd into a secret area. He takes two of them and kills them, makes a great fire and then cooks the meat of these two slaughtered animals. Usually if you do this, you would eat - appetite would be whetted as you would be smelling the meat - and of course it is deeply customary to make an offering to the gods. Always, the offering must be made to the gods before one can eat. So, Hermes bundles up all of the portions and he creates and wraps very carefully each of the portions. Then he also makes a portion for himself. But he wraps that up and instead of eating it himself, he places his own portion on the same shelf with the gods. He refrains from participating, he withholds his appetite. He does this in a very ceremonial way, consciously preparing and making his own portion in the same fashion as he offers to the gods. Of course in so doing, Hermes becomes a god even though he hasn't been brought yet before Zeus.

So, he puts this all together and returns - in the stealth of the night he sneaks back into his cradle and comes back as a little baby into his crib. Apollo discovers that his herd has been stolen. He goes around and he says to an old man, "Who did you see coming here?" This man has seen

Hermes on the road and doesn't betray Hermes, but nevertheless Apollo locates Hermes and goes in and sees this baby lying in the crib. He says, "I can tell, you took that cattle! Aren't you the one who did that?" And Hermes lying in his crib with his little rattle and playing with his covers, very slyly and cutely says, "Oh, no Apollo, I would never do such a thing. I wouldn't do that, would I?" Just like that. Apollo finds this very funny, because this baby, who has shown his enormous powers on the very first day of his birth, pretends not to have done what he has done. Apollo laughs and Hermes says, "Here, let me play this music for you." He charms Apollo with his music, and sings the whole story of the gods in his exquisite voice, and Apollo is overcome by the beauty of the music. Apollo says, "Listen, don't worry about taking those cattle, I'm making them a gift to you." Hermes hands him the lyre and says, "Here this is yours!" They make a trade. And Apollo indeed is thrilled by the lyre and says, "Hermes, not only am I going to give you the cattle that you took, I'm going to put you in charge of all of the herds from now on. You are the god of the herds."

This is how Hermes becomes a god. At this point Apollo also takes Hermes and they go before Zeus and Apollo says, "Look at what this boy did. He's so brilliant and he's so gifted," and so forth and so on. Zeus recognizes him then, and so Hermes becomes one of the gods.

The important thing, at least for tonight, there are so many strains in this story, but for tonight is this matter of restraint. An important point in this story is that by not eating the food, Hermes becomes a god. If he had eaten the food, he would have become human. Because the humans are the ones who actually eat, whereas the gods don't eat, they just have offerings made to them. So Hermes understands this and he understands the importance of restraint and that by restraining himself he's going to do something greater. Something greater is going to come about for him. Very important point in the Hermes story, the matter of restraint!

Restraint is one of the very important virtues in the Greek society. One cooks the food, and then before one would eat, before the food would even enter one's mouth, the offering is made to the gods. One always offers first, offers to the guests...So this practice of personal restraint is an

extremely important virtue. Of course, this question of appetite, comes into the story also. Hermes certainly has an appetite for godly power. He wants to be in the heavenly area, with the gods. So he restrains himself from eating, but he knows that his appetite for something else is there too. So, he's not without appetite.

There is another story about restraint - they're many in our history, but here is just another one. This took place in our American history. You all know Steven Douglas, who was the African American orator, educator and teacher, who was a slave, learned to read and then escaped from slavery and eventually became a free man, and became a great orator, and went about in Europe and in the United States speaking on behalf of equality. When he became free after the Civil War, he returned to the South, to Baltimore where he had worked in the household of some people. He returned and married the woman who helped him escape to the North.

So Douglas tells the story of the importance of restraint, that literally changed his life. First of all, he learned to read. He knew at some point very early on, that learning to read was going to be the huge difference in his life – and that that would be the difference between slavery and freedom. He knew that because slaves were not permitted to learn to read, because they would become useless, they would no longer be able to be enslaved. Slave-owners knew this and they forbade anybody who was a slave to learn to read.

So Douglas learned in the stealth of night - a lot like Hermes sneaking around in the dark to learn to develop his skills at reading – and he had the great fortune to come across some very important texts that led the way for him to be able to articulate the arguments against slavery and to develop his skills as an author. But the important point in restraint came. It was a practice on the plantations for the slave to have one week off between Christmas and New Year. The slave-owners would always supply them with applejack – as much applejack as they wanted to drink. Very toxic alcoholic drink. There would be great partying and carrying on. Some slaves would not drink, they would use the time to make crafts, they would sew some clothing, or they would do other things. But there were lots and lots of them who would drink applejack and just party

all week long. And Frederick Douglas was one of those partiers, and he would do it two years in a row. He discovered himself in the second year, when he woke up one morning having slept in a pigsty. He realized that the applejack was used to continue the aspect of shame in the slaves and by maintaining shame, by maintaining their uselessness, by their own sense of shame in over-drinking, they could remain enslaved. They would believe something that was absolutely not true.

Douglas saw this, and he saw the manipulation of the plantation-owners. The following year he refused to drink, and he saw this action as one of his turning points - the restraint of his freedom to not participate in a tactic that the slave-owners used to maintain the sense of shame. He said that was a very important turning point in his life. It gave him the strength to see through another one of the ways - not being able to read and using those kinds of means to create shame. Not participating in those he saw as extremely important. So he saw restraint as essential to character development.

We certainly know that restraint is very much in the Buddhist Teachings. Restraint is a virtue in every one of the world religions. Every spiritual practice would teach us to take up the practice of self restraint. But I don't think it's so easy, and it's certainly not easy in this society today, where the very kernel of our culture is a lavish abandon of restraint, where we are told by our government to go out and spend, and that we must spend in order to keep the economy going. We must eat, we must use certain tools for our well being. Once our bodies get used to a certain amount of food, not so easy to restrain ourselves. Remember that we don't need quite as many calories as we think we need.

So, how do we practice this? How do we practice restraint? I think restraint is a very conscious virtue. I certainly think that we learn and we practice and we acquire some obvious restraints, but it's not just about food. It's restraint in emotions, in anger, restraint in just everything. I was out shopping today and two kids got into a violent exchange down the aisle of the store. One kid got really hurt by the other, got kicked right in the shin and then he had one of the small shopping

carts just run into his leg. The mother said something to the boy who had done the injury “What are you doing? Why don't you think about what you're doing?” and the boy said “I don't think when I get angry, I just do whatever I want!” So, we have the misunderstanding about the importance of thinking, and of paying attention. On the one hand we are taught “don't stay in your head too much ! Be free, open yourself. When we're throwing the football, don't think about it just let it fly through the air. When we are running, don't think about running. Just run !” So we have this sense of abandon, and we don't understand the importance of thinking or the development of empathy. Maybe when we smash a shopping-cart into someone's leg it's going to hurt.

I was very pleased to learn that my grand-son at his school was studying empathy and they were using water to learn empathy. The kids were told to bring a backpack and an empty liter bottle to school. They walked for two hours to the lake, filled up the liter bottle with water, put it in the backpack and walked for two hours back to school. The lesson was to teach them how it is for some people in developing countries. I thought that was a good lesson! My grandson's school is not in the U.S.; the parents in the U.S. would probably be screaming and yelling that their kids were made to walk for two hours with a bottle of water on their backs. A liter gets pretty heavy for ten year old kids after two hours. And I don't think that they could drink, I think that they had to boil the water after they got back, because you obviously can't drink lake water. So there was the practice of restraint that went along with the practice of empathy.

I do think that restraint is a conscious practice, something that we have to agree to engage in. And it is not always easy because we don't want someone else to get away with something, our nature may want to retaliate because always in our culture, “Who shouts last, wins!” The Buddha's life is also very much about restraint. The Buddha nearly starves to death and then agrees to take some milk and some rice to eat. But thereafter there is the practice of restraint. He doesn't gorge on a lot of food. He says, “Now we follow the Middle Way. We follow that which is moderate. We practice moderation in everything.”

What do we think about the difficulty of practicing restraint? What makes it so difficult for us?

Student

It seems that the work environment implies restraint. When we leave work and we're given the Applejack: commercials, advertising, this trip, this experience! It's a huge manipulation. I guess I'm curious about, in the second story, he seemed to have a "realization"..I think each of us has to go through that maybe. Wake up one morning and ask, "What am I doing?!"

Teacher

There is lots of Applejack out there. Would that not be a good name: "Applejack Shopping Mall."

Student

Well, when you say that, everything being Applejack, I mean there is so much...whenever we indulge in any area, whether we're conscious of it or not, there is some shame. And then the unwillingness to allow to stop us, allow that to be a part of us anymore, is a real turning point. The other thing I was thinking of is that the Middle Way is really difficult because it requires us to be conscious. There are no set rules about how much is too much or it's not all one way or all another way. It's just being conscious in any situation and knowing when enough is enough. For me that's hard in so many areas. If I'm not aware, if I'm not thinking, I will eat too much of something I didn't need.

Student

I also very much believe that the difference between over indulging and restraint...we have to use our own brains, to see the difference and to think. And I think Western society, and maybe especially here in the US, even the children are so used to other people doing the thinking for them, or finding responsibility some place other than themselves. It is a very conscious thing to do and we need to understand that any decision lies with us, and requires us to be aware. It's so interesting. I came across a thing a couple of days ago that said, "The stores are closed today, so I'm hugging the things I have!" Be happy with that...

Student

Restraint sounds like a positive control that one has on oneself. But what about suppression?

Teacher

If restraint becomes neurotic it's a problem too. And suppression is neurotic restraint.

Student

I was thinking that many people do too much of something because they're using it as some kind of coping mechanism, or it's something that is keeping them feeling spiritually okay. I'm just thinking how to talk about restraint when people have some kind of need that needs to be fulfilled and whatever is trying to fulfill that need, it seems like it needs even to be a beer conversation..It just seems like we all have so many places of emptiness or needs...that the restraint becomes confusing

Teacher

Well we just finished a year of studying the nature of lack. Usually not to understand the nature of lack within us, that cannot be filled – in the Dharma there is nothing missing, there is absolutely nothing missing in us but we have the existential notion that we are incomplete in some way, that we need something in order to satisfy this empty place or this fear of death, or this something. It's this existential lack that is essentially behind this thing that says. “We must have, we must acquire.” It cannot be filled. There is a misunderstanding in people in the first place, that by acquiring they will fill something, they will satisfy something that cannot be satisfied. Stuffing the garage full of things that we bought at the shopping mall, can never possibly satisfy. Even though we may be trying to do that – fortunately we have no basement here and we have no garage – the urge to do that has to do with some neurotic notion or some misunderstanding about the existential place in ourselves. Fear, inadequacy...and we can't stop it all over the world, we can only practice for ourselves. And perhaps model in our families and with our friends because we are able to practice some restraint. To just say “restraint!” to other people who are filling those needs, no, I think that that's not going to work. It's a deeper matter than that. But for us to say “restraint!” is okay, because we've been busy studying lack and the underlying issues all this year.

Student

I also think that for us, our practice is how we can look at ourselves, how we can sit with ourselves and become more aware, and find that place of rest. So, I mean it's a wonderful

opportunity that we have. The other thing with restraint is that, in both stories it opens up the possibility of doing something for others, for the larger world. Restraint gives the possibility to actually do something that maybe wouldn't have been possible before.

Teacher

Yes, in our practice there is a reason that we sit on this unadorned cushion that is just an island with nothing else around it. We come in without our purses, and money and our cellphones. Everything gets left out and we come in as empty as we can be, as naked, as unadorned, we come and we sit without any support on this island of the Zafu. In this practice we learn, this itself is the practice of restraint. To practice Zazen is restraint. The way in which we practice teaches us over and over to see that we don't need what we think we need. We really need very little. We may have more than we need, and there's not much that we need. We need food, not so much of it, we need clothing not so much of it, we need shelter not so much of it either, and we need love. Four basic needs. Lots of that fourth one.

Student

One thing you said earlier about slave-owners attempting to prevent their slaves from learning to read. And then a little later someone else mentioned critical thinking. Something occurs on the cushion that I wouldn't called critical thinking, I almost say kind of singing. Singing as you said, singing that I don't need. I don't know what to call that, because it's not critical thinking in the sense of analyzing and...But I think that's what we cultivate on the cushion, is that watching the impulse arise and fade away.

Teacher

Well there is the great development of the intuitive body that sees this that understands that. We intuit that we don't need. And the intuitive body is awakened, the intuitive eye is awakened in Zazen. What is invisible becomes abundant. What is visible we don't need so much of, but what is invisible, the abundance of spirit, the abundance of compassion, the abundance of generosity, all of these things become abundant in us. Whereas what is visible, things, are which we don't need. All these other things we need a great deal of. It isn't that we aren't without abundance, or that we shouldn't develop this notion of great abundance of generosity and virtue and so forth, strength and courage in order to restrain from that which is not healthy for us. When we become

abundant in spirit, abundant in the strength and courage of practice then our restraint is not so difficult.

Student

It jumped into my mind, the notion of poverty. Not in the economic sense of poverty, I always thought about it in terms of poverty of spirit maybe. Does what you're talking about relate to that.

Teacher

Absolutely does. It's become something that we don't even want to talk about. Whereas poverty at one time was a virtue, it has turned and has become a dirty word that somebody is living in poverty and shame. Even in my growing up, poverty was a virtue. You live without the need to acquire. When you enter practice and you go to a training temple, you must move from one place to another every thirty days. You cannot stay in that same little area where you are living. You stop acquiring because you don't want to move all of this stuff every month. People try to give you something, you say, "Oh, no thanks, give it to somebody else." You practice non accumulation by continuing to move. Certainly in the foundation in the original people on this land, in the migrating tribes, they couldn't acquire more than they could carry. Not just in the American people but anywhere, wherever we had migrating wandering people, you can't carry it, so you don't need it. The wagon trail is littered with garbage of people who brought all kinds of stuff hooked on to their wagons and they just had to dump it as they went along. The horses couldn't pull it. This non-acquisition is important practice.

Eido Frances Carney

With gratitude to Josepha Vermote for transcription of this Dharma talk.