

Bhante Sanathavihari

*Right Effort: Understanding an Often Overlooked Mental Discipline on the Eightfold Path*

Week Two: “Guarding the Senses”

November 12, 2022



Welcome back to this course on *samma-vayama*, or wholesome effort. In this episode, we’re going to be focusing on *sanvara*. Sanvara means guarding or sense restraint. Here we have six senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking. Thinking is the sixth sense in Buddhism.

Before we get into the details about this, I’d like to share with you one of the Buddha’s sayings about this topic. The Buddha on one occasion said that the mind in its natural state is uncontaminated or pure or bright or clear, but the mind is only contaminated due to external influxes or influences.

This helps us understand the importance of the practice of *sanvara*, guarding the senses.

Guarding the senses is so important that it is one of the first trainings that monks like myself receive. We’re advised that when we go on alms rounds or when we interact with people, we should avoid looking around and being distracted by everything that’s going on. When we go on our alms rounds, we don’t look at the people who are serving us. We just walk straight and look down and try not to get entertained and enchanted by anyone or any of the lovely faces on our alms rounds.

It’s a very important practice not only for monastics but also for our everyday lives. But in order to understand how to protect the senses, we need to understand how the Buddha explains this guarding of the senses. We have to learn a little bit about Buddhist psychology or theory of mind. According to the Buddha, there is a sense organ, and that sense organ picks up a certain sense object.

For example, with the eye, there’s a mental image, a *rupa*. With the coming together of the eye and the mental image, then there is visual consciousness or visual perception, which we would

Bhante Sanathavihari

*Right Effort: Understanding an Often Overlooked Mental Discipline on the Eightfold Path*

Week Two: “Guarding the Senses”

November 12, 2022



call seeing. When these three things come together, that is called *phassa*. Phassa means contact or cognition or sense impingement. This is when you become completely aware of that experience through the senses.

So let's say now we see something. We're aware of something. Our eye has made this contact, this phassa. From there arises *vedana*, or feeling tone: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. We have to place this within the teachings of dependent origination. I'm not going to go into all of dependent origination, just a little bit to explain this process. *Phassa paccaya vedana*. Sense contact is condition for feeling.

So when we see something or hear something or taste something or think about something through any of the senses, there's some sort of hedonic tone or affective tone that comes to it, either pleasant (*sukha*), unpleasant (*dukkha*), or neutral, neither pleasant nor unpleasant (*adukkha-asukha*).

When this happens, we need to be very careful because we can be pulled in by those unpleasant, pleasant, and neutral experiences. According to the Buddha and the fourth noble truth, this leads to the root of our suffering, which is *tanha*, desire or craving, this impulse or urge to follow through. It's not enough that something is nice; we want more of it. And that leads to suffering because we may not be able to have more of it or we may not be able to have that nice feeling endure for a long time. Or if an unpleasant feeling arises, we may not be able to avoid it. We might have to experience that.

It is within this context that we need to understand the importance of guarding the senses. If we don't guard our ears, our nose, or our mouth, we can let ourselves be pulled in by this desire, this

Bhante Sanathavihari

*Right Effort: Understanding an Often Overlooked Mental Discipline on the Eightfold Path*

Week Two: “Guarding the Senses”

November 12, 2022



craving, this *tanha*, when we do come in contact with these different things that we pick up throughout the day.

So the Buddha says that we need to be aware first. That's why *sati*, the practice of mindfulness, is so important and integral. Even though when we look at the eightfold path, *samma-vayama*, or harmonious effort, comes before *samma-sati*, which is the practice of wholesome mindfulness, they don't necessarily have to happen in that order all the time. We're going to mix and match and combine them, and we'll see how they support each other and arise together, although we might give particular focus to any one of them depending on what type of practice we're doing or what our own personality requires.

Understanding how these pleasant or unpleasant or neutral experiences that we come into contact with through our senses lead to desire, which leads to the whole chain of events that eventually lead to suffering and rebirth, or unsatisfactoriness and re-existence, we understand the importance of guarding our senses.

Now, most of you are not going to be monastics. You can't go away into a temple or the mountains of the forest where you can avoid most of these. I think many of you are just living your normal lives. So how can we apply this?

I think we can use this teaching in the sense of trying to avoid or reduce unnecessary distractions or interactions. We know that when we watch something on our phone, whether we're watching the news or streaming a video or listening to a song or listening to a podcast or watching a show, all these things bring some sorts of feelings with them. They're associated with some sort of thoughts. And if you notice that during that time, some unwholesome states arise, then you need to withdraw your attention and, if possible, even avoid watching, seeing, and going to these

Bhante Sanathavihari

*Right Effort: Understanding an Often Overlooked Mental Discipline on the Eightfold Path*

Week Two: “Guarding the Senses”

November 12, 2022



kinds of places or associating yourself with people who trigger you or lead to these unwholesome states arising.

A very everyday way that we can practice this guarding of the senses is by taking a minimalistic approach into our lifestyle. We don't need to overindulge in eating and drinking and bodily comforts and the things that we watch and sounds that we hear. We need to be very careful about what we pay attention to with our senses because it can bring unwholesomeness and contaminate our potentially natural state of clarity in the mind.

Placing this within the larger practice, as I said in the first video, this has to do with avoiding the bad, or *sabbapapassa akaranam*. We're doing that with our senses. We're avoiding the bad. We're not letting ourselves be taken in by unwholesome things which might lead to unwholesome thoughts, unwholesome words, and unwholesome actions.

And not only are we protecting ourselves from these things, but at the same time, we are protecting others because most of us don't live alone, and if we overindulge in these things that can trigger unwholesome states of mind, there will be a ripple effect that will affect our families, our friends, our community, our nation, and the whole world. So guarding the senses is not just about protecting our own mind, but it's also about protecting our communities and our world and all infinite beings throughout the entire universe.

I want to connect this teaching and show its implications into a larger social context because some of these teachings might seem very individualistic. As Westerners, we're already very individualistic, so there's that temptation to fall into being more individualistic. But what's the point of just practicing for me if there's no benefit to others? That's why I wanted to share with you how this has an effect on all the other things that we do.

Bhante Sanathavihari

*Right Effort: Understanding an Often Overlooked Mental Discipline on the Eightfold Path*

Week Two: “Guarding the Senses”

November 12, 2022



This practice is going to help you with your mindfulness training because you’re avoiding distractions or things that are going to cause more problems during your mindfulness practice and your *jhana* practice of *samma-samadhi*, the calming of the mind. The mind can’t be calm if we’re always entertaining and taking in all these unwholesome experiences. It’s very, very difficult.

I want to finish by touching on a very unique aspect of this, which is called equanimity, or *upekkha*. I like to think about *upekkha* as *upa ikkhati*. *Upa ikkhati* means to place attention within. So instead of how we normally walk around in the world, placing our attention outside, I want you to practice *upekkha* in the sense of placing your attention within or looking within.

So walk around, look at all the things you do, but do not grasp or attach onto the objects that are being perceived through the senses. Keep your attention directed inside, although you may be looking outside, and focus on what pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences are arising. Focus on the desires, whether towards greed, whether towards hatred, whether towards delusion arise. And in a general sense, pay more attention and become more informed about the things that you do every day and what kind of experiences, what kind of dhammas, they generate in your mind.

In the next episode, we’re going to be talking about *pahana*. *Pahana* means to remove or to eliminate. We’re going to get into some more specific meditation techniques, and I’m going to be citing some suttas that you can look up later and read for yourself—we’ll share the links—and we can practice how to eliminate unwholesome states in the mind. Thank you for joining us, and see you next time.