

Lesson 7 – SELF-CONTROL AND PERSEVERANCE - The Ascetic Life

Siddhartha knew that to become enlightened--which means having the ultimate knowledge, wisdom, and peace, with no more suffering—he would have to stay away from environments with distracting sights and sounds such as people talking, and the distractions of comfortable living conditions such as having many delicious foods and exciting things to do. These distractions would lead him to suffering like everyone else, constantly trying to find enjoyment and avoid pain. Staying alone in the forest was the way to avoid these distractions.

So he started living alone in the forest near Uruvela, a village to which he could walk and receive food donations from the villagers.

Siddhartha also knew that he had to avoid distractions in his mind. He started practicing meditation techniques to control his mind, to stop the scattered, wandering, busy mind with its mental chatter, stories, and distractions of thinking about the past and future.

There were other people who also lived in the forest, away from distractions and comfortable living conditions, practicing meditation and other techniques to try to control the mind and become enlightened. They were called ascetics. Many of them tried to control the mind, to make it extremely strong and focused, by forcing it overcome discomfort and pain in their body. They believed that if their mind could tolerate pain and extreme discomfort—such as heat, cold, and hunger—without trying to escape it, then the mind could be brought under control.

Siddhartha was now called “the monk Gotama” because he lived like a monk or ascetic and his family name was Gotama. There was a group of five ascetics who knew about him, including one of the astrologers who came to see the baby Siddhartha and predicted that he would become the Fully Enlightened One who would teach the world how to become enlightened. The other four were sons of the other astrologers.

They wanted to find the monk Gotama so he could teach them how to become enlightened, so they wandered around, asking people in different towns and villages whether they had seen him.

Finally, they found him in the Uruvela forest. Hoping that if he achieved something special he would tell them, they stayed with him, serving him for example by sweeping and cleaning the area he was staying, looking out for his safety, and bringing him hot or cold water.

To control his mind, Siddhartha tried clenching his teeth and forcing his mind to stop, sweating with the extreme effort. He became constantly mindful, fully aware of each moment, and full of energy in his body. But his body became agitated because his mind was exhausted by the forcing control over itself. And

the painful feelings of forcing his mind to stop didn't give him the power to control his mind.

He tried to meditate while holding his breath to see if that would cause his mind to come totally under his control. But while holding his breath as long as he could, he heard a loud sound like wind roaring in his ears, felt terrible pain in his head and a burning feeling in his stomach. And such painful feelings didn't help him gain any control over his mind.

He was not becoming enlightened with these techniques. He wondered whether he could control his mind by totally overcoming hunger, conquering his feeling of hunger. He thought, "Suppose I entirely stop eating?"

There were deities who knew what he was thinking, and didn't want him to starve. They came to him and said,

"Good sir, don't entirely cut off food. If you do so, we will inject divine food into your skin and you will live on that."

Siddhartha thought, "If I claim to be living without food, and these deities inject divine food into my skin, then I will be lying." So, he told them there is no need for them to do that.

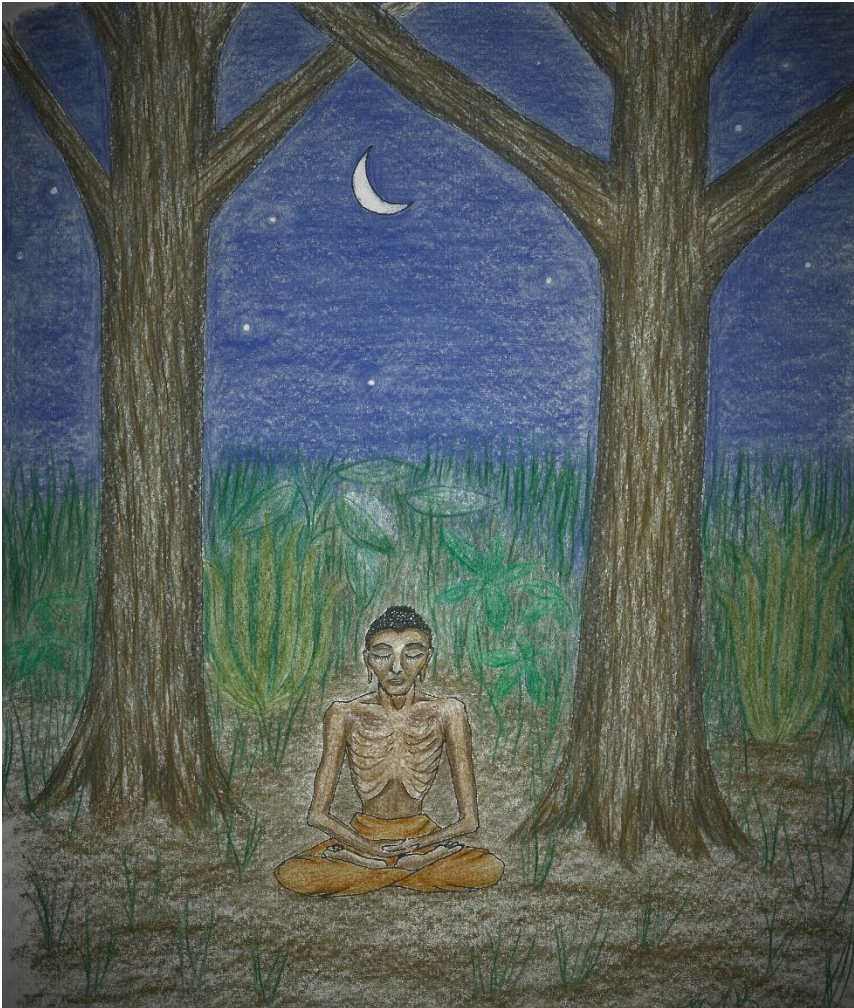
However, he felt that eating food regularly from the villagers was too comfortable of a lifestyle and not helping him control his mind enough to attain enlightenment. He thought, "Suppose I take very little food, say a handful each time, whether it is bean soup or lentil soup or pea soup?"

So he ate only a handful of food whenever he went to the village. But he didn't seem to be getting any closer to enlightenment. He wanted to make more effort and try even harder to attain enlightenment, so he stopped going to the village for food. He started eating only fruit which fell to the ground in the forest.

After some time of eating so little, only eating the fruit he gathered, still he was not enlightened. He thought that searching for fruit was not helping him become enlightened. He then ate only the fruit that dropped from the tree that he was using as a shelter. Month after month, year after year, he became thinner and thinner with so little food.

The extreme starvation over several years made his body become extremely thin, emaciated, so even his muscles wasted away and he looked like a skeleton. His legs and arms were so thin they looked like bamboo sticks. His backbone stuck out from under his skin like beads on a string, and all his ribs could clearly be seen, protruding sharply through his thin skin. His eyes were no longer bright and beautiful but were sunken deeply into their sockets. When he touched his belly, he could feel his backbone. When he stood up, his body was so weak that

he fell down on his face. When he massaged his legs and arms to ease his pain, the hair came off his body from eating so little food.



After six years of living as an ascetic in the forest, even his skin lost its golden-brown color and became dull due to lack of nourishment. When people looked at him, they couldn't tell what color he was; some thought he was a black man, others thought he was a brown man, and still others thought he had light colored skin.

Someone very powerful and evil was watching him: a demon called Mara. He did not want people to become enlightened,

because then he and his demon armies would be weakened. Determined to prevent Siddhartha from becoming enlightened, Mara, speaking as if he felt pity, said to Siddhartha:

“Oh you are thin and pale, near death. Live, sir! Life is the better way. Come, live the holy life, and make merit doing holy rituals. What can you do by struggling now? The path of struggling is too rough and difficult.”

As he spoke, he came closer to Siddhartha.

Siddhartha replied calmly, “O Evil One, you came here to get what you want. I don't need merit now at all. Talk about merit to those who need it. I have confidence, energy, and understanding. I can control myself, so why do you speak to me about saving my own life? By controlling my mind, I shall have more mindfulness, wisdom, and greater concentration. My mind doesn't look for enjoyment, but it sees the purity of a being. Your demon armies are selfishness,

craving, laziness, fear, doubt, hatred, stubbornness, seeking popularity, fame, and admiration even for wrongdoing; also, showing off and speaking badly of others. No one but the brave will conquer them. And by conquering them, happiness will result. I don't retreat from this battle; it's better that I die in battle against them now than to live defeated and controlled by them. Your armies, which the world with all its gods cannot defeat, I shall now defeat and break using my wisdom, like a stone breaks a clay pot."

Mara went away, and Siddhartha was left alone in peace.

Siddhartha thought, "Whatever pain a monk or holy man feels, has ever had in the past or will feel in the future, cannot be greater than the pain I am feeling now in my body. But I am still an ordinary, unenlightened human. Might there be another way to enlightenment?"

He remembered that a long time ago when he was a very young boy, his father took him to a plowing ceremony, and he sat alone in the cool shade of the rose-apple tree, and at that time, he had a happy, pleasant meditation.

He thought, "Might that be the way to enlightenment?" He realized, "Yes, meditating happily with a strong, healthy body is the way to enlightenment! Why am I afraid to enjoy the pleasure of meditation? It's not possible to meditate happily with a weak, starving body. Suppose I ate some solid food, some boiled rice and bread?"

He then went to the village and ate food that the villagers offered to him. It revived him, and he felt better.

But the five ascetics saw him eating food and they thought, "The monk Gotama has given up the struggle for enlightenment and now he wants a life of luxury." They thought he was a failure. So, they left him.

Questions:

1. What is an ascetic? (a person who avoids comfortable living conditions and distractions, and practices meditation and other techniques to try to control the mind and become enlightened)
2. How did the five ascetics who stayed with Siddhartha know him from before? (one was an astrologer and the others were sons of the other astrologers who saw him as a baby, predicting he will be enlightened)
3. Why did they want to find Siddhartha? (they knew he would become enlightened, and they wanted him to teach them)

4. Why did Mara approach Siddhartha? (he didn't want Siddhartha to become enlightened)
5. What did Siddhartha say that he would use to conquer the demon armies? (his wisdom)
6. Why did Siddhartha decide to eat normal food again? (he realized he could meditate happily and become enlightened not by starving himself, but by eating and having a healthy, strong body)

What the Buddha said:

“Kāyena saṃvutā dhīrā, atho vācaya saṃvutā, manasā saṃvutā dhīrā, te ve suparisamvutā.”

“The wise are controlled in action, speech and thought. They are truly well-controlled.”

Dhammapada 234 (17:14)

“Yo ca vassasataṃ jīve, kusīto hīnavīriyo, ekāhaṃ jīvitam seyyo, vīriyamārabhato dalhaṃ.”

“Better than living a lazy life for a hundred years without making effort, is to live for one single day strongly making effort.”

Dhammapada 112 (8:13)

Dharma Discussion – Self-Control and Perseverance:

Siddhartha left his wife, son, family and life as a prince for a very important reason. What was that reason? What did he want to find?

The way to end suffering, enlightenment.

He was determined to find the way to end the cycle of birth, suffering, pain, illness, old age, death, and rebirth.

He was so determined that he left everyone he loved and everything he had to live in a forest—among frightening animals like tigers and snakes—with nothing.

In order to do that, he needed to have enormous self-discipline, or self-control.

What exactly is self-control, or self-discipline?

Having control over our body, our speech, and our mind.

What do we mean by having control over our body?

Not just doing whatever we feel like doing, but doing what is better for ourselves and for others.

Choosing to do what is actually good for you rather than what feels good at the moment.

Can you think of some examples?

How do you have self-control when choosing what to eat? You choose healthy food rather than junk food.

How do you have self-control while meditating? You keep your body still, and you sit with your back straight and eyes closed.

What do we mean by having control over our speech?

Not speaking in ways that hurt others, not lying, not shouting when it may disturb others, not talking when we are supposed to be quiet.

For example, how do we have self-control of our speech while in class? Raising your hand and waiting to be called on before speaking.

What about having control over our mind? How do we discipline our mind?

Concentrating, trying to avoid distractions.

We do this when we are concentrating on homework, working on an art project, practicing a sport or practicing playing a musical instrument.

Siddhartha chose to do not what felt good at the moment, being comfortable while living at the palace, but what was really better for himself and everyone. He had the self-discipline to do what was really the best for everyone, to find a way to end suffering, to find the way to enlightenment.

But he didn't find enlightenment when he left the palace and went to the great meditation masters; he had to try to find it on his own, in the forest.

But he didn't find it even by practicing the most extreme methods of self-control—holding his breath, and starving himself.

He tried and tried to find the way to enlightenment every day, meditating for hours in the hot, cold, windy or rainy weather, outside with wild animals and insects around.

And every day, he didn't find it. Month after month, he didn't find it. After six years, he still didn't find it.

It seems that he failed--he kept failing every day—to find what he was looking for. But he kept trying. Every day he tried again.

Can you think of a word that means to keep trying, not giving up, even when there are difficulties and failures? Perseverance.

Siddhartha had extreme perseverance. He tried over and over to become enlightened. During six *years* of suffering starvation and extreme discomfort, and still failing to reach enlightenment, Siddhartha did not get frustrated or angry and did not give up.

He did have some success—like he told Mara, he gained mindfulness, concentration and wisdom with his meditation and extreme self-control.

And he had confidence that he could conquer and control all negative qualities—craving, laziness, stubbornness, seeking fame, and so on.

That is what he meant by battling and conquering the demon armies.

He gained this confidence, concentration and power by his perseverance.

What are some experiences that you have had with perseverance?

Some examples are learning to ride a bicycle, swim, play a musical instrument, do a difficult project for school.

We make mistakes, we don't do things perfectly, things go wrong, it's not fun, but we keep trying.

Did you become more confident when you persevered, when you kept trying without giving up?

When we overcome problems and failures, each time we decide not to be lazy or give up, we gain more courage and confidence, more concentration and willpower. That will give us confidence to try many other challenges.

When we are trying hard to do something and we have difficulties, we can remember Siddhartha's challenges and failures, and his perseverance.

Activity:

Statue game: All students except one sit facing the same direction, in a meditation position, perfectly still, like statues. The other student walks around them and tries to make each sitting "statue" student move or smile, without touching anyone. For example, he can say something silly, joke, make funny noises, wave a hand near them, or pretend to tickle them. If a student moves (smiles, frowns, grimaces, etc.), then he is "out." The last person remaining as a "statue" wins.