



SIDDHARTHA PRACTICES EXTREME SELF-CONTROL

## **Lesson 6 - SELF-CONTROL**

*Opening chants, meditation, and review of last lesson.*

*Question to think about before the story:* Have you ever been uncomfortable - too hot, cold, hungry, thirsty, or feeling pain - and there is no way to get rid of the discomfort anytime soon? What did you do, did you complain or did you have **self-control**?

### **Story: The Ascetic Life**

Siddhartha walked to the city of Rajagaha, and in the morning, holding his bowl, he went up to some houses in the city and stood at the door silently. People offered him food and put it in his bowl. Many people seeing him thought he was a deva (heavenly being), because he looked so handsome, young and noble, and he walked very slowly and dignified, like a self-controlled person, with his eyes looking down only a few feet in front of him. After receiving the food, Siddhartha walked to the Pandara Mountain, where he sat down to eat. The food was all mixed together in the bowl, and when he tasted it, he felt sick. He always got the best fancy foods served to him neatly on plates at the palace, and he did not like this mixed up food. He thought, "I wanted to be a renunciant, which means I must eat the food that people offer me. Why am I so repulsed? What is the meaning of this repulsion?" He thought about why he was disgusted with the food, and controlled his thoughts so he could eat it with contentment.

He then looked for a great master of meditation, to learn the way to end suffering, old age and death. He went to the famous teacher Alara Kalama, and told him he wants to live the holy life in Dharma and discipline. Alara Kalama said, "Venerable one, you may stay here. With the teaching I give, a wise man can realize through direct experience what I know." Siddhartha soon learned his teachings, and then asked Alara Kalama what he had experienced through direct knowledge with this teaching. Alara Kalama said that it led to nothingness. Siddhartha concentrated well on the teachings and experienced nothingness, and told Alara Kalama, who said, "You are now like me. You can help me teach my students." But Siddhartha thought, "His teachings do not lead to purity, the highest peace, full enlightenment, Nirvana." So, he left that ashram (hermitage) to find a teacher who could help him to become enlightened.

He went to the famous teacher Uddaka Ramaputra, and became one of his many students. Siddhartha studied and practiced the system taught by Uddaka Ramaputra, and when he mastered it, he told his teacher, who then honored Siddhartha by asking him to teach all of his students. But Siddhartha realized that the system he taught did not lead to purity, full enlightenment, Nirvana, so he left the ashram.

Siddhartha went to a place near Uruvela, a beautiful forest with a river, shade trees, and a village where the villagers might give him food (alms). This was an ideal place, so he decided to stay there. The sons of four of the wise men, and the

youngest of the wise men who had seen the marks of a great Dharma teacher on Siddhartha when he was a baby, had come to Uruvela. They were now ascetics, people who live in very harsh conditions so that they can practice self-control, trying to control and purify their minds. The five ascetics knew about the marks on Siddhartha's body indicating that he will be enlightened, and they decided to stay near him so they could get enlightened, too.

At first, staying in the forest was frightening. Siddhartha thought that any sound might be a wild animal which could kill him. So he thought deeply about fear and horror, and tried so hard to fight his fearful thoughts with good thoughts that his body sweated. He did many ascetic practices that were supposed to help control and purify the mind. He practiced holding his breath until he went into a trance, and then until he heard a sound like wind roaring in his ears. He held his mouth, nose and ears until his stomach burned with pain, but it did not purify his mind. He stayed out in the hot sun in the day and endured cold nights without a blanket. He controlled his food so at first he ate only roots, leaves and juice, then only a cup of soup, then he ate only once every 2 or 3 days, then he ate nothing, and then he ate only what dropped into his bowl. After six years of doing these ascetic practices, his body became emaciated (terribly thin) and his muscles started withering away. His ribs showed, his backbone looked like beads along his back, and his eyes were sunken. His skin, even the skin on his head, was wrinkly, his complexion was very unhealthy, and when he touched his stomach, he could feel his backbone.

Someone very powerful and evil was watching him: Mara, a most powerful and frightening demon. Mara did not want people to become enlightened, because then his demon armies would be weakened. So, he was determined to prevent Siddhartha from becoming enlightened. Mara told Siddhartha, "You are thin and pale, near death; why don't you live a religious life making merit by doing rituals? Your path is too difficult." Siddhartha replied calmly, "O Evil One, you came here for your own selfishness. I do not need merit now. I have confidence, determination, understanding, and self-control, so I will have greater concentration and wisdom. Your armies are selfishness, craving, laziness, cowardice, doubt, hatred, stubbornness, seeking fame and gain; for cheap popularity they show off and speak badly of others. Conquering these armies leads to happiness. Death is better than losing the battle against those evils. I meet you in battle, with your armies, so I will not be driven off my path to enlightenment. I will conquer your armies with my wisdom, like an unbaked clay bowl is broken with a stone." Mara went away, and Siddhartha was left alone in peace.

Siddhartha could hardly walk, and he often fell down from weakness. One day when he fell, laying on the ground he thought, "Whatever pain any monk has felt from extreme self-torture cannot be worse than this. But I have not gained wisdom and enlightenment. This leads to weakness of the body and mind. Is there another way to enlightenment? On the day of the ploughing ceremony when I was young, sitting alone in the shade of the rose -apple tree, I could

meditate with happiness. Might that be the way to enlightenment? Yes! It is not possible to meditate happily with a weak, starving body. Suppose I ate some solid food, some boiled rice and bread?” He then ate some boiled rice and bread, and it revived him. The five ascetics saw him eating food, and they thought, “That monk wants a life of luxury, he has failed.” So, they deserted him.

*Questions after the story:*

1. Why didn't Siddhartha like the food given in his bowl?
2. Why did Siddhartha leave his teachers Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputra?
3. What did Siddhartha do for 6 years in the forest?
4. What is an ascetic?
5. Why did Mara approach Siddhartha?
6. What do you think Siddhartha meant when he spoke of conquering the demon armies? Was he really going to kill some demons in a war? Or was he going to conquer all evil thoughts and prevent them from weakening his mind?
7. What did Siddhartha think about when he fell?

*Quotation of Buddha about the moral of the story:*

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

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

Dhammapada 234 (17:14)

*Application of the moral(s) in the story to our daily lives:*

When Siddhartha was given food that he didn't like, what did he do? What do you do when you are given food you don't like? Siddhartha didn't throw the food away. Instead, he controlled himself and then ate the food with contentment. He learned not to be spoiled and choosy, but to be content with what he has and not complain. He walked slowly in a self-controlled way, looking only a few feet in front of him, instead of walking fast and looking around everywhere, or shuffling along in a lazy way. When Mara approached, Siddhartha was not afraid or angry; he did not shout, but he talked calmly and confidently.

When the body is controlled, or disciplined, then the mind can be more easily controlled for good concentration. Good concentration is important for almost everything we do, not just for meditation, but also for learning in school, or learning anything; for playing sports, playing an instrument, reading, and so forth. If we concentrate well, we learn well, we perform well, and so we also get confidence. How do we behave if we are undisciplined? If we are undisciplined, we are boisterous, aggressive, lazy, or we eat too much, or we do what we want to do rather than what is good for us. When our voice is undisciplined, what does that mean? It means that we shout, speak too much at the wrong time or speak in an unkind or harsh way. When the body and voice are undisciplined, then the mind is uncontrolled, so it is easily distracted and cannot concentrate. Of course, children should play as appropriate for their age, but it should be at the correct time and place and should not be too aggressive. So in this way, self-control is very important for our success in almost everything we do.

Renunciants and monks try to discipline their minds very much so that they can deeply meditate and purify their minds. To control the mind that much, they obey many rules that are only for them, not for laypersons, to control the body, voice and thoughts. That is why Siddhartha did not look around everywhere when he walked, and did not chat freely with others, but spent time alone in the forest. But Siddhartha also learned that controlling the body in an extreme way, by not eating, not breathing normally or not protecting the body to keep it healthy, is NOT the way to purify the mind. By torturing the body that way, what happens? Both the body and mind become weak.

But at the other extreme, by indulging the body with many comforts and luxuries, what happens? What happens if we eat anything we want at any time? What happens if we watch too much TV? What happens if we don't do much work? What if we don't control our talking? Both the body and mind become uncontrolled and undisciplined.

The Buddha said we should follow the Middle Path - not starving or torturing the body, but not spoiling it with too many comforts.

*Activity to reinforce the lesson:*

Statue game: All students except one sit facing the same direction, in a meditation position, perfectly still. The other student walks around them and tries to make each sitting "statue" student move or smile, without touching anyone. For example, he can be silly, joke, 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 to be "out" wins.

*Closing chant:* Sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhitattā  
May all beings have happy minds!