



Sense Restraint in Daily Life: Recommendations from a Health Behavior Change Perspective

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In this article, F. Curtis Breslin, Ph.D., C.Psych draws on his insights as a long-time practitioner in the Thai Forest tradition of Ajahn Chah and as a retired professor of psychology to suggest ways in which we can practice sense-restraint in our daily lives to cultivate more enjoyable, more wholesome, and more mindful experience.

At a recent online retreat, I heard Ajahn Punnadhammo, a senior monk in the Thai forest tradition of Ajahn Chah, explain one of the key reasons for practicing sense restraint (*indriya samvara*). Putting aside activities that preoccupy or distract us, he said, is a supportive condition that helps settle the mind and facilitates deeper states of concentration leading to insight. During days of mindfulness or multi-day meditation retreats, sense restraint refers to refraining from unnecessary speech (i.e., noble silence) and temporarily putting aside the various habitual ways we inform and entertain ourselves. The practice of sense restraint is one aspect of the parami of *nekkamma* (i.e., renunciation; Sucitto 2012). Many people respond positively to temporary sense restraint during meditation retreats yet struggle with integrating it consistently into their daily lives. While the Ajahn’s rationale for sense restraint may ring true, the

predicament I and others face is that we cannot live our life (or even our free time) on a 10-day retreat regime.

Theories and research on health behaviour change (e.g., diet and exercise) can help clarify and demystify the role of sense restraint in daily life, as this kind of self-regulation is a key part of long-term change to healthier behaviour. Drawing on this research, my aim in this article is to offer practical, intermediate steps on how to shift your free-time activities away from those that temporarily boost mood through pre-occupation or distraction and towards those that foster and support mindfulness.

From a Buddhist perspective, this essay provides practical steps on how to operationalize the four aspects of Right Effort (*samma padhana*; *Magga-vibhanga Sutta*, SN 45.8). The four efforts refer to preventing and abandoning unwholesome activities and mind states, as well as cultivating and maintaining wholesome ones. A health behavior change perspective suggests that a key leverage point is to develop *chanda* (i.e., a healthy, willing motivation; Ajahn Jayasaro 2017) for taking up free-time activities that are enjoyable and foster a settled, alert mind that is then more able and willing to engage in formal mindfulness practices. Just as with diet and exercise, cultivating *chanda* for wholesome, more mindful activities offers an attractive alternative to preoccupying, distracting free-time activities, which makes it easier to give them up. Of course, this assumes both that no matter how busy you are, you have some free time, and that you wonder whether you can sometimes spend it in ways more in line with your values and spiritual aspirations.

While sense restraint can sound unnecessary and outdated, it overlaps with the currently popular idea of “simplifying” your life by giving up non-essential activities and decluttering your personal space. Simplifying your life is touted as beneficial because decluttering allows more room to integrate what you value into your life. Similarly, changing to a healthier diet or increasing your physical activity level also requires sense restraint. For example, eating healthier often

requires giving up foods that are pleasurable but high in sugar. Likewise, increasing the time you spend exercising usually requires foregoing preferred sedentary activities like surfing the internet.

In the same way, sense restraint as part of a spiritual practice can include moving away from optional, free-time activities that keep our mind in “doing mode” to other activities that help foster mindfulness and bring us into a “being mode.” There are interesting, relaxing leisure activities that help to settle the mind that are not formal meditation practices per se. Examples include walking in nature, origami, yoga, puzzles, stargazing, watching nature documentaries, and learning to play a musical instrument (for more ideas, see the Dialectical Behavior Therapy pleasurable activities list). As the Buddha says in the Dhammapada, verse 290:

*It is wisdom
that enables letting go
of a lesser happiness
in pursuit of a happiness
that is greater.*

Have you noticed that certain activities that you do when you have free time are colored by a kind of psychological addiction? Perhaps you can recall having had a busy day, and when you finally have some free time you choose to indulge in a “guilty pleasure” such as binge-watching your favourite Netflix series, leaving little or no time to practice formal meditation or read or listen to Dhamma. We may feel the need to preoccupy our mind with entertaining and distracting activities to decompress from a stressful day, but when we engage in them *too much*, some less urgent but important things fall by the wayside. This cycle is a classic dynamic seen in addictions, with this being a very mild form. Even if we still have time to stop and meditate after our distracting activities (e.g., binge-watching

a TV series), such prior activities pull us out into the sense world and reduce our inclination to look inwards.

One metaphor that conveys this health behaviour change dynamic is to see the original distracting, preoccupying activity as your “heroin” activity which fulfills a need for a mood boost, but around which you have difficulty being mindful. One treatment for heroin addiction is an opiate called methadone, which does not produce the euphoric high of heroin and lasts about 24 hours. Methadone maintenance can allow a person to lead a healthier life by providing an alternative that reduces their preoccupation with securing the heroin high. In the same way, you are looking to replace the free-time activities that obscure your mindfulness practice with a “methadone” substitute which is still of interest and enjoyable, but does not lead to craving and bingeing because it does not have quite the euphoric high of the “heroin” activity.

Of course, if you can go “cold turkey” and maintain doing only formal meditation practices in your free time, that’s great. However, if you have tried multiple times to completely abstain from binge-watching your favourite TV series and been unsuccessful, the approach outlined below might be worth trying. This methadone-for-heroin approach is also characteristic of, for instance, trying to eat more healthily. The “ideal” diet for your physiology might be unpalatable enough that you would rarely follow it. Your “best” diet would instead balance nutrition and taste so that you can sustain it. Likewise, even though spending all your free time in formal meditative practices might be “ideal,” if you discover that you can’t stick to it, then you need to apply discernment to operate within your psychological limits to find “healthy” free-time activities that support mindfulness and are interesting and sustainable.

There is nothing inherently bad or immoral about doing something that temporarily helps you destress and feel better. You don’t have to beat yourself up for not meeting some ideal you may have for spending more of your free time

in formal meditation practice. Self-compassion is a crucial attitude to cultivate as we explore how to use our limited free time more skillfully.

The issue of spending free time skillfully comes up with monastics too: Ajahn Chah, for instance, was known for keeping monks busy on construction projects. Additionally, in the Thai forest tradition, monks engage in many crafts in such as weaving, sewing, crochet, and macramé to fashion a carrier for alms bowls (Luang Por Baen 2017). These crafts are helpful when the mind is restless—in fact, the senior Thai Forest monk Ajahn Amaro has described such activities as a type of “skillful occupational therapy” (Ajahn Amaro 2020). The crafts monastics undertake are hands-on, non-competitive activities that build skill over time. These manual crafts typically have a repetitive quality, which can also help settle a restless mind.

One tricky issue is that many preoccupying, distracting free-time activities are necessary or support well-being when done in moderation. For instance, the interpersonal connections that happen through social media can indirectly support practice by reducing loneliness and through online Dhamma offerings. How much time to spend with a particular free-time activity requires individual reflection and investigation. One line of reflection might be: What is the effect on my mind when I spend X amount of time watching, for example, Netflix shows? Is this activity taking away time from formal practice and reading or listening to Dhamma? This process of reflecting on whether the consequences of a free-time activity were positive or negative is very similar to the advice the Buddha gave to his son Rahula on methods that lead to more refined and skillful behaviour (Ambalattthika-rahulovada Sutta, MN 61). Often, when we engage in such reflection we find the classic addictive process at work: there are immediate, reliable positive consequences (e.g., a temporary boost in mood), and the negative consequences are more delayed and uncertain (e.g., the adverse effects of skipping daily mindfulness

practices don't always occur). These immediate, reliable consequences of an activity are important to recognize and investigate because their attraction is one of the main reasons why making a sustained change in behaviour can be so difficult. This is discussed more in the second recommendation below.

When it comes to how to make a change in your daily habits, psychological theories and research can help. The following are several evidence-based factors in health behaviour change theories, with ideas on how to increase your motivation to change (Glanz, Rimer, and Viswanath 2008).

1. Intrinsic motivation needs to be understood and fostered.

Sustainable changes for health behaviours such as diet and exercise require intrinsic motivation because the actions need to occur repeatedly over a long period of time to be of benefit. “Intrinsic motivation” refers to engaging in an activity out of your own interest or curiosity (Hadad 2013)—you enjoy engaging in the activity with little thought regarding its outcome. Research suggests that two key factors to fostering intrinsic motivation for an activity are having a variety of options to choose from and not feeling coerced into a choice (Ryan and Deci 2000).

Similarly, fostering intrinsic motivation is vital to sustaining mindful, peaceful free-time activities that support your daily life and spiritual practices. The Buddhist concept akin to intrinsic motivation is *chanda*. In his book on the *paramis* (i.e., noble character qualities), Ajahn Sucitto describes *chanda* as a healthy willingness of the heart to serve or do something because of an intuitive sense that the activity is worthwhile and meaningful. *Chanda* is a prerequisite for making effective, sustained effort. *Chanda* is not regarded as a fixed trait you do or do not have; rather, it needs to be continually nurtured and renewed to sustain effort in the long run.

Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, refers to engaging in an activity because of coercion, peer recognition, or some external reward. For example, if you jog because you enjoy exerting yourself and being outdoors, then you are intrinsically motivated. If, on the other hand, you jog because all your friends are doing it, or only because you want to achieve a specific body image goal, then that falls under extrinsic motivation. One type of extrinsic motivation in particular, termed introjected motivation, is a kind of “near enemy” of intrinsic motivation that can be difficult to discern: it is a state of motivational conflict where part of you is not that interested in engaging in an activity, such as healthy eating, but you have learned from outside influences (such as family, friends, or the media) that you “should” eat more healthy food. So you might eat more healthy food for a period of time because you will feel guilty and self-critical if you don’t. This kind of introjected or “should” motivation occurs usually because we are focused on the desired outcomes of the activity but don’t enjoy the activity itself. As many have probably experienced, however, activities based on such motivation are difficult to maintain.

The parallel to extrinsic motivation in Buddhism would be a form of craving or desire (*tanha*). One form of craving is the craving for achievement or self-esteem (*bhava tanha*), which is focused primarily on the resultant self-image gained from the activity and less on enjoyment of the process itself. Another is craving to get rid of, or avoid, a negative consequence (*vibhava tanha*), which carries a “have to” feeling. For instance, when the aims and concerns of your job do not seem in line with your values, it can be difficult to muster a willingness of the heart to put forth effort into the job (i.e., extrinsic motivation).

Recommendations:

Pursue multiple free-time activities that are enjoyable. One implication of the discussion of intrinsic motivation is the

importance of having an array of enjoyable free-time activities to choose from. It might seem like common sense that free-time activities should be enjoyable, but if you are anything like me, sometimes I have pursued activities for a while because I thought I would be in line with a desired self-image if I did (i.e., introjected motivation). If you have several peaceful, mindful activities to choose from when you have free time, that variety and choice can help foster a durable intrinsic motivation and weaken any “have to” or “should” reasons for change (i.e., reduce introjected motivation).

The various free-time activities I have developed share some common characteristics: they are not competitive, they have no external deadlines, and they tend to be solitary pursuits. These characteristics are similar to the crafts that monks engage in described above. If a healthy activity starts to feel less enjoyable, perhaps put it aside and engage in another activity you enjoy for a while. The key is providing the mind with an opportunity to settle, not so much the output of the activity itself.

Avoid “white-knuckling” it. Willful effort, or what is called “white-knuckling it” in Alcoholics Anonymous, is a potential pitfall, especially for those who tend toward perfectionism. Remember to balance your spiritual aspirations with self-compassion—the Buddha advocated a middle path, and we have to start from a realistic assessment of where we are. For almost all of us, trying to impose a meditation retreat schedule onto our free time is a kind of unrealistic aspiration that can adversely affect our practice. Be curious as you try shifting from the preoccupying, distracting activities to more mindful free-time activities. Can I put forth effort without turning it into a Self or Ego in “doing mode” trying to become a better person? Ajahn Amaro (2020) suggests the key is to use wise reflection and mindfulness to notice more quickly when *bhava tanha* or introjected motivations arise. This serves to cultivate an awareness which can determine

whether or not unskillful motivation is entangled in the motivation.

Even an activity that you enjoy and have intrinsic motivation for can feel onerous when there is an unrealistic deadline for getting it done. Thus, it is worthwhile to evaluate potential free-time activities based on whether they have deadlines or a demanding pace of activity. For example, if you are a night owl and out of shape, then trying to join a bicycle group that only meets early in the morning and expects everyone to ride at a fast pace might not be suitable for this purpose.

This is important to note because research has documented a “rebound” effect: if you try to use willpower to force yourself to do something, once you become tired or stressed, it is likely that you will go back and engage in your bad habit more intensely (Erskine and Georgiou 2010). Ideally, after any initial challenges to starting a new activity, the natural reward of engaging in it will take over and sustain your intrinsic motivation.

2. The pros and cons of changing your free-time activities should be understood and explored.

People often have some ambivalence in making changes in lifestyle habits such as exercise, and the same is true for shifting to more mindful free-time activities. Unexplored ambivalence is one reason you can make a change attempt and then relapse. It is possible to clarify your ambivalence by investigating what you see as the advantages and disadvantages of the change. In the health behaviour change context, this refers to the cognitive process of gaining awareness and insight, as well as consciousness raising in the form of feedback or education (Prochaska and Norcross 2018). If you strongly believe that shifting to more mindful, peaceful activities will be beneficial to your well-being and practice, that’s great, but considering the advantages is only one side of the coin.

The other side is considering the cost of change. What do you perceive as the downside of spending less time with the preoccupying, distracting activities you do now? One common perception is that it will be very difficult to go on without the short-term mood boost that many preoccupying, distracting activities provide, especially when you are stressed. Therefore, it is important to identify the “hook” of the preoccupying, distracting activities—in Buddhist terms, the type of *tanha*, or craving, associated with the activity. The intentions behind many free-time decompression activities fall into the category of *kama tanha*—craving for sense pleasures to temporarily boost our mood such as internet entertainment, music, eating comfort food, and so on.

Another intention behind free-time activities may be to create a self-image we crave (i.e., *bhava tanha*). You may turn to video games out of a need to feel mastery or a sense of superiority; or you may spend time at work above and beyond what is necessary in order to maintain a self-image of industriousness, thereby eating into your free time. As a co-worker once said to me, in many jobs, enough is never enough. Finding a balance between work and personal life requires wise reflection on what is urgent in the short term versus what is important in the long term. These value conflicts sometimes require setting boundaries at work, which can bring up the worry that you will be fired or not receive the praise and recognition that others receive. You may also be motivated by *vibhava tanha*, the craving for an experience to end. The classic example would be drinking to temporarily obliterate unpleasant emotions or thoughts. Each of these motivations and intentions merits further investigation and understanding.

Just as contemporary theories and research on health behavior change suggest we should understand and explore the pros and cons of changing our free-time activities, the Buddha advises us to recognize and investigate our thoughts around an issue or behaviour. A process similar to exploring the pros and cons of change can be found in the *Relaxation of*

Thoughts, or *Vitakkasanthana Sutta* (MN 20). In this sutta, one strategy for letting go of unskillful thoughts is to “scrutinize the drawbacks” of such thoughts. The Buddha indicates that in certain situations, we can employ a cognitive strategy to resolve the mixed feelings we may have about giving up an activity that we perceive as giving us short-term comfort at a cost.

Recommendation: *Continue cultivating the reasons for sense restraint and change.*

Reinforcing and supplementing your rationale for changing your free-time activities requires ongoing efforts. A common misconception is that you need only wait for a Eureka moment that eliminates your ambivalence, and then your motivation to change will never be tested again. The reasons behind change require constant renewal and bolstering. They are like sharks that needs to swim continuously in order to keep water flowing over their gills in order to breathe. In the same way, your motivation to change needs to keep acquiring and reinforcing the advantages of changing and reducing the disadvantages of change. The more the reasons for change, the better.

Methods for strengthening your rationale include reading and listening to dhamma talks on supportive conditions for practice, such as sense restraint. In addition, practical information on hobbies and strategies for behaviour change can be useful. As you hit particular roadblocks in making the change stick, such as urges to return to indulging in previous preoccupying, distracting activities, it can be helpful to talk with others who have worked through similar challenges. Regularly participating in days of mindfulness and meditation retreats can also remind us of the benefits of sense restraint.

3. Barriers to change need to be understood and managed.

Another important piece of the change puzzle is the perceived barrier to transitioning to a different activity. For example, you may strongly believe that learning to play the guitar would be a more peaceful way to spend your free time, but perhaps you don't have the money for a guitar, and you perceive yourself as being all thumbs. If, in the past, you have been resourceful enough to find the money for activities (or know someone who is not using their guitar) and you have successfully overcome being all thumbs, then you will likely have a high confidence level that you can overcome these barriers. If, however, you are unsure that you can overcome these barriers, they are likely to reduce your motivation to select guitar playing as your free-time activity. In this case, you might want to consider an activity with fewer barriers.

Just as reducing the barriers to the new activity increases the likelihood that you will do it, adding barriers to the preoccupying, distracting activity will decrease its frequency. In behavioural psychology, this strategy is referred to as increasing the response cost of a behaviour: the greater the response cost, the less likely it is for the behaviour to happen.

Recommendation: Reduce barriers to the new activities and add barriers to the old activities.

To add “speed bumps” to the preoccupying, distracting free-time activity you currently engage in, you could start by simply turning off your cell phone to create the minor hassle of turning it on each time you want to use it. You could also consider waiting until you have a list of at least three things to do on the internet before opening up your web browser. Another strategy could be to commit to engaging in a daily chore like cleaning the bathroom before engaging in the preoccupying, distracting activity.

With regard to reducing barriers to the new free-time activities, here are some of the most common barriers to

health behaviour change and strategies for addressing them (Center for Disease Control 2020):

- **Lack of time.** Time management approaches suggest you investigate your schedule systematically (i.e., complete an hour-by-hour timetable) to identify when and how much time you spend on each activity. You can then start to engage in new free-time activities in the time slots where you usually turn to preoccupying, distracting activities. This may take some planning ahead—if your free time occurs at work or away from home, for instance, you may need to pack any necessary materials in advance.
- **Lack of energy.** Low energy is a common reason that we gravitate towards more passive, distracting activities during our free time—such activities are often convenient and require little mental effort on our part. One recommendation is to experiment with different mindful free-time activities that require approximately the same energy expenditure as your old activity (e.g., putting together a puzzle).
- **Lack of skill or resources.** While some free-time activities require new skills or resources, there are many that do not, such as walking in nature or a park. Even with activities that require you to learn new skills, such as playing a musical instrument, you can take a beginner’s class or watch “how to” videos to develop enough skill to start enjoying the activity. While some free-time activities do require equipment, you can often find less expensive, beginner’s-level equipment or used equipment to get started.

4. The social support for change needs to be understood and nurtured.

Health behaviour change theories affirm that your social environment powerfully affects your motivation. Specifically, if important others such as your family and friends are supportive of a given change (and ideally engage in similar mindful, peaceful free-time activities), then their support can increase your motivation to change. This notion of associating with supportive people lines up well with the Buddha's statement to Ananda that associating with admirable friends is the whole of the holy life (*Upaddha Sutta*, SN 45.2).

Recommendation: Buddy up.

Just as with health behaviour changes in diet and exercise, receiving support from friends and family can make or break maintaining healthy free-time activities. At a day of mindfulness or retreat, perhaps you have noticed that when everyone around you temporarily gives up use of technology, it is easier for you to give it up and not feel too bothered by its absence. This buddying up does not necessarily have to be about others engaging in the same new free-time activity with you—it could be a group of fellow practitioners mutually supporting each other's intention to change their free-time activities more generally.

In a similar acknowledgment of the power of mutual support, the Buddha established the Sangha, a group of like-minded individuals who practice together, and explicitly laid out group norms to support practice (i.e., the Vinaya). Making efforts to get social support for your healthy free-time activities or having like-minded people join in your new activities can take effort, but given the clear success of the Sangha creating a supportive social environment for practice, it is important to integrate peer support into any plan for change.

Conclusion

Before closing, it is important to recognize that the spiritual practice of sense restraint has broader implications in Buddhist practice than the health behaviour change perspective presented here. Sense restraint—and renunciation more generally—is not only a supportive condition for mindfulness, but also provides the opportunity to develop patience and to investigate the underlying nature of desire and craving. By observing and investigating the mind/body response to not automatically engage in our typical pleasurable activities, we learn equanimity in the face of a minor wanting. This strategy can lead to insights that strengthen our ability to deal with more difficult desires.

The beauty of the Buddha’s teachings is that he described numerous ways both to cultivate and maintain the wholesome and to prevent and abandon the unwholesome. This essay used a health behavior change perspective to encourage developing *chanda* for wholesome, mindful activities as a good place to begin to let go of activities that you see as not so wholesome. Targeting effort into spending your free time engaged in more mindful pursuits serves as an intermediate, manageable step. Once you experience the reward and benefits of settling the mind in this way, hopefully you will have the confidence to shift even further into mindful and meditative activities in your free time and daily life.

Shifting to more mindful activities in our free time is not a simple process and cannot be forced. Hopefully, seeing the links between sense restraint and health behaviour change will help you to patiently, skillfully, and compassionately nurture the preconditions for intrinsic motivation towards more mindful free-time activities. Also, as your meditation practice develops, you might find that these free-time activities will naturally and gradually lead to more of a continuity in present-moment awareness and less of a “doing mode” in your daily life—like a mediation retreat. In the meantime, these ideas are offered as an intermediate step.

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