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Self-Control

A wild horse can be tamed but one never puts a bridle on a tiger. Why is that? Because in the tiger there is a wicked, cruel and incorrigible force, so that we cannot expect anything good from him and have to destroy him to prevent him from doing harm.

But the wild horse, on the other hand, however unmanageable and skittish he may be to begin with, can be controlled with a little effort and patience. In time he learns to obey and even to love us, and in the end he will of his own accord offer his mouth to the bit that is given to him.

In men too there are rebellious and unmanageable desires and impulses, but these things are rarely uncontrollable like the tiger. They are more often like the wild horse: to be broken in they need a bridle; and the best bridle is the one you put on them yourself, the one called self-control.

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Hussein was the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed. His home was beautiful and his purse well filled. Whoever offended him offended a rich man, and heavy is the anger of the rich.

One day a slave carrying a bowl of boiling hot water was passing by Hussein as he dined. By misfortune a little water fell upon the grandson of the Prophet who let out a cry of rage.

Falling to his knees, the slave had the presence of mind to recall an appropriate verse of the Koran:

"Paradise is for those who bridle their anger," he said.

"I am not angry," broke in Hussein, touched by these words.

"... and for those who forgive men," continued the slave.
Words of Long Ago

“I forgive you,” said Hussein.
“... for Allah loves the merciful,” the servant added.

In the course of this exchange, all Hussein’s anger had vanished. Now wholly at peace with himself he made the slave rise and said:

“From now on you are free. Here, take these four hundred pieces of silver.”

In this way Hussein learnt how to bridle his temper which was as generous as it was hasty. Since his noble character was neither wicked nor cruel, it was worthy of being controlled.

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So if your parents or your teacher sometimes urge you to control your nature, it is not because they think that your faults, whether great or small, are incorrigible; but, on the contrary, it is because they know that your quick and fiery spirit is like a young thoroughbred which must be held in check.

If you were offered the choice of living in a sordid hut or in a palace, which would you choose? The palace, most likely.

We are told that when Lord Mohammed visited Paradise, he saw great palaces built on a height overlooking the entire countryside.

“O Gabriel,” said Mohammed to the angel who was showing him all these things, “for whom are these palaces?” The angel replied:

“For those who control their anger and know how to forgive offences.”

Well, a mind at peace and free from rancour is indeed like a palace, but not so a vindictive and turbulent mind. Our thought is a dwelling-place that we can, if we choose, make clean, sweet and serene, full of harmonious notes; but we can also make it into a dark and dreadful lair filled with mournful sounds and discordant cries.

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In a town in the North of France I once knew a boy who was frank by nature but impetuous and always liable to lose his temper. I said to him one day:

“Which do you think is more difficult for a strong boy like you, to give blow for blow and to let fly your fist in the face of a friend who insults you or at that moment to keep your fist in your pocket?”

“To keep it in my pocket,” he replied.

“And which do you think is more worthy of a brave boy like you, to do the easier or the more difficult thing?”

“The more difficult thing,” he said after a moment’s hesitation.

“Well then, try to do it the next time you get an opportunity.”

Some time later, the young boy came to tell me, not without legitimate pride, that he had been able to do “the more difficult thing”. He said:

“One of my work-mates, who is known for his bad temper, struck me in a moment of anger. Since he knows that normally I am not one to forgive and that I have a strong arm, he was preparing to defend himself when I remembered what you had told me. It was harder for me than I thought, but I put my fist in my pocket. And as soon as I did that, I felt no more anger in me, I only felt sorry for my friend. So I held out my hand to him. That surprised him so much that he stood looking at me for a moment, open-mouthed, without speaking. Then he seized my hand, shook it vigorously and said with emotion: “Now you can do what you like with me, I am your friend for ever.”

This boy had controlled his anger as Caliph Hussein had done.

But there are many other things that also need to be bridled.
Words of Long Ago

The Arabian poet, Al Kosai, lived in the desert. One day he came across a fine Naba tree and from its branches he made a bow and some arrows.

At nightfall he set out to hunt wild asses. Soon he heard the hoof-beats of a moving herd. So he shot his first arrow. But he had bent the bow with such strength that the arrow, passing right through the body of one of the animals, dashed against a nearby rock. When he heard the sound of wood on stone Al Kosai thought he had missed his mark. So then he shot his second arrow and once more the arrow passed through an ass and struck the rock. Again Al Kosai thought he had missed his mark. In the same way he shot a third arrow, and a fourth, and a fifth, and each time he heard the same sound. When it happened for the fifth time, he broke his bow in rage.

At dawn he saw five asses in front of the rock.

If he had been more patient and waited until daybreak, he would have kept his peace of mind and his bow as well.

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It should not be thought, however, that we have a high regard for a training which weakens the character by depriving it of all its drive and vigour. When we put a bridle on a wild horse, we do not want the bit to tear his mouth and break his teeth. And if we want him to do his work well, we must tighten the reins to guide him, but we must not pull on them so hard that he can no longer move forward.

Unfortunately there are only too many weak characters who can, like sheep, be driven by a mere bark.

There are slavish and insensitive natures, lacking in spirit and more forbearing than they should be.

Abu Otman al-Hiri was known for his excessive patience. One day he was invited to a feast. When he arrived, the host told him: “You must excuse me, I cannot receive you. So please go back home, and may Allah have mercy on you.”
Abu Otman went back home. No sooner was he there than his friend appeared and invited him once more.

Abu Otman followed his friend as far as his doorstep, but there the friend stopped and again asked to be excused. Abu Otman went away without a murmur.

A third time and a fourth the same scene was repeated, but in the end his friend received him and said to him before the whole company:

“Abu Otman, I behaved in this way in order to test your good temper. I admire your patience and forbearance.”

“Do not praise me,” replied Abu Otman, “for dogs practise the same virtue: they come when they are called and go when they are sent away.”

Abu Otman was a man and not a dog. And it could do no one any good that he should thus, of his own accord, without dignity or good cause, submit to the mockery of his friends.

Did then this man who was so meek have nothing in him to control? Oh, yes he did! It was the most difficult thing of all to control — the weakness of his character. And it was because he did not know how to control himself that everyone controlled him as they pleased.

A young Brahmacharin was clever and knew it. He wished to add to his talents more and more so that everyone would admire him. So he travelled from land to land.

With an arrow-maker he learned to make arrows.
Further on he learnt how to build and sail ships.
In another place he learnt how to build houses.
And in other places he acquired various other skills.
In this way he visited sixteen different countries. Then he returned home and proudly declared, “What man on earth is as skilful as I?” The Lord Buddha saw him and wanted to teach him a nobler art than any he had learnt before. Assuming the
appearance of an old Shramana he presented himself before the young man with a begging bowl in his hand.

“Who are you?” asked the Brahmacharin.

“I am a man who is able to control his own body.”

“What do you mean?”

“The archer can aim his arrows,” the Buddha replied. “The pilot guides the ship, the architect supervises the construction of buildings, but the wise man controls himself.”

“In what way?”

“If he is praised his mind remains unmoved, if he is blamed his mind remains equally unmoved. He loves to follow the Right Law and he lives in peace.”

Children of goodwill, you too should learn to control yourselves, and if a tough bridle is needed to control your nature, do not complain.

A spirited young horse which will gradually become well-behaved is of much more value than a placid wooden horse which will always remain placid whatever you may do, and on which you put a bridle only for the fun of it.