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RESEARCH ARTICLE

SELF-RESTRAINT AS A VALUE FOR SUCCESS IN LIFE: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Self-restraint is a fundamental virtue that shapes the course of an individual's life, influencing their ability to manage impulses, make deliberate decisions, and achieve long-term success. While its importance is often overlooked in favour of immediate gratification or external factors, self-restraint serves as a pillar upon which personal and professional achievements are built. This paper explores the significance of self-restraint as a value to be developed for success in life, discussing its psychological, behavioural, and societal impacts. It further examines the relationship between self-restraint and key life outcomes, including emotional regulation, goal attainment, and interpersonal relationships. By understanding and cultivating self-restraint, individuals can navigate life's challenges with greater resilience, ultimately leading to enhanced well-being and success.

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, the pursuit of instant gratification often overshadows the value of patience, discipline, and self-control. However, these qualities, collectively known as self-restraint, are critical to long-term success in both personal and professional realms. Self-restraint involves the ability to control one's emotions, behaviours, and desires in the face of external demands, to achieve a greater goal or adhere to social norms. It is an essential component of emotional intelligence and is linked to a variety of positive outcomes, such as better mental health, improved academic and professional performance, and more satisfying relationships. This research aims to explore the role of self-restraint as a key value in achieving success, highlighting its development and applications in different facets of life. By integrating insights from psychology, sociology, and philosophy, this paper examines how self-restraint contributes to individual growth, societal cohesion, and overall success.

The Psychological Foundation of Self-Restraint: Self-restraint is deeply rooted in psychological theory, particularly in the context of self-regulation and willpower. Psychologist Walter Mischel's famous "Marshmallow Experiment" (1972) is a key study that demonstrated the long-term benefits of self-restraint. In the experiment, children who were able to resist the temptation of eating one marshmallow immediately in exchange for two marshmallows later were found to have

better life outcomes in terms of academic performance, health, and personal well-being.

The Role of Self-Control: Self-control, the ability to delay gratification and avoid impulsive behaviour, is a critical aspect of self-restraint. Research suggests that individuals who exhibit strong self-control are more likely to set and achieve long-term goals. In contrast, those who struggle with impulsivity often face challenges in making choices that align with their long-term aspirations. The prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain associated with decision-making, is integral to exercising self-control, and its development through practice plays a significant role in strengthening self-restraint over time. Swami Vivekananda had aptly pointed out that when we let loose our feelings, we waste so much energy, shatter our nerves, disturb our minds, and accomplish very little work. The energy which ought to have gone out as work is spent as mere feeling, which counts for nothing. It is only when the mind is very calm and collected that the whole of its energy is spent in doing good work. And if you read the lives of the great workers which the world has produced, you will find that they were wonderfully calm men. Nothing, as it were, could throw them off their balance. That is why the man who becomes angry never does a great amount of work, and the man whom nothing can make angry accomplishes so much. The man who gives way to anger, or hatred, or any other passion, cannot work; he only breaks himself to pieces, and does nothing practical.

It is the calm, forgiving, equable, well-balanced mind that does the greatest amount of work. The supreme power of self-restraint had been further emphasized by Swami Vivekananda through his unequivocal insistence on the importance of surmounting and defying agencies that tend to disturb the mind. He argued that a carriage with four horses may rush down a hill unrestrained, or the coachman may curb the horses and urged us to ponder over which is the greater manifestation of power, to let them go or to hold them. He also gave the example of a canon-ball that flying through the air goes a long distance and falls while another is cut short in its flight by striking against a wall, and the impact generates intense heat. Similarly, all outgoing energy following a selfish motive is frittered away and it will not cause power to return to an individual but if restrained, it will result in development of power. In a lecture given by Swami Adiswarananda at the Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, Bourne End on October 23, 1998, there is an express reference to the Bhagavad Gita that says, the one who has no self-control has no peace; one who has no peace has no happiness, and one who has no contact with the true Self has no self-control and so happiness is not dependent on having things or not having things. It is an interval between the cessation of one desire and the start of another—a gap, a moment of desirelessness that evolves from self-restraint and self-control. Again, the Mahabharata raises this question in the chapter on the enchanted bull. Yaksha, a voice without a form asks Yudhisthira a number of questions. One of them is, “Who is happy?” In answer, the king says, “One who is free from debts and obligations.” Then “one who stays home” which means one who has contact with her true Self. We are not home. All the time we are moving around, loafing around. The third is “one who eats a scanty meal at the end of the day,” meaning one who has mastery over the palate. The third text, the Bhagavatam, says “The deluded person is troubled by two urges: the palate and the sex instinct. Of these, the palate is most important. One who has conquered the palate has also overcome the grosser instinct.” There is thus a sustained insistence on self-restraint as a means of success in life.

The Psychological Benefits of Self-Restraint: Self-restraint contributes to a person’s emotional regulation, reducing the frequency of impulsive outbursts and increasing the ability to navigate emotionally charged situations with composure. This ability to stay calm and collected allows individuals to make thoughtful decisions, avoid unnecessary conflicts, and build healthier relationships. Moreover, self-restraint is linked to increased happiness, as individuals who practice self-control are less likely to experience regret, guilt, or anxiety related to impulsive decisions. The supporting texts discussed above have been vocal on the necessity of self-control or self-mastery, which is essentially control over the mind. The mind is our constant companion and even in dream the mind controls us. However, the mind is both our friend and foe. When regenerate, it is a friend; when angry, it is our worst enemy. Self-knowledge is the means, then. We perceive the world through the prism of the mind, so the world is in the mind. “Mind is the cause of bondage and mind is the cause of liberation.” We are born in the mind, we live in the mind, and we die in the mind. But the mind is not in our control. An average person, it is said, is born crying, lives complaining and dies disappointed. The mind is restless. One is always looking for novelty and for change. We get bored with things very easily. We are unable to see things in the proper perspective. We cannot think properly.

George Bernard Shaw once remarked, with his usual caustic wit, “Thinking is rare. The average individual perhaps thinks once or twice a year. I have made a distinguished career by thinking as often as once a week.” The mind experiences three states: waking, dream and deep sleep. It creates illusions, dreams, and fancies. It creates variety and diversity. Again, the mind also has three modifications: *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*—tranquillity, restlessness and inertia—rotating all the time. These are the three qualities of mind. Everybody experiences them. One who can control them is called a free soul. The *gunas* are present in each person but only proper self-control or self-restraint leads to appropriate use of all these faculties and leads to success. There are six centres of consciousness and the mind is constantly fluctuates between them. Swami Adiswarananda explains that the body is like a six-storey house where the master of the house lives in the basement. Living in the dark, dingy basement, he has developed a taste for it. The mind has a remarkable capacity for developing a taste for anything. If we keep a person in a place with a strong smell, after some time that person will grow so accustomed to it that he would be offended by sweeter fragrances. The average mind remains pinned down to the three lower centres—the bottom of the spine, the region of the organ of generation, and the navel. At this level the whole world of sight, sound, taste, touch and smell are only sending information about the palate and sense pleasure. However, Swami Avedananda contends in the same lecture that the same mind, when it rises to the fourth level, appears homogenous and unified giving spiritual impulses and gradually rising higher and higher. The universe of names and forms and diversities and dichotomies gradually dissolves into a unified mass granting us tranquillity and proper perception and action leading to success. Some people say we should not control our impulses, that self-expression is best. This is the Freudian, Adlerian approach. They say that any form of control is unhealthy, unnatural. It makes a person false.

One should have expression and control creates neurosis. Control creates inhibition and inhibition can lead to exhibition, but the human being has become what it is today by exercising control. In the human stage the mind begins to assert control over the body as opposed to the beastly uncontrolled impulses and that is why it is human. In the spiritual stage, the soul is trying to free itself of the mind. Through prayer, austerity, penance and pilgrimage you are trying to extricate yourself from the bondage of the mind. Instinct used by the sub-human makes raw impulse. Reason is advanced by controlling the raw impulse and purifying it, and intuition appears after you have overcome reason by purifying it. Both Vedanta and Yoga think that the stuff of the mind is a Sanskrit word called *samskara*. *Samskara* is thought potency. This works in the following way: when you think a thought repeatedly, it first affects the intellect, then the emotion, then the biochemistry. Then it goes deep down to the glands and hormones. It therefore alters the biochemistry and remains lying deep down there. Running away cannot obliterate these *samskaras*. Distance cannot annihilate them, old age cannot reduce them, and reason cannot uproot them. Reason requires pure mind, which is very rare. To bring peace and tranquillity to the mind the *samskaras* must be neutralised by counter-*samskaras* as contended by Patanjali—*pratipaksha bhavana*. Counter-*samskaras* must be created against each *samskara*. This is where the practice of self-mastery comes from. Man must fight bad habits with good new habits. This is also the teaching of the Bhagavad Gita.

A samskara is formed by three organs: by talking about it, by thinking about it and by acting according to it. The three acting together make samskaras. Yoga says life is short, samskaras are deep, mind is perverted, and reason is weak and so the mind's impure conditioning is mechanical and reason is too weak to overcome its perversion. The mind is never controlled unless we control it. Hence control must be forcible. The Yoga system prescribes the eightfold practice including yama/niyama. The first five are external and the last three internal. It asks for the rise of the whole mind to overcome the obstacles and with unwavering determination. Educating the mind to give up its old ways is a slow process. Auspicious desires are not always forthcoming. The journey to the goal is never completed unless we hasten our steps. Patanjali refers to dispassion (vairagya) as a complementary means for control of the mind, not primary. It seeks to develop reason through training the exercise of willpower. It seeks to arouse then modify our sub-conscious indirectly through the help of regulation of breath, posture and diet. This comes close to modern psychology that explains how the conscious mind is modified and controlled by the sub-conscious. But the Yoga system further shows us how we can modify the sub-conscious by conscious effort; how repeated exercise of the will at the conscious level can influence the sub-conscious depths and modify them permanently. By controlling and disciplining the manifested effects of impurities, it goes to the root of all impurities to overcome them. The Yoga system says, "I am only aware of the effects of these impurities in the restlessness of my mind and body, but I do not know the cause. However, I do not need to speculate because by controlling the effect I can overcome the cause". Our consciousness is in deep slumber at the base of the spine. It must rise to the upper centres. Thus, the blockage in the canal of consciousness, sushumna, has to be cleared. The yoga system prefers the dredging of the canal rather than dissolving the blockage, whereas Vedanta prefers to dissolve. Posture, diet and pranayama are the means to dredge. Conversion of energy to ojas provides the sustained strength to dredge. To dredge you have to have strength, for that needs energy. Spiritual energy is refined, giving you determination. The manifestation of yoga powers generates confidence in the mind.

Behavioural Implications and Goal Achievement: Self-restraint is instrumental in the pursuit of personal and professional goals. Success in life often requires individuals to make sacrifices in the present in order to secure future rewards. Whether in education, career, or personal development, the ability to persevere through challenges, resist distractions, and stay focused on long-term objectives is critical.

Self-Restraint and Academic Success: In the academic context, self-restraint allows students to delay gratification, prioritize their studies, and resist distractions, all of which contribute to higher academic achievement. A study by Duckworth et al. (2007) demonstrated that grit, a combination of passion and perseverance for long-term goals, is a key predictor of academic success. Grit is essentially a form of self-restraint, where individuals remain dedicated to their goals despite setbacks and obstacles. Students who exhibit this trait tend to perform better in school, even when they do not necessarily have higher intelligence than their peers.

Self-Restraint in Professional Life: In the workplace, self-restraint is crucial for maintaining focus and productivity.

Professionals who can resist the temptation to procrastinate or indulge in short-term pleasures, such as excessive social media use, are better equipped to achieve career milestones. The ability to delay gratification in the form of working towards long-term goals, completing tasks with attention to detail, and managing time effectively sets successful individuals apart from their peers. Furthermore, self-restraint in handling workplace stress, making thoughtful decisions under pressure, and exercising patience with colleagues fosters a collaborative and efficient work environment.

The Social Dimension of Self-Restraint: Self-restraint also plays a vital role in maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships. Whether in family life, friendships, or romantic relationships, the ability to manage one's impulses and emotions fosters trust, understanding, and respect among individuals.

- **Self-Restraint in Relationships:** In romantic and familial relationships, self-restraint helps individuals avoid acting on negative emotions such as anger or frustration, which can lead to conflict and misunderstanding. For example, spouses who practice self-restraint are more likely to engage in constructive communication during disagreements rather than resorting to hurtful comments or actions. Similarly, parents who model self-restraint are more likely to instill this value in their children, contributing to better family dynamics.
- **Social Cohesion and Societal Impact:** On a societal level, self-restraint is essential for maintaining social order and cohesion. People who are able to control their behaviors and impulses are less likely to engage in actions that harm others, leading to safer communities and a more harmonious society. Moreover, individuals who practice self-restraint are better equipped to contribute to social causes, volunteer efforts, and community development projects, fostering a sense of collective responsibility.
- **Developing Self-Restraint:** While some individuals may be naturally more predisposed to self-restraint, it is a skill that can be developed and strengthened over time. Several strategies can facilitate this process:
- **Mindfulness and Meditation:** Practices that promote mindfulness, such as meditation, help individuals become more aware of their thoughts and impulses. By increasing awareness of their emotional triggers, individuals can make more conscious choices rather than acting impulsively.
- **Setting Clear Goals:** Establishing specific, achievable goals provides a clear sense of purpose and motivation, helping individuals resist temptations that might derail their progress.
- **Delayed Gratification Exercises:** Actively practicing delayed gratification in small, manageable ways can strengthen an individual's ability to resist immediate desires. For instance, setting aside time for work before indulging in a favorite activity helps build self-control over time.
- **Building Emotional Awareness:** Developing emotional intelligence through self-reflection and empathy exercises enables individuals to better regulate their emotions, reducing impulsive reactions and fostering thoughtful decision-making.

CONCLUSION

Self-restraint is a crucial value that supports success in various aspects of life, including personal well-being, professional achievements, and social interactions. Through its association with emotional regulation, goal achievement, and harmonious relationships, self-restraint empowers individuals to make deliberate choices that align with their long-term objectives. Although challenges such as societal pressures for instant gratification and external distractions may make self-restraint difficult to practice, its benefits far outweigh the short-term rewards of impulsive behaviour. By cultivating this value, individuals can achieve greater personal fulfilment and contribute to the greater good, creating a more successful and cohesive society.

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