

## CHAPTER 43

# Self-Control

One of the main characteristics of being human is our ability to be self-reflective, because we have a spiritual aspect to our existence. As we grow physically, our mind and spirit should grow as well. Infants and toddlers have a hard time controlling their body. They eat when they are hungry, sleep when they are tired, and urinate and defecate whenever they feel the need. As we grow, we are expected to become progressively more mature. We can control our body with our mind. Self-control is seen as a measure of maturity.

There are many areas in life in which it is important for us to practice self-control. One example is eating. If it were possible for you to eat as much as you wanted, what would be the result? You would become overweight and sick.

Another example is sleep. Suppose you decided that you absolutely need ten hours of sleep a day. Even knowing you had to study for a test or had other responsibilities,

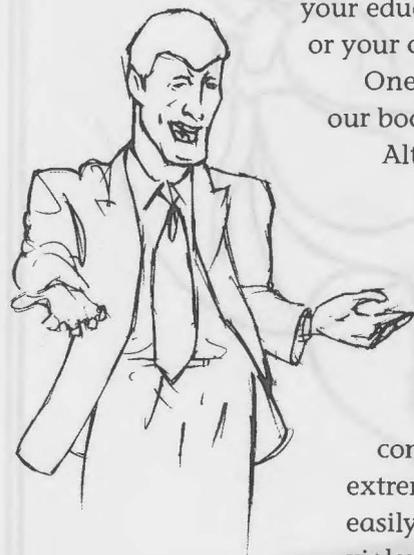
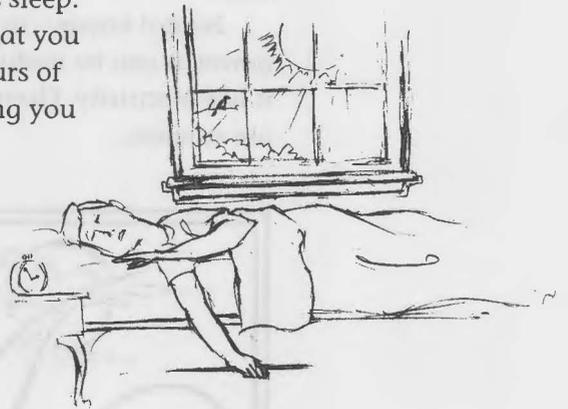
you would stay in bed for ten hours. How would that impact your education, your career prospects, or your communication with others?

One of the most difficult parts of our body to tame is our tongue!

Although it is small, it can be

very unruly. Often we can't control it and brag about ourselves, gossip about others, shout and curse. No matter how much we may regret saying certain words, it is impossible to take them back. Words may be invisible, but they are very powerful tools and can outlive their speaker.

We need to exercise emotional self-control. Perhaps you know some people who are extremely sensitive and emotional and burst into tears easily. Others may be very short-tempered or turn violently angry. People who lack emotional self-control are usually rather difficult to get along with. Our emotions are the source of our energy and motivation. Just



like horses, they have to be tamed and disciplined if they are not to run wild. With a bridle they will take you where you want to go.

Self-control in the area of sexual behavior is obviously a mixture of both bodily and emotional discipline. Both are especially challenging to teenagers. With the onset of puberty, large quantities of sex hormones start to be produced, which act on both the body and emotions.

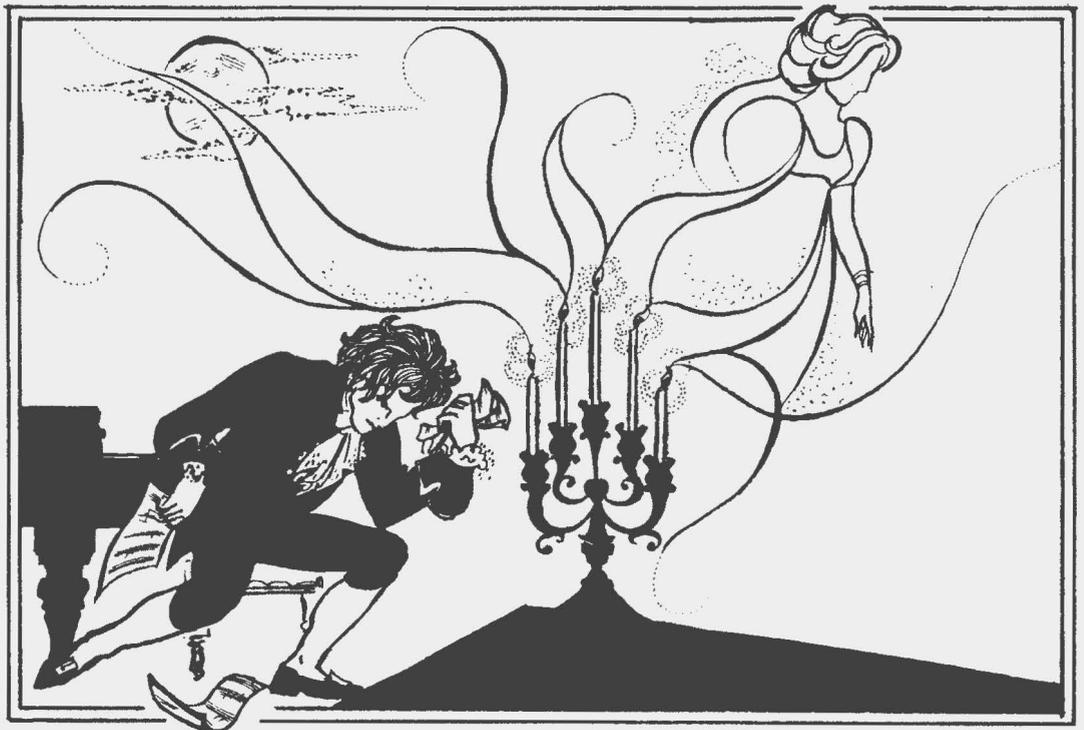
Hormones are a real factor. Nevertheless, we are not to be slaves to chemicals! Adolescence is a time to practice real self-control. When you are confident that you can keep yourself in control all the time, this is a good indication that you've made it to adulthood. Obviously, from that definition it can be said that a great number of "adults" are not really adults at all.

Self-control is not about suppressing or repressing desires, or pretending that they don't exist. For example, becoming aware of and being attracted to members of the opposite sex is part of the process of growing up, both physically and spiritually. It is not bad, and it is not wrong. It can be good, when these feelings are channeled into appropriate activities.

There are many ways in which sexual energy can be directed and harnessed before it is finally consummated in marriage. Some examples are sports, creativity (art, music, drama), voluntary service, spiritual exploration, etc.

If you have a chance, listen to Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. Many people are familiar with the peaceful opening theme, and it is easy to imagine a calm, moonlit night. But you will be surprised by the torrent of power and the energy of the second movement. At the time Beethoven wrote this music he was frustrated and rejected in love. All of his peaceful dreams (first movement) were suddenly frustrated and lost. Experts say you can hear his sexual frustration and energy in every bar. See what you think!

Sexual energy can be channeled into tremendously creative activities. Like any power, it can be useful if understood but can destroy you if treated casually. Think of it like electricity. Electricity is indispensable and very helpful but can kill you if you are careless.



People often regard self-control as limiting. The opposite is the case. For instance, an experienced pianist can sit down at a piano and play any piece of music he chooses. If you watch him, you may notice that his eyes may be closed as his hands move across the keyboard effortlessly. His body may sway as he lets the music flow through him. He is obviously enjoying himself immensely. Reaching this level of accomplishment takes years of practice. The first time you sit at a piano and try to play, it can be a very frustrating experience. Your fingers won't go where you want them to, and it takes all your effort and concentration to play a few notes correctly. Gradually you learn a few simple tunes and practice the scales again and again. As your fingers become disciplined, you no longer have to think about them. They just go where they should. The more disciplined you become, the more freedom you have. Eventually when you have completely disciplined your hands, you will be able to play whatever you like.

In the same way, self-control gives a person great confidence and joy. A person with self-control can trust himself because he knows that he will do and say what he wants to. The same applies to loving. We must learn self-control in order to love others.

## Religions on Self-Control

All the world's religions and many of its great philosophers recommend the practice of self-control and self-discipline as the first prerequisite for maturity and growth. Here is a selection of their teachings:

**Sikhism:** With the conquest of my mind, I have conquered the whole world.  
— Adi Granth

**Buddhism:** Though one should conquer a million men on the battlefield, yet he, indeed, is the noblest victor who has conquered himself.  
— Dhammapada

**Judaism & Christianity:** He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he who rules his spirit is better than he who takes a city.  
— Proverbs

**Hinduism:** It is true that the mind is restless and difficult to control. But it can be conquered ... through regular practice and detachment.  
— Bhagavad Gita

**Greek philosophy:** What it lies in our power to do, it lies in our power not to do.  
— Aristotle

**Taoism:** He who conquers others is strong; he who conquers himself is mighty.  
— Lao Tsu

## Something to think about



Self-control is the channeling and controlling of our drives and impulses—whether biological, emotional, or intellectual. This is not a popular concept in modern society. Restraining ourselves, after all, means possibly missing out on something special, some wonderful experience that we long to have. Teenagers especially sometimes seem to be willing to do anything to avoid boredom. According to the backdrop of voices in our society, self-control sounds like the opposite of living passionately.

An analogy may help to clarify the meaning of self-control and its relationship to living passionately. If you ever had experience with campfires, you know the difference between a fire made from wood and one made from paper. Think about each type of fire.

- Which type of fire is easier to get going? Looks most spectacular in the beginning? Goes out more quickly?
- Which type of fire takes more tending and careful preparation to build?
- Which fire provides more warmth? Might last through the night? Can be used for cooking?
- Which one is more likely to go out if a little wind comes up?

Self-control is “tending the fire within.” We are all blessed with the “fuel” of life’s energy within us—our emotions, our drives and urges, our longings for pleasure. We have to resist our impulse to get an instant big blaze going with this fuel, or it will burn out like a newspaper fire. We have to learn self-control—not giving in to our passions on demand. Then we will be able to build up our inner fire, tending it carefully and patiently. We will become persons of depth whose passion, like firewood, gives warmth and light for a lifetime. Having only physical intimacy does not lead anyone in that direction.

Being able to practice self-control makes a lot of sense when we look at our life as a long-term project of building our character. As discussed throughout this book, the key question for every human being is this: What kind of person do I want to be and become? Do I want to be a person who can “tend the fire within” for the sake of something worthwhile?

## For Your Journal



Sometimes people see self-control as a factor limiting their personal freedom. Try to prove the opposite point of view.

*See the Appendix for the psychological test pertaining to this lesson.*