# Renunciation — The Path of Letting Go

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 15:46

*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa* — Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

This evening I've chosen the topic of renunciation. Now it's not a word we particularly love. We don't fall for it. But you won't find a wisdom tradition that doesn't have some level of sensual restraint in its teachings. Consider Lent for Christians and Ramadan for Muslims. The Hindu tradition and the Jains, of course, all have some form of fasting as part of their practice.

Now in the Buddha Dharma, the Buddha has made this distinction between self-mortification and renunciation. By self-mortification, we understand that the body is to blame. So if we lost our tongues, we wouldn't have any greed. Of course, the Buddha himself went under such practices, nearly starving himself to death. He ended up saying that that practice was just adding more suffering to the already inherent discontent of life.

But renunciation is the restraint of the senses, understanding that it's nothing to do with the body, but our relationship to it. So there is a direct path through renunciation. You'll get monks and nuns who live way out in the jungle, completely renouncing any contact with the sensual life and only going into the village to get some alms.

To understand the importance of renunciation, we have to really go back to the roots of the Buddha's teaching. That always lies in this delusion of a self. What do we mean by that? Well, whatever you finish this sentence with — "I am..." — that's what you're not. That's what we, of course, presume ourselves to be. In fact, the "I" in the "I am" is also part of that delusion.

So it's the problem of this "me" always wanting to be happy. Now, that's not so bad. The Buddha actually has a whole chapter in the Dhammapada devoted to being happy, a happy self. But it's just what we are seeking for our happiness which is going to cause disappointment and eventually sorrow.

That's easy to overcome when we keep reminding ourselves that everything, absolutely everything arises and passes away and does not repeat. You can't repeat the party that you had. It just doesn't happen. It's only going to cause suffering trying to do that. When we become dependent on something — the mobile, or a person that we become dependent on — then when we lose it, that's where the pain is.

What we have to find out is where does this self manifest, and that's the point of desire. That's the direct psychological indicator that the self is active. But it's a certain type of desire. There's a special word in Pali for it: *taṇhā*. There are other words for desire, but this specific desire is the one that leads to indulgence.

It's the one that leads us to attachment.

So it obviously includes all the physical senses, such as food and sex. But it's the sensual pleasures too — art, nature, human association. All that comes under the name of sensual. Some people only think of sexual, but it's not. It's the total sense organ of the psychophysical organism, which includes the intellect — all the stuff we learn, the history, science, all the stuff we talk about, the politics. And the culture, all the imagination, the fantasy. All that's part of the sensual life. And of course the pleasures and joys we get from work.

So everything we're doing, everything we experience, we always have to be careful that there is this little bit of taṇhā when it's making us happy. Even in the practice, when we enter into beautiful states of mind, a bit of peacefulness, a bit of joy, and those concentration exercises that some of you might practice — the absorptions — you become attached to them.

All this would be perfectly lovely except for the clinging. That's why we're practicing renunciation. It's a way of letting go of our cravings, no matter how small they are.

The importance of renunciation is found in the Eightfold Noble Path. The first, of course, is right understanding, which is exactly what we're trying to do here. The second one has to do with right intentions. Sometimes it's translated as right thoughts, but intentions, I think, captures it better because it's the intentions that create the attitudes that then manifest in speech, in action and in our livelihoods.

What are these right intentions? Well, the first one is renunciation. The second one is non-ill will. And the third one is harmlessness.

So how do we put this teaching into practice? Well, we can start little. It's getting used to letting go of things. Those of you who've been on retreats know all about this really. But it's good just to remind ourselves that we ought to do it as a little daily practice also.

For instance, if you find yourself snacking and grazing throughout the day at a particular time — say TV in the evening — and you recognize it as unhealthy, so you make a decision: "Stop it. I'm going to stop it." But then you have to remind yourself, you have to bear the discomfort. Every time the word "toast" comes to mind, or "biscuit," whatever comes to mind, the alarm bell should go off. Then we repeat the reasons to ourselves why we're not going to fall for it. We're going to renounce it and then reaffirm that determination.

Now, surprisingly, these desires begin to really loosen up after two or three days and they go. We regain our agency. We gain back our control over our appetites. That's what we're heading for, because generally speaking, we're enslaved to these things. As soon as they come up, they come up as demands and they become needs. Well, they're not needs, are they?

But even when we've got through that discomfort and now we feel we've got our agency back, you always

have to be careful about that little demon of the self, the demon of desire. It's only lying low. If we're not careful, we'll soon become an obedient servant again. We have to remind ourselves: not until the delusive self has been completely extinguished will such unskillful desires cease.

Now here we might make a little distinction between boredom and disinterest. Remember that desires are excited by stimuli and they lose their intensity over time. That's when we get bored with something. Taking food for instance as our little object here — you can't keep eating the same biscuit. You've got to look for something else. We need variety. But given enough time, however, we go back to our favourite biscuit. That's how boredom works. It gets fed up with something, we seek something else, and then we remember, "Oh, wait a minute, what about my favourite biscuit?" And then you're back to that.

Disinterest is something different. It's a spiritual quality. We lose interest in something. We no longer care about biscuits or what biscuits we have or even if there are any. Yet there's still the enjoyment of biscuit if it comes our way. To quote an ancient Zen master, when asked to explain Buddha Dharma, his reply was: "No preference." No preference. That's where we're aiming. We're aiming to a point where we're not sticking onto anything.

At a mental level, it's views and opinions. It's the same attitude that we apply, renouncing this "I'm right and everybody else is wrong or almost wrong or not as right as I am." There's always a conceit that underlies these positions, doesn't matter what it is — religious, political, cultural and so on. Now, it doesn't mean to say that we have to change our understanding. It may be fine. But being open to others, allowing us to nuance our understanding. And occasionally, we might even change our opinion, especially today with all this polarization.

Then there's being members of the human community, aware of climate crisis, of mindless consumption. We have a duty here to simplify our lifestyle. How many pairs of shoes do we actually need? When you're buying some clothing, do you actually need it? We have to see that the culture is caught up — we are caught up in this selfishness that's been generated by neoliberalism and consumerism.

Then we get the idea of giving something away. In the very act of generosity, we're actually exercising renunciation. Of course, it makes living a little lighter.

When it comes to personal relationships, we possess other people. So it manifests as control. We manipulate. We use anger, threats of abandonment, spiteful action. We hold grudges and nurse them. We offer presents and promises to entice them. Becoming aware of those little behaviors, developing the skills of forgiveness, trust, training ourselves to see the situation from the other person's point of view — all that is the exercise of renunciation.

Then there's the news. Oh my goodness. Trawling through the news every morning, every evening, during the day, always onto it, finding out what's happened next with this constant daily messaging of war, Trumpian shocks, injustice, and so on. It's no wonder that we can build up a sense of hopelessness,

disempowerment. Now we can undermine this by method, of course, but sometimes the best policy is just to stop listening, to limit the input.

During my first twelve years as a monastic, I took very little interest in world affairs. For long times, I was quite secluded. It took a while when I got back into ordinary daily life here to find out what was happening. But I never felt I'd lost anything. The Buddha, in the discourse on developing *mettā*, which we read at the end, advises us not to be too busy.

So again, it's about decluttering our lives. How are we spending our time? What are we spending it on? Social media, doing things, always having to do something, trying to get back to just being every so often. Being and doing. Do we find ourselves in a sense of rush, of anxiety, even a sense of occasional overwhelm? Then you have to prioritize. You have to let go of some engagements.

When we do that, we find ourselves being more relaxed and we meditate better and become more aware about this underlying turbulence in our hearts, which is often fueling the overactivity. It's allowing that to exhaust itself and bring a greater sense of calmness. It really is a wise thing to constantly remind ourselves that tranquility, calmness, is a factor of enlightenment. A factor of awakening.

Now, renunciation isn't the fullness of the spiritual life. Such practice brings a sense of ease into our lives. It brings with it clean energy. Letting go of the demands of egoistic self is a relief. It's not a deprivation. The energy, the freedom we feel seeks a different focus. The focus is the other.

We're social animals. Everybody knows that. We love people. We love animals. We love to help others. Some of our greatest joys is supporting others in their griefs, in their joys. But you have to always remember this little devil of self may sneak in and we find ourselves doing good in order to feel happy. That's no good. Danger lurks in the most heartfelt generosity.

Luckily, it's enough just to acknowledge the unskillful motivations and then to reaffirm the good intentions. We don't have to be hard on ourselves. A dash of humility is needed here. Just acknowledge that the work on ourselves is yet to be done. That's a comfort. The Buddha warns us the path is gradual, very gradual in my experience anyway.

So renunciation — well, it's important. We need to reflect on our lives, see where we're sticking onto something, someone, some behavior, and just allow ourselves to let go for a while. Suffer gladly the pain of releasing the numbed cramp and enjoy a bit of peace.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that I have not caused confusion, and that by your practice of renunciation you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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