Investigating Anattā: Power of Renunciation

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:38

I think it must have been mettā, the feeling. Such appreciation for the Sangha. And looking around here, half the people in here are really good friends. All of you are really dedicated practitioners. I feel like we could just all take turns giving the Dhamma talk. It feels like such a privilege.

When we were chanting the refuges and precepts, I just was flashing on how that's been going on for 2,600 years, just like that. There's a saying that if there was ever one moment where no one was practicing the Buddha Sāsana in the world, it would go out of existence—not the truth, but the Buddha's teaching. And so actively, with us sitting here practicing and committing to the precepts and the refuges, we are part of that. I flashed back on all the nuns chanting in Burma, and this feeling arose that it's the same as it's been for 2,600 years, and we're all part of that. Somehow my heart just felt really full. I wanted to share it with you because sometimes you can forget that, just sitting here slogging through the day. But it's a beautiful thing you're all doing. All of us.

Those of you who were here last week remember I was speaking about sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view, personality belief. My focus last week was on how our sense of self is constructed moment to moment by how we cling to views, to constructions, thoughts, and beliefs that are based on clinging to any aspect of nāma-rūpa—any aspect of mind or body experience. Because we perceive permanence in what is impermanent, we cling to an aspect of the aggregates of nāma-rūpa and construct a whole sense of self moment after moment. Why couldn't I have said it that quickly last week? I ended by saying how it's cut through by the deep and transformative perception of impermanence, of anicca. That cuts through the sakkāya-diṭṭhi clinging to views.

Tonight I want to talk about another aspect of practice that is very basic—you all know this—but it's another avenue of seeing through the delusion that keeps creating a sense of self. It's very simple. Rather than view, the first step of the Eightfold Path, it's wise intention, the second step: attitude. Specifically, the attitude of renunciation.

But first I want to say that this sense of clinging to a sense of self, of creating or somehow just having a sense of self, is so subtle at times. Sometimes it's really gross, but it's so subtle that it pervades through all levels of our experience. This isn't to be discouraging. I actually found this rather encouraging, because sometimes people think, "Well, I should see through these views. Why do I keep having a sense of self? It's enough already." But the elimination of complete belief in sakkāya-diṭṭhi, which in itself seems like it would be huge—the elimination of the belief in sakkāya-diṭṭhi does not completely remove the sense of personal identity.

In fact, I want to read you from the sutta. I want to read a lot of Buddhist material tonight. There's one that I've always really liked, about a bhikkhu named Khemaka. The other bhikkhus thought that he was an arahant, completely enlightened. The sutta goes on with this whole long story of how they keep coming to talk to him, saying, "You're an arahant." And he says no, he's not, back and forth.

But the point is, he says he's not an arahant because he still has this feeling of "I am." And they said, "Well, what is it?" He said, "Friends, I do not speak of form as 'I am'"—rūpa, part of the aggregates—"but at the same time, I don't speak of 'I am' apart from form." He says, "I don't speak of feelings as 'I am,' of perception, of volitional formations as 'I am,' or of consciousness as 'I am.' Friends, although the notion 'I am' has not yet vanished in me in relation to these five aggregates, still I do not regard anything among them as 'I am.'" He doesn't think form, perception, consciousness, volitional formations, or moods are me. He knows this is not me. But at the same time, there's some feeling of "I am" there.

Can't you relate to that? And this person, he's not just some schlump. He's a very seriously practiced bhikkhu.

He says, suppose, friends, there's the scent of a blue, red, or white lotus. Would one be speaking rightly if one would say the scent belongs to the petals, or the scent belongs to the stalk? He said, no, friends. So how would you answer it rightly? Answering rightly, one should say the scent belongs to the flower. So too, friends, I do not speak of form as I am, nor do I speak of I am apart from form. He goes through all of the aggregates in this way. So although the notion has not yet vanished in me in relation to these five aggregates, I don't regard anything among them as this I am.

Even though a noble disciple—when they say noble disciple, that means someone who has at least reached the first stage of awakening; when they use that word noble, that's what it means, at least—even though a noble disciple has abandoned the five lower fetters, he's passed the first stage, still, in relation to the five aggregates subject to clinging, there lingers in him a residual conceit I am, a desire I am, an underlying tendency I am that has not yet been uprooted.

I can really relate to this. Not the five lower fetters being gone—I'm not saying that. But this subtle sense, like a perfume, the scent of a flower, just this conceit, this underlying tendency I am, kind of floats around and you can't quite pin it down.

The point I want to make here is how clinging is so pervasive, because all of this residual conceit or sense of I am arises because of clinging. And so that's why clinging is always the core teaching—freedom from clinging.

So tonight I want to talk about seeing through clinging in the arena of the attitude of our heart and mind, working with the second step of the Eightfold Path, which is wise intention, wise attitude.

The direct response to the tendency, the reflex action of clinging—because it seems like that, a reflex—and by clinging, we mean not only clinging for the pleasant, but wanting the unpleasant to go away, sort of like

clinging to non-being, so it covers both of those. The direct response is paññā, wisdom, seeing through attachment to views. But when paññā is turned on clinging, with clear seeing we begin to perceive the seductive and delusional nature of clinging. And the natural response is this shift, this purification of our attitude, where we put our trust. The natural response of the attitude of heart and mind shifts from one of greed, wanting and not wanting, to that of non-greed, of a natural renunciation.

This inner attitude, this purification, is something that we can actually include in our practice through giving attention to renunciation. So renunciation is both an expression of the spaciousness, the coolness, the peace of the fire of greed and clinging having gone out, and it's also a structure, a form of practice that we can cultivate to purify the tendency of clinging.

Uninvestigated, and even partially investigated—what's interesting is if you look and see for yourself. Don't believe what I say, but what I see is that our notions are kind of superficial about both of these two attitudes, about clinging and about renunciation. They are both kind of backwards in a way. Clinging—not if we think about it rationally, but the way we act—is going to bring us happiness. Clinging and wanting and getting things is a way of happiness. Renunciation is kind of dour, unpleasant, a penance at best, but certainly not very joyful and nothing that we particularly want to hang out with.

Two things from the Buddha in this regard. One about clinging. He says: Monks, what is the noble truth about the origin of suffering? Just this—his answer—just this craving, which brings renewal of being, and which is accompanied by pleasure, by lust and emotion, finding delight now here and now there, namely the craving for sensual pleasure, the craving for being, the craving for non-being. This is called the origin of suffering.

What I like about this in this particular context is that he points out that craving is accompanied by pleasure and lust and is finding delight now here and now there. That's the way, I think, when we don't really investigate, that's how we relate to craving. Oh, delight over here, delight over there. This doesn't work anymore, never mind, delight over here. And that is superficially what we notice, what is feeding the reflex action to go to clinging as a strategy for happiness, this finding of delight. You could say that's the gratification in clinging. There is pleasure. It brings delight. The danger, of course, is it doesn't last. And the escape is the abandonment.

Now, in terms of the way that we view renunciation—that's kind of upside down to what the real experience of it is when we open into that, that real renunciation of attitude which is freeing, which is so spacious. This is again from a sutta. The Buddha was speaking with Tapusa the householder, who had been talking to Ananda and asked Ananda some questions. Then Ananda took him to the Buddha. So Tapusa sits down and Ananda says: Tapusa here said to me, Venerable Ananda, we are householders who indulge in sensuality. We delight in sensuality. We enjoy sensuality.

We rejoice in sensuality. For us, indulging, delighting, enjoying, and rejoicing in sensuality, renunciation seems like a sheer drop-off." In other words, that's not attractive, right? "Yet I've heard that in this doctrine

and discipline, the hearts of the young monks leap up at renunciation, grow confident, steadfast, and firm, seeing it as peace. So right here is where this doctrine and discipline is contrary to the great mass of people—this issue of renunciation."

Can you relate to that? Maybe you're not exactly rejoicing in sensuality, but there's that sense that renunciation means I can't have anything.

The Buddha's answer is interesting. "So it is, Ananda. So it is." He didn't say, "Oh, this foolish man." He agreed with him. "So it is. Even I myself, before my awakening, when I was still an unawakened bodhisatta, thought, 'Renunciation is good. Seclusion is good.' But my heart did not leap up at renunciation. It did not grow confident, steadfast, or firm, seeing it as peace."

So we could cut ourselves some slack, if even he as the Bodhisatta experienced this. The Buddha continues: "The thought occurred to me, 'What is the reason? Why doesn't my heart leap up at renunciation? Why doesn't it grow confident, firm, or steadfast, seeing it as peace?' And I thought, 'Well, I have not seen the drawback of sensual pleasures. I haven't pursued that theme. I have not understood the reward of renunciation. I have not familiarized myself with it.'"

He's always just so straightforward and practical, you know? That's why my heart doesn't leap up at renunciation. Of course, you can imagine he goes on and says that he did pursue those themes, and his heart did leap up at renunciation. Because when we really explore with a clear heart and mind, without getting lost in our preconceived notions, clinging actually isn't such a purveyor of delight. Momentary, maybe. But if we really look...

This is from Nisargadatta Maharaj. I know, I'll read from the Buddha too, but I just like this one: "The state of craving blocks all deeper experience. Nothing of value can reveal itself to the mind that knows exactly what it wants."

Can anybody here relate to that in your meditation practice? The mind of clinging is narrow, restricted, limited. The Buddha says this over and over. Nothing can reveal itself to the mind that knows exactly what it wants. That's the danger in craving.

The Buddha often used strong fire images about the burning of craving. You know the Fire Sermon, where the eye is burning, eye contact is burning, forms are burning, they're aflame. I'm not going to read that one, but basically he's saying all our senses, all forms, all contact—everything is burning with passion, burning with aversion, burning with delusion. It's not a light, "Oh well, let's just see how it goes" kind of image. It's saying we are burning.

Here's another passage where he describes clinging. Actually, the name of the sutta is "Clinging." A bhikkhu once said, "In one who keeps on focusing on the attractiveness of phenomena—the five aggregates—craving develops." And this is very important; I'll say it again later too. This is unwise attention: focusing on the attractiveness of phenomena. It develops craving, and craving then, as a

requisite, develops clinging. From clinging as a requisite comes becoming. From becoming, birth. Then aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair. You know that chain of dependent origination.

"The origin of this entire mass of suffering and stress—just as if a great pile of fire, a massive fire of thirty or forty cartloads of timber, were burning, a giant fire, and into it a person would time and again throw dried grass, dried cow dung, dried timber, so that the great mass of fire, thus nourished, thus sustained, would burn for a long, long time."

In the same way, one who keeps focusing on the attractiveness, the allure of phenomena—craving develops, and the whole chain of dependent origination unfolds. It burns for a long, long time.

So basically, it's not that sense objects or any object is a problem. It's that craving keeps throwing fuel on the fire. Craving itself is the fuel that keeps us going.

Renunciation, actually, rather than being a sheer drop-off, rather than being a penance, rather than restricting and limiting our life—it's craving that restricts and limits and contracts consciousness, contracts the mind and heart. But renunciation, the inner attitude of non-greed, the inner attitude of simplicity, of contentment—that actually opens up space to be truly awake. The coolness of a mind and heart that's not burning with the fire of clinging. The spaciousness that actually allows for nature to reveal itself when the mind is not clinging.

This is from Huang Po: "This pure mind shines forever with the radiance of its own perfection. But most people are not aware of it and think that the mind is only the faculty that sees, hears, feels, and knows, blinded by their own sight, hearing, feeling, and knowing. They don't perceive the radiance of the source."

That's clean, actually. We're blinded by our own sight. It's not the sight that blinds us—it's the clinging to it. It's that looking outward. It's really the crux of our problem, the heart of our ignorance: that in the attachment to forms, to our seeing, to our hearing, to the meanings of our thoughts, to our emotions, to what's happening, to experience, there's this continual looking—as a metaphor, not looking with the eyes, but a continual turning of attention outward, away from what Huang Po calls the radiance, the natural radiance of heart and mind. Looking outward for completion, whether it's to pizza, whether it's to concentration, whether it's to enlightenment, whether it's to the person next to you being quiet—it doesn't matter what it is, whether it's to a different mental state.

The looking outward isn't necessarily outward beyond this body. It's outward from just resting at ease in whatever arises. The looking outward that's fueled by craving, by clinging—it's really the heart of our problem, as if somehow perfection is outside of ourselves.

Huang Po continues: "This one mind, this pure mind, is the Buddha. And there is no distinction between Buddhas and ordinary beings except that ordinary beings are attached to forms"—and by forms he means all of experience—"ordinary beings are attached to forms and thus seek for Buddhahood outside of

themselves. By this very seeking, they lose it."

That seems to me really the heart of the conundrum. But it's radical. It's not give up some of the seeking but hold on to this one. Any tiniest little looking outside, we lose the recognition of the pure mind. That's the clinging. You see how pervasive, how subtle it is. And as we all know, just saying, "Okay, I get it, clinging's no good, I think I'll stop now"—no. It doesn't work that way.

So in terms of looking at renunciation as a quality of mind and heart, in small ways, large ways, whatever—playing with, practicing an active kind of renunciation—it's just another way of changing the channel from the constriction of clinging to the spacious coolness of non-greed, of renunciation. It's a movement of deep compassion for ourselves, not of penance, of punishment, of negativity. Real renunciation is a joyful, opening experience—just a state of mind that comes and goes like anything.

So really, when we think of renunciation, rather than thinking of it as a giving up, it's more about learning to renounce this fruitless quest of looking for peace in something outside of here and now.

The way Sogyal Rinpoche said: "The purpose of meditation is to introduce us to that which we really are—pure awareness, which underlies the whole of life and death. In the stillness and silence of meditation, we glimpse and return to that deep inner nature that we have so long ago lost sight of amidst the busyness and distraction of our minds. Meditation is bringing the mind home."

That's really how I think of simply opening to the moment, of putting down the craving, of renouncing the craving in any one particular moment. It's bringing the mind home—withdrawing this looking elsewhere for peace, for wholeness, because it's the looking elsewhere that actually hides the wholeness.

But it's such a deep, deep habit. We really rely on it. And I think, as almost everyone I've talked to here has noted, and as I see in myself all the time, we see through many, many moments of reaching outside or clinging to something—whether it's a particular outside sense object, a particular state of mind, wanting things to be a certain way, or suffering. We see it, we really see through it. And then it may really be peaceful, spacious, open for a while. But some little other something comes into the mind or the experience, and that deeply ingrained reliance on clinging, that reliance on the idea—we don't even hold it consciously—that something has to be different for peace, for freedom. Whether it's the sitting has to be different, this thought has to be different, my experience has to be different.

And as soon as that comes in, it's clinging. Clinging might be in the form of pushing away. And it's so easy for us, especially when it's subtle, to overlook that attitude of craving and get a little bit focused on the thing that we're craving or pushing away. That's looking away. Even when it's something like a mood—we're involved in it, and then, "Oh, there's disappointment. What does that mean?" We're trying to think. Looking away right there. It's so subtle.

But it doesn't mean we're renouncing life or renouncing experience or even renouncing sense objects. As Geshe Rinchen says, having great compassion for yourself is the same as renunciation, because we're

renouncing the delusion, the attachment that keeps one bound to samsara.

So what I'm talking about here with renunciation is really this inner attitude—just a willingness to notice the attachments. And you can't necessarily stop it, but we can at least renounce buying it wholeheartedly. The inner motivation of renunciation is, I think, more important than the outer form. The outer form can support us, and I'll talk about that some. But I know it's possible to live very simply or to be practicing very austerely—I know it's possible to be an ordained person and be completely filled with attachment to the form, with pride or arrogance or complete self-judgment, which is really the same thing, one or the other. It's possible, although it is hard, to be living a completely immersed worldly life and not be clinging. It's harder. It is harder, just because stuff happens so fast. But it's really all about inner attitude, what's in the mind that's noticing.

So as I was saying, we get so habituated to looking away. Almost like one of the ways it feels is: something will make me feel happy when things are unpleasant. But sometimes when things start to get spacious and quiet, that sense of—again, it's a superficial sense of an emptiness, of something lacking, of something needing for completion—and looking out for that. It's a reflex habit. Whether it's for sense experience, the five senses, whether it's to mental experience, emotion, whether it's to ideas and views, views of self—it doesn't really matter what to.

So our practice of renunciation is really a conscious choice for our happiness. It's a conscious choice to break this habit, to consciously see what the mind is doing—the constriction and the burning that clinging brings, and the peace and the space and the joy that a moment of renunciation can bring. It is hard because it's such a habit for our mind to face away from itself, and things happen so fast.

This is Ajahn Chah. He's talking about the flood of sensuality. *Kāmogha*, the flood of sensuality: "We are sunk in sights, sunk in sounds, in smells, in tastes, in bodily sensations, in mental activity. We're sunk because we look only at externals. We don't look inwardly."

And there's so many. They happen so fast. And Sogyal Rinpoche goes on to say: our mind faces away from itself. Our attention, our mind, bends towards whatever we experience—sight, sound, smell, taste, texture, mental experience. Our mind leans toward. The attention is completely caught up by what's happening, and then we get into thoughts about it—the future, the past, the associations—and then we're gone. Out of that comes views. But it's this tendency to lean out.

And then how that leads even more to craving is that unwise attention that I spoke about. Play with this in your practice. When you notice something pleasant—whether it's an image in your mind, something pleasant you're eating, a pleasant emotion, a pleasant sitting, doesn't matter what—the unwise attention, this is what the Buddha said fuels, throws the fuel onto the craving, is really focusing on how attractive this thing is. That's different from noticing pleasant *vedanā*. That's just pure mindfulness. It's more like, "Wow, this really tastes good. This is really so smooth on the tongue." That kind of "This is really gratifying. I really like it."

Unpleasant, of course, is easier to see. When you're annoyed at someone, the mind just keeps going back to those annoying things about that person, every time. You can see it more easily—I can see that one more easily anyway. Each time the mind goes back to what's wrong with that person, you get a little more annoyed. A little more annoyed.

Well, it's the same with the pleasant. They're both unwise attention. Throwing fuel on the pleasant object and the gratification.

So I'm using simple sense experiences, like food. But try a really smooth, light sitting. You're aware of it, and you're noticing, "Oh yeah, this is nice, this is pleasant," but there's this subtle quality of, "Mmm, yeah, this is how it's supposed to be. I'm just really seeing the rapture now. This is really..." And we keep focusing, subtly, on just how nice this is. We don't see the clinging in the background. We think, "I'm really immersed in the beauty of this experience."

Just play with how that happens. I mean, you'll know. We know. We don't always know how we got there, but we know that craving was being fed—sooner or later, when it hits us back in the face. And those are the times when we don't think craving is finding delight now here, now there. We think, "Wow, I was mindful. I was doing it right. How come it went away?" And then we hear ourselves and go, "Well, I know it's supposed to go away. Everything's impermanent. I really know that. But something's wrong. There's something I'm doing wrong." And then we'll find some other rationale or some other reason, because we can't really acknowledge that we're just clinging—that was really nice and I really liked it. I. That sense of me.

Just play with that. It's unwise attention. We do it all the time and get led into whole worlds of *papañca*, of action.

Here's an example. Once I was sitting in a beautiful place in South Africa, and I came out one morning right at dawn. There was this big row, this really beautifully landscaped arrangement of iris bushes. And this one morning, right at dawn, they'd all bloomed. It was really exquisite in my memory—the memory is years ago now. Very subtle lavender and white, extremely beautiful.

And I came out: "Ah, beautiful." You see, renunciation doesn't mean we can't appreciate the beautiful. Renunciation doesn't mean, "Oh no, don't look at that." Renunciation means renouncing the clinging and really bringing mindfulness, wisdom, *satipaññā*, right to that moment of sense contact. That's the place for renunciation.

Well, I didn't do this at that point. "Wow, aren't they beautiful? They're so beautiful." The pleasant feeling in my body—I'm all liking that. "They're so beautiful." And then, you know clinging is going on because it leads to *papañca* of mind and proliferation of action. "My mother would love to see these. She's such a gardener. I wish I had a camera, but I don't. But maybe my friend sitting over on the other side does have a camera."

I ended up running around the place, looking for my friend, bothering him on his retreat, getting his camera, trying to take a picture. Which, of course, when you look at the picture, it doesn't show anything. It just shows some green leaves.

I wasn't appreciating the beauty of those irises anymore. I was running around like a nut, trying to hold on to it. That's just a simple example, but that's how craving leads to complexity, leads to papañca, makes our lives so complicated.

The renunciation isn't "I'm never looking at a flower again." The renunciation isn't cutting down all the irises so we don't, God forbid, get tainted. It's bringing in sati-paññā—mindfulness and wisdom—right at that point of contact. Oh, it's beautiful. You feel the energy going out. Or it's awful. You feel the energy recoiling. Oh, it's like this. That's really the essence of wise attention, of renunciation, right at the point of contact, understanding it.

This is the Buddha: "For some people, contact—the point where sense plus object meet—if you've been right there, that point of seeing, the eye, the iris, is seeing, is enthralling. Contact is enthralling. And so these people are washed by the tides of being, drifting along an empty, pointless road. Nowhere is there any sign of broken chains. But others come to understand their sense activity, and because they understand it, the stillness fills them with delight. They see just what contact does, and so their craving ends. They realize total calm."

It's beautiful, isn't it? It doesn't sound so harsh or like penance or a restriction of life—restraint at the sense doors. First is sati-paññā, mindfulness and wisdom, at the point of sense contact. When we're able to do that, great. It doesn't have to expand any further into clinging, into papañca. In that moment, that's a renunciation of the clinging, of looking outside, looking elsewhere for completion.

That's something the space and structure of a retreat, the simplicity of a retreat, helps us do. All of you have chosen to come here. It's a huge form of sense restraint, of renouncing complexity, renouncing having things your way, renouncing getting the meals you want, renouncing being with your family—whatever—to be here. It's not that all the things we're putting away to come here are bad, or that those things are keeping us from freedom. Of course not. But the strength of our trust in clinging and looking outside is so deep, and it rises so quickly. As Ajahn Chah says, we're so sunk in this flood of sensuality, the flood of experience. Even on retreat, it's not as much, but there's still so much going on—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, thinking. That's always going on.

But there's so much, especially in our daily lives, that this is why renunciation as an outer form matters. Often when we say renunciation, people think right away of it as an outer form, whether it's taking robes or renouncing work and busyness for a while to come on retreat. I'm not saying renunciation is merely the outer form, but outer form and structure is extremely helpful to give us the space to explore the burning of clinging, the coolness of renunciation.

It's like Thich Nhat Hanh says: things are so busy and loud, just shut the windows once in a while. You don't have to let every wind come blowing through your house. It's not that we hate the world. It's not that we're shutting out the world. But simplifying just gives us a lot more possibility to notice what's going on. And I know you all know this. None of you would be here if you didn't know it. I'm just reinforcing what we already understand. Clear the decks. Appreciate the simplicity.

But the simplicity itself is meaningless if we're not using the space it creates to really look at what's going on in this mind and heart when we come to that point of contact. So how much form, how much simplicity we want—that's personal. It's something for each of us to explore, and it may change as we go through our lives. But it's really about what helps us be more present at this point of contact.

With sati-paññā we just meet what's happening, and we don't concoct a whole world out of craving, out of clinging. I know you know what I mean. But just later, think back over how many worlds has your mind concocted today based on contact? Contact with a sight, contact with some thought. How many different, incredibly strong personality views have you created in your mind today just based on an unpleasant thought that came up? Based on not liking the way your breath felt?

Or maybe a really beautiful moment arises, and then it goes. They come, they go. All we have to do is watch it.

But you see how fast, how much contact there is. It really, really can help to simplify. It gives us space to recognize what the mind is doing. And the conscious renunciation of outer form—say, the conscious putting down... Take, for example, the eight precepts. Not that people should do it, but one of the things it can do is this: I've made the renunciation of outer form, I'm not going to eat in the evening.

So when I'm on eight precepts, like sitting in Burma, you're just on eight precepts. It's easier, actually, when everyone's on it and they're not putting out tea—I must say, it's a lot easier. But you just watch what comes up in the mind. So hunger comes up. So what? It doesn't really matter. You just watch it. What you put down is that clinging, that urge to do something about it. And it really doesn't matter. I really mean it. You're hungry? Go hungry tonight. Okay. The hunger's like this. There's no "I've got to fix it, I've got to do anything." There's no clinging. So hunger, not hunger. You feel weak, you feel fine. It doesn't matter if there's space. There's coolness. There's no burning in the mind.

That's just a simple example. Sure, at first, with some outer forms of renunciation, the mind kicks and screams. "I don't want to do this! No, don't take it away! I'm going to be so—if I don't have that, I don't want to live without that." Well, most of us have something, maybe more than one or two somethings, that fall into that category. And sometimes it's something really banal that you're too embarrassed to admit to anyone. Often when I go to Asia, it's just some little thing—I'm not going to say what little thing—things I just have to take. I don't need this, but now I've got to have it.

Sometimes it's not banal, and we might not even be able to say what it is to ourselves because it's much

closer to home. A certain sense of ourselves. A certain personality trait that we hold to. Or a memory. Or a way that we relate to the past. Or whatever it might be—a particular experience. Sometimes it's a fear of something we don't even have, but we don't want to give up the possibility that maybe someday we're going to have that, you know?

Just watch. Where is the mind? No, not this, not this! It's kicking and screaming. And then realize the problem has nothing to do with having or not having that thing, or that state, or that sense of yourself. The only problem is the clinging. Renouncing the clinging that keeps us bound to samsara.

Again, we get so focused on having or losing the thing, or the idea, or the sense of ourselves. We're looking outside again. We're jumping over, we're overlooking the attitude of mind, of heart. "No, no, I need this. I need this. I need this." And in that moment when we see this—we've shifted to the wise intention of renunciation. We've put down the claim in that moment, just for that moment. And we discover we're already home.

I mean, there's the larger renunciation of form in this particular tradition—people who take robes, nuns or monks. I myself lived for about a year as a precept nun in Thailand. And it's true, my mind was kicking and screaming for a good two months. Everything that came into my vision—aversion, aversion. And I mean, it was my choice, right? No one held a gun to my head.

But really, the mind doesn't just say, "Yes, the coolness of renunciation! I'm so happy." But by the end of that time, I'd adjusted to the life in Asia. I'd adjusted to a lot. I won't claim that everything was wonderful, but the simplicity of that life really suited me. And the sense of space in my heart, in my mind, the sense of ease, the sense of joy—of course, I probably exaggerate in retrospect; we can't trust our memories. But I do know it's true that I was really happy the last few months of that time.

And it's given me a really strong appreciation of the beauty and power of simplicity externally, to just reinforce the possibility of recognizing the simplicity internally. Again, it's not that we have to have a simple external life. It's just easier to turn around and bring the mind home, or recognize it's really already at home. So just have a look for yourself. The mind does kick and scream, like Tapussa the householder said—we rejoice in sensuality, we don't even like to think about renunciation. But that's because you don't know what it is. You don't know how happy it really is.

I think also why monks and nuns are so honored and respected in Buddhist countries is that traditionally the householders have a great respect for the level of external renunciation that's required. And the longer you live like that, in some ways the bigger the renunciation, the harder it is. For me, I knew I wasn't going to live like that all my life, so there was a way in the background where I could think, "I don't have this now, and that's fine." The craving doesn't come up. But you have that little out in the back of the mind: "I know next year..." So it's not like I've given it up forever. I didn't have to look at that. Although that's just a thought, because who knows what's going to happen the next moment.

In some ways, our practice—just our moment-to-moment mindfulness, samādhi, whichever one you do in practice—each moment that you simply come out of a fantasy and feel the sensation in the foot, each moment that you notice disappointment is taking you away and recognize, "Oh, disappointment is like this," you come out of the identification, out of the wanting, and you just are aware with mindfulness. Each moment that we come out of a story, that we come out of a criticism, out of a space-out, and just recognize, "Oh, this is what's happening right now"—in a way, each moment of that is the hugest renunciation of all. Renouncing in that moment all your self-images, your self-ideas, your holding to fantasy, your constructions, your concoctions, your saṅkhāras—just for that moment, it's like, "Ah, just this."

In that moment, just for that instant, you've put down all clinging, all looking outside, all feeling of incompleteness and needing something else, all sense of self. "Oh, just sensations of pressure, tightness, calling it breath. Feeling of self-judgment is like this." I know, it's so simple. It's like, "Yeah, fine, right." The next moment, okay, the habit of clinging arises again. Concocting a view, concocting a story—it arises again. That's okay. But notice those moments of renunciation. We're already home. It's not that we got rid of something and created peace; we just turned around and saw, "Ah, peace is in here." And I'm not lost in clinging. And I'm not feeding that fire with cow manure. That's what it feels like usually—feeding fire with cow manure.

Anyone can renounce things, people, places, or lifestyles. Okay, we're already at a high bar here, right? Anyone can renounce that. But only a true renunciate renounces interest in her own mind—renounces her ideas, her beliefs, hopes, conditioning, her wounds, her defeats, her victories, her past and her future. That's the moment of true renunciation. Just renouncing the clinging, because in the moment there's no past or future. Victories, wounds—they're all thoughts, they're all imaginings. Just that pureness of presence, that's the moment of true renunciation.

This is what we can practice. In the mindfulness practice, or samādhi too, you just come back to the breath.

Without clinging, without aversion, you just put down the craving, the attachment that binds you to stories or wanting something other than where you are.

And we can also use it in terms of specific forms. If you notice you're really getting caught over and over in a particular thing, you might experiment with putting it down. Really look at how renunciation brings space to the heart, to the mind.

You might notice—see if this is true for you—how when clinging is getting strong, when we're uncomfortable, how when the mind hasn't quite gotten quiet, when something's disturbing it, how quickly the tendency is to fill up the space.

When you notice the ending of a thought: quick, get back to the breath, right away! Not just, "Oh, that's

thought, it's over. Just space." No—do something. Do something!

You walk out and you're just walking. Look at the bulletin board. Go do something. "Oh, I have fifteen minutes and I just walked. I'm not ready to sit. It's going to be lunch. I've got to do something." So you read the bulletin board again. You read the back of the toilet bowl cleaner again. You go and wash your hands. You go and do something.

Or even in the sitting, nothing's really happening. You're just there. It's not like there's nothing happening that you can feel good about. It's just nothing's really happening. So you have to do something to fill up that space.

Just notice that tendency. What is it you're drawn to do? What do you get involved in? What do you get caught up in? Experiment with putting it down. Don't read, if that's your thing. Don't look at the bulletin board more than once a day, if that's your thing. If seventeen cups of tea is your thing and you're gagging on it, you don't want any more tea, but there's nothing else to do—put down the tea.

If it's looking at other people—how much do we look at other people? And for what? Don't judge it, but notice. Wanting to look, notice when you look, and notice what's the effect. How often does looking at other people really make you happy? Not too much. Not too much. Just notice that.

But remember that renunciation is a path of joy. It's not that the problem is in the forms, in the externals, or in our moods, or in anything. The Buddha said: "It is not the fetter of forms, or form of the eye, but whatever desire or passion arises in dependence on the eye in the form—that is the fetter. If the sense door, the eye for example, or the sense object, the form, or eating and food, whatever, was the fetter, was the chain, then this holy life for the ending of dukkha would not be proclaimed." It wouldn't be possible. "There is an eye in the Blessed One," he's saying. I have an eye. "The Blessed One sees forms with the eye. Yet no desire or passion arises in the Blessed One. So the Blessed One is well released in mind."

You get the sense. Forms aren't the problem. The eye isn't the problem. Renunciation is not trying to cut off life, cut off perception, cut off experience. That's not renunciation—that's aversion, fear. Renunciation is that *ah*, seeing sense contact with sati-pañña, and just putting down that looking down.

Anywhere else, looking outside to any degree for completion, for fulfillment—when we see the futility of that, what opens up is a great path of joy and space and coolness.

And it requires a kind of surrender, doesn't it? A surrender to just the truth of this moment. A total surrender of our beliefs, our expectations, our desires about practice, our ideas of who we are, of where we're going. A surrender even of our ideas of freedom. Our ideas of liberation.

This is on a moment-to-moment level. I'm not talking about something abstract or far away. We absolutely surrender all the concepts, the self-concepts, the expectations, and just land completely at this moment of contact. Without the mind moving out in any way, then the natural radiance reveals itself.

Can we trust that enough?

The more we recognize the burning nature and the futility, really, of this searching outside for the peace that's already here, the more the heart and mind naturally incline to the spaciousness, the coolness of letting go, of non-greed—or as Ajahn Amaro calls it, the peace and ease that is the natural peace and ease of the mind and heart.

Can we just rest in the peace and ease that is the natural peace and ease of the mind and heart? That's what renunciation opens us up to.

I want to end with a little poem from one of the nuns from the time of the Buddha. Mittakali was her name. She was turned to the Dhamma when she heard the Buddha give a discourse on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. The texts tell us that up until this point in her life, she had the reputation of being a very difficult person—angry and self-centered. But when she heard the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, it changed her. She put a great sense of commitment into her life as a nun. And of course, she became an arahant—otherwise you didn't get your poem in this collection.

She wrote:

Although I left home for no home
and wandered full of faith—
so the outer renunciation—
I was still greedy for possessions and praise.
I lost my way.
My passions used me,
and I forgot the real point of my wandering life.

Then as I sat in my little cell,
there was only terror.
I thought, this is the wrong way.
A fever of longing controls me.
Life is short.
Age and sickness gnaw away.
I have no time for carelessness
before this body breaks.

And as I watched the elements of mind and body
rise and fall away,
I saw them as they really are.
I stood up.
My mind was completely free.

The Buddha's teaching has been done.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.