Coming Home: Renunciation

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 55:14

Today, in an interview, somebody said from a very deep place in his practice, "I feel like I've come home," with a sense of real peace, of ease, of letting down. And the saying, "I feel like I've come home," had nothing to do with being here at IMS or with any particular place or location. He was really talking about the experience in his practice at that time of having let go of trying to manipulate, control experience or practice or whatever was arising—letting go of self-referencing and just being completely present with experience as it comes and goes. Just that ease of total presence that lets us come home to what is really true.

The purpose of meditation is to introduce us to that which we really are, that 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 what I want to talk about tonight: bringing our mind, our hearts home so that we can recognize our true nature. And the way I want to talk about it is through the aspect of mind, of heart, of renunciation.

I think this is a concept that we often don't really quite understand. Renunciation is the key component. We renounce the distractedness, the clinging, the busyness, the fantasies, the attachments that keep us from resting at home in our true nature. But the word renunciation, even though we've talked about it quite a bit before—the concept doesn't play well in our culture, in our training. And you don't have to have come from a Catholic background to have that; it's pretty pervasive, I think.

Renunciation can be equated with some kind of harsh penance, with deprivation, with giving up things for our own good but in a way that's going to make us miserable, with self-mortification, rigid adherence to some outer ascetic form. But nowhere much do we hear of renunciation as actually being a source of joy, a source of freedom, an actual delight and relief to come out of this distractedness that keeps us looking elsewhere for the truth.

Renunciation also happens to be part of the second stage of the Eightfold Path: right thought or wise thought that is motivated by wisdom, the first stage. The three aspects of right thought the Buddha speaks about are these: thoughts or intentions of greed transform to thoughts or intentions of renunciation, letting go, open-handedness, open-heartedness, which then moves to generosity. The second aspect of wise thought is metta—thoughts of ill will transform to thoughts of friendliness. And the third is that thoughts of cruelty transform to intentions of compassion, of kindness. Those are the three right intentions. Tonight I want to talk about renunciation in that way.

If you remember, the Eightfold Path is the path of happiness, not the path of suffering. And so the thought or intention, the movement of heart and mind of renunciation, is an expression of wisdom. It's an expression of the pure heart and mind, as Sogyal said—that deep nature that we've so long ago lost sight of amidst the busyness and distraction.

Renunciation is actually an expression of realizing our intrinsic wholeness, of accessing inner contentment instead of this ceaseless, restless looking outside of ourselves for wholeness and contentment, which is where it can never be found. And the only way we can learn that is if we would stop looking. You know how Krishnamurti said, "To seek the truth is to deny it." And that's just what we're doing. So renunciation is a conscious choice for our own happiness and well-being.

This is from Huang Po: "This pure mind shines forever with the radiance of its own perfection. This one mind is the Buddha and there is no distinction between Buddhas and ordinary beings except that ordinary beings are attached to forms and thus seek for Buddhahood outside of themselves. By this very seeking, they lose it."

That's the crux of our confusion, our problem, if you would put it that way. Through our attachment to forms—not just material visual forms, but also all the mental realm, thought forms, emotion forms, visual forms internally, so the five senses and the mental sense, the sixth sense—being attached to those, thinking that somewhere by holding onto or acquiring new forms we're going to make ourselves truly happy, actually complete ourselves in some way. And by continuing to look in this way, by this very seeking, we lose it.

By thinking that anything outside of absolute attention and presence, wholehearted being here and now in this moment—just the slightest movement of thinking something else outside of here can open me to inner completion—that's the exact movement of mind and heart that hides the potential for peace. And it's so hard for us to get that. So that's why renunciation as a practice comes in.

Renunciation, restraint of the senses, in its truest form, its deepest form, is a giving up of this fruitless quest for peace and completion by adding something extra to what's already here.

Now, do we really, really believe this? I mean, it would be nice if we did.

It sounds good, you know? But our conditioning is so deep, so subtly pervasive. It assaults us everywhere we go in this culture. I don't need to give you many examples. But really, how much of our sense of who we are is based on what we have, what we do, what clothes we wear? Even here in yogi land. Isn't there a certain image we present of ourselves that we're aware of—by what we're wearing, how we're eating, how we're walking? In some way, so much of what matters in the world is seeming externals, and it's just so deeply ingrained.

But in a way, when we move towards something outside of ourselves to complete us, that's the real self-abandonment. We think, "If I get the love I need, if I get the approval I need, if I get the new car I

need—I don't know, whatever it is—then I'll be okay." That's the movement of moving away from completion, of abandoning your true nature. But it's so subtle, this pull towards "if I just get this, if I just do that, if I just have this comfortable feeling."

And we can end up so easily at the end of our life—or the end of a sitting—lost in some fantasy land of either make-believe happiness or real suffering because we didn't get the make-believe happiness. We can end up our whole life this way.

I read an interview with Marlon Brando in a magazine about three years ago. Actually, I didn't read it—it was in German, so my friend Franz translated it for me. Brando was saying, "I was never a good father or a good husband. I was always busy with my own life. Now I'm a guilty old man who feels ashamed of his life. Besides food, there is nothing else in the world for me. That's the only thing in my life. I know this eating will kill me, but I just can't stop." It's intense, isn't it? Hopefully he's moved on from there.

I use that example from someone like Marlon Brando on purpose, because that's someone we would think has had enormous opportunity—through having and being in so many different realms in this culture—who should really have had a good shot at happiness. It's so hard to believe that this wanting outside of ourselves is so much the way that keeps us miserable.

So renunciation is not a penance for our sins. It's a gift to ourselves of love and compassion. From Geshe Raptan: "Having great compassion for oneself is the same as renunciation, because we're renouncing the delusion, the attachment that keeps one bound to samsara. The point of renunciation is the development of love and compassion for oneself. Only then is compassion for others possible."

The point of renunciation is love and compassion for oneself—not self-punishment, not self-hatred.

So what is renunciation then? What does it look like? Really, at the heart of it, it's intention. The intention of the heart and mind that lets go in a moment of craving or clinging. It's that simple. It doesn't have a particular outer form that our behavior must match, although there can be. But so often we get caught in thinking, "If I give up this, if I give up that, if I come up to some particular standard of asceticism, or I give up the most important thing in my life—that's renunciation."

But really, renunciation is not about outer form. It's about the inner motivation of our heart. We could meet an outer form of very stringent asceticism and be completely attached to that form. I've seen it often enough in monks in Asia—more Western monks who I could talk to. "Well, you know how it is. We come here and we're really very sincere. But boy, on the good days, we're really clinging to being a good, ascetic, slow-moving yogi." That's okay. We see that. It's suffering. That's the next thing to renounce.

But it's not about form. Slow isn't necessarily more enlightened. You can't tell from the outside. It's all in the intention.

Now, at some level, of course, this form of renunciation is part of all of our lives, where we want

something, but when we can expand our vision to the bigger picture, we're able to give up a particular thing in the service of something greater. If you have children, you do that all the time. You give up your sleep or you give up what you want to do in order to be with your child, to help your child grow—or with old people, or with friends, or just going to work every day when you'd much rather go to the beach in Maui, but you like to eat and have a place to live. So in service of that, we'll do something we might not particularly like.

It's simply being able to expand the big picture. When we're talking about the renunciation that opens us to freedom on our spiritual journey, we just expand to the biggest picture we can possibly imagine. And so it's really in service of being willing to recognize our natural completion, our natural purity. To be willing to recognize that, we make the commitment of the greatest renunciation of all, which is the renunciation of all seeking outside of ourselves, no matter what that seeking may be.

From the outside, that might look like you're some kind of huge ascetic. But as Anandamayi Ma, the great Indian woman saint, said one time—she lived a very simple life, and some businessmen, wealthy men, came and were praising her in awe at her asceticism. She just kept laughing and laughing. Finally they said, "What's so funny?" And she said, "I'm not the renunciate. It is you who are the renunciates, because you are giving up the great delight, the great happiness, the great joy of the divine presence."

We just need a bigger picture. That's why we like to have a few saints and masters around in the world—because they remind us there is a bigger picture than the next sitting.

So what helps us? What allows us to even let in the possibility of this great renunciation, the renunciation of all seeking outside of ourselves? Often, as I said, we can turn to very strong, harsh asceticism—it's a very common spiritual practice. I'm not saying that's a negative practice; it can be helpful. But remember, it comes from intention, and it's easy to miss that.

When we read about the Buddha's life, when he first renounced all the great indulgence of pleasure—compared to how so many people in the world live, life in this Western world can be like a big pleasure garden, even with all our sufferings—it's easy to say, "Okay, throw all of that over and get really tough. Renounce everything. Give up everything. That's the way. That's what's going to do it." But that can just as easily be an aversion trip, or an ego trip. The intention can come from fear: "God forbid I should get near anything pleasant because I'm going to be lost." Now that might be true, but we don't have to live in fear of that.

True renunciation isn't a shutting out of the world, shutting away all sense experience out of fear or aversion. That's just trading greed for fear. And it's not necessarily true that the more externals you give up, the more awake you're going to be. It might help, but it isn't a given, because it's all in the intention.

I think that's what the Buddha discovered. Luckily for us, he bequeathed us what he called the middle path—not wallowing in sense pleasures and not living a life of such mortification. As you know, he almost

starved himself to death before he realized that he didn't have enough energy to really look. So he bequeathed us the middle path, which to us in this life might seem like a path of strict austerity, but it's really the middle path between what's possible.

The middle path is not of harsh mortification, but of restraint of the senses. One way of defining restraint that I like, from Buddhadasa, is that with real mindful awareness, we pay attention at the point of sense contact—at that point where I meet sense object and there's knowing. We don't try to shut out all sense contact, although we might try to restrict how much we let in. But the real restraint is paying attention at the moment of sense contact. Then it doesn't have to expand into looking elsewhere for happiness.

When we pay attention—and that's our whole practice here, is it not?—we begin to discover how much of our sense of presence, how much of our energy, as it were, just flies out the sense doors. We've talked about this a lot, and it continues to be amazing, doesn't it? It just flies out the eye door, the ear door, the mind door. And in a second, we're miles away, somehow thinking this is really where it's at, this is what's going to make things whole, complete, okay.

When we pay attention, we see that. And rather than a punishment, rather than some sense of restrictedness—"Oh my God, now I have to pay attention every time sense contact comes"—when we really do that, it doesn't lead to restriction. It leads to real presence, openness, ease in the moment of what's arising.

It opens our hearts and minds into the present and allows us to begin to touch that truth that's always here, that deepest part of ourselves, of our life.

As I said, renunciation can't be forced, because then it comes from an outer obligation and the intention isn't really one of renunciation—it's of meeting some ideal. But the inner intention, just the simple letting go of heart and mind, arises naturally from wisdom. It arises from a moment of clear seeing.

Two particular aspects are said to naturally bring about a moment of renunciation: the wise seeing of the painful nature of grasping, and the recognition of impermanence. We've hammered on that first one, and we will continue to do so, because seeing the painful nature of grasping is so ultimately freeing. And of course what helps with that is recognizing impermanence.

I won't say a whole lot about these two, just offer a couple of examples of how they really allow the heart to open.

In noticing the painful nature of grasping in little things, you've seen how that moment of craving and grasping, when it arises, is actually the grasping itself that shatters our natural great peace. You've noticed that, have you not? Really look and see. It's just the littlest things—that's what's so great about a silent retreat. You have time to explore.

I remember one time I was flying an overnight flight to Europe. I don't sleep well on planes—I don't sleep

at all unless I can lie down, which pretty much never happens these days. So I was sitting on the plane as it was loading up, and about five minutes before the doors were going to close, I suddenly noticed that none of the seats in my row were filled.

In that moment, I had been perfectly peaceful just sitting there. But with the thought, "Maybe I could lie down," it was as if some kind of vice snapped shut in my heart. What had been perfectly spacious and peaceful became a source of tremendous suffering and ill will. Everyone who came through the door became my enemy after that—until they either sat down or walked past. Then I went, "Oh, okay, may you be happy." But only after they walked past.

I really watched how much the sense of separation—me and other—was created just by clinging to that thought: maybe I could lie down. It was stunning.

So just explore. In those moments, how much pain is created? Notice the futility of grasping anyway, because the grasping wasn't going to help. Either the seats were going to be empty or not. My sitting there hating everybody and urging them past really wasn't going to have much to do with it. It only made me miserable.

We miss our essential completeness, that wholeness in the situation, our own essential completeness. As soon as I saw, "I need those seats," I had distracted myself from my essential peace and wholeness. As soon as the plane took off—and as it happened, nobody sat down, so I had the seats—the essential wholeness was back. But it could have been even if someone sat next to me, because it was the grasping that was the problem.

There's something about clinging that, if we sort of look at it but don't really examine it deeply, we almost find a kind of poignancy in the clinging itself. It seems almost sweet, as if the clinging somehow makes us feel more alive or more present. It makes us feel more *me*, that's for sure, but that's not necessarily more alive.

There's a way, I think, when we don't really explore the experience of clinging, that we get a little caught in the almost sweetness of it itself. You know that haiku of Bashō? It's pretty well known: "Although I'm in Kyoto, when the cuckoo sings, I long for Kyoto."

Just longing. That kind of poignancy, bittersweetness. We're entranced by it, by the pleasant feeling, by the seeming promise of happiness the clinging brings. And we forget to notice.

It's not necessarily the clinging that's bringing that happiness. It's the absence of clinging that reintroduces us to that peace that's always been here—and was here before we got so caught in the clinging in the first place.

There's a line I love from Galway Kinnell. I won't read you the whole poem, but he's talking to his little daughter, and he says: "When I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up and hold you up in the

moonlight, you cling to me hard as if clinging could save us." In some way, we think clinging will save us.

I read in a newspaper in Seattle a report about something called compulsive hoarding condition. It's something that happens with elderly people—I don't know if it's just elderly people, but they're the ones who get found out. Elderly people who can't throw anything away. This is a real condition. The newspaper article was about one particular woman. The neighbors had finally called the health department because her house was smelling so bad. They went and found sixteen tons of garbage in her house—debris, newspapers, bags, cans, pieces of string. Everything that had come in, nothing could go out. The house was completely packed. All the rooms, just a little alleyway in one room that she would use, a little corner where she could sit, and everything else completely full. The health department said it was the fourth house that week they had to come and clean out. The fourth house that week.

The article quotes a woman who is a geriatric psychiatrist saying, "I see it as a response to grief over the passing of time. It's a kind of abnormal response to getting older. You can't say goodbye to it." Can't say goodbye to anything.

Sometimes when you go back to that little back dining room and look at the food stashes—I think we all have a little bit of that in us. I know when I'm sitting, I'll keep saving the banana. I never eat it. But I just keep saving it. We all do that.

So just noticing in yourself that pain of grasping, and our somehow denial of that, our involvement in that sweetness of clinging. It isn't really sweet when you look at it. It's really painful. So look at it, please.

And the fact of impermanence—just in a moment when these come together, you don't have to say, "Oh, I think I'll renounce. It would be for my well-being." The heart just lets go. It's really, "Oh, yeah, right." Let's put the banana back. I don't need the aggravation.

Bhikkhu Bodhi says, "Real renunciation is not a matter of compelling ourselves to give up things that we inwardly cherish. It's rather a matter of changing our perspective on the things we cherish so that they no longer bind us." So we think we cherish something, but if it's binding us, is that what we mean by cherish? We're not cherishing ourselves in that moment. When we recognize this, our heart and mind naturally turns towards renunciation.

The word renunciation is most commonly used in association with the renouncing of sense pleasures. And of course, this is a big area where we look outside of ourselves. Renunciation isn't just, as I said, the flat-out giving up of all sense pleasures. We do need to cut it back a little bit. We do need to give ourselves some slack from running after so much sense pleasure—not from fear of judgment, but so that the mind and heart has some space to recognize natural great peace.

Huang Po: "Blinded by their own sight, hearing, feeling, and knowing, most people don't perceive the radiance of the source." There's just too much sense desire, sense pleasures going on. We get blinded by them if we're not really aware with mindfulness wisdom, *sati-paññā*, right at the point of contact.

Just coming here on retreat is a huge renunciation, isn't it? It's not something to belittle. It's a huge amount of letting go of sense pleasures. Also letting go of sense of self and identity. And you see already how much space it allows in awareness, in the heart and mind—not space just to see the *kilesas*, but to see how we suffer from them, and then the heart naturally lets go. There can be a re-recognition of natural great peace.

So we have a huge giving up just to come here. But we do find, don't we, how sneaky this tendency to fill ourselves up by sense pleasures is.

So for each of us, we just need to pay attention as the retreat goes on—not with judgment, but with interest, with delight—to see how we've transformed going out to the movies every night into looking at the bulletin board five times a day. It might not seem like a fair trade, but look at the intention. What are the ways we're still filling up the awareness, the space of presence, from outside in some way to help ourselves feel whole?

That yearning to look—a lot of people have been talking about that. It's so amazing how you feel like you'll just die if you don't look up at the person walking by. Why? So that we can have some kind of judgment about them or us and then feel bad about ourselves. But that yearning is so strong. Or wanting different sensations in your sitting or your walking, wanting the breath to be more subtle, wanting a new sensation in the lifting or the moving, wanting some new emotion or some new subtlety of emotion, or something different to happen, or for the noting to change, or to have less change—or that subtle love of thinking.

That subtle love of analyzing all the dharmic aspects of what's going on—it's another way of filling up the space, of looking for something else to make ourselves feel whole.

I remember one time I went to Sayadaw U Pandita in an interview, sort of whining as much as one dares whine to him. Basically, "It just keeps on going, the same old thing, the same old thing, noting, noting." And he just looked at me and said, "So what do you want, different objects to note?"

You get it? Like, really—does it matter if I'm noting lifting, moving, or thinking, sensation? Does it matter if I get to note pressure instead of tingling, or if I get to note sadness instead of happiness? Does it really matter?

So conscious restraint of our senses—what we do when we come on retreat here—and then the willingness to look in an even more refined way, to bring that mindfulness wisdom at the point of contact, and also to consciously, when we can, limit how much we're going out looking. Limit the input a little bit.

When we talk about this, the sense is it feels constricting. But as someone said today in an interview—it was really great—she was talking about this looking around, this compulsive need we have to look, and how really unpleasant and distracting it is. And she finally said, "Okay, I'm just going to be looking down at the ground." And I said, "That's great. That's restraint." And she looked up and said with a sense of such innocent surprise and joy, "Yeah, restraint—but it was a relief. It was really great."

We think of restraint as like putting someone under restraint because they're out of control—a kind of holding back. But this restraint of just limiting how much we look around, it's a relief. It's a joy. It makes space to really meet ourselves and meet life more fully with joy and appreciation. It's immensely freeing.

I want to read you something from the Buddha talking about restraint of the senses. First he gives a simile—you know, he talks a lot in similes. I used to skip the similes, but then I realized I really like them.

He says, "Suppose a man catches six animals of different domains"—like they live in different areas of the world—"a snake, a crocodile, a bird, a dog, a jackal, and a monkey. And he ties them each with a strong rope and then takes those six ropes tied to those six animals and ties them together in the middle, so they're all tied to each other. Then all those animals would just be swinging around and struggling together, each trying to get back to its natural habitat. So the snake would struggle thinking, 'I want to get to the anthill,' and the crocodile thinks, 'I want to get to the water,' and the bird wants to fly up into the air, and so forth. So they're all struggling. And then when those six hungry animals grew weak and weary, then the one who was strongest would carry the day and they'd all just be dragged after the one who was strongest to wherever that was going."

"So in the same way, O bhikkhus"—now, whenever he uses six, you can pretty much guess he's talking about the six fields of sense experience: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, sensing with the body, and the mind—"So in the same way, whenever a person fails to practice and develop mindfulness as to the body or the mind," and then he starts with the eye: "The eye struggles to draw him towards attractive objects while unattractive objects are repellent to him," and he runs through all the senses.

So it's as if the eye is struggling to pull us towards pleasant objects, and the ear is struggling to pull us towards pleasant sounds, and the body is struggling to pull us towards pleasant food or a nice soft sitting place or whatever—just this struggle when we're not mindful. This is lack of restraint.

And what is restraint? "Restraint is when, seeing objects with the eye, the person is not drawn towards the attractive ones and is not repelled by unattractive ones. Simply remains firmly established in mindfulness."

Just that awareness at the point of contact, not pushed and pulled to and fro by whether it's attractive or unattractive. So she remains firmly established in mindfulness and her mind is boundless. The heart is boundless, meeting sense experience with mindfulness. She knows in truth the liberation of the heart, the liberation by wisdom.

See, he's not here saying restraint means you hide away from all sense experience. Simply meeting it firmly established in mindfulness, not pulled towards the pleasant, repelled by the unpleasant, and the heart and mind is unbounded, boundless. That is really the beauty of restraint, of natural renunciation.

So the next time you feel like one of those animals is pulling you towards—I don't know what—reading all the kinds of tea there are, or listening to what that new particular sound could be, or what the person in

the next room could possibly be doing with the noise they're making—the next time you feel like you're being pulled that way by clinging, stop a moment. And instead of letting the awareness go out through the eye door or the ear door or the mind door, turn it back on the clinging itself. Just make the simple experiment of landing firmly with mindfulness in the experience of the grasping, in the experience of the clinging. Stay there with it, with kindness but clear comprehension, and watch the clinging fade. It will, eventually.

If you're somewhere where you keep getting re-stimulated by seeing—say you're in the dining room and it's that third cookie you really want—it might be helpful to leave the dining room so you don't keep seeing it, because it's getting re-stimulated every moment. It's harder that way. But go somewhere and just stay with the clinging, with spaciousness and clear comprehension, until it fades, and then notice. What do you have? What's there? If you're lucky enough that a new clinging doesn't arise so quickly, there's no space—what we can notice is peace. That actually what we wanted was this peace of non-clinging. So often the third cookie doesn't actually give us that, does it? If we just hang out with the grasping and watch it vanish, we find out that that completion, that peace, that natural perfection is already here. It's the looking away that blinds us to that.

So this restraint at the sense doors is not about cultivating fear or aversion to pleasant experience. It is a fine balance to walk. I have a friend who spent some time here on retreat going around blindfolded, experimenting. I mean, that's an experiment. I don't know that I advocate it. But at some point, it's learning to meet sense experience with sati-pañña, with mindfulness-wisdom, because we don't have to shut out the world. We learn the difference between attachment to sense pleasures and the enjoyment of a peaceful heart and mind.

Thich Nhat Hanh says this in a way I really like: When we are obsessed by sense pleasures, we lose our freedom. But we have to distinguish between indulging in sense pleasures and the joy and happiness that we experience when we are mindful and at peace. Attachment to sense pleasures brings about suffering and entanglement both in the present moment and the future, for ourselves and others. But the joy and happiness of a peaceful mind and heart brings neither suffering nor attachment in the present or in the future, for ourselves or for others.

It's very important that we realize that renunciation, restraint of the sense doors, is not to shut ourselves off from the world, but to open up the space that allows us to live with great joy and appreciation of ourselves and all that the world offers us. And still, the simplicity of outer life is immensely supportive of opening our hearts to this greater appreciation.

And you know, it doesn't have to be that we're really deep in the spiritual path. Simply cultivating simplicity, even for a short time, opens the space to recognize the truth, even if we don't think we're looking for it. Today, just pure chance, I was looking for distraction and I picked up a magazine lying around our house called Men's Health—not a new age health magazine, but a really mainstream

magazine for young men about looking good, feeling good, how to get the most out of life. I opened it and it just happened to open to an article about a guy who writes for the magazine, some young editor, who went to the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemane in Kentucky for four days, where the monks live very simple lives of silence.

It was amazing. This guy, you could tell, was a fun-loving, bar-hanging-out kind of a guy. He said in the beginning, "I'm about as spiritual as a hot dog bun." That's how they write in this magazine. "The thought of disconnecting from the outside world, left alone with my tortured thoughts, seemed pretty unnerving." Within half an hour of getting there, he thought, "I've got to get the hell out of here."

But the article was actually fascinating. He stayed there four days and, almost against his intentions, it really profoundly moved him. Within two days he was saying these monks—and it could be nuns, but anyone really on the renunciate path—are actually the most revolutionary people in our whole society. And he meant it. He said, "Forget James Dean, these guys are the most revolutionary." He talked about different aspects that really touched him and said he ended up seeing a lot that would really help him in his life.

He was in awe that someone could be so radical as to choose celibacy. Just thinking of how much suffering sexuality had caused in his life, he said, "These guys are radical. It's amazing." He was truly amazed. The silence, the simplicity of life, the simplicity of their routines, not holding grudges, the metta—all of it. Just in the silence, no one was preaching at him. In fact, they would talk to him a little bit, but no one was indoctrinating him. He said they get up at three in the morning, they have a lot of quiet contemplation and short services. Four days, and it just really seeped in.

The last night, he said, on the way there he had carefully noted where all the bars were in the nearby area, because he figured he was going to need to escape at some point. And he didn't until the last night. It almost sounded like he just thought he *should* want to escape. So he said on the last night he went to a bar, was hanging out, there was all this music, and he had a Weiss beer. As it got louder and louder, he sat there thinking, "What am I doing here?" And he went back to the monastery. Went to bed, got up at three the next morning to go to the services, and then he left.

He said, "Well, I'm not ready to sign up." But it touched him, because it allows us to reconnect with the truth—whether we have a name for it or we know it or we recognize it or we have some big context for it or not. It really doesn't matter. And allowing ourselves some outer simplicity, some outer renunciation, gives us the space to begin to re-recognize this.

So just look at the ways—here, more and more subtly—we're getting caught in sense desire. And without judgment, notice the pain of it and see if we can put it down, to give ourselves more space to open to what we really are.

And it's not only sense desire we renounce. It's a lot of our self-identifications: the way we present

ourselves, the stories we hold about ourselves, the ways we act—keeping busy, taking care of people, being the good yogi, being the bad yogi, being the angry yogi, whatever it is. The greatest renunciation, I think, is simply in the moment when any of these strong self-stories begin to arise and we notice it. "Oh yeah, that's me. Okay." Just feel the lifting. Just feel the sensation of this next breath. That simplicity—that's the great renunciation.

We just put down all the stories and interpretations and papañca and sense of self we're creating, and relax into the presence of whatever's arising in this next moment. That's all. In one moment, over and over—that's where we can begin to recognize that we're already home. We don't have to go anywhere. We don't need to create any better story about ourselves or others, or present ourselves in any light. Just let go and rest at ease in whatever's arising in this moment.

And we discover that we're already home.

It's the looking outside that reinforces our belief in being incomplete, that we're suffering beings, that something better needs to happen. It's the looking that reinforces it. That moment of renunciation, just letting go of the looking—we're back at home. No matter what may be arising, it really doesn't matter. If we can just rest here, we'll discover our potential to be at home.

From Jetsun Milarepa, Padampa Sangye said: "Everything is found within the natural state, so do not seek elsewhere." Buddhahood is the wisdom within us all. It is not elsewhere. It is actually our fundamental nature.

I'll end with a poem by Lalla, a fourteenth-century Kashmiri woman:

I was passionate, filled with longing.
I searched far and wide.
But the day that the truthful one found me,
I was at home.

May we each come home to our true nature.

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