# Renunciation - The Wisdom of No

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 58:27

I first became interested in Buddhism when I was in the Peace Corps in Thailand. This was back in 1965, so it's quite a while ago. It was my very first introduction to the Buddhist teachings and just a very little bit of meditation.

When I came back to the States, I tried to practice by myself and realized that I really needed a teacher. It was just too confusing to figure out exactly what to do and how to do it. So I decided to go back to Asia—this was in 1967—to look for a teacher. I stopped in India on the way. I went to different ashrams, I went up to the mountains looking for some Tibetan teachers. I didn't have any particular names or destinations.

After traveling for some time around northern India, I ended up in Bodh Gaya, which, of course, is the place of the Buddha's awakening. Munindraji, my first Dharma teacher, had just come back from nine years of practice and study in Burma. At that time, there were just a very few Westerners in Bodh Gaya—about half a dozen of us. We were all practicing at the Burmese Vihara.

Munindra said something at the first meeting which made so much sense to me that I knew I really had found what I was looking for. It was just the very simple statement that if we want to understand our minds, we need to sit down and observe them. That was all. There was nothing to join and there was no set of beliefs I had to subscribe to and there were no ceremonies or rituals of any kind. It was just that very simple, common sense instruction: if you want to understand your mind, sit down and observe it.

Of course, this proved to be both very profound as an instruction and also in its application, in its depth. As Munindraji would often say, it's simple but not easy. I'm sure you have observed that for yourselves.

We can begin this observation of our minds, this coming to understand ourselves, by paying attention to one very obvious aspect of our minds: both the content and the nature of our thoughts, and all the attitudes in the mind that our thoughts condition.

The Buddha said that whatever one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of the mind. That's a simple sentence, but it has tremendous implications for our lives, our actions, for understanding what conditions us.

This really points to the very great power of habit and habitual tendencies in the unfolding of our lives. The more often a particular thought or kind of thought arises, the more frequently it will arise. It's not that it's just happening in the moment and gone. Each moment is actually conditioning the arising of subsequent moments. The more often particular kinds of thoughts arise in the mind—particularly when

we're lost in them or identified with them—the more often they will continue to come until it becomes the inclination of our minds.

It's this understanding of how the mind works and how it's conditioned that led the Buddha to give so much importance to the second step of the Noble Eightfold Path, which he called Right Thought. Given that our actions are conditioned by how we think about ourselves and how we think about the world, and that wholesome and unwholesome actions bring their respective results, we need to understand that our actions are conditioned by how we think, and the actions themselves bring karmic results, either wholesome or unwholesome.

It's not hard to see that an essential part of our practice is the cultivation of those thoughts and intentions which bring about happiness, which bring about peace, which bring about understanding, both for ourselves and others.

As with so many other parts of his teachings, the Buddha didn't just stop with this general principle of paying attention to your thoughts, cultivating the wholesome ones, letting go of the unwholesome ones. He was very specific about what kinds of thoughts should be cultivated.

He is speaking to the bhikkhus. And remember, bhikkhu in its broadest context means everyone walking on the path—so he's really speaking to us. "And what, bhikkhus, is right thought? It is the thought and resolve of renunciation, free of sensual desire. The thought of goodwill, free of ill will. And thoughts of compassion, free of cruelty."

This is very specific. What is right thought? Thoughts of renunciation, thoughts of goodwill, of mettā, thoughts of compassion.

The question for us is how to put this very specific teaching into practice, not only on retreat but in our lives. How do we cultivate right thought, both here on retreat and in our lives in the world?

Again, the Buddha gives some very specific advice. There's one discourse in the Majjhima Nikāya, the Middle-Length Sayings, and the sutta is called "Two Kinds of Thoughts." In it, he describes a way to begin this practice.

Notice what the mind does when we hear these repetitions. After the second or third time, does the mind just space out? Think, "Oh yeah, he said that already, I know this"? Or can we understand that the Buddha may be repeating it because it's important, and so we should take it in each time and really see what it means for us.

This is from the sutta, Two Kinds of Thoughts:

"Bhikkhus, before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened bodhisatta, it occurred to me: suppose that I divide my thoughts into two classes. Then I set on one side thoughts of sensual desire, of ill will, and of cruelty. And I set on the other side thoughts of renunciation, of goodwill, of compassion."

So he's discerning what kinds of thoughts are arising in the mind, setting on one side the unwholesome ones, on the other side the wholesome ones.

"And as I abided thus, diligent, ardent, and resolute, when a thought of sensual desire arose in me, I understood thus: this thought of sensual desire has arisen in me." This is the important reflection: "This leads to my own affliction, to others' affliction, and to the affliction of both. It obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties, and leads away from nibbana. When I considered this leads to my own affliction, that thought subsided in me. When I considered this leads to others' afflictions, that thought subsided in me. When I considered this leads to the affliction of both, that thought subsided in me. When I considered this obstructs wisdom, causes difficulty, and leads away from nibbana, these thoughts subsided in me. Whenever a thought of sensual desire arose in me, I abandoned it, removed it, did away with it."

Then he goes on likewise with thoughts of ill will and cruelty.

One of the most interesting things for me in reading the suttas, the discourses, is remembering that all of them are really instructions to us. It's not about Buddhist philosophy. Over and over again the Buddha is telling us this is a way to practice, and it's always surprisingly shocking that when I do put these instructions into practice, they work. So it's definitely worth at least making the experiment.

Following in the bodhisatta's footsteps, we too can cultivate a clear discernment about the kinds of thoughts that are arising in our minds, particularly the repetitive ones, the patterns of thought that keep coming again and again. We can begin to notice which patterns are rooted in sensual desire, which are rooted in ill will or cruelty. We can consciously reflect on the harm that they cause both to ourselves and to others, that they lead away from clarity, from wisdom, from nibbana. We can consciously reflect on that and let them go. When we notice, when we pay attention to those patterns of thought that are rooted in one way or another in renunciation, in goodwill, in compassion, we can reflect on their value, on their skill, and strengthen them in our lives.

All of this is the use of wise reflection in the service of the path. We want to use our intelligence as we undertake the practice. The Buddha, as you can see, is very specific about the kinds of thoughts that are harmful, the kinds of thoughts that are for our welfare.

One of the things that happens, of course, as we become mindful of these two kinds of thoughts—the unskillful and the skillful—is that we can become increasingly aware and sensitive to the strength and seductive power of the unwholesome patterns. We find our mind getting seduced by them again and again.

Ill will and aversion are said to be more dangerous than desire, than greed, but easier to uproot. Desire is less dangerous—it causes less obvious harm—but it's harder to uproot. Why is this?

When we're experiencing thoughts of ill will or aversion of one kind or another, the suffering is very obvious. These mind states generated by ill will and anger and aversion and hatred are always

unpleasant. We're always suffering in the midst of them. Even though they're very harmful, very dangerous, causing a lot of harm, once we start paying attention to them, we're more motivated to see through them and to let them go because we see the suffering so clearly.

Sense desires, on the other hand, are often associated with pleasure. We get pleasure from the gratification of our sense desires. So it's not always apparent why renunciation of sense desire is a good idea. Why should I give up these pleasures? The Buddha himself acknowledged this situation. This is not just us in the twenty-first century West. People from the Buddha's time onward have been entranced by sense desires, sense pleasures.

So one time in the time of the Buddha, a group of lay people were meeting and discussing this very question. They brought this discussion to Ananda, the Buddha's attendant and cousin. This is what these householders had to say:

"Venerable Ananda, we are householders who indulge in sensuality, delight in sensuality, enjoy sensuality, rejoice in sensuality. For us—indulging in, delighting in, enjoying, rejoicing in sensuality—renunciation seems like a sheer drop-off. Yet I've heard that in this doctrine and discipline, the hearts of very young monks leap up at renunciation, grow confident, steadfast, and firm, seeing it as peace. So right here, this doctrine of renunciation is contrary to the great mass of people."

I think we can relate to that. Just as lay people, we rejoice and delight and enjoy sense pleasures. And it struck them as odd that the young monks, the young nuns, would leap up—their hearts would leap up—at the thought of renunciation. These lay people were confused. Ananda himself was a little confused at this point, I think. So he said, "Let's go ask the Buddha about this." They went off to where the Buddha was staying, and Ananda recounted this conversation.

This is the Buddha's reply: "So it is, Ananda, so it is. Even I myself, before my awakening, while I was still an unawakened bodhisatta, thought, 'Renunciation is good, seclusion is good,' but my heart didn't leap up at renunciation, didn't grow confident, steadfast, or firm, seeing it as peace. The thought occurred to me: What is the cause, what is the reason why my heart doesn't leap up at renunciation?"

This is a question we might all ask. Why don't our hearts leap up at renunciation? Why don't they grow confident, steadfast, or firm, seeing it as peace?

Then the thought occurred to the Buddha: "I haven't seen the drawback of sensual pleasures. I haven't pursued that understanding. I haven't understood the reward of renunciation. I haven't familiarized myself with it. That's why my heart doesn't leap up at renunciation, doesn't grow confident, steadfast, or firm, seeing it as peace."

I think that's true for a lot of us. We haven't understood the reward of it. We haven't familiarized ourselves with it. So tonight I'd like to reflect a little bit on the drawbacks of sense pleasures and familiarize ourselves, at least a little bit, with the rewards of renunciation.

Our first challenge is just hearing the word *renunciation*, because for many of us—and certainly quite predominantly in our Western culture—we associate renunciation with a repression of desires, with deprivation, with a rather bleak and austere lifestyle. If this is our association, it's no wonder that our hearts don't leap up at the thought of it.

But if we understand renunciation in a different way, we might begin to get a sense of the potential within it for peace and freedom. And that would be understanding renunciation as the experience of non-addiction. That's really what renunciation means: the mind is not addicted.

We all know the suffering of addictions to whatever they might be—addictions to food, or to drugs, or to alcohol, or to sex, or perhaps even more unnoticed addictions to work, or to power, or to wealth, or to fame, to comfort. And here on retreat, we can also unknowingly become addicted to and entranced by different meditative states, different mind states, different emotions. We're often addicted to excitement, when exciting things happen. We love that feeling and go after it. Even more strange, some people are addicted to the feeling, the emotion of fear. I've always been struck by how popular horror movies are. The scarier the better. Many people just love that rush of feeling terrified.

We become addicted not only to the gratification of our wants, but also to the mental habit of wanting itself. I've seen this very clearly in a state of mind I call "catalog consciousness." Do you know this experience? Of course not while you're on retreat, but being at home, you get one of these endless catalogs in the mail, and you make the mistake of opening it. As soon as we open the catalog, we keep turning the pages, waiting for something to want, just hoping, "Oh, maybe I'll want something on the next page." We love the feeling of wanting, and we keep hoping.

that there'll be something we want.

Yogis get addicted to different meditative states of rapture or calm or concentration. But sometimes we can get addicted even to the interest and power of investigation. And all of these are factors of enlightenment, so these are wholesome qualities which we're cultivating. But do we become attached to them? Do they come out of balance? How often in our practice are we trying to hold on to or recreate some pleasant, good experience?

I had this happen so many times in my practice. There was one time I had been practicing with Goenkaji for a few years. He does this sweeping practice, sweeping the body. After some time, my whole body had opened and become this body of light. Every time I sat, there was just this bliss—fluid light. It was fantastic. Then I ran out of money and had to come back to the States to work for a little bit. I couldn't wait to get back to India, to my body of light. I went back to India, and it had become a body of twisted steel. I don't know what happened back here. For two years I struggled to get back that experience. It was the worst two years of my practice because I was in a constant state of struggle, frustration, discouragement. It took two years to finally learn that it's not about getting anything back. It took all that time to learn to simply relax back into what was arising rather than trying to get something back or hold on to something.

So I share this story just so you don't spend two years doing this. Five minutes is enough. The practice is not about getting anything back. It's not about holding on to any particular experience. It's always about letting go.

I was mentioning in one interview an experience I had in my time with Munindraji in India. I'd been there for some time and again had just a powerful experience—it felt like the whole idea of subject and object fell away, the awareness was spontaneous, and whatever I did, awareness was there. I felt completely free. I went running to Munindra to tell him about this great experience, and all he said to me was, "Joseph, don't recondition your mind with this concept of freedom." I thought I was just reporting this wonderful, fantastic experience. And he was saying, don't hold on to this. Don't create a concept about this. Don't reify this. So over and over again, we need to be reminded: practice is not about holding onto any particular experience, no matter how wonderful or freeing it may feel.

Now, what's so beguiling about our addictions, whether small ones or very big ones, is that in the moment of gratification, they actually do give us pleasure. That's why we get seduced by them. But then, because of our conditioning, because of the pleasure we get, because of the gratification we get from them, we begin grasping at them, trying to hold onto them, and then suffer when they change, as they always will. So then we reach out for another one and another one and another one, and this becomes our lives—continually trying to get the next hit of gratification, not learning the lesson that even though they do give pleasure in the moment, they're not capable of fulfilling us because of their impermanent nature.

It's very interesting to observe ourselves, and here on retreat it's such a gift because you have nothing else to do all day long except observe the mind and your actions and your thoughts. This is a great laboratory of understanding. We can really see with tremendous clarity and depth just what our patterns are, what our conditioning is.

Just as an experiment, it would be interesting to look at the pattern of your habitual actions during the day. You might not think of them particularly as addictions, but how easy would it be to let go of some of the things that have simply become a habit? Nine-fifteen in the morning, sitting is over, cup of tea, and then I'll go walk. Nothing wrong with a cup of tea, but has that become a habit? And if that has become a habit, how hard or easy would it be to let it go? Something as simple as that. Or do we go to bed at night at a certain hour, a certain time, or when we actually are feeling really tired? Have we gotten into a habit, or are we responding to how we actually feel? Do we have certain habits about how much food we take?

Could we take less? Again, there's nothing inherently wrong about any of these things. It's just an opportunity to investigate the power of habit in the mind. Because habit is just a more polite word for addiction. We're really caught in a certain way of doing things.

So it's possible to relate to desire in a much different and freer way. This is where we can begin to explore the meaning and the freedom of renunciation. Because it's possible to develop an attitude, instead of addiction to habit, of wise restraint—particularly with those thought patterns or patterns of action that

are rooted in greed or sense desire or ill will.

We can practice settling back, seeing the desire arise in the mind, and realizing we have the freedom to not act. It's not repressing the desire, it's not pushing it down. We're seeing it arise, but we're bringing some wisdom to that moment and saying, "No, I don't have to act on this."

A very interesting experience happens from this experiment. And it's worth looking at this carefully because it can begin to shift our understanding of how we're living in the world. We can begin to see, even in small things—we don't have to start with the big ones—even in small things we can taste for ourselves that there is greater ease in not wanting than in wanting.

This is not something to believe or to take on faith. This is a suggestion to look carefully at your own experience. Pay careful attention to those moments when some desire, some wanting, some holding is arising in the mind. And pay attention to the moments of transition where we go from wanting, desire for whatever it may be, to the moment of not wanting. Because at a certain point, if we're just sitting or walking and observing it, it will arise and it will pass away.

Notice the quality of that transition. It may be that we're lost in some kind of sensual desire. It may be some kind of sexual fantasy. It may be thoughts of what you're going to do when you leave retreat and go on some fantastic vacation, whatever it may be. Notice what it's like when we're lost in the wanting. And then notice what it's like when the mind is free of the wanting.

For myself, it has always felt in that moment of transition that I'm being let out of the grip of something. It's like the desire had been gripping the mind. And then when the desire goes, the wanting, I'm being let out of the grip of it into a freer, more open, more easeful space.

There's one verse in the Dhammapada which highlights this experience. And it's worth our looking in our own experience at this, so that it goes from being some kind of theoretical understanding to something we actually know for ourselves. The Buddha said, "If by giving up a lesser happiness a greater happiness could be found, a wise person would renounce the lesser for the sake of the greater."

It's just that commonly we don't pay enough attention to our experience to know for ourselves that yes, the gratification of sense desires does bring a happiness—that's true—but there's a greater happiness in the mind being free of desire. We need to see this, we need to actually experience this for ourselves, and then renunciation is not a burden. We're actually settling back into a place of greater happiness, of greater ease.

In these moments, even if they're just for short moments at first, we might get an inkling of understanding how our hearts might leap up at the thought of renunciation, growing confident, steadfast, and firm, seeing it as peace. Because we've tasted it, even for short moments.

But even when we've had this experience in our practice and in our lives, still the strengthening of the *pār*

*amī* of renunciation is a gradual process. Because there's often an initial fear or anxiety that we have to overcome about renouncing something that's familiar, until we've seen for ourselves that it actually leads to greater happiness.

Just two little examples of this. The first years I was in India, I was there just as a lay person, but I was practicing intensively. In those years, I had a lot of hair. And I had the thought, "I'm going to shave my head." So, first time, you know. And it was amazing how much—I don't know, it wasn't exactly fear, but it was something. "Oh my God, shave my head. What's that going to be like?" But I was just motivated to do it, and okay, so I shaved my head.

And it was so interesting. About three and a half seconds after the head was shaved, I realized that was nothing at all. What was I attached to? It meant nothing. It changed nothing. There was nothing about either having hair or not having hair that meant anything.

Fortunately, I've learned that lesson. But the contrast was just so striking—the shift of my mind state from one moment to the next.

Years later, after all my practice in India, when I first went to Burma, some friends had gone before to the monasteries and were describing what a great practice situation it was, but also that the conditions were pretty hard—not a comfortable place to practice. The night before I left, I had this anxiety dream. I dreamt that I arrived in Burma at the monastery and they took all the zafus away. Oh my God, what am I going to do now? No zafu to sit on. They didn't actually take the zafus away, but it was just indicative of that anxiety about renunciation.

Sometimes there's anxiety about being in solitude—just being by oneself and not speaking, the renunciation of all that's familiar to us. But with experience, what creates anxiety at first can turn into an appreciation of just the great joy of it.

I had a powerful experience of this just last year in March. I was teaching in Italy with my colleague, Stephen Kamala, in a thousand-year-old monastery in the hills of Tuscany—a Catholic monastery where we were renting some of the facilities. Three miles above the monastery, there was a hermitage where monks would go in for life. Each one had a little cell and an enclosed garden, and that was it. They go in for life. They had one cell and garden that was open, where visitors could go just to see what it was like.

We went up there, went through the walls of the hermitage, and into this one cell that was open. I started doing some walking meditation in that garden, and I had this thought—it was so amazing just to imagine going into that little compound of cell and garden for life. Surprisingly, I was just so inspired by the thought. It was not disconcerting at all. The thought that came to my mind was: entering this for life, where one's only companion is awareness. That thought was just—whoa. To be in a situation where awareness is one's only companion.

I was struck by how different that response was from what it would have been in my early years of

practice. Obviously, I haven't entered that cell yet, but just the thought that it was inspiring was itself inspiring.

Being on retreat, there are so many opportunities to practice and explore this aspect of renunciation—what it means, and the possible peace and happiness that it can bring. Pascal spoke this morning about the eight precepts. For those of you who are interested, even if it feels like it might be a little edge—what would it be like? Especially not eating after the noon meal. In Asia, in the monasteries, this is just common. Everybody who goes to practice is always on eight precepts, the lay people. It's not special at all. Here in the West, it's a bit more of an edge. It's not something where you feel you *should* do it. It's a question: if there's interest in exploring in that particular way, it might be worth doing for a while just to see what it's like.

We can practice renouncing complexity. That would be a really good one to renounce. Because so often, as you well know, we're just lost in the stories and dramas of our mind, our thoughts and emotions. And we in some way relish them. We just love our stories. We can create very complicated lives for ourselves.

Yet when we investigate our experience, even when we're lost in some big drama, when we really investigate what's going on, as the Buddha said, there are only six things that are ever happening: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations, and objects of mind—and the knowing of them. That's all that's ever happening. Yet out of these building blocks of sights and sounds and smells and tastes and sensations and mind objects—thoughts and emotions and internal images—we create whole movies, whole dramas, getting lost in them, forgetting what is most essentially happening.

So is it possible to remember, as we're lost in this proliferation of our stories, can we practice—at least at times, at moments—renouncing our addiction to papañca, renouncing our addiction to the proliferation of these mental stories?

Stephen Mitchell, who is a poet and a great translator, wrote a book of his own poems called *Parables and Portraits*. One of the poems in this book he calls "The Myth of Sisyphus." If you remember that Greek myth, Sisyphus is condemned by the gods to roll a big boulder up a hill. Every time he gets it almost to the top, it falls back down again. He's condemned to push it back up. Endless toil.

This is Stephen Mitchell's take on the myth of Sisyphus:

"We tend to think of Sisyphus as a tragic hero, condemned by the gods to shoulder his rock sweatily up the mountain, and again up the mountain, forever."

The truth is that Sisyphus is in love with the rock. He cherishes every roughness and every ounce of it. He talks to it, sings to it. It has become the mysterious other. He even dreams of it as he sleepwalks upward. Life is unimaginable without it, looming always above him like a huge gray moon. He doesn't realize that at any moment he is permitted to step aside, let the rock hurtle to the bottom, and go home. Tragedy is the inertial force of the mind. Tragedy is the force of habit.

I love that because it's so descriptive of how we relate to our own mental proliferation. We're in love with it. We're in love with the story. And we don't realize that at any moment we're permitted to step aside, let the thoughts, let the story, let the drama subside, and be at home. We don't even have to go home—we are already there.

There's also one other aspect of renunciation that's really part of it all, and it's what I call the wisdom of no. So often in spiritual practice and in spiritual scenes, we emphasize the yes—the yes of acceptance, the yes of openness, the yes of receptivity, the yes of fullness of experience. This is all an essential part of our practice, because this yes is often the antidote to self-judgment, self-criticism, to contraction, to limitation. We're learning to open. We're saying yes to experience, yes to the world.

But there is also a wisdom in no—recognizing that some things are not skillful, are not helpful, are not leading to happiness or to our well-being. And in these times, we can practice saying, "No thanks, I'll pass on this one."

It's important to understand what this quality of restraint really means, because it's at the heart of our practice. Practicing the wisdom of no is a great art, because we need to learn how to do it in a wise and loving way. Restraint is not repression. It's not avoidance. It's not denial. It does not mean being judgmental about what's arising or having aversion to what's arising. With wise restraint, we can open to every single part of our experience. We're practicing that openness, but we're learning to see what's arising with discerning wisdom. We see what thoughts and what actions are skillful, leading us onward to happiness, to peace. And we see what is unskillful, leading to further conflict and suffering.

It's like a parent saying no to a child who's about to do something harmful. It's not the no of aversion. It's a no of love. It's a no of care. It's a no of concern. And as most of you have probably noticed, we all have this inner two-year-old who is quite active in our minds. We need to be a wise and loving parent with this inner two-year-old. When different kinds of unskillful thoughts come up—what the Buddha highlighted as thoughts of desire, thoughts of ill will, thoughts of cruelty—when we recognize them, see them, understand them as being unskillful, we can say to that inner two-year-old, "No, that's not a good idea."

It's interesting just to watch our minds through the day and practice this wisdom of no even in small things. The Buddha suggested asking a few very simple questions regarding thoughts, desires, and actions. When we become aware of them arising, we could ask the question: Is this necessary? Is this helpful? Oftentimes they're not. And if we can see that in the moment, we recognize this is not necessary, this is not helpful, and we simply let them arise and pass away. No, I don't need to do this. No, I don't need to carry on with this thought.

There's a wonderful poem by Naomi Shihab Nye called "The Art of Disappearing":

When they say, don't I know you, say no.
When they invite you to the party, remember what parties are like before answering.

Someone telling you in a loud voice they once wrote a poem, greasy sausage balls on a paper plate, then reply. If they say we should get together, say why. It's not that you don't love them anymore. You're trying to remember something too important to forget. Trees, the monastery bell at twilight. Tell them you have a new project. It will never be finished. When someone recognizes you in a grocery store, nod briefly and become a cabbage. When someone you haven't seen in ten years appears at the door, don't start singing him all your new songs. You will never catch up. Walk around feeling like a leaf. Know you could tumble any second. Then decide what to do with your time.

This poem just captures it. We're so caught up in the habits—the social habits of our lives and the internal mental habits. But if we really recognize that we're like a leaf that could fall any time, then we decide what to do with our time. What do we invest in? What thoughts do we invest in? What actions do we invest in?

In this way, we really begin to see that the wisdom of "no" at the appropriate times is the expression of a free mind.

The night of the Bodhisattva's enlightenment—the Buddha's enlightenment under the Bodhi tree—he was attacked by all the forces of Mara: desire and fear and aversion, all the forces of delusion. Joseph Campbell, the great writer of myths, describing that evening, had a line which I have loved and which has been such an inspiration for my practice. Campbell describes the attack of Mara, the Bodhisattva sitting under the tree, and writes: "The mind of the great being was not moved."

I love that. It's a possibility for all of us. As we sit or walk through the day and all of these different forces arise in the mind, arise in the heart, can we be like the Bodhisattva? The mind of the great being was not moved. There is tremendous strength and freedom in that.

It's through the power and understanding of renunciation that we can, at least for times, remain unmoved in the face of strong desire or aversion or ill will or cruelty—the unwholesome thoughts the Buddha pointed out.

I'd like to close with a poem by Mary Oliver that I came across, which in some way really describes what we're all doing here. She called it "The Old Poets of China":

Wherever I am, the world comes after me. It offers me its busyness. It does not believe that I do not want it. Now I understand why the old poets of China went so far and high into the mountains, then crept into the pale mist.

So you're all the old poets of China, climbing far and high into the mountains. It's really what a retreat is about—creeping into the pale mist.

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