Finding Joy and Happiness Through Renunciation

Chas DiCapua · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 48:27

Part of me doesn't want to talk. It's so quiet in here. It would be nice to just sit with you for an hour. It's really so nice in this hall. I know oftentimes the teachers will say that, but coming in from engaging in the world and walking into this hall is just fabulous. So thank you for that.

The title of the talk tonight is Finding Joy and Happiness Through Renunciation.

All sentient life wants to be happy. It's a built-in thing—deeply happy. And we can feel, we can notice and experience, that our current way of connecting with life isn't exactly fulfilling that desire for happiness fully. There is a gap. Is the problem that we want to be happy? No, of course not. So then what is the problem? Why is there that gap, and how can it be solved? These two questions—what is the problem and how can it be solved—are really what gets answered by the teachings of the Buddha.

There is one sutta where the Buddha and Ananda are together in a forest. I'm paraphrasing here. The Buddha says to Ananda, "Are there many or few leaves in this huge forest that you're in?" Ananda says, "There are many, Lord." And the Buddha says something like, "That's what I know"—that's the vastness of the Buddha's omniscient knowledge. Then he bends down and picks up a handful of leaves and says, "Ananda, are there many or few leaves here?" Ananda says, "Few, Lord." The Buddha says, "This is what I teach"—compared to all the leaves in the forest or all his knowledge. And he said it is this that he teaches because it has to do with suffering and its end. If it doesn't have to do with that, he doesn't teach it. So really the teachings are about what is the problem and how can it be solved.

Of course, the teachings are summed up in the Four Noble Truths. They spell out what the problem is, what causes it, how it can be solved, and that it can be solved. The problem isn't that we want to be happy. It's how we're going about trying to fulfill that wanting to be happy.

The second noble truth says that the reason we have dissatisfaction with our lives is due to craving. Craving for sense pleasures, which includes thoughts—pleasant thoughts. Craving for becoming: "I'll be happy when this comes to be." Craving for not becoming: "I'll be happy when this stops coming to be."

An important part in finding this happiness that all sentient life wants, that we want so deeply, lies in understanding—not intellectually, but from our own experience—how this craving manifests in our own heart and mind. Actually really seeing that, studying that, investigating it. This is the purification stage of the practice that I spoke about in the talk some weeks ago, when we're actually seeing the mechanisms of

craving and how it arises. We can then use that understanding to develop skillful means to let that craving come and let it go.

Really, much of this practice is about letting go. I'm not sure if I mentioned this in another talk, but I heard one teacher say that the yogi who sits down to meditate for the first time and the yogi who is one mind moment away from enlightenment are doing the same practice of letting go, just on different levels of subtlety.

So what is it exactly that we're letting go of? The mistaken belief that we are a separate self and that our happiness lies outside our own heart and mind. It's the mistaken belief, or you could say the wrong view, that we can find lasting happiness through indulging in sense pleasures. This is the description of samsara—continually trying to get lasting happiness from sense pleasures. The way to end this problem, the way to end the cycle of samsara, is to let go of that craving. The freedom is found through non-clinging.

For the remainder of the talk, I'm going to concentrate on this process of letting go, or renunciation. If it's craving that keeps us from our true happiness, why do we do it so much? Why don't we just renounce, be done with it, and be happy? We want to be happy. We know what we have to do. Why don't we just renounce and be happy?

In the Anguttara Nikaya, in the nines, the Buddha answers this question for us. The title of the sutta is "Contrary to Popular Opinion."

The venerable Ananda, together with Tapusa the householder, went to see the Blessed One, and on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One, "Tapusa the householder here has said to me, 'Venerable Ananda, Sir, we are householders who indulge in sensuality, delight in sensuality, enjoy sensuality, rejoice in sensuality. For us, indulging, delighting, enjoying, rejoicing in sensuality, renunciation seems like a sheer drop off.'"

Sometimes I'm sure we can appreciate that.

"'Yet I've heard that in this doctrine and discipline, the hearts of the very 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.

"So it is, Ananda, so it is. Even I myself, before my awakening, when I was still an unawakened bodhisattva, thought, 'Renunciation is good, seclusion is good,' but my heart did not leap up at renunciation, did not grow confident, steadfast, or firm, seeing it as peace. The thought occurred to me, 'What is the cause, the reason why my heart doesn't leap up at renunciation, doesn't grow confident, steadfast, or firm, seeing it as peace?' Then the thought occurred to me, 'I haven't seen the drawback of

sensual pleasures. I haven't pursued that theme. 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.' And then the thought occurred to me, 'If, having seen the drawback of sensual pleasures, I were to pursue that theme, and if, having understood the reward of renunciation, I would familiarize myself with it, there is the possibility that my heart would leap up at renunciation, grow confident, steadfast, and firm, seeing it as peace.'"

There's a Pali term that embodies the wisdom in this sutta, and it is nibbida. It breaks down into the prefix "without" and the root verb "to find." So it means "without finding" or "not finding."

There's a story from the Buddha's time that shows this teaching quite clearly. It's about the dog and the bone. There's a dog that's hungry, and it's trotting around looking for something to eat. It sees a bone, goes over, and picks it up. This bone, by the way, is a very bleached-out bone. It's been there a long, long time. There's no meat on it, no blood on it, nothing. It's just white. But the dog picks it up, chews on it a little bit, and then spits it out on the ground. There was nothing there for it.

The important thing to understand with this story, and really with the teaching of renunciation in general, is that the problem isn't with the bone. There's nothing wrong with it. It's just being a bone. It's not doing anything wrong. It's what it is. It's just that it won't satisfy the dog's hunger for meat or for food. It's not possible for it, being what it is.

Being what sense pleasures are, just being what they are by their very nature, it's not possible for them to satisfy—this is the analogy—our desire for happiness. The problem isn't with the sense objects. It's just that, like the bone and the dog, they can't provide us with the happiness that we're after. And the reason they can't is because the pleasure associated with them doesn't last.

Remember, we're talking about pleasure—pleasant, unpleasant—and deep happiness. Those two are not the same thing. Suzuki Roshi said, "True renunciation is not giving up the things of the world, but in knowing that they go away."

The reason we can't find lasting happiness in sense objects is because they don't last. They're changing constantly. There's also the subtle or not-so-subtle agitation that's bound up in the acquisition, the going after sense pleasures. It's not a calm state.

The happiness that we long for isn't the temporary happiness of sense pleasures, nor is it the agitated excitement bound up with the thinking about them and the trying to acquire them. It's the ease of having let go.

As Ajahn Chah said, "If you let go a little bit, you'll have a little bit of happiness. You let go a lot, you'll have a lot of happiness."

If you let go completely, you'll have complete happiness, and your troubles with the world will be over. So

that's pretty clear.

It's not possible for sense pleasures to give us what we want. And when we see that—or when we begin to see that, because it's not just an on-or-off switch, it's a process—as we begin to see that, we begin to invest less of our happiness in them. This is the key: to start to loosen our grip on the belief, the wrong view, that we can actually find happiness in them.

This also explains why we can have such an adversarial relationship with renunciation. Don't we have difficulty giving up the things that we get so much pleasure from? As the Buddha said, when we don't see the drawbacks of the sense pleasures themselves and the grasping for them, why would we want to give them up? If we don't see the drawbacks and they give us so much pleasure, why would we want to give them up? Where would that intention to give them up come from?

Also, if there's a sense that we have to give something up, often we'll rebel. We don't like to be told what to do by other people or ourselves. We can mistake renunciation to mean giving up the sense pleasure itself, but what it really means is giving up the suffering that's bound up in wanting them when we're not mindful of that.

Why don't we see this? Because we haven't seen the suffering bound up in our attachment to them. We haven't, as the Buddha said, seen clearly into the drawbacks of sense pleasures.

Now, if the problem isn't with the sense pleasure—the bone or whatever—but with the attachment to them, does that mean that we can eat all the ice cream we want and not suffer? I can't say. We can't really say. Only we ourselves know when we're becoming attached, when we're placing our hope for happiness where it's not to be found. Only we can know that.

But this knowing—and this is what you've been doing for six weeks or three months—this knowing takes practice and time. It's why we're developing mindfulness, so we can see this process clearly.

I didn't own a TV for many, many years, maybe like twenty-five years. Partially, or mostly, because I knew that I would probably get into the habit of watching it when I really didn't want to. I just kind of knew—best not to have one. But now I do have one. At some point I felt like I could do this, I could have this and not go overboard with it. Also, I got one because there is this kind of subtle sense of identification with a person who doesn't own a TV at Krypton. That's not what we're here to do—change one identification for another.

So even though what we're really giving up is the view that sense pleasures can fulfill us, at times it can be helpful to actually renounce the sense pleasure itself. Again, only we can know where that line is—when we can work with something and have some sense of balance in our life with it, and when it's not possible, and it would be best just to remove that from our life somehow.

Now, what's great about all of this is that we don't necessarily have to use willpower to let it go. Using

exclusively willpower is a form of aversion that pits mind against mind. It's not exactly the way we want to practice. If we're just using willpower, there can be a violence with that. And in the end, if it's only willpower and not wisdom, it's probably not going to work.

In fact, we actually don't have to struggle to try to let go or give up anything. What a relief. Think about that—not struggling. Think of all the ways we struggle with ourselves: I should do this, I shouldn't do that. The critical voice, the critical mind. It can be so prevalent.

But we need to do something, right? We need to do something a little different than we have been, because what we've been doing has gotten us where we are right now. And that's not cutting it. That's not doing it for us. It's not bringing us the happiness that we so want, or we wouldn't be here.

So yes, we don't just use willpower, but we do need to do something. And that something is to see clearly from our own experience how the suffering is bound up, how it's inherent in seeking happiness in sense pleasures.

It's not like you engage in seeking and then suffering comes afterwards. The suffering is bound up in the seeking itself. As we're seeking, it's already there. So we simply want to look deeply and see this more and more clearly as it's happening. This is our practice of vipassana meditation—to see clearly. And that's where we need to focus our efforts.

Yes, the Buddha's last words were "Strive on. All conditioned things are impermanent. Strive on with diligence." He didn't say, "Well, just lay back and take it easy." He really was saying there's a lot to do here. But where do we put that energy? Where is it directed? We want to direct it towards mindfulness and clear seeing, not merely towards manipulating outer circumstances. "I don't own a TV, therefore I must be free"—that doesn't mean anything. It just means you don't own a TV. But we can mistake it. We can put our energies into manipulating outer circumstances, which for a time might be helpful, but it's in the clear seeing that we want to invest our efforts.

It's the seeing that's going to liberate us, not the struggling. If it were only a matter of willpower and struggle, if it were just that and we simply needed to do it enough, well, we could apply the strength of our will, or if we happen to have a good work ethic, we could apply that and—voilà—we would be free. But when we undertake the Dharma path, we enter a realm where the intellect and willpower play only a minor role. It's much more about seeing things as they are and being mindful.

So not seeing the drawbacks of sense pleasures is one reason why the heart does not leap up at renunciation. Now this isn't in the sutta, but I've seen this in my own practice: another reason why at least my heart hasn't leapt up is not experiencing—or not noticing—the pleasure of abiding happily in the present moment. Again, it's all about noticing. We have plenty of moments when craving isn't present, or at least isn't grossly present, and we're simply abiding here and now without a lot of wanting or not wanting. There's a way we can fail to notice the subtle pleasantness of that mind state. There's a way we

can miss the subtle joy and happiness in awareness itself, in simply being aware.

I know you've had countless moments of this on retreat. You're not doing anything special—just some movement of the body, lifting an arm, reaching for a cup—and the awareness is there, and it's a peak moment. There's no place you'd rather be. There's nothing else you'd rather be doing. The lack of wanting and not wanting is known, and it's a beautiful moment.

When we don't realize that abiding in awareness in the present moment is really our true home, we tend to look elsewhere for our happiness. That's why The Wizard of Oz is a great Dharma movie. It really is. Dorothy didn't see it. She had to go away, couldn't find it, came back. Ah, it's right here.

The last reason the heart doesn't leap up at the thought of renunciation is that perhaps it hasn't known the joy of a steady, secluded mind—you could use the word concentration. It makes sense: "Well, nothing here. I'll look somewhere else. Nothing pleasant, nothing happy here. Let me go look someplace else for it." But when a person does realize where their happiness lies, where their home really is, they would rush home, like Dorothy did, and never want to leave.

It's like a person coming home from a long and arduous journey. There's this wonderful little section in one of the Upanishads that speaks to this sense. It says: "Like an eagle folding its wings after a long flight and gliding down to its nest." That's the sense of letting go—done struggling, fold the wings, glide down to the nest. And what's there is really a beautiful, easeful state of mind.

This is a quote by Sri Ramakrishna: "O longing mind, dwell within the depth of your own pure nature. Do not seek your home elsewhere. Your naked awareness alone, O mind, is the inexhaustible abundance for which you long so desperately." He's talking about where to find that happiness that we all want.

I'm going to talk some now about practicing renunciation, working with renunciation in our daily life. Renunciation isn't exactly a central theme in our society. The advertising industry is based on having people feel that they don't have enough, that they need more. The insurance industry is based on things being okay now, but they might not be in the next moment—you better do something about that. Saving money for retirement is a huge industry, and on and on. Not that anything is inherently not dharmic. Are you a bad yogi if you put money away for retirement? No, that's not the point. These are just examples of the culture we live in. It's not a renunciation culture.

So in working with renunciation in our daily life, there's a two-pronged approach. First is to feel the suffering of craving itself, as I was talking about before, and also how things change and can't be held onto even once you've got them—the suffering involved in trying to hold on. The second is consciously limiting or completely severing ties to a certain sense pleasure that we know we have a strong attachment to. That can be a skillful means at times as well.

Here on retreat, due to this form that you've all committed yourself to quite beautifully, you've been renouncing many things. You've been living like quasi-nuns and monks in a way. You've renounced

entertainment. There's a lot of renunciation that goes around food here—you're not in control over what you eat. What's served that day is what's served, and to some degree when you eat. Of course, renouncing speech. For many people, renouncing indulging in sleeping or oversleeping. And of course, you've renounced the acquisition of material things as you've been here. These are really big areas in our life.

So let's look at how renunciation with each of these areas might look, and then I'll offer a template—a really helpful template, I think—for how to work with any type of renunciation in daily life.

Starting with speech, perhaps one of the most difficult arenas in our life to be mindful of. It happens so quick, and because it happens so quick, it can be hard to be mindful of. What I've found—and I'm going to do it right now consciously—is that if you can remember when you're speaking to be aware, really conscious of your body and the touch points, everything just slows down ten percent. It can give that little bit of extra time to maybe notice what your intention for speaking is, or a little bit extra time just to decide or make a choice of words that would be most kind or skillful. Really helpful. But of course we have to remember to do it. The body's right here though, so when you're ready, it's always right there for you, ready to be known.

Another helpful way to renounce speech that we actually don't want to be doing is to start to notice the intention for speaking. Sometimes that can come afterwards, right? Speech happens fast. So sometimes we can notice the intention before, sometimes right during we can catch it, or sometimes it's not until afterwards. Why did I say that? Oh, I was actually trying to look good, or have someone have a certain view of me, or whatever. Or my intention was actually to be kind, maybe. Remember that this is the high bar—speech. So be gentle with yourself when you consciously bring your attention to this part of your life and work with renouncing unwholesome speech. It's a difficult area.

I'm going to mention food briefly because it's going to be the example I use with the template. I don't mean sitting down for a meal—I imagine you won't want to be renouncing meals in daily life—but more like just the eating to eat kind of thing. A really good question, if you can catch it: What's happening right now? Just ask yourself that question. This may have been mentioned around mindfulness of eating, but you don't have to stop there.

In your daily life, and this is so helpful, it's so easy and simple: put the fork down. Put the spoon down. Put the sandwich down. It makes all the difference in the world. I notice if the fork stays in my hand, I'm chewing, and the next bite is coming up before I've even swallowed. It's like the mind gets on this track—it doesn't even want the sense pleasure to stop for one second. It just keeps a constant stream going. So simply putting the utensil down or putting the sandwich down really breaks that cycle. And you can just chew, be present with what's happening.

Entertainment is another area. Again, the impulse arises: "Oh, let's go do this," or "Let's go to a movie." What's happening right now? Just to notice. It doesn't mean not to go, but it can be really helpful to check in with that. And then another thing that can be helpful is to make a habit of noticing the state of your

mind and heart after you've engaged with whatever particular entertainment you've engaged with. How does that feel? Do you like feeling the way you do at that moment? And again, you might—I'm not saying you won't. But often we forget to look afterwards.

In the sutta where the Buddha was talking to his son, he said to check before, during, and after you do something to see if it was unwholesome, if it brought suffering to yourself or others. We can often remember to think beforehand, but I know for me, I often forget to check afterwards. Well, what was the effect of that? What was the effect of watching that movie?

Sleep is a very interesting thing. Have you ever just reflected on how much we sleep? A third of our life if we sleep eight hours. We go into this room, get onto this piece of furniture for eight hours every day. It's amazing. It's a lot of our life. And our birth as humans is precious. Having found the Dharma on top of that is even more precious. And our lives are racing by—just racing by. Our death is racing towards us from wherever it is, whether it's tomorrow, ten years from now, whatever. It's just racing towards us.

And so, in light of that, does it make sense to roll over and go back to sleep? It puts things in perspective—that teaching of asking ourselves, in light of what we're trying to do here, in light of what's important to us: what's important now? So the alarm goes off or you wake up and you have that choice. You can get up or you can roll over. What makes sense in light of this?

And then also, just to remember—and sometimes we can forget this—overindulging in sleep is a form of sloth and torpor. It's a hindrance to our practice, and it's something to be let go of. We want to let go of the hindrances, not feed them.

Material things. You can ask yourself this question: How many things do I need to be happy? And you can ask that with different emphasis. *How many* things do I need to be happy? How many things do I *need* to be happy? Depending on how you're feeling. And of course, the answer is none.

You don't need anything to be happy. So you can ask it literally like that, or you can ask it with a different emphasis: "How *many* things do I need to be happy?" I found that really helpful.

Also, something helpful I found in renunciation with material things is to really notice that moment—I don't know, I would call it disappointment—but the fading, when the joy fades. When you've wanted something and you bought it or gotten it, and there's that moment, or moments, or for some period of time there's pleasure, there's some kind of happiness, and then it goes. That is a great moment to notice. Really tune into that and what's left afterwards.

And then finally, with material things: if you happen to have debt due to buying material things that you didn't really need—sometimes we have debt just because we have to, there's not enough cash flow and we need to pay bills—but if you have debt due to buying things that aren't really needed, notice the weight and the burden of that debt. Notice the results of acquiring material things, too many of them, that aren't really needed. What is the result of that? Well, one of the results, like I mentioned, is when the joy fades in

the mind, but the other result is in the checkbook. And we can notice that, tune into that, see the cause and effect.

Lastly, as a skillful means—or as a template to approach renunciation in these areas, or really anything in your life, but especially food, entertainment, and the acquisition of material things—here's a template that can be helpful. I'm going to use food as an example because I like food, so it's something I work with.

It's 10 PM, and you notice you're on your way to the fridge for the third time that night. The first thing you do is to stop and stand or sit down and ask yourself the question: What's happening? Just stand or sit there. You don't even necessarily need to look for an answer. Just stand or sit quietly. Ask the question and feel into your body. What is the experience of the body right at that moment? What is the experience of the heart and the mind right at that moment? Take a couple minutes, two to five minutes, to do that.

And then—and this is going to progress—get up or continue walking to the fridge and get what you were going to get. So in this first part, you don't stop yourself. You pause, you notice, and then you keep doing it. Then after you're done, stand or sit again and notice how you feel in the body and the heart and the mind. Not to judge in any way, but just to notice. And you do that for a week. So for the first week, you pause, but you keep going. You follow through with the impulse. But you also look afterwards as well.

The following week, do the same thing. Stop, ask the question: What's happening? Feel into the body. Look at the heart and mind. And then for this week, as you're doing that, see if you still want to go to the fridge or not. After you've done that for two to five minutes, just check in. Do I still want to go? Yeah? Okay, then go. Or if something's changed and you don't want to go, then you don't. You just sit down and feel how that feels in the body and the heart and the mind. How did it feel for that impulse to change, to fade and go away? And you do that for one week.

Then the next time you notice you want to go to the fridge at night, simply ask yourself what's going on. This is the third week now. Stand or sit down and be with that experience, just as before. But now, you have the intention not to get up and go to the fridge—just using this example—even if you feel you still want to. Notice that experience in the body, in the mind, whatever it is. If it's "I don't want to anymore" or "I still want to," just notice and be with that experience until the intention to do something else arises.

I just used food as an example, but you could do this with anything. You could use this template with anything. The important part is to go gradually. Really important.

Because this gradual approach will reduce the possibility of rebellion in the mind that can happen. And even more importantly, it provides a lot of information—really helpful information—about how we are actually feeling in the heart and mind when these impulses are arising, what's actually going on. We can learn and see. Mostly it goes unnoticed or unseen. And it is this information that will really help us get to the root of the issue, not just "I'm not eating after six anymore." Again, that's a good intention, but I think we want to be skillful in how we approach it. Because with that approach alone, there may not be as much

learning. Of course, there's going to be some—whenever you say you're not going to do something, you feel what it feels like to want to do it. But with this gradual approach, we can glean more information from it.

It's really important to go slow, not push. Be patient. And above all in these areas, be kind with ourselves.

This is Nisargadatta: "All you need is already within you. Only you must approach yourself with reverence and love. Self-condemnation and self-distrust are grievous errors. All I plead with you is this: make love for yourself perfect."

So we don't want to push too hard or get goal-oriented or project-oriented with this. We're doing all of this so that we can see and understand. It is the seeing and the understanding that lets go. It's said that you don't let go—wisdom lets go. All of this is so that we can see clearly. And as the wisdom builds, the letting go happens. And as Ajahn Chah said, the more we let go, the freer we are, the happier we are.

May your hearts leap up at the thought of renunciation.

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