

# Nekkhamma — Renunciation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 12:46

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*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa. Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato  
Sammāsambuddhassa. Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa.*

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So we're on to the fifth of these *pāramī*, of these perfections. And this one is renunciation. *Nekkhamma*. N-E-K-K-H-A-M-M-A. Just in case you want to remember it.

It translates very well as renunciation. Now it's a key thing in Buddhist understanding, renunciation, and it's symbolised in our practice through the Buddha's own Great Renunciation—that's what it's called. It's that point where the vanity of life and the necessity of sickness, old age and death finally get through to him and he leaves. He leaves his home, he leaves his wife, his child is just born. He's a young man, he's only twenty-nine when he goes.

So we have this image of him getting on his horse, Kanthaka I think his name was, with his servant Channa and riding off to the river across the Rubicon. So it has this mythical image of crossing into another country, a river. And of course he would talk about Nibbāna eventually as being the other shore. Anyway, he gets to the river, cuts off his hair, dons the rag robes of a mendicant and off he goes. His poor horse, Kanthaka, stricken by grief, dies. Little myths around that. But it's known as the Great Renunciation. He leaves everything.

And one of the practices that he does before he becomes liberated is, of course, he tries self-mortification, the mortification practices. And these were really based on the idea that desire arose mainly from the body, so if you didn't eat then your desire for food went and so did your greed. So they were pretty tough practices to overcome the body, thinking the body as being the problem. And he practised these in his usual way to the final degree.

And if you remember, he left his companions, his five companions, and they thought he'd gone soft. But his eventual description of these mortification exercises was *dukkha anañño anatthasaṃhito*, which means ignoble, which means it's not on the path, it doesn't lead to liberation, useless, and suffering. So there he is, trying to get rid of suffering, and he's just piling it on with these very heavy exercises of mortification.

But renunciation is something different. Renunciation is stop doing something in order to discover your attachment. That's the purpose of renunciation. And one of the distinctions we can make these days is between fasting, which is a word people don't generally use these days apart from fasting for health, and

dieting. So the idea of fasting for health and dieting is you get your weight down so you can eat again, more. It's just a trick we play on ourselves. But that's not the spiritual point of fasting. Fasting was always to let go in order to see what your relationship was to what it was you were letting go of.

So if we take renunciation in that very broad sense of the term, I mean, just look at your life and just catch what you're attached to. And then just say, no, I'm not going to do it for a while, just to feel the amount of energy I'm putting into that particular object, that particular pleasure that I have.

I mean, one of the things I have said to people is, choose your favourite program on TV. So some of you will be watching the World Cup. Just sit in front of the TV, get yourself a cup of tea and a biscuit and don't turn it on. And just feel what happens when your program is on that you're normally wrapped up in.

And you can take anything that you're attached to, it doesn't matter. It could be going out of an evening, it could be DVDs, it could be a cup of tea. I dread doing renunciation of a cup of tea! But if you just think of your—just as the desire comes up for something and then you say no. But now it doesn't work unless you sit in silence, unless you actually turn into yourself and just feel the fire of that craving. You've got to feel it. And as the craving comes up, then that's telling you how attached you are to the object.

Now, why would you want to get rid of an attachment to something which is giving you pleasure? It's because that attachment is coming from an essential delusion of seeking happiness in pleasure, seeking happiness in the world. And we don't really want to stop that unless we see the aftermath. So the aftermath of attachment to pleasurable things is frustration when you can't get it, grief if you lose it, boredom. People these days, the general ordinary person doesn't connect boredom with pleasure.

And it's a big problem because the more bored you are, it means the more you'll be seeking pleasure. And boredom is the measure of the way that something that you've enjoyed has lost its oomph, has lost its buzz. So that's why you can't keep eating the same piece of chocolate. You've got to have it flavoured with orange or lemon. There's always going to be variety. So variety is the spice of life, but it's also a real disease. It brings about diseases, and those diseases are this continual lack of satisfaction, of gratification rather. So you're always seeking for something stronger.

There's that grief if you lose it, frustration if you don't get it, and this constant underlying anxiety that you may lose it. Hence you get this massive insurance industry. So unless we make that connection with the happiness that we get from pleasure with the aftermath of it, then of course renunciation doesn't make any sense.

Now, there's a deeper reason for that renunciation, because as you pull away from the world, you're also discovering what is beyond the world. You're also discovering what is on that other shore. And that cannot be discovered so long as we're attached to this world. So the process of renunciation is also not simply a psychological therapy for addiction, for compulsive behaviour. It's actually a spiritual insight because it's leading you to see that there is something other. This other shore, *Nibbāna*, what is it?

So the practice of purification is absolutely essential. You can't progress without understanding the role of renunciation in the spiritual path. And if you look at any tradition, any spiritual tradition, you'll find that it's always leaving the world. You're leaving the world. Think of anything you know—Sufis, Christian monks, Christian ascetics—they're always leaving the world.

Now we then think, well, if we left the world we just become a blob or something or a useless person. But of course this is a spiritual progress in which you are leaving the world but also developing a new relationship to the world. And that relationship no longer has this false idea that it's going to bring you happiness because you've found your happiness in something which is beyond the world, the unconditioned.

When we come back into the world having made that discovery, then of course we act in the world with that wisdom. And that's exactly what the Buddha did. And it's exactly what anybody who's enlightened does. They always come back into the world. In the oxherding pictures of Zen, remember, you get to number nine and it's the circle. So that's the completion. But then in the tenth picture, the monk is coming back into the world.

Now, although that's in the grand scheme of full liberation, we do it all the time. As you let go of something, you've also let go of some small compulsive behaviour. That compulsive behaviour is now put to better use. It turns into its opposite. So where there was compulsive behaviour—it's all about me, me, me, servicing me, me, me—it now moves outwards, it becomes you, you, you, them, them, them. So it moves from selfishness to generosity, aversion to love, cruelty to compassion. So there's always that coming back into the world. It's just a natural transformation.

But renunciation is difficult. It's not easy. It's not something that anybody would do unless they saw some benefits. I mean, if you're an addict, you see the benefit. If you're an alcoholic, obviously you want to try and let go of that. But we don't see how addiction in our lives, with a small 'a', is actually the source of a lot of restlessness and suffering and the usual stuff that I've mentioned—frustration, grief, the whole lot.

So renunciation is an absolute key virtue to develop in our lives. And you don't have to push it, just very slowly. And of course life itself, as we move towards sickness, old age and death, is a natural renunciation. And if you can't let go of life as you get older—as we get older, as we move towards the grave—then of course it becomes a real pain, a real suffering, isn't it? We have to grow old with dignity.

And that dignity becomes natural if we can just find that easiness of releasing, of just letting go. This is the way it is. I can only hope that my words have been of some assistance. Now through your constant effort at renunciation, you will liberate yourselves from all suffering and achieve the great peace sooner rather than later.

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