

# 06 Renunciation and the Buddha's First Occasion to Teach

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 21:01

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Greetings, I trust you had a fruitful day. I do not say happy, I say fruitful.

*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-Awakened One.

It's not that I don't wish you had a happy day, it's just that happiness comes and goes, but we can make it fruitful through our spiritual practice.

I want to share a quote from one or two emails that came through concerning our subjects. Harold writes, "I was on retreat last summer near Glastonbury. It was organized by Gaia House and walking out in the evening, I discovered nearby was a cemetery. So a couple of evenings I went and sat there and studied the gravestones, reflecting on how many had died before my current age, nearly 69, and how their bodies would now have rotted down to skeletons. However, I feel that experience was probably too comfortable to be really effective. That probably had to wait until a meditation first thing one morning shortly after the first recommendation to socially distance, when the potential impact of the events I had been attending up to then suddenly hit me with waves of panic, which no amount of rationalization on actual probabilities of anything happening to me could calm. So I just sat with it that morning and the next morning, and it slowly subsided, but not fun while it was happening."

So that's when death strikes, when we feel the horror that we feel of serious sickness and death. That horror, that sickness is the measure of this false idea of who I am, this self.

He also goes on to say that it was good to hear my reminiscences of frugality. "I can remember about 1960 being tasked with cleaning the grate in my grandfather's house and carefully laying the fire for the evening with paper twists when my parents were staying there. When my parents bought their own house in the mid-60s, this had partial central heating which heated the ground floor and their bedroom on the first floor, but not mine. Well, I wasn't there all the time. This meant in the winter, I would crawl out of bed and switch on the electric fan heater and then get back into bed until the room temperature was high enough for a morning wash to be considered." Softie.

So there we are, a bit of frugality. These days, people in midwinter walk around in their shirts and blouses with the house at 24 or 26 degrees as if they were living on the Mediterranean. Terrible.

There's a little email here from May. She spent time in Japan at Bukokuji, a training monastery there with her teacher, but there was a monk there from Chile called Chikusa. He had traveled by foot alone in India and became ill with fever. He was in a village, he doesn't know where exactly, and had begun to accept that he would die. However, a herdsman brought him to his hut and treated him with what he believed was cow's urine. And he recovered after a week or so.

There we are. It's meant to be fermented, so any germs in it would hopefully be destroyed. According to Ayurvedic medicine, it's called *kaumūtra*. It contains nitrogen, sulfur, phosphate, sodium, manganese, iron, silicon, chlorine, magnesium, malic, citric and tartaric acids and calcium salts, vitamins A, B, C, D and E, minerals, lactose, enzymes, creatinine, hormones and gold acids, whatever that is. It says that the urine is actually similar to the human body in some way according to old Ayurvedic medicine, and it seems to have cured this Zen monk from Chile. So there we are.

Those are just a little bit of replies, but I must say that yesterday evening I didn't really stress enough that this is an occasion to begin to test our powers of renunciation and what happens when you renounce something. For a dharma teacher not to be teaching that is terrible, and I gave myself very poor marks. But I'm going to make up for it now.

Remember that the whole of the spiritual life could be said to be renunciation. We're not talking about self-mortification. We're not talking about blaming and beating ourselves up. We're talking about seeing where desire, where we get caught up with desire, with reaction, wrong desire, of course. And this is just an opportunity. If we find ourselves, for instance, out of work, furloughed, or our wages reduced, it's an opportunity to let go of certain things. Some of us may still be in jobs but we can't fly anywhere, we can't go anywhere, we might be isolated—although I prefer the word secluded. Of course we have to let go of certain desires that come up through our past habits.

It allows us to sit with them, feel their energy, feel their power. The important thing is to stay if you can till the very end of that feeling, because right at the end of that feeling there's a switch, there's a change, there's a sense of being relieved, a sense of relief from that grip. The more the grip, the more the relief. Then you get that sense of peacefulness.

Remember that in that process of transformation, the energy is being transformed. Nothing is lost. Whatever energy was caught up in that turbulence of desire, wrong desire, will then turn into pure energy, which can be used elsewhere. Given a situation, it may manifest as love, compassion, joy, or just being peaceful, just being calm.

Don't miss this opportunity. Every time you feel you want something, check it and say, "Ah yes, this is a desire. Now let me have a look at it, let me feel it." By renouncing those things that we have to renounce anyway—and this is the whole point—in a situation like this, you find yourself having to renounce stuff. So you may as well make spiritual capital from it, if you'll excuse the expression.

And baths—giving up baths. Somebody has given up having hot baths. Remember in the old days, medieval days, you only had one bath a year. It was taken in May or thereabouts. You only had one big tub where first of all your dad got in, then your mum, then all the kids from the eldest to the youngest. That's where we get the phrase, "Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater." You know what the water must have looked like by the time the baby had its bath.

Right up until, I think it was the 1980s somewhere around there, people were happy just having a shower a week, a bath a week. Now we find that very difficult. Now you have to have a shower every day. But actually, you don't. You don't need a shower every day. By the way, that's why most marriages took place in June—that was before people began to stink a little.

So you can look at your lifestyle and see what's actually necessary, what is actually necessary. Then you can add a little bit on top of that maybe, but you're beginning to define what our indulgences are. It's funny how we need things just because we have them, but you don't need many things that we have.

I'm putting that aside now and continuing to resolve to talk about the Eightfold Path and to answer the question. But I do want to sidetrack a bit.

I want to take a reading about how the Buddha began his teachings. There's a whole discourse here, the *Arīyapariyesanā Sutta*, the Discourse on the Noble Search, where the Buddha tells his life story up until how he became fully liberated. It gives you some idea of the person, how he was.

So he said, "When I was staying at Uruvelā, as long as I chose"—so that's where he became fully liberated, close to what they think is present-day Bodh Gaya. Some of you will have been there. "I set out to wander by stages to Benares"—so that's present-day Varanasi on the Ganges there.

Between Gaya—that's the town near Bodh Gaya and the place of enlightenment—the *Ājīvika* Upaka saw me on the road. The *Ājīvikas* belonged to a sect that were fatalists really. They had Makkhali Gosāla who was a fatalist—everything was predestined. There were many of these people who'd gone out, mainly men but some women, who had left society to live as *samanas*. *Samana* means somebody who strives—for spiritual attainment in this particular case.

When Upaka sees him, he says, "Friend, your faculties are clear. The color of your skin is pure and bright. Under whom have you gone forth? Who is your teacher? Whose Dharma do you profess?"

The Buddha replies in verses: "I am the one who's transcended all and knower of all, unsullied among all things, renouncing all things by craving's ceasing freed. Having known this for myself, to whom should I point as my teacher? I have no teacher and one like me exists nowhere in the world with all its gods, because I have no person for my counterpart. I am the accomplished one in the world. I am the teacher supreme. I alone am a fully enlightened one whose fires are quenched and extinguished"—that's the fires of greed, hatred and delusion. "I go now to the city of Kāsi"—that's Varanasi—"to set in motion the wheel of the Dhamma. In a world that has become blind, I go to beat the drum of the deathless."

That's very impressive, eh? But Upaka replies, "By your claims, friend, you ought to be the universal victor." "The victors are those like me who have run to destruction of the taints"—so remember, these are the basic problems that we have, basic misunderstandings. "I have vanquished all evil states, therefore Upaka, I am a victor."

Now when this was said, the *Ājīvika* Upaka said, "Hmm, maybe so friend." Shaking his head, he took a bypass and departed. So I think the Buddha realized this isn't quite the way he was going to spread the Dharma.

Now we also have to accept there's a bit of hagiography here. Hagiography is the story of the saints. You always build a saint up—legends and myths all surround them and they become much greater in a sense in some ways than they actually were because of this mythology that surrounds them. So I doubt if he came out with a set of prepared verses. He probably said that he felt he was, that he knew himself to be fully liberated, but he didn't convince this *Ājīvika*.

That reminds me that when I was living at the Birmingham Buddhist Vihara in Birmingham in the 1980s, early to middle 1980s, we used to get cards and letters from somebody announcing that the next world leader was living in London, somewhere in Pudding Street or something. I remember picking these up, about seven or eight of them, picking them up and thinking, "Oh yeah, just like *Ājīvika*. Oh yeah, right, okay." I never got round to finding out who this person was.

He then, of course, is on his way—the Buddha's on his way—to see his old friends whom he'd been training with. He wandered in stages and eventually came to Varanasi, Benares, to the Deer Park at Isipatana, and approached the group of five. The *bhikkhus* who saw me coming at a distance agreed amongst themselves: "Friend, here comes the recluse Gotama who lives luxuriously"—remember he'd given up the path of self-mortification—"who gave up his striving and reverted to luxury. We should not pay homage to him or rise up for him or receive his bowl and outer robe. But a seat may be prepared for him. If he likes, he may sit down."

However, as I approached those *bhikkhus*, they found themselves unable to keep their pact. One came to meet me, took my bowl and outer robe, another prepared a seat, and another set out water for my feet. However, they still addressed me as friend.

Whereupon I told them, "Do not address the Tathāgata by the name of friend. The Tathāgata"—that was how he referred to himself; it means the transcendent one—"the Tathāgata is the accomplished one, a fully enlightened one. Listen, because the deathless has been attained. I shall instruct you, I shall teach you the Dharma. Practicing as you are instructed, by realizing for yourself here and now through direct knowledge, you will soon enter into and abide in that supreme goal of the holy life for the sake of which clansmen rightly go forth from home to homelessness."

So that's a very pat phrase that you get throughout the scriptures. Then he tries to talk to them about this.

There's this lovely passage here where the usual thing is everybody tries three times. So a second time and then he actually says the same thing a third time, and then he asks them—because remember, this is anybody's guess, but here it's his five friends—"Have you ever heard me speak like this before?"

They said, "No, venerable sir." "The Tathāgata is the accomplished one." And then he goes through this business.

Then he says, "I was able to convince the *bhikkhus* of the group of five. Then I sometimes instructed two *bhikkhus* while the other three went for alms, and the six of us lived on what the other three *bhikkhus* brought back from their alms round. Sometimes I instructed three *bhikkhus* while the other two went on alms, and the six of us lived on what those two *bhikkhus* brought back from their alms round."

"Then the *bhikkhus* of five, thus taught and instructed by me, being themselves subject to birth, having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, seeking the unborn supreme security from bondage, *Nibbāna*, attained the unborn supreme security from bondage, *Nibbāna*. Being themselves subject to aging, sickness, death, sorrow and defilement, having understood the danger in what is subject to aging, sickness, death, sorrow, and defilement, seeking the unaging, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, and undefiled supreme security from bondage, *Nibbāna*, they attained the unaging, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, undefiled supreme security from bondage, *Nibbāna*. The knowledge and vision arose in them: 'Our deliverance is unshakable, this is our last birth, there is no renewal of becoming.'"

So there you have a nice little passage which gives us some idea of his early movements. Of course they've been souped up a bit with verses and stuff like that, but at least we can get an image of him, of how he walked 250 miles from Bodh Gaya to Sarnath with the sole purpose of seeking out these old companions whom he felt were open enough or developed enough to receive his Dharma.

Time is passing on and I did want to read the actual discourse, which is what you might call the root discourse of Theravāda, the root discourse of Buddhism, frankly. It's not just Theravāda, it's the root discourse and it's all about the Four Noble Truths. I'm afraid because time moves on, I shall have to leave that little delight for tomorrow evening. And I will be getting round to the Eightfold Path sooner.

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