Renunciation

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One of the least appreciated principles of the Buddha’s teachings is the principle of renunciation. Nobody really likes to hear about it, the idea that you have to renounce things in order to find happiness. In fact, the Buddha himself admitted that when he realized that he was going to have to renounce things, his heart did not leap up at the idea. It was only when he realized that there was no other course that he was willing to let go of things that he found dear and appealing. A lot of the problem is that we tend to think of the word in terms of deprivation, doing without. You have to do without this, do without that, and there doesn’t seem to be much of a payback. But the Buddha’s principle is basically that it’s a trade-off. You can’t have everything you want. In fact, the more you try to have everything you want, the less you have of anything at all. Sometimes you meet people who are trying to fulfill their total human potential in terms of physical fitness, material wealth, spiritual progress. However they define perfection in all the different realms of human life, and as they try to attain perfection in all these, you find that they get more and more frantic, more and more pulled apart. You have to focus. It’s only by focusing on one thing that you can really excel at it. A large part of the practice is getting your priorities straight, realizing what’s important, what has to be sacrificed, and what other things. The basic principle, the Buddha said, is that when you see that there’s a greater or more abundant happiness that comes from letting go of a lesser happiness, you’ll be willing to let go of the lesser happiness. It sounds pretty brainless. Anybody would agree to the principle. In fact, there’s even one translator of the text who insists that that can’t possibly be the case, because it is so obvious. And yet, when you look at people’s lives, it’s not obvious at all. The Buddha talks about unconditioned happiness. People say, “Well, can I take my relationships along with me? Can I take my sexuality along with me? Can I take my self-image along with me?” Whatever. The answer is no. People say, “Well, maybe I’m not interested after all.” But then when you actually look at human life, you realize that there are certain things that have to be given up. How can you find peace of mind when you’re holding on to these other things? Because they themselves are not happiness. They’re the cause of suffering. The attachment we have to them is the cause of suffering. And when it’s your seat, when you see the necessity of letting go, that’s when renunciation becomes more tolerable, more palatable. And the funny thing about it is, when you finally do let go, you find that you’re well rid of those attachments. But there’s always that sense of loss, a sense that we’re going to be deprived of something that causes us pause, which is why we have to keep reminding ourselves that we’re not really letting go of anything all that good. Buddhism is often accused of being negative about things, speaking about suffering, speaking about the unattractiveness of the body, speaking about impermanence, that chant we had just now. The world is insufficient, insatiable. The world is nothing of its own. The world offers no shelter. The world is swept away. There are obvious facts, but people say that Buddhism is pessimistic for focusing on them. Isn’t there a good side to the world at all? Well, there is a good side, but it’s not as good as nirvana. That’s the whole point of this. The Buddha has something better to offer us if we’re only willing to let go of our attachments to things that really can’t provide true happiness at all. If these things could provide true happiness, he wouldn’t bother. But the truth is that they don’t. So in order to wean us off of these things, on the one hand, the Buddha points out there is a negative side. On the other hand, he provides a positive place to be, a state of concentration, like what we’re working on right now. Without this state of concentration, a lot of Buddhist contemplations really do turn negative, but get very depressing. But if you consider them from the point of view of a concentrated mind, they’re not depressing at all. They’re liberating. Once the mind gets into a state of concentration and then it turns around and looks at its old attachments, it realizes there’s nothing really worthwhile there at all. And this is the important factor. Once you really see for yourself that you’re better off letting go, it makes it a lot easier. Because the strength of our bondage is not determined by the strength of the bonds. It’s the strength of our attachment to them. There’s a passage in the canon where the Buddha compares two different people. One is a man with a miserable little shack, not the best kind, a miserable little pot with a few grains of rice and gourd seeds to plant, a miserable bedstead, again, not the best kind, and a miserable wife, not the best kind. And he sees the ease and well-being of a monk’s life, but for some reason he can’t bring himself to give up his miserable house, miserable bed, miserable pot, his miserable wife. And the question is, even though things are pretty miserable, would you say that they’re a weak tether, a weak bond? Well, no, because for that person they’re very strong. For some reason he’s really attached. On the other hand, there’s a wealthy person, lots of land, lots of wives, lots of wealth, lots of grain in his granary. And he sees the monk’s life and realizes that the monk’s life is a better life. And he’s able to give those things up and ordain. So in any case, even though there’s a lot that he could be tied down to, the nature of the bond itself is weak. It makes you realize that it’s not the issue of how good things are outside, it’s our unwillingness to look at their bad side. That’s the problem. It’s not that we have lots of things to be attached to that creates the problem. It’s the fact that our side of the attachment, the subjective side of the attachment, that’s the strong one. That’s what keeps us holding on. So we work on that by giving the mind a better place to go, bringing it into a state of concentration, so that you can see that the true well-being of the mind doesn’t have to depend on things outside. It depends on how you manage it from within, how you focus it, how you relate to the sensations of the body, how you relate to the sensations of the breath, how skilled you are at maximizing the sense of pleasure and rapture that comes with staying with the body. So even though eventually our attachment to the body is something we’re going to have to learn to give up, the first thing to do is learn how to relate to the body in a way that’s really positive. When you look at the passages dealing with contemplation of the body in the Canon, they fall into two sorts. One is dealing with the body as an object of attachment in terms of our sense of identification, our sense of physical attraction. From that side, the Buddha focuses on the negative. When you take the body apart in terms of its parts, there’s really nothing there to feel lust for. There’s really nothing there that’s worth getting attracted to. There’s really nothing there that’s worth using to exalt yourself over others in terms of your looks, in terms of your race, in terms of whatever. When you really look at the body truthfully, there’s nothing much there to base lust or pride on. But then there’s the other side. The Buddha focuses on the sense of rapture. That can come with the concentration. That’s something you have permeate throughout the body. So you learn to relate to the body in a different way. You’re realizing that the second way of relating to it in terms of focusing on the breath, taking the sense of ease and well-being that come from the breath, that sense of fullness that comes as you’re sitting there, not pushing or pulling or squeezing or abusing the breath, but just allowing them to happen in whatever way is most comfortable. It gives you a sense of fullness, and that fullness can permeate the whole body to realize the problem. It’s not so much the body; it’s the way you relate to it, and you can relate to it in a much better way. Eventually, you’re going to have to let go of this sense of rapture and pleasure. Still, it’s pulling you in the right direction, giving you a new perspective, realizing that if you let go of those outer attractions, the sensual passion you feel for it, the pride you might feel in it, and just simply be with the sensation of the body in the present moment, the mind is much better off. Then you take that same principle and you apply it to each ascending stage of the concentration, until the breath in the body gets so rich and so refined that it becomes still. And when it’s still, your sense of the body begins to blur. Then you can, as I say, transcend all perceptions of form and go into the formless. You find that at each stage, by letting go, you reach a happier, more refined happiness, a deeper happiness, a greater sense of ease. This right here is very instructive. Much of the Buddhist teachings starting from the practice of generosity and virtue is to show us the sense of well-being that comes with letting go, so that the more difficult, more refined ways of letting go become easier and easier. You’re more inclined to believe the principle that by letting go, you gain true happiness. Some people want to go straight to the ultimate letting go of the sense of “I” and “mine” without going through the preliminary stages. In other words, not being willing to give up sensual things, not being willing to give up their attachment to the body, but somehow they’re willing to give up their attachment to “I” and “mine.” It doesn’t work that way. You have to work through the grosser attachments before you can work on the more refined ones. Otherwise, your perception of the refined ones gets really distorted. And you start indulging in a lot of denial and hypocrisy. So you have to be willing to let go. In the beginning, it’s like this. We take it on faith. We take it on trust, that through letting go there’s a greater happiness that comes in return. But as we practice this way, we find that more and more it really is true. You finally get to the point where you’re letting go, not with a sense of regret. You’re happy to let go. You’re glad you let go once you’ve done it. There’s that famous passage about the monk who sat under the tree, saying, “What bliss! What bliss!” His friends, knowing that he used to be a king before his ascension, were concerned that he was thinking about his happiness back as a king. So they reported it to the Buddha. The Buddha asked the monk to come and see him. And the Buddha asked him, “What do you mean when you’re saying, ‘What bliss! What bliss!’” The monk explained, “Back when I was king, even though I had guards inside and outside the palace, inside and outside the capital city, inside and outside the borders of his country, still he couldn’t sleep in peace, always afraid that someone was going to try to come up and kill him, take his power away, take his wealth away. But now that he’s a monk, living off the alms of others, not possessing anything that anybody else would want, he can go to the foot of a tree, out in the middle of the forest, and not feel the least bit threatened. He’s once satisfied, his mind free like that of a wild deer. That’s the bliss he was talking about.” So when you run up to this issue in your practice, that there are certain things you’re going to have to give up in order to gain a greater happiness, remind yourself that it’s a trade. It’s not deprivation. It’s a way of finding a deeper happiness. And even though it may go against the grain, where does it go? It’s been taking us back into death and rebirth and death and rebirth how many times? That’s where the grain goes. Try going against the grain and see what happens.

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