

2010-11-07 The Paramis Renunciation

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SPEAKERS

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This morning I would like to continue. A series of talks I'm giving over this year called on the pāramīs, perfections. And once a month I do one of the pāramīs, and this month. It's the perfection of renunciation. And renunciation is a big word. And I suspect most of you who don't ordinarily use it in conversation. And when I think about it, I don't know if it's the same association for many of you, but I have a strong association with the word renunciation. With the kind of with religion, it's kind of like a kind of a spiritual kind of thing to do. And it's sometimes been said it's a very unpopular topic in the modern West because renunciation itself seems a kind of deprivation. And many people in the West are not into deprivation. They're into if anything the opposite. If they had a choice, and then there's some serious questions, why should I deprive myself? Why should I do without? If that's what's called on. But I think it's a very powerful word very powerful concept. And because a strong association is so with spirituality, I think it's warranted a deeper look at what this word is about. It's a Western word, and it's a word that's used to translate, nekkhamma. The Pali word that's literally means something like, it means that it's not clear what the etymology of the word is and meaning of the word, but it's sometimes explained as me meaning going forth, going out. And sometimes it's explained as, as overcoming kamma or essential desire. So overcoming Letting go of central to the renouncing central desires a big one for at least monastics in Buddhism. And but the idea of going forth is clearly stated in the text is beautiful, I think, metaphor that it contrasts going forth with a confined dusty life. So, whereas going forth means going out into the wide open spaces, so if you imagine yourself locked in a mountain cabin, all winter long, one room cabin with all your relatives, you know, your like your relatives, but, you know, it's after a while, it feels a little dusty, you know, confined and challenging maybe. And so, the, and then finally, the snow thaws the spring and you go out into the beautiful Sierras or something and bide open pastures and it just feels so good. To be out in the wide open, it's that kind of contrast. And so at least in Buddhism, the idea that with renunciation, there is something gained. Not it's not about deprivation, but rather the gaining of something. And you know, whereas renunciation kind of implies letting go of something, the emphasis in Buddhism is what is gained. And there's a very famous verse in the Dhammapada. That is little bit disturbing for some people to hear the first time. But I think it's a very wise and profound statement. If, by giving up a lesser happiness, one could experience greater happiness, a wise person would renounce the lesser to behold the greater

So some people don't like it, because it seems like the emphasis is selfish. You know, just you know, if we get let go of a lesser happiness for greater happiness, I mean, that's Kinda like a selfish desire, right, you know, for myself. But the the, the emphasis in Buddhism is to move from that. The, the, you know, if you think of your life as a, as a big continuum from that side of the continuum, where you suffer to that side of the continuum where you don't suffer, where you're happy where you're peaceful, or to help other people out of your compassion to go from that the extreme side of that side of the continuum where we're unhappy to that we're happy, so it's so requires understanding what happiness is.

Buddhism puts a great emphasis on kind of what's possible in this lifetime, what's possible in terms of freedom from suffering, the attainment of happiness, and liberation, awakening, freedom is considered to be the *masuka* the great happiness. And so, renunciation is meant to serve the process of attaining this great happiness for you and for others as well. So in that context, then we will announce something which you know, sometimes we we announce things which are quite fine, there's nothing wrong with certain things that we can decide to give up. But we can't do at all. And one of the one of the neurosis is of many people in the modern West, is in excess of choices. And, and or acts of excessive messages, you're supposed to have it all get it all do it all. And, and it's a kind of suffering with that just says, this is kind of suffering, not to have choices and not be able to decide what to do with one's life. The in many in many endeavors in life, it's quite recognized that it's useful that you have to in order to do one thing well, or do a few things well, you have to let go and not do other things that in other situations would be quite normal to do. Someone who decides to go to college to go to junior college. For example, to get a, you know, to get a job, or going to go into college means that you can't, you know, you can fill in the blank, whatever it is, you know, which is a lot of things you can do because you have to focus in on what you're studying. Or some people decide to have children.

And only then they decide, they realize afterwards that this requires a certain degree of renunciation and certain things that you're you used to do and you can't do so you have to kind of focus on this thing for a while. And then we have extreme examples. You know, if someone who really wants to excel in something in sport or in arts or music or career, sometimes they really choose to really focus on that for some for a long period of time to really excel. And I think most people who excel really far in almost any endeavor have made that choice. I made a choice that really focus on that and at the expense may be of letting go of other things which are perfectly okay. And sometimes it's done in appropriately. Sometimes it's done so that we become, we become kinda kind of, you know, not whole as human being, sometimes it's done at the expense of for our family and friends who are sometimes hurts because of it. It's not uncommon for, you know, for family to be neglected by people who really excel and do great things in their lives, because they're focusing so much on that. The But still, this idea is, you know, I think it's an ordinary part of human life this idea that choosing one thing over another, so this is what the quote is talking about. So then we come to Buddhism and Buddhism emphasizes Regency ation as part of me into emphasizes renunciation and It's it's in its list called the 10 perfections, which are 10 beautiful virtues of that come from a very beautiful motivate to beautiful motivations that people can have their motivations and approaches to life, which if anything is considered sacred and Buddhism is one of the some of the most sacred things. Compassion is really a kind of having to be motivated and moved by compassion is, is a very highly regarded, beautiful phenomenon human heart and liberation, freedom. Awakening is also a beautiful capacity and potential and experience through the heart of the mind that we have. And so these two beautiful things are linked with renunciation in the list of the parties the perfections in order for renunciation, to be a part of me to be one of these perfections explicitly has to be connected to the motivation the concern the interest and compassion for others. In liberation for oneself and others, or compassion for all for yourself as well. So because of that, that's a protection from renunciation being some kind of world denying the depriving kind of stance where, you know, you're supposed to kind of, you know, the more you suffer, the better it is for everyone. And just, you know, might as well just kind of live it for deprived life. It's supposed to actually make you kind of, you know, it's a beautiful virtue. And I think of this kind of all these 10 *pāramīs* as they grow in a person makes a person strong, makes a person noble makes a person kind of a large person, a Maha. Maha satisfies a term for some of the people who really engage in this path of the *pāramīs*. They become a great being. And that's a little odd language because for Buddhists, because many people associate Buddhism with becoming, you know, with not self and not self must mean that we're supposed to be totally, completely Self effacing and selfless and, and humble. And, you know, like I don't count the teachings on selflessness is not meant to be something that squashes

the vitality and energy and motivations of our life. It's supposed to refine it and clarify it. So there's no clinging connected to it, there's no selfishness connected to it. But being free of selfishness does not mean that you kind of become a wimp. You will become some you know, kind of, so the idea of a masataka great being. So it's a quality of these great beings to be able to have renunciation, it's a virtue. So the question then, in terms of this part of me is what do we look at, that we can let go of? What parts of our life where the letting go of it clearly is a compassionate act, supporting for other people? And how do we look at our life and understand how letting go of Something is clearly helping us to become liberated.

Often compassion has a lot to do with generosity, being supportive and giving your time and effort and supporting other people. And if you're holding on tight to your own time, your own things, it's very hard to budget to be compassionate. So the idea of being able to let go, in order to support other people is often connected to compassion. And in the same way, if you're holding on tight to your things to your time, your being your comfort and all these things, it's hard to be liberated because the clinging to those things is the opposite of liberation. So to renounce supports the process of letting go. There are there are a number of reasons why. In Buddhism, we emphasize renunciation. One is because if we're clinging to something if we're addicted to something We're being harmed by it. And so we renounce in order to let go of the harming, that gets done. And some people need to renounce the really strong, powerful accuracy that's witnessed by other people to they really get into it, because their addiction to certain behaviors is so powerful, they need help. And, and some kind of public even ritual, some some some some way that's really powerfully helps them to renounce and stick to it. Sometimes it's very essential for certain addictive behaviors. And just in Buddhism, we think that everyone's addicted, not necessarily to what we conventionally think, is addiction. But anybody who meditates I think realizes quickly that they're addicted to thinking, you know? And so how do we overcome that addiction? And sometimes, what do we have to renounce without that let go of, at least psychologically, so that our mind can be free from its obsessions, its preoccupations with concerns is a very interesting question. So one side of renunciation, it is the fact that, you know, letting go of something which is causing harm for us, ourselves and for the world around us. The other side is, which I've already talked about, is a side of renouncing because it's beneficial. And, and it can be beneficial a number of ways. One way is that it's beneficial because we then we can pick up something that's better to do. We can get involved in something. We prefer to do something it's better for the world better for ourselves. And other very interesting Act, which is the discipline of renunciation is that sometimes it's really useful to at least temporarily, renounce something, that might even be really a perfectly fine thing to do. But to stop doing it for a while, so you can understand what your relationship to that thing is because there might be a lot of Subtle attachments, a lot of beliefs, a lot of assumptions, a lot of sense of self connected to it. That would be really good to flesh out and see clearly. And it's hard to see it if you keep acting on it normally as you normally would, by not doing it for a while, you see. So, for example, some people find this and going by going on retreats, meditation retreats, which are kind of like temporary renunciation retreats. We don't advertise it that way because people wouldn't come maybe but then, but then come, you know, come to spirit ragnu in our new retreat center, we can call it the renunciation center. You know, come and renounce for 10 days and no one will come. But, but basically what it is because when you go when you go and retreat, for example, you renounce ordinary social conversation, and that's part of the deal coming on silence Like retweet. And some people don't discover how addicted or how caught up or how involved they are in social conversation, and all the different beliefs, assumptions, feelings, reactions that go into social conversation. And it can be quite a challenge for people to negotiate the first days of a Silent Retreat if they've never been on it. Because of all the different kind of, you know, the powerful forces within us that come into play through speech. So a small example would be some people find their security, that they're safe with other people, by being able to be in conversation with them. And know that, you know, they kind of present themselves a certain way they

get feedback in a certain way. And when you're not talking, that ordinary way of finding yourself safe with people is impossible. In fact, if you go on retreat and sit down at the dining room table with you know, 678 other people to table

you know, or in ordinary life when you sit down with people at a table that you They, you know, even if they're strangers, they look up and say hello or smile or, you know, you know, say here, please, you sit down in a retreat table with seven or eight strangers and they look at their oatmeal. And that, you know, they don't say anything, they don't even look at you. And, and so if you're used to the social cues that, you know, if you use if you use a worldly social cues for people looking at their opening when you sit down the table, it's not good news. You know, this is these people don't, you know, don't want you there. But that's not what it means on retreat. And so people sit down and they see that they're, that they're operating on, you know, there's this constant vigilance, looking and checking in and getting reassurance and wanting to find out what's going on. That's always operating. Sometimes it's really needed in society. There's good reasons for it, but sometimes it's not needed. And on retreat, that's supposed to be one place where it's If needed, and you can put that part of our life to rest. And it's a beautiful thing to put it to rest. But you don't necessarily see how that operates unless you've renounced it for a while. So the same thing can be true with a lot of different things. It could be around food, sometimes on retreats, people renounce eating in the afternoon after 12 o'clock, and a lot of food issues can come up. And not all our issues and beliefs around food are so wise. And so sometimes you can see that if you, you know, have renounced eating after 12 o'clock. There's the issue of renouncing sexuality, which also happens on retreats. You know, come to spirit rock and renounce sex for 10 days, please. And that's what we do is expected to be celibate while you're there. And so some people it becomes a big deal. They've never had to kind of actually not be sexual, and either privately or with someone else for that long of a long time. And so a lot of the beliefs, ideas, expectations, sexual behavior is one of the most complex social activities that any human being does. It's infused with not just desire, but with all kinds of beliefs and assumptions that are socially conditioned and family conditioned. It's a very complex event. And one of the ways to kind of begin teasing apart some of that is to renounce it for a while, and then you can see what goes on. So part of the value of renunciation sometimes is this heightened awareness, it shows us what's going on in a clearer way than if we just freely do whatever we want. But sometimes renunciation is a way of getting something, some improvement, you know, being able to pick up some greater happiness or do something but greater good. I wanted to give you an example of a little act of letting go that I like to mention it's fun to this little story. So that's why I've said it a few times, about expand on it this time. So those of you heard before but Here's something new. Many years ago I was visiting a via Gary the monastery where Ajahn Amaro Najin personnel used to be habits with a group of people middle of the week, and, and it's sometimes the customer knew at a monastery to bring something to bring in offering a food or something. And so I knew that back then they didn't, they sometimes didn't have a lot of food up there. And so I went to the market and loaded up several bags full of dry goods, you know, rice and pasta, canned foods and different things they could just keep because I knew that on the weekend, they got a lot of food. I have a lot of visitors during the week there wasn't much food. So I thought I'll just fill them up so they have for some days and you know, whenever whenever they need it. And I didn't think too much about it just seemed like a nice thing to do. And, and I went with a group of people who brought brought food and then there was time for the meal. They had The main meal of the day, and we're all sitting in a room together. And the way I didn't know how it worked at this particular monastery, but the way it worked was that everyone was sitting quietly in the eating room. And then people from the kitchen would carry in each of the dishes for that meal and announce who had donated, donated it that day. And so they started listing the names of all the people that have come up with in a group of five, six people we've gone up there with who brought brought x, they brought cooked food. I didn't bring cooked food, I brought dragons for the next days. So it didn't take me long to realize that everyone's name was going

to be announced. So and so brought this on so I brought this on, and here I was sitting you know, and inside of me was just I felt like I wanted to jump up and say, but but I brought things to

bring I brought dry goods there in the kitchen. You know, and I see this kind of agitation, this kind of concern, this fear of having to be judged by other people and going on. And so I felt like this wasn't really appropriate, you know, I mean, this is not the place to, you know, show my how wonderful I am, you know, at a Buddhist monastery where you're supposed to renounce your conceit so I like go, and like it was a bit, you know, took a little effort to let go that the energy that's moving up, but you know, but this is interesting, but part of the reason I let go, was also because I knew that if I did stand up and say, Hey, wait a minute, I brought something that people would see me as being conceited then. So it wasn't just because I was letting go because I thought was wise to let go. But I was also protecting myself from being judged. I couldn't when I was, I was caught in either way. I was playing the self game. So how do we go So, you know, I had to let go, you know, I realized I could let go and deeper and deeper layers not even been concerned one way or the other what people thought about me. And this idea of attachment to self concept, self image how people see us is a very deep one for many people. And for me, there was a time my practice early on maybe, where I could have been practicing for about seven years, six, seven years. And I could see that I was holding on to some sense of self that was difficult to let go of, but it was appropriate let go of it was it wasn't really help helping me it wasn't really helping me be happy to, to cherish and hold on to the self concept to try to prove the self to who I was to people around me. But I had a hard time letting go of it. So I said I need a ritual. So the ritual I made for myself was I was going to go to the second time To practice in Asia, in Thailand and Burma and so I told myself when I crossed the international dateline that's when I'm going to let go so I prepared myself I was flying over the Pacific and this you know, looking and figuring and there's something something inside of me some some something kind of got reset slightly and not so much that I could let go of my conceit so easily. But I think it was more like I didn't let go necessarily so completely, but it's more like I changed direction. I kind of okay, this is I'm focusing my life on something else. Now. I'm not going to focus on strengthen the conceit. I'm going to focus now on letting go of it. So it kind of a change of direction that happened. Thanks to the international dateline.

I think it's interesting to look at the difference between the Letting Go. And renunciation because letting go is a big part of Buddhist practice, because freedom is freedom from clinging. So it's letting go of clinging, that is really at the heart of what Buddhism is all about. But the but you know, there can be a single moment of letting go. So I could have sitting there at the monastery, eating rum. And I could have let go of my impulse to scream and say, Hey, wait a minute. Me too. I brought things. But I could also look at it more deeply that there's this common tendency in me to want to toot my horn, but the idea, you know, it's kind of and, and this is that this doesn't help me it doesn't help the world around me. So rather just like going and letting go of at this time. Let me kind of make a choice here or an act, which tries to do it much more ongoingly in my life, and renunciation is this kind of sense of it? This kind of let me do on an ongoing basis, not just in this particular situation, but let me kind of turn my life in a different direction. So I do this in an ongoing way. Let me renounce gossiping, for example, it's one thing to stop gossiping today in this particular situation, but maybe realized the way I gossip is not helpful for me or for other people. I'm thinking I'll renounce gossiping or I'm going to renounce exaggerating, or I'm going to renounce lying, or I'm going to renounce some people, you know, to be things like television, I'm going to renounce television. I know when people have done that, and they feel quite happy or doing it. Well, I didn't realize I had so much time. I've had people tell me, you know, I don't have any time for meditation. And then I said, How much time do you watch television and then their eyes go wide and so the Latin roots for the word Renounce is to announce again, to tell again. And there's something that you know something is public statement, this kind of clear, kind of standing behind something, I just letting go, but clearly, kind of announcing it, clarifying it, claiming it,

being behind it. And I think it's one of the beautiful things in life when it's done appropriately and healthily, to have a very strong motivation for something. And, and set the course I'm this is what I'm going to do to make a commitment to it. And, and let the commitment override some of the ways we get distracted some of the ways we get pulled left and right by other interests or attachments, when we're making commitment. And so classically in Buddhism, renunciation is seen as a commitment. Let me commit myself to let go of certain things. For the benefit of others and for the benefit of me. And so the challenge for all of you, if you're so inclined, is to reflect consider. What would be useful for you to renounce in a clear, committed way would be helpful for you to renounce would be beneficial for you, and for the world around you, for your family, for your friends, for your society, to renounce to let go of and isn't clear on going away. And if you make that choice, that commitment, what do you learn about yourself from that process? What do you have to clarify? What do you have to kind of understand what do you have to work through? That's not necessarily easy thing to do. And I think it's really beautiful. I think it's really beautiful, that people who want to do that inner work, the clarifying work, to be able to live a life that really serves us and serves Others. And I would hope that renunciation, letting go in a Buddhist sense, is really for the betterment of ourselves and better for betterment of the world that lets us better express our compassion and better live from a place where our heart is free and not contracted or constricted. So I hope that that has inspired you around this word renunciation, that if you hear it again in the Buddhist context, again in the future, it will make you smile. Oh, yeah, this is a good thing. And if that didn't happen, doesn't happen because of this talk. Then I failed. And I'll but since I've renounced my concern about what you think about me, it's okay to fail sometimes.

So, no Comments or questions you'd like to make? We have a couple of minutes, protests.

Just a comment that

I think he left, you did not mention how free renunciation can be that there's an incredible lifting in the heart. If you really accomplish it,

oh yeah, it can be very freeing. And I meant to say give one little example. There are very freeing, definitely master the whole, the whole, letting go and not clinging is that's the whole idea is freedom. But on retreats, it's very interesting to renounce or commit oneself to following the schedule of the retreat to renounce your own preferences. And one of the ways it's freeing is that if you follow the schedule, it's time to sit it's time to walk meditations time, Tea Time to sleep this fall. In a very Matter of fact way, maybe get rid of your, your your watch and just kind of listen to the bells and the bell says, Come, sit Come sit is then the consideration the debates, the What should I do now? What's the best thing to do now? Maybe I should sit longer maybe I should go take a walk, maybe I should take a nap. Maybe I should eat that a snack, doo doo doo, you know. And we people can be constantly negotiating their desires and preferences and questions. And it's so wonderful not to do that. And so I'm not going to be involved in all this preferential world have preferences and choices and, and some people find it very freeing just to follow the schedule. Now you're not supposed to. That's supposed to mean we're supposed to be an ultimate automaton. Just kind of following whatever everybody else tells us. I mean, being able to choose is a very important part of life. But there are a variety of ways and renunciation really frees up energy frees up the mind. powerful ways.

Thank you for

sharing a your way of coming to terms with selfing and comparison in the monastic situation where you are bringing food. I appreciate it and I wanted to ask if you could take it one step further. Because as you sign as I have shined the light of my attention on places of comparison and found suffering, and on

places of mixed up intentions, there could be a multiplicity of intentions going on some of them more noble, some of them much less Noble. What happens next? Is it in enough to just know, and that the light of attention will eventually gradually over many lifetimes.

Allow it all to be Noble.

Or how does one parse out the less noble intentions and let them go. So there you are at the monastery, and you are aware and what happens next?

I don't know what to say. I mean, it's what do we what do we do? I mean, mindfulness is a lot to do with investigation looking more carefully, more deeply what's really going on here. And that's always useful to look more deeply find out, be mindful and I did that at the time I did it afterwards, I reflected what happened and looked at it that was useful. But you know, it's maybe a little bit too easy to If we emphasize too much just the mindfulness thing, that people end up being passive, you know, you know, you said many lifetimes, right just like, you know, I just sit here and watch until I'm pure, and then I'll act, you know, never get around to doing anything. And when people often do have mixed intentions, there can be some really beautiful pure intention. That's, you know, to be helpful to someone for example, and you want to get credit for it. And you want to show the world that you're really smart, they're really kind and an egotistical way. And so, what do we do, do we do we act or do we not act act in that situation? And my feeling is that is that I look at kind of at the end of this mixed intentions, I kind of look try to look at them all. And decide which is this must have the strongest ones operating because If it's if there's a fair degree of pure intention operating, I think it's really sad to sacrifice it because there's some impure intention. It's kind of a sad thing that this should you know, and I think that, you know, if it if there's 30% impure, we call that way 30% pure. Maybe should do it anyway. And just go along with the impure, so you don't sacrifice and because you're also strengthening the pure intention, and then you realize this is impure, and you realize I need to do work there. But I'm not going to, you know, be frozen and not act in the world in this good way, because I'm a little bit egotistical here. But if it's 90%, impure minus sentiment, you know, all about me, myself and mine and the other person, you're helping us, you know, you couldn't care less about them really. You know, but you know, a little bit you have some, maybe a little bit care, and so maybe then maybe you don't do Because when it's when the percentage is skewed towards the impure, chances are that that's going to infect what you do at some deleterious way. Is that a answer? That's satisfying enough?

I can work with that. Okay, thank you. Okay.

So, thank you all. And I hope that your renunciation makes you a happier person.