

Renunciation

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Okay. So, I think it's a coincidence that announcement and what I'm going to say next. I'm going to talk about a topic which has a reputation of being unpopular in the Buddhist West. And I hope by the time we finish it becomes popular. So I'll begin with an analogy to get to the topic. If you are really tense, something's going on in your life, you're really tense, you're kind of beside yourself in tension and preoccupation and concern, and you're starting to feel like you're not really being efficient, get anything done, just kind of like going in circles, and you know, you're trying to cook, but you're dropping everything, and you're taking more time cleaning up than you spend time trying to cook, and it's not really, cooking's not even working, but just imagine you're so tense.

And so finally it dawns on you, you know, maybe I should meditate. And you sit down. And you're not really ambitious in meditating. You just sit down to just sit there and be present for all this tension, all this agitation that's there. And maybe you close your eyes. Maybe you sit upright.

And as you sit there, something begins settling. Some of the tension might even feel like it's draining away. And something gets a little bit quieter. And you feel your shoulders release, maybe your belly releases. And so this is kind of nice. And so you stay and something begins to come back to what we might call a homeostasis.

And if you do it long enough, maybe you get really relaxed and you start slouching a little bit. It kind of feels good to finally just be relaxed. But then you keep staying it. And then something inside of you, not your desires exactly, but something almost physical inside, it feels like there's an upwelling of wanting to be upright more, not to slouch. And so there's a movement to then come into a kind of homeostasis, where we're not tense, we're not overly relaxed, but we're kind of here in a nice, balanced, full way. And a number of things had to shift for that to happen.

And things had to be quieted down, relaxed. Certain preoccupations faded away from being preoccupations. There are still issues in life that need to be dealt with, but we're not obsessing about them and making us tense about all of them. And it was just a very nice process. So that could describe something. And if you decide at the beginning of that, when you're still running around, you know, I really need to settle down and let go of some of this stuff.

I need to quiet down. I need to kind of release a lot of these things I'm caught by. And that's the thought you have when you first sit down. It could still work just as well. From a traditional Buddhist language, what you were doing was renunciation. That's the unpopular topic.

If we think of renunciation as giving up your house, your home, your spouse, your everything, in order to go off, for example, to be a monastic, live a life of radical simplicity. Maybe, you know, that's why it's unpopular. It's just like, why do I have to let go of all these things? When the Buddha talked about this word he called renunciation, it doesn't have the same kind of negative connotations, obvious negative connotations that I think the word renunciation has in English. Because renunciation in English is so closely associated with leaving something behind, with getting rid of something, relinquishing something, giving it up. And the Buddhist word that's translated as renunciation might have that association in Buddhism as well, but it also has a positive association, positive meaning.

It literally, the Pāli word literally means to go forth, to go out into the open, to leave a confined space to go out and walk in the open air. And what's emphasized in the Pāli word is more what's gained in the process of renunciation rather than what is lost. So it's not meant to be an act of deprivation to renounce. It's actually meant to be something positive that brings you something really good. So in that example I gave earlier, if you felt running around and someone came and said, I think he's used to renounce. You probably get more tense or angry with them.

But if you understood that what that meant was to allow you to go forth after a period of meditation, go out back into the world refreshed with the open air of a clear heart, a clear mind, your friend's advice might be really good. Oh, I just have to settle down and relax and just be present. And there's actually a natural process inside. That's not my, I don't engineer this kind of settling down. I just have to be still for a while. And just being still for a while, it quiets the momentum, the fueling of tension that obsessive thinking creates and the emotions that go with it.

But still, there's a quieting, there's an emptying out of obsessive mind states, tense mind states, which don't serve us, which actually limit us, hinder us. They're the ones that are

depriving us of something really valuable. We're being deprived of a natural, healthy way of being. And the process of settling and quieting is a process of letting certain things go so that we come into this healthy homeostasis, healthy way of being. And we're actually enhanced by it, not deprived by it. So, part of the reason why the Pāli word, the Pāli word is *nekkhamma*, which means to walk out, to go forth, is translated as renunciation, is that it's actually the word used for someone who becomes a Buddhist monastic.

They go forth. And the idea is they go forth from, maybe this is an unfortunate association, but from the dusty confines of home life, which may be meant in a small little hovel with 13 kids and just, you know, all the struggles and all that. And somehow, as a young person, you can, enough of this, I want to go out now and find a whole other way of living that clears the heart, that clears the mind, that frees it all. And so, it's going forth. And so then, because I think in Christianity, the word for a Christian monastic, Catholic monastics becoming a monastic, is they renounce. And so there's then taking that westernized word, and then applying it to a Buddhist monastic, calling that word going forth, translating it as renunciation.

But when this discussion about renunciation as a practice, what's being focused on over and over again is not letting go of any things or people or activities per se in and of themselves. The focus is always on renouncing or going forth from unhealthy states of mind. It's always these unhealthy states of mind which are their primary focus. There's a lot of discussion about renouncing sensual pleasures in the English translation of the Buddhist teachings. But it turns out that the word that's translated as sensual pleasures, because you can't really renounce sensual pleasures. You'd have to go, I don't know, go live someplace that's always unpleasant or something.

Find someplace like, you know, hell or something. And then maybe you can renounce sensual pleasures because, I mean, they're part and parcel of life. The sun is shining and it's nice. I had a lot of pleasure walking down here today. Just the fresh air was so nice, the breathing, it felt pleasant. So you can't really renounce sensual pleasures.

But the word that's translated as sensual pleasures is a Sanskrit word, Pāli Indic word, *kāma*, K-A-M-A, which has a dual meaning. It means sensual pleasures and it means sensual desires. And desire is a product of the mind. And so what being let go of is sensual craving, sensual compulsions. Those can be let go of because there might be one or two of you here that maybe once accidentally in your life you were somehow caught and trapped by some kind of sensual compulsion. It might have been known, but I don't want to assume anything that that might have happened to any of you.

But it does happen to some people. That sometimes they regret what they do afterwards, and sometimes they make a mess of their family, and all kinds of things because of that particular drive for sensual pleasures of some sense or other. So what the Buddha was talking about a lot then is not letting go of sensual pleasures. And to make that clear, in one of the texts the Buddha is described as capable of, or in actuality, experiencing more sensual pleasures than anyone else in the world. Just with the food he eats and with just walking down the street, somehow in the sun or outside, there's graphic depictions of the Buddha. There's no hindrances or no obstacles for him really taking in and experiencing sensual pleasures to a great degree.

So it's not sensual pleasures, but it's sensual compulsions. That's what's renounced. But why? Is that going to make your life less interesting? It certainly will make it, you know, less suitable for a soap opera. Which might be really, I mean, most of the books, novels we read, I mean, someone is doing something kind of unethical.

That's what makes it interesting. So if we want our life to be a novel, then maybe sensual compulsions are how you make it exciting for everyone. But maybe it doesn't end very well, those novels, in life, in real life. But to renounce them, renounce compulsive desires, sensual desires in an unhealthy way, is not meant to deprive us, but is meant to give us something better. So the act of renunciation is always a movement to something better. And what is that?

There's a certain kind of freedom, a certain kind of allowing something from within us to come forth, to go forth with a healthy, wonderful, inspiring kind of feeling and movement. Just as with sitting down to meditate when you were so tense, after that period of meditation, maybe it was inspiring now to go forth, to go on and continue your way. And you find yourself surprised because it's time for lunch. But it's not even time for lunch, but you've been away from your phone for now 30 minutes, 60 minutes. I mean, that's like a record. And normally you would, like it's sitting right there, because you don't want to be too far away from it.

And so normally you would just grab it to look. What's happened in the world? What's happened with email? What's happened in text? What's happened with phone calls? What's happened on social media? What's happened? But you're so settled, you're coming to a kind of a balanced state of mind, balanced state. You're so content. You're sitting here with the tensions no longer there. And you can feel like, why bother? The compulsion to look is not there. You know what that happens if you go for the phone. And you know that right now you're connected. You're here in a nice way. So you don't pick it up. For that moment, you renounce your phone or the desire to do it because you know you're going to lose something

that you've gained. It's going to diminish you in some way. And then you go make your lunch. And you sit down to eat. And you're so content. It's so nice. The colors are so good. You're so content and happy. And the phone is there. But, you know, you're alone eating. It's a waste of time. You could be doing two things at once. You have a lot of things to do. You might as well check your emails while you're eating. But it's so nice to sit and just eat and feel the food. And no wonder the Buddha had so much sensual pleasure when he ate, because he didn't have a phone. And so there's something gained in the fact, having meditated felt so good after the meditation. Sitting down and eating without looking at a phone and doing anything, just being there with the food, actually something settles even more. It feels even nicer and better. And then you get a phone call from your neighbor saying, you know, oh something tragic has happened and I feel really sad and, you know, I could really use some company. And you go over there and you're so glad you did all those things beforehand. Because now you're completely present and open and available. You're not having to be torn away from your phone. You're not caught up in the anxiety of what you have to do. And you're not going over there, well I'll just go there for a little while and I wonder how quickly I can help the person with their grief so I can get back to my phone. It's like, now you're so happy that you entered this nice, quiet, homeostasis, healthy way, because wow, you're there for that person in a nice way, in a good way.

And so, so this renouncing, letting go, is not meant to be deprivation. It's meant to actually enhance us. And that's the movement. If a Buddhist teacher tells you to renounce, they should probably change their English. They say, go forth. Come out of that shell.

Come out of that prison you've created for yourself. Come out of that, how you're caught in preoccupations, concerns that you have. Come forth. I'm here. Welcome. Come out. Join me here in this freedom.

So the Pāli word that's translated renunciation, it kind of implies both movements. It implies a kind of letting go, leaving behind something. But it also implies the beautiful feeling of going forth, going out into freedom. Both meanings are there. It's kind of similar to if you're in a house and you go through a door to another room, simultaneously, you're leaving one room behind and going into the next room. So this idea can happen together.

You're simultaneously letting go of some previous way of being caught and trapped in your mind, preoccupied, into more of experience of freedom. And this dual meaning that goes on is really explicit in other words for letting go in the Buddhist language. There's the word that's sometimes translated as relinquishment. And I don't know how often we use the word relinquishment in English usually, but usually it's not a good thing, like relinquish control or

something. But anyway, it's used for this translation into English. And sometimes it's only used to describe, at times, a really high level of spiritual maturation.

And really, it's high levels of strong meditation. When things are really good, you enter into a nice, wonderful homeostasis, some of the deepest attachments are relinquished, given up, let go. However, the word that's being used for relinquishment, actually, there's several words that translate it as relinquishment in English. They have dual meanings. Sometimes what they mean is giving, generosity. And so how are we supposed to do? On one hand there's relinquishment it means, and the other hand it means generosity or giving. Which do we choose? Maybe it's the same thing going through the door in the house. Both things are meant.

And so we have a positive association also with the word relinquishment that means to give. Two of these words that translates relinquishment are used to translate a phrase in Pāli, describes a person who's still living at home, like a lay person, who is, their mind is free of stinginess, who delights in giving, practices giving, and freely gives, open-handedly gives, and the word delight is used repeatedly, but, and because delights in giving away. So sometimes they translate one word as giving and the other one that's giving away, that both of them in other situations are translated as relinquishment. And so we do that little bit in English. We have this dual meaning as well when we have the expression to give up. Give up kind of means like to surrender, like kind of collapse and kind of abandon something.

But I think originally it meant offer up on the altar, to give something up. It's kind of a sacred act in the religious sense. And so we say giving up or to give away. Giving away can have all kinds of meanings, but it could also be a beautiful thing to give away something in a generous, open-handed way. And so this act of giving contains within it these two sides of going through the door. If you give something with your own hands, you have to relinquish it, let it go, renounce it with your hands by giving it to someone else.

But what happens then? Now your hands are free for the next task. Whatever life comes with, you can now free to do something else. And you're so glad to not be carrying this thing around anymore that was such a, you know, limiting you. Give it away, maybe. So, giving has both these qualities in it. It's both a letting go and a kind of, in that letting go, there's a movement of freedom in the hands. Maybe freedom in the heart as well.

So, back to this word renunciation. It has this positive association that we gain. What do we gain in this process? And so back again to the analogy at the beginning of the talk is one of the things we gain is homeostasis is a healthy inner life. And we come into a balance. And part of the purpose of surrendering or renouncing or relinquishing and all these powerful English

words is to enhance something about ourselves. Not to become less than what we are. To maybe come back into who we really are in a certain kind of way, in a healthy, basic way, free of compulsions, free of addictions, free of hostilities, free of the ways we're caught. And to feel how good that feels from the inside out, to feel how we become better by it. Because what's waiting in each of us is a healthy heart, a healthy mind.

And one of the strategies for coming back into that is to let go of all the forces in the mind which are unhealthy, which keeps us tense, keeps us in hostility, keeps us reactive. And one of the means of doing that, I think for those people who meditate, is to meditate. And meditation is one way, at times, where you don't have to do the renouncing. It does it for you, if you sit quietly and peacefully. With time, everything that's being held onto will release, will settle. But, there's nothing wrong with you helping out.

So from time to time, you might want to consider letting go. And certainly let go enough so you can meditate. I know some people who have a hard time getting to their meditation because there's that phone, or all the things that are like that, like, I have to do, I have to, you know. And the momentum of, you know, always checking the device, the momentum of certain kind of attachments and preoccupations, makes it really hard to slow down and stop. And so when it's really, really hard to stop, that's when maybe renunciation becomes an act of courage. Okay, I kind of really have to, I really have to do this. Let me at least let go physically of what I'm doing. I don't know if I can do it in my mind, but at least physically. I'll be sit down, it'll be a little bit like being in the rodeo. I know, the wild bronco. But I'm going to sit there and see what happens. And chances are, something will settle in quiet. Chances.

So, renunciation. So does that make it a little more popular? A little bit more welcome? And I thought it was kind of funny to give this talk because, today, because right after Thanksgiving, the neighbors started putting up Christmas lights, preparing for Christmas. And I thought, oh good, I'll give a talk preparing us for Christmas. Renunciation. So we have a few minutes before the end if any of you have any comments or questions or testimonials. I see someone's hand way up in the back.

Thank you for this talk, Gil. I have a question about the topic of renunciation. And that is, what is the difference between renunciation and surrender? Or is there no difference? It's not exactly in your question, but I love the word sacrifice because it has the word sacred in it. It literally means in Latin to make sacred. And though a sacrifice, the way it's used is often, again, a diminishment, or often like you kind of have to give something up and get nothing in return. But there is something about giving, doing, the act of letting go, that can make something sacred for ourselves.

So, surrender, I don't know, you know, so again, not answering your question directly. In terms of renouncing, the Buddha said, when renouncing something is unhealthy, if renouncing something makes unhealthy states stronger, and healthy states decrease, that kind of renouncing you should not do. When renouncing makes healthy states stronger and unhealthy states go away, that's the kind of renouncing you should do. So your question, which is a good one, is how do these two compare? I don't know how to answer that question because it's a little bit of a linguistic, semantic question. But this teachings of the Buddha applies to both of those. If surrendering makes things healthier for you and the unhealthy inner life go down, do it. Surrender. But if it's not, it's the opposite, don't do it. And you could ask both. And maybe then you don't have to compare the two. That each thing can be its own thing in your vocabulary. Thank you. Yeah, is it okay that I did not quite answer directly?

So the way I interpret this is that it is not a vocabulary question, but it's something you have to feel within yourself. Perfect. Yes. So it's more like a testimonial. So I came here a few weeks ago. I was very disturbed and I spoke to you. I said that I'm being tired of being my own cheerleader. And you said you will be my cheerleader. That meant a lot. And I said I want to give up before that. You know that was one sentence before that. And you said don't give up. So thank you for doing all this for all of us. Thank you. Thank you very much.

Here in the corner here now. So this brings a memory of mine that I haven't thought about for a long time. Before my husband and I got married, we took a trip to Nepal as an experiment to see if we could get along well enough in that kind of camping and hiking. You did that after getting married? No, before. Before getting married. So before we got married we went to Nepal as a test to see how we could be together in those circumstances and two things happened that were We were in the Khumbu area going up towards Everest. My husband is just fascinated. He loves anything to do with Nepal and the Everest area and everything. He studies it. He reads it. He just absorbs everything. And there is this book that he, that had a picture of this one from one of this monastery up towards Everest that he wanted to replicate. So we were hiking by and he took this picture. And he, then I said, oh, can I borrow your camera? You know, this is, this is in, this is in, 1986. So you didn't have phone cameras, right? So I borrowed the camera, and I took some pictures, and I put the camera down, and we started hiking again with the group. It was a small group. And I'm a little ways away, and I'm like, oh my god, I forgot the camera. And we dashed back, and it was gone. And with the picture that my husband really wanted. And he said, it's okay. And that was such a pivotal moment in our relationship that he relinquished, gave up that picture, and in that stepped into this basically an expression of love for me and forgiveness.

Also on that trip, this was later on, we had gone into the tent. I always like to put my boots outside the tent. And so I put them out there. And in the middle of the night I was dreaming. And I dreamt that somebody needed those boots. And I said, yeah, go ahead and take them. And the next morning my boots were gone. And I didn't have another pair of shoes. But my husband did. And his feet are much bigger than mine. And they were a pair of sneakers. But that's okay. We made it work. We put in extra socks. And I hiked the rest of the trip in a pair of sneakers that were too big for me. I hadn't thought about those two experiences for a while. I mean, the camera one, we think about a lot, we talk about it. Every time we meet somebody, we say, yeah, you know, this is a really important time, a moment in our relationship. But yeah, I just, it's perfect for me to put it in context of what you're talking about, Gil. So thank you very much for that. Very nice, very nice.

So he let go of the camera and what came forth from that was 40 years of a good marriage, maybe. Well, we try to remember that time and then it helps us in the other times. Very nice. Thank you. So, it's wonderful. Thank you all. It's very nice to have you and have this time together. I appreciate it a lot. And if you want to talk to someone next to you for a little bit before you go, it's often a nice thing to do. And I look forward to seeing you next week.