

Renunciation Isn't Deprivation

July 8, 2023

Whenever there's an ordination, it makes you stop and think about the principle of renunciation. For many of us, the word *renunciation* sounds like deprivation, but in the Buddha's teachings it's a kind of trade. You're renouncing your search for happiness in sensual pleasures, in your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures—the pleasures of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations—and you're going to look for your pleasure and happiness inside, in the mind.

But there's part of the mind that would like to say, "Why can't we have it all? The pleasures of the senses, the pleasures of *thinking* about sensuality, and the pleasures of deeper concentration, insight, release?" But those pleasures work at cross purposes. The simple fact of ordaining doesn't mean you're going to be deprived of sensory pleasures. They're still there as people provide you with the requisites of life, but you try to keep that side of your fascination as limited as possible.

Thinking thoughts of sensuality, getting resolved on sensuality, is part of the wrong path. The right path is renunciation. And it's important that you regard it as a trade—it's going to have to be one or the other. The pleasures of renunciation are much greater, go much deeper, are much more satisfying.

The act of taking ordination recognizes that fact. And it's good to remind yourself again and again that this is where the ultimate happiness lies.

There are three stories in the Canon that illustrate this principle. They all have to do with sleeping soundly. The first one has to do with Ven. Bhaddiya, a former king. Now that he's a monk, he sits under the tree and says, "What bliss! What bliss!"

The other monks hear this and they're concerned that he's probably thinking about the pleasures of the time when he was a king, so they report this to the Buddha. The Buddha calls Bhaddiya in and asks him, "Why do you sit under a tree, saying 'What bliss! What bliss!'" And Bhaddiya says, "Back when I was king, even though I had guards stationed in the palace, outside the palace, in the city, outside the city, in the countryside, outside the countryside, even so, I couldn't sleep properly for fear that someone might attack." And you never know about those guards themselves. "But now," he says, "I sit under a tree, my needs are met by the gifts of others; my mind is free like a wild deer."

So, that's the pleasure that comes simply from not laying claim to a lot of things that other people would want. You don't have the fears; you don't have the worries. There's a lightness that goes with that.

However, the pleasures of renunciation go a lot deeper than that. There's another story where the Buddha has been sleeping outside in the cold, and a young man comes the next

morning and asks him, “Did you sleep well last night?” The Buddha says, “Yes, I slept quite well.” The man says, “But how could you sleep well? The ground is hard. The wind is cold.”

And the Buddha gave him an example: Suppose there were a young man—this time not a king, but a wealthy young man—sleeping in a house sealed away from the wind, sealed away from the cold, with all the luxury that you could think of in a bed in those days, plus his four wives to attend to him. Would he sleep well? And the young man he’s talking to says, “Well, yes.” But then the Buddha asks, “What about the fevers that are born of passion, aversion, and delusion? Could they keep him awake, keep him from sleeping well?” “Well, yes, that’s true.” The Buddha said, “In the mind of the Tathāgata, those fevers are banished.” In other words, the mind is not disturbed by anything at all. That’s the noble attainment of the Buddha—a mind that’s free from fevers, free from all the disturbance of the defilements.

So renunciation is basically freedom in its highest form. That’s where the practice is aimed: at a mind with that freedom.

But in the meantime, before you get there, the Buddha also recommends two practices in particular. They compensate for the fact that you’re not able to indulge in the pleasures of the senses and indulge in your thoughts of sensuality—your plans—your resolves on sensuality. These come in a story where a brahman notices that the Buddha seems to be healthy—his eyes are bright, his complexion is bright—and he says, “You must get to sleep on really nice high and luxurious beds as the Buddha.” Then he goes into a description of what counted as a nice bed back in those days. And the Buddha said, “Those kinds of beds are forbidden in my teaching, but there is another kind of high and luxurious bed, in fact there are three,” that the Buddha was able to enjoy.

The first one he calls his *divine bed*, the four jhanas: the pleasure, the rapture, the equanimity that you can develop as you get the mind into concentration. This is much better than any high and luxurious bed that the world outside could offer.

What this means of course, is that when you’re giving up your pursuit of pleasure in thoughts of sensuality, you’ve got to replace it with skill: the skill of getting the mind centered, getting the mind to settle down, and to find satisfaction in being with one thing—undisturbed, just being able to enjoy the pleasure of having the mind settle in.

So, when thoughts of sensuality seem attractive, you have to remind yourself that there’s a better way of finding pleasure. And it’s right here, right here with your breath: Focus on the breath, keep your thoughts on the breath, keep your thoughts on nothing but the breath.

And evaluate it: “How’s it going right now? What could I do to make it better, more satisfying?” As you get more and more absorbed in the breath—more and more absorbed in the process of getting the mind to settle with the breath—there’s a strong sense of well-being that comes. You can allow that to bathe the body, run through all the body, from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes—all around.

You can tap into that without having to have things outside adjusted like this or like that. You don't have to lay claim to anything outside; you don't have to take anything from anyone outside.

There's a strong sense of well-being that comes with this. This is not the ultimate of the Buddha's "high and luxurious beds," but it's the kind of well-being that can come only through the principle of renunciation. After all, right concentration begins with putting aside thoughts of sensuality, putting aside unskillful mental states. You can't get this pleasure unless you can say No to the pursuit of sensual fantasies, at least for the time being. That's what sensuality is, in the Buddha's teachings: your fascination with your sensual fantasies. You have to learn how to say No to that, and only then does this other pleasure open up to you.

So, that's one of the Buddha's high and luxurious beds. The second one is the brahmavihāras. If you can't get the mind into jhāana quite yet, you can at the very least think thoughts of goodwill for everybody. The Buddha calls this his *Brahmā bed*.

You realize that, for all of us, happiness has to be found within. And the pursuit of true happiness is something that everybody can do without conflict. In other words, your true happiness doesn't have to conflict with anyone else's true happiness. That right there is a comfortable thought.

The thoughts of the world are simply: "How can I gain something and not let other people take it away?" You gain something, someone else has to lose. They gain, you lose. It's because of sensuality that we have wars—people *wanting* war, which is crazy—because their desires for sensuality are so much more important to them. They don't care who's harmed. They learn to see the harming of others as inevitable.

But when you look for your happiness inside, that pursuit of happiness doesn't have to harm anybody at all. It doesn't have to take anything away. In fact, the more you find a sense of well-being inside, the more you have to offer to others outside.

So, you can think those thoughts which allow you to have goodwill for everybody, compassion for everybody, empathetic joy for all those who are happy.

And then equanimity, when you realize that it's going to be up to each of us to make this choice. When you've chosen the path of renunciation, it doesn't mean that everybody else in the world is going to choose it, too. There's only so much you can do, but what you *are* doing in your pursuit of happiness is harming nobody. That thought allows you to be equanimous.

So, renunciation is a trade—and it's a good trade, a trade up. You're trading candy for gold. You're abandoning the fears and worries that come with trying to lay claim to power, trying to lay claim to material things, and you're finding your pleasure elsewhere, in safe places: inside you, in your experience of the body and the mind as you experience it from within. An area where no one else can enter, no one else can sense.

If you're looking for your pleasures outside, people can see the material things you have and they can want them. But when you're looking for pleasure inside, it's nobody else's business—which means it's *safe*. Nobody else has to know.

But you've developed your resources inside: through the brahmavihāras, through the practice of jhāna, right concentration, until you get to that third high and luxurious bed of the Buddha's which is the *noble* bed—where the mind is free from its effluents. In other words, no longer any dangers from outside, and also no dangers welling up from within. That's the ultimate, total freedom, total happiness.

So it's odd that the word *renunciation*, which has the connotation of deprivation, actually leads to a happiness where there's no deprivation at all.