

Trading Up

January 1, 2019

This is that time of year when people think about what they're going to give up or what they are going to try to work harder on in the coming year. The festivities of the holiday season are over now, and it's time to face reality. The basic principle of reality is that if there's something you want to gain, then you have to give other things up.

We like to think of happiness as being like a big garden with all kinds of flowers, and the more kinds of flowers and plants, the better. But there are certain plants that will kill off the other ones. If you plant your garden full of eucalyptus saplings, for instance, they'll eventually kill everything else off.

The same holds true in the search for true happiness. There is true happiness and less true happiness. And the search for happiness basically means making a trade; there are some things you've got to give up in order to gain things that are of more value. Discernment lies in figuring out which are the things of more value. This principle of trade-off is something we're doing all of the time. The question is simply, "Are the trades wise?"

Look at the description of the path that we chanted just now: There are a lot of tradeoffs. There are a lot of things you have to give up. As the Buddha said, the path as a whole starts with generosity. That's one of the precursors of the path, one of the foundations. You see that by being generous you gain. You may lose the material object or whatever it is you give away, but you gain a lot in return. When you can appreciate that principle, then you're ready for the path.

It starts with right view, which involves giving up a lot of other views, or at least putting them off to the side. With right view, we see that the big issue in life is suffering, and particularly the suffering that comes from craving. That's what we have to focus on. Which means we have to give up a lot of other opinions about a lot of other issues. We have to give up a lot of the ideas about who we are. We take that question 'who we are' and we put it off in brackets. Then we look simply at our sense of self as an action and then we can decide if that action is contributing to more suffering or is helping to put an end to suffering.

When you do this, you begin to realize that you have lots of different senses of self and you have to sort through them. It's like going up to your attic, realizing that you've got some treasures in the attic but you have a lot of junk and you'd be better off getting rid of the junk.

Then the path goes on to right resolve: resolve for renunciation, for non-ill will, and for non-harmfulness.

Renunciation means that you give up your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures. That kind of thinking constitutes a huge portion of the junk up in the attic, but of course it's something we're really attached to. When you talk about right resolve, it's easy to say that, yes, you'd like to learn how not have so much ill will for other people and you'd like to learn how not to be harmful, but a lot of people really resist the idea of renunciation. They think of it as deprivation. They think that people who come out to the monastery like this are throwing away the real happiness that human life can offer. They don't realize that we're looking for a happiness that's something else, the best that human life can offer, but it's a happiness that requires a certain amount of giving up.

In fact, right resolve connects directly with right concentration. The resolve for renunciation connects with the very first phrase in the description of right concentration: "secluded from sensuality." In other words, you're not getting away from pleasures so much as you're getting away from your fascination with thinking about how you want this pleasure, how you want that pleasure, wouldn't this be nice, wouldn't that be nice—realizing that a lot of those pleasures, when they come, they go. And what are you left with? You're left with the actions you did in order to get them. And if the pleasures really were good, then you really miss them and you want to get them again. And maybe the second time around: If the first time around the actions to get that pleasure happened to be skillful, maybe the second time won't be so skillful. You're setting yourself up for making a lot of mistakes.

So resolve that you want to get the mind beyond your fascination with sensuality.

The Buddha would get people ready to think in these terms first by giving a talk on generosity and a talk on virtue, and then on the rewards of generosity and virtue. Then he'd start talking about the drawbacks of sensuality—even the pleasures that come as a reward of being generous and being virtuous. If you just stay on the regular worldly level. Then, when you begin to see that the rewards of sensuality, even though they are nice rewards, have their bad side, you start to think that maybe you would want something better than that. That's when the Buddha said you'd be ready for the path.

So you have to look at your life. What are the things you've got to give up?

From right resolves, the Buddha goes on to describe the virtue factors of the path: right speech, right action, and right livelihood. These factors involve giving

up certain ways of talking that are harmful, giving up certain ways of acting that are harmful, any ways of making your livelihood that are dishonest or harmful.

Then you're ready to work on the mind. In other words, you've got to clear away a lot of the underbrush, clear away a lot of the junk in your life if you want to have some space for the mind to develop.

The path factors dealing with concentration start with right effort. Here again there's a trade. You work on skillful mental qualities and try to let go of unskillful ones. A lot of the unskillful ones, if you can see them in those terms, will be easier to give up. The problem is that all too often you don't see them as unskillful. You see them in other terms. Sensual desire comes up and you think, "This is the spice of life." Ill will comes up and you think, "The person really deserves to suffer." Sleepiness and drowsiness come up, and you can convince yourself, "Well, I've been working really hard, it's time for a rest." Restlessness comes up and you can convince yourself that the things that you're worried about are really worth worrying about. Doubts about the practice come up, doubts about yourself, and you can convince yourself that these things really are doubtful.

In other words, we tend to side with these things, and it's a major shift to begin to see that these 'friends' that you had, these 'little pets' you've been raising, really are harmful, that you might want to get past them. This is called generating desire. We're not giving up all desires as we practice. In fact, we've got a very strong desire for true happiness. This is what drives the tradeoff that we're making.

There was that article that appeared in Israel recently about the monastery, and some of the feedback was, "I feel sorry for all these people. They've just given up so much for what? For nothing"—as if we've given up all our desires and see nothing but bad things in the world. Well, we see that there is a lot of bad in the world, but, we see that there is a lot of good too if we focus our desire in the right place. And this is how we come to meditation, starting with the practice of mindfulness.

You strip things away, all your greed and distress with reference to the world. You stay simply with the breath in and of itself, the mind in and of itself, as you've got it right here. When things are stripped down like this, you find that the sense of well-being that can be developed as you stay focused can grow really, really intense. Establishing mindfulness, you get into concentration, thinking about the breath, evaluating the breath, making it more comfortable and letting that sense of comfort spread throughout the body. That's a sense of comfort that doesn't come when the mind is fascinated with sensuality. Sensuality here is the eucalyptus tree or the eucalyptus brush that you've got to eliminate if there's going to be room for the good things in the garden of the mind to flower.

As you go through the different stages of concentration, you get so that you can drop the evaluation and directed thought when they've done their work, and there's an even greater sense of pleasure, a greater sense of rapture. Then eventually the rapture becomes unpleasant, maybe even disturbing—because your sensitivity has grown greater, so that what seemed really nice to begin with is now not so nice after all. There will be something quieter, something better. Even the pleasure that fills the body, that's gross too. As you let go of these things as they seem gross, the mind reaches a state of perfect balance and equanimity, an extreme but very subtle sense of well-being. And it's from that sense of well-being that you can look at the ways in which the mind creates its suffering for itself and you can begin to pry them away.

So the practice in the very beginning is the practice of seeing that there is a trade and there's certain things that you've got to give up to get something better. It's a series of wise trades all the way down the line.

There's a parable in the Canon where two men have gone into a village that's been abandoned. It was abandoned in a hurry, as the result of a plague, so they figured, "Well, there must have been a lot of good stuff left behind; let's go check it out." So they go and they find some flax, the plant from which linen is made. They bundle up the flax and then, as they go on, they find some linen thread. The first man says, "Okay, this is what we got the flax for, it's for the sake of linen thread. Let's throw away our flax and take just the linen thread instead." But the second person says, "Well, no, I worked hard bundling up this flax, I'll just carry what I've got." So the first man throws away the flax and takes the linen thread. The second one takes just the flax. And from there they find things of greater and greater value. There's linen cloth, and then there's silver, and then there's gold, and in each case the first man throws away what he's got and takes the better item, whereas the second man says, "Well, I worked really hard on this flax, I'll hold onto it." When they get back home, the relatives of the first man are pleased, whereas the relatives of the second man think he's a fool.

This is basically an illustration for the path. You'll find that you've got good things to hold onto to begin with, but then you'll find better things, and you've got to let go of the earlier things if you're going to get the better things. It's a trade. but it's a trade up in each case. People who are not willing to make the trade are left with just flax. The people who make the trade, they get the gold.

So renunciation is not deprivation, it's a trade. It's a trade that, if it's done wisely, leads to true joy, leads to the true well-being that comes from the mature realization that we can't have everything we want, so we've got to decide what's really worth the effort and what's not. And it turns out that if you're willing to

give up certain things that the path tells you to give up, the rewards are greater than the things you gave up. It's not a path where we say, "Well, I'll just content myself with this little corner over here." We're not putting ourselves into a corner; we're putting ourselves into an open door that opens to something really wide, so wide that by the time you reach the goal there's no regret at all for the things you gave up. You've found something infinitely better.

So look at what you are holding onto and ask yourself, "Is this really worth holding onto? Is this the flax or is this something better or is the gold here yet?" There is gold in human life but it's not in the element of gold. It's the gold of a mind that's been well trained, that's seen that there really is a deathless element inside.

Even though we're often not conscious of the fact that we're making tradeoffs and closing off certain options as we go through life, you have to be alert to the fact that that's exactly what we're doing all the time. We're always making a trade of some sort or another. And the better part of wisdom is knowing how always to trade up.