

## *The Saints Don't Grieve*

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One of the most difficult but important principles in the practice is what the Buddha called, "Learning to see renunciation as freedom."

For most of us renunciation seems to be a restriction – as when you're getting the mind to focus on the breath. Before you make up your mind to do that, the mind doesn't seem to be restricted, doesn't seem to have any violent wishes, or disorderliness or unruliness. But then all of a sudden, as soon as you tell it to stay with the breath, it finds all sorts of other places where it wants to go. It complains that it's being constricted, that it's being tied down. You have to learn *not* to listen to those complaints, because, as the Buddha explains, when the mind really does settle down with one object, it's freed from a lot of restrictions and burdens.

He describes progress through stages of concentration as stage-by-stage release. Simply getting the mind to stay consistently with the breath, you're released from unskillful mental states, released from sensual desires. That's a state of freedom, but there's a part of the mind that doesn't see it that way. And that part of the mind gets a lot of encouragement from the world outside, partly because it's in other people's interest to have us chained to our sensual desires. Once we're chained to our sensual desires, they have a hook to sell us things, to make us buy, and our desires play along with that.

We mistrust the impulse toward celibacy, toward renunciation. I was talking a while back to a Zen practitioner – admittedly someone who wasn't all that advanced – about conflict resolution in the community, and I pointed out that having the Vinaya as our standard was very liberating. To him that was an unusual idea – that rules could be liberating. Part of his quest, he said, was "to learn how to see beyond rules so that you weren't confined by them. So how could rules be liberating?" I pointed out, "For one thing, we don't have to sit around discussing what the standards of behavior in the community are going to be week after week after week. It's all settled. The standards are livable, they're humane. So having the standards established frees us to have a lot more time to practice."

And that's just a very basic example. There are other ways in which rules are liberating as well. Popular culture likes to hear about monks and nuns who are having trouble with their vows, who end up either disrobing or acting out their desires in weird and convoluted ways. This shows that they're being confined and restricted by their rules, that they really miss the things that they gave up. That's what popular culture likes to hear – that it's offering us all the really good things in life, and that the alternatives are bogus. But when you really get a taste of what it's like to get the mind to settle down without having to hanker after

other things, you find how liberating it is. When you see the rewards, you're more and more willing to let go of the things that you're normally attached to in favor of the freedom of not being attached.

This impulse to mistrust the principle of renunciation isn't just an American or a Western issue. It goes way back in Buddhist history. For example, there's the Mahayana ideal that the arahants are stuck in a limited nirvana. The Mahayanists feel that bodhisattvas have more freedom because they have a foot in both worlds, they say.

Well, nirvana is the opposite of being stuck. For one thing, it's not a place. When there's no place, there's no being stuck anywhere. Second, the person who attains nirvana is totally undefined, with no restrictions whatsoever. From the outside it looks uninviting, but from the actual experience of the practice – of learning to let go, let go, let go and be less and less defined by this, that or the other attachment – it brings a huge sense of freedom.

So, as we stick with our efforts to stay with the breath, to stay with one thing, remember: We're sticking, but we're not stuck. We're not being confined. We're learning to give up restrictions, learning to get out of the chains that have become so familiar that we've learned to mistrust the idea that anybody could be happy outside of those chains. But the freedom beyond those chains is just what the Buddha's talking about. All his teachings aim in that direction. He said that his teachings all have a single taste. Just as the ocean has the taste of salt – anywhere you go in the ocean the water tastes salty – everywhere you look in his teachings there's the taste of freedom, the taste of release.

Even when he teaches restraint of the senses, again, it's for the purpose of liberating the mind from all the unskillful states that would arise if you weren't careful. He says that if you're not careful about how you look at things, how you listen to things, how you smell things, taste things, touch things, then the mind is assailed. It's injured by sense objects. To many people that amount of restraint sounds confining, but when you take the mind to a state of concentration where it's not injured in that way, you realize the sense of freedom, the sense of relief that results.

So a lot of the practice comes down to a willingness to take the Buddha at his word in spite of all of our fear of what it might be like to renounce things, to give things up, to show restraint. Our preconception is that it's very confining, and, as the song goes, "The saints are so miserable they're crying and grieving. I'd rather laugh with the sinners than grieve with the saints."

Well, the sinners don't laugh all that long – and the saints don't grieve: They're totally free.

So allow space in your imagination for that possibility: that renunciation really is freedom, when you do it wisely, when you do it to learn and understand. Open up your imagination to the possibility that the Buddha was right – that all these practices and rules really do have the taste of freedom.