Simplify

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The Dhamma strips things down to their essentials, with the realization that if you try to take on too many things all at once, you end up not doing anything very well. This is what the principle of renunciation is all about: realizing that some problems are more important than others, and some solutions more important than others as well. Some forms of happiness last longer than others do.

So we have to look at ourselves with the realization that we have only so much energy. If our energy gets scattered around or spread too thin, we end up not succeeding at anything at all. Given the fact that we have limitations in our time and energy, we want to make the best use of them. Focus them on the issues that really do make a difference, and be willing to give up other issues that are not so important. It'd be nice if we could cover all of our bases, to have our cake and eat it too, but it just doesn't work that way. We don't have the time; we don't have the energy.

We can think of renunciation as a process of simplification. That's a word with a nicer ring to it nowadays: You want to simplify your life, to cut away the unnecessary clutter. But either way, whether you call it simplification or renunciation, there are hard choices you have to make. And so it's best to look at it as a tradeoff. You can spend your time on activities that give immediate results that don't last very long, or on activities that give more long-lasting results but take more effort, more time, more patience, require more precision. Ultimately you realize that the best trade is the one where you give up lesser forms of happiness for more long-lasting ones, ones that speak to the really deep issues in life.

What are those issues? Well, there's the fact that we're active creatures. We're constantly acting, constantly putting forth an effort of some kind or another. So the question is: What's the best use of that effort? As long as we're putting forth an effort in some direction, we want to get results that last even though the effort itself might not last. With all the energy that goes into the effort—and sometimes the suffering and stress that go into the effort—we want good results to show for what we've done, so we can look back at our lives and say, yes, that was a life well spent. A life well worth the effort involved. At the very end of life, it's all going to seem so short—just that little bit of time we have here as human beings. We want to make sure that we don't fritter it away.

Look at your life in the same way you'd look through an attic, deciding what you're going to keep, what you're going to throw out. You're moving from a

house with a large attic but you've got only a small trailer to make the move. Some things need to be thrown out so that you have space in the trailer for the things that really mean a lot to you. In other words, there are things you've got to give up in order to have the time for the things that really matter, really make a difference, really do give substantial results. That's the underlying insight that informs the teachings on renunciation.

When you think about it, you realize that the time best spent is the time spent developing good qualities in the mind, because those are things that can help you in any situation. You have to devote a certain amount of time to keeping the body strong, but with the body you reach a point of diminishing returns. Ultimately there comes a point where no matter how much you've looked after the body, it's going to leave you. And sometimes it doesn't leave you nicely. Sometimes there's a messy parting. And in cases like that, you'll be glad for the time you spent working on the mind, because you realize that that's much closer to home. At the same time, the strength of the mind when really developed doesn't have to depend on the strength of the body. It doesn't end when the body dies.

This is one of the things you discover as you meditate. Ordinarily, when people are tired they get in a bad mood. They feel overwhelmed, really put upon. But when you learn how to develop a greater sense of spaciousness in the mind, a greater sense of wellbeing in the mind, after a while you begin to realize it doesn't depend on the level of energy in the body at all. The mind begins to have its own internal nourishment, its own internal place to recharge.

This is why we spend so much time sitting here with our eyes closed, working on mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, because these are the qualities that will see the mind through any situation. When you see people really "losing it," this is what they've lost. They've lost their mindfulness, they've lost their concentration, they've lost their discernment. So you want to work on strengthening these qualities. Whatever time is spent making them stronger is time well spent.

This is what's meant by taking refuge in the Dhamma: realizing that if you focus on these few things, you don't have to worry about other things. You can really trust the practice to see you through. Often our desire to cover all the bases is a fear that if one thing doesn't work out, something else will. And we hesitate to commit ourselves to a particular path of action for fear that it may not see us all the way through. We hedge our bets. Yet instead of providing us real protection, this attitude ends up giving us a life of nothing but bits and pieces: a little bit of this, fragments of that, a little bit of peace, a little bit of wealth, a little bit of health, nothing in any really solid measure.

But by taking refuge in the Dhamma we're taking refuge in the conviction that developing the mind will cover all contingencies. And because the practice of virtue, concentration, and discernment—all the seeds for happiness—lie right

here, that simplifies matters. It also allows us to give our full energy to the things that matter most.

So even if from the outside it may look as if the life of practicing the Dhamma has a lot of hardships, a lot of renunciation, a lot of doing without, it's not an impoverished life. You find that real wealth develops inside.

One of the first things that attracted me to the Dhamma was seeing my teacher, Ajaan Fuang, living a very simple life—a little tiny monastery out in the hills of Rayong, just a couple of huts, not that many people—but he was happy. You could feel a very strong sense of wellbeing just emanating from him. And you realized that it didn't depend on his being wealthy, it didn't depend on his being famous or having a lot of students or friends or anything. It was simply because he had worked on his mind. As he said, he wasn't born that way. Whatever sense of wellbeing he had developed in the mind came through the practice. And as you come to know the practice, come to know the Dhamma, you realize exactly how all-encompassing it is. Once these qualities are developed in the mind, they take care of all kinds of situations. Qualities of mindfulness, discernment, and concentration are basic to any skill, basic to our ability to deal with any situation. So by focusing on these few things we really do cover all of our bases. They encompass everything.

One of the good things about the Dhamma is that it's so big. You can give your whole life to it. It's something *worth* giving your life to, because it teaches you what you need to know, teaches you the skills you need to handle whatever life throws at you—and more. So even though a life of renunciation may seem like a life of getting pared down and narrowed down, it's not really that way at all. It broadens out because you're not confining the mind with narrow, petty issues. You're dealing with the few really big essential issues in life that cover everything.

Years back when I was a young monk I had to take the Dhamma exams—the exams they give to the monks in Thailand once a year—and part of each exam involved writing a short Dhamma talk. They'd give you a phrase from the Pali Canon or a couple of verses from the *Dhammapada* or *Sutta Nipata,* and you'd have to develop that particular theme, bringing in another related Dhamma quote before you finished. The first year you had to bring in one quote; the second year, two; and for the final year, three. To prepare you for this part of the exam they gave you a book with Dhamma quotes to memorize. And being your typical American I hadn't had that much memorization practice in school. The little novices would memorize pages and pages of these Dhamma quotes, but I realized that in my own case it would be wise just to pick a couple of quotes that would be useful in all circumstances. The one I found useful every year was a passage from the *Dhammapada:* If when you see that there's a greater happiness that comes from abandoning a lesser happiness, be willing to abandon that lesser happiness for the sake of the greater one.

That's a principle that covers all situations and it's the one underlying the teachings on renunciation. In fact, it underlies the whole practice: realizing that as long as we're putting forth effort into our lives, we might as well put forth effort that will leave us something to show for it. Think of the number of people you know who have lived very active lives but then toward the end look back and say they have nothing to show for all that activity, for all that effort, for all that suffering. But you won't find in that group of people anyone who's been practicing the Dhamma. The effort that goes into the Dhamma gives long-term benefits in terms of developing the qualities of the mind, opening us up to new dimensions that we wouldn't have even imagined otherwise.

So when the Dhamma requires that you give things up, remember that it's a tradeoff in giving up a lesser happiness for a greater one. You're giving up the habit of scattering your energy around in exchange for a better habit, one of focusing on the qualities of the mind that will see you through every situation and take you beyond situations.

This is why it's so important to strip things down to the essentials and stay with the essentials. The essentials cover everything. They take care of everything. They can provide you with all of the refuge you need.

So even though it may seem simple-minded, we're sitting here focusing on what? The breath coming in and out. It may not seem all that profound or intellectually stimulating, but it's one of the essentials. Not only the breath in and of itself, but the habits we develop as we keep the mind focused on the breath: mindfulness, alertness, persistence, clarity of mind. These skills are basic to all skills in life, so make sure that you really have them mastered. Whatever you have to give up in terms of time devoted to other things in order to master these skills, it's a wise trade, a trade that leaves you with something far more valuable than whatever has been abandoned. That's something you can depend on, because these are qualities that teach you how to depend on yourself. There's that passage, "The self is its own refuge." It means that ultimately you have to be your own refuge, and that you can be your own refuge only if you develop these qualities that make you dependable. If you depend on them, ultimately you find that they allow you to depend on yourself. That's a promise that comes with a 2,600 year old guarantee.