

Renunciation (Right Intention, Part I)

It's October now, so it's time that we move to the second part of the Noble Eightfold Path. You'll recall that the Path is divided into three sections: wisdom, morality, and concentration. So far, we've only covered the first part of the wisdom section: Right View. Right View encompasses the concepts that we must understand in order for the rest of the Path to make sense. To reduce it to the most basic formulation: 1) our actions have consequences, and 2) our suffering is caused by craving.

Tonight we begin our discussion of the second part of the wisdom section: Right Intention. Where Right View consisted of things that we should know or understand, Right Intention comprises those mental states that we should actively cultivate. These are three: renunciation, good will, and harmlessness. We can think of Right Intention as forming a bridge between the interior qualities of Right View and the external behaviors described in the morality section of the Path.

“Renunciation” is a scary word for most of us. It brings to mind the more dramatic types of renunciation that are practiced by monks and nuns. This is indeed one aspect of renunciation. This kind of renunciation is often motivated by a frustration with the limitations of household life. This was the case for the Buddha himself.

The Buddha described his early life as a prince as one of extreme luxury, but he became disillusioned with that life due to his observations about aging, sickness, and death.

Even though I was endowed with such fortune, such total refinement, the thought occurred to me: 'When an untaught, run-of-the-mill person, himself subject to aging, not beyond aging, sees another who is aged, he is horrified, humiliated, & disgusted, oblivious to himself that he too is subject to aging, not beyond aging. If I — who am subject to aging, not beyond aging — were to be horrified, humiliated, & disgusted on seeing another person who is aged, that would not be fitting for me.' As I noticed this, the [typical] young person's intoxication with youth entirely dropped away. —AN 3.38

He then reflected on the drawbacks of a normal household life as described in this passage:

Before my Awakening, when I was still an unawakened Bodhisatta, the thought occurred to me: 'The household life is crowded, a dusty road. Life gone forth is the open air. It isn't easy, living in a home, to lead the holy life that is totally perfect, totally pure, a polished shell. What if I, having

shaved off my hair & beard and putting on the ochre robe, were to go forth from the home life into homelessness?' –MN 36

Notice the part about “life gone forth is the open air.” This idea of renunciation as freedom occurs again and again in the suttas. Renunciation is not seen as deprivation, but as liberation. This is an important point: “freedom” as we use it in an everyday sense often means being able to do what we want, to be able to indulge our desires. In Buddhism, we pursue freedom *from* desire in order to overcome suffering.

Another common way that renunciation is described in the suttas is as a trade off of something cheap for something valuable. There is a part of the canon called the Theragatha that is a collection of short verses spoken by monks. One of these expresses this idea of a beneficial trade.

I'll make a trade: aging for the Ageless, burning for the Unbound: the highest peace, the unexcelled rest from the yoke. –Thag. 1.32

So we see that renunciation in Buddhism does not have the flavor of hardship that we may associate with the word, but rather a feeling of freedom, lightness, and energy.

But most of us, for one reason or another, are not ready to leave our homes and become monks or nuns. How can lay people practice renunciation and experience its benefits?

A good starting point is material generosity, or *dana*. Not only does this practice help others, but also it makes us feel good. When we're giving, we can't feel like we don't have enough, so the practice combats feelings of dissatisfaction. The practice of *dana* is also very effective at helping us to see attachments that we might not otherwise have been aware of.

The sharing of material things, and even the greater material renunciation practiced by monks and nuns, is outward renunciation.

This in itself is valueless without inward renunciation. In the words of Bhikkhu Bodhi:

Real renunciation is not a matter of compelling ourselves to give up things still inwardly cherished, but of changing our perspective on them so that they no longer bind us. When we understand the nature of desire, when we investigate it closely with keen attention, desire falls away by itself, without need for struggle. –from The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering

So what we really need to give up is our attachment. Giving up the things to which we might be attached is a tool to expose our attachment and make it easier to combat. When we see the attachment and examine it, we've gone a long way toward getting rid of it.

As with so many topics in Buddhism, this brings us right back to the Four Noble Truths. Suffering is caused by craving, so it's the desire that we need to be free from.