

Letting go: *Nekkhamma Pāramī*



The previous chapter introduced the renunciation *pāramī* as one of the first three perfections. I'll add some more on renunciation, because what it entails can be misunderstood, and its value underestimated. Far from being the route to starvation, renunciation is the path to realizing fulfilment.

Examining Needs and Wants

If the first three perfections establish a vehicle in which to cross over the floods, renunciation also takes us further: it pushes the boat away from the ground that the floods break over. It takes the mind to a more stable place, where it can gain access to great ease and clarity. So like every other *pāramī*, renunciation supports (and depends on) wisdom. Wise renunciation goes against the current of gain — that very powerful assumption that happiness comes through having or storing up something, even a spiritual something. This assumption, which promises a way out of dissatisfaction, actually supports the nagging insecurity of assuming that we are fundamentally lacking, inadequate or needing to be propped up. As long as this assumption holds the mind, we can never realize the independent balance that is Dhamma. This is why, if you really want freedom from the suffering that the mind creates, you have to be prepared to challenge the assumption of gain and loss. Otherwise, you'll be chasing its mirages and projections forever, and losing touch with the way to freedom.

Just looking around reveals how this sense of inadequacy is played upon by the forces of material consumerism that are exhausting the planet. They support the notion that the senses will provide us with fulfilment — but do you know anyone who has fulfilled human potential, or is at peace, through feeding on sights, sounds, tastes and the rest? Of course, it's not so easy to give up that dependency. Feeding on the senses remains a natural inclination for us until we have realized something more fulfilling and less prone to loss, jealousy or addiction. That's why true renunciation, rather than repression, can only develop dependent on finding fulfilment through cultivating the mind. This isn't to deny that material support in terms of adequate food, clothing, shelter and medicine is essential for human life; but to recognize that 'adequate' may mean forty pairs of shoes to one person or a yearly pay of millions of dollars to another. Even then, the sense of 'adequate,' 'enough,' 'satisfied' keeps slipping away from the outreach of the clenching hand into 'another one,' 'a little more.' The reason for this lies in the clenching reflex itself: when we grasp, we tighten up, lose perspective and limit the mind's potential. In that state, we lose balance — so we reach out for more, and then tip over.

On the other hand, cultivating our spiritual potential gradually eliminates the sense of lack and thereby grants contentment and inner strength at no cost to oneself or other creatures. To at least attune to the spirit of this cultivation checks the tide of ignorance: we stop ignoring the evidence of the *dukkha* of the clenching hand. Once we have learnt the clarity, resolve and skills from handling the pull of the senses, renunciation can go further — we can let go of attachments to status, to our opinions, and even to who and how we assume we are.

In this psychological domain, renunciation is in two stages: letting go (*cago*) and complete relinquishment (*vossagga*). Letting go is the giving up of trying to be something, the giving up of holding onto some psychological ground as one's own; this refers to the attachment to becoming and views. Complete relinquishment is the abandonment of the sense of self, of being any finite coherent

thing, subtle or gross, in terms of mind states or of awareness itself. This is the abandonment of ignorance. So the development of this perfection runs in tandem with the development of wisdom. When the mind is firm, composed and clear, it can stand free of habitual supports.

Renunciation in its most obvious sense entails introspective enquiry: to look into one's wants and wisely translate appetite into relevant needs. This wise discernment is a vital requirement in the world of the total, round-the-clock, internet market. So keep asking yourself, 'Do I really need this?' When you enquire into needs rather than wants, you'll find that needs are simple. To me clarity, balance and the ability to bring forth the good seem to be needs — along with the more relative needs (time to meditate, adequate teachings and material support) that make this possible. Needs tend to simplify and take you through the jungle of fantasy to a place of value. When I attend to wants on the other hand, it's not long before the next little want comes along on top of the first ... and then the next ... and then the sense of being inadequate and deprived. But maybe instead of having another snack, the itch to get out of feeling bored or empty would be met by an act of generosity or kindness to another. And maybe the hankering for entertainment would be addressed by steadying and brightening the mind's energies through meditation.

Therefore it's important to keep reviewing what is necessary, using reflections such as: 'What I get in terms of my mind states is the result of how I act.' To support cultivating the mind, there's a relative need for food, shelter, clothes, medicines and so on, and relative needs change as situations change. For example, there might be the need for a university degree or a car to get to work. And just because they're relative doesn't mean that they're not important — for a while. To judge current needs takes an ongoing cultivation of wisdom. Therefore, when one looks into the impressions and aims that come up in life, it's good to recollect: 'This seems to be how things are right now, and this seems to be the direction to go in. What is necessary, and how much do I want to commit to that?' Then there is an opportunity to bring wisdom

into one's life in a down-to-earth way. This process of enquiring into relative needs, rather than denying that there are any, is one of the hallmarks of the Buddha's approach to renunciation. It's a gentle and reflective practice, not an ascetic ideal. This is an important point, because taking an absolutist stand against the sensory world places the mind in the current of the three non-sensory floods.

Steady in the Face of the Floods

These floods — of becoming, of views and of ignorance — become more apparent as we cultivate introspective meditation. Becoming (*bhava*) is the appetite to assemble status, personality role and accomplishments for the enhancement that they offer us. So this could even mean being the most accomplished ascetic in the district! When the mind takes a stand on becoming, the trend is to get swept into wanting to be something that we sense we aren't and yet could or should be. Most of us are trying to believe that we are, or are going to become, better than we believe we are now — although what we think we are is just a point of view. We can get depressed believing that we're not good enough, without really questioning: how good do you have to be to be at peace with yourself? Isn't every talent, act of service, or development a plus on top of that? Being at peace with the way you are right now does require an ethical sense, and clarity with regard to the mind, its energies and moods. So being at peace doesn't mean there's no room for development, but that the interest in development can come from the wholesome wish for truth and self-acceptance rather than from an ungratifiable need to be something.

Becoming also operates in a counter-current as the urge to be nothing (*vibhava*), to be apart from what we assume we are. So when we think we haven't become anything great, we can feel like failures. Because of this urge to push away what we think we are, people seek oblivion through drink and drugs. People even kill themselves — every financial crash evokes a wave of suicides from businessmen, not because they have been made destitute, but through the depression of not wanting to see themselves as

failures. So this flood of becoming is a source of loss of self-respect, contentment and wisdom. When in this flood, we're running from a false assumption and towards a mirage.

The flood of becoming supports and is supported by sensuality, views and ignorance. People can feel they've become something special when they've increased their ability to possess a lot of fancy expensive stuff. And the drive of becoming is one reason why people feel they need to be something special: the unique, the charismatic, the weird, whatever. In terms of becoming, just being one in seven billion is a waste of time — hence we get neurotic about our individuality. Actually we already are unique, we already have become what we seem to be; the game is being played and we can contemplate the sense of identity as it flows and changes. That's miraculous enough.

But when this flood makes us numb to our potential, one of the illusory certainties it offers is to become a believer, someone who forms an identity out of their religious views, beliefs or political inclinations. This lens of identity is called 'self-view.' Under its influence, people adopt -isms and get fundamentalist about them — 'this is true, this is right, all those who don't share my views are deluded, damned', etc. Fundamentalism gives people a strong sense of belonging to the tribe of the just and the true; it comes from an inability to handle the fluidity of being open. But we can get across this too, if we can meet and be steady in life's uncertainty. We may feel the energy going up into our heads and a shield forming over our hearts to hold ourselves firm; we may harden to defend ourselves from those of different views. But if we get hot and frame people in a distorted light, in the bluster and smoke of all that, we don't notice the fire. So the thing to notice is not the view, or the other person, but the shift of energy that gets our hearts pumping and our thoughts whirring into battle stations. That's the fire of ignorance. The practice of cooling the fire involves coming into the body and steadying the heart through the breathing. Putting out that fire entails questioning: is holding onto this producing suffering in myself and others? From what urge, flood or unconscious reflex does it stem? Can that be

let go of? And how? This is the enquiry into the Four Noble Truths, the heart of the Buddha's teaching.

Meeting the Floods

To come out of the deadlock of the floods begins with the ability to recognize rather than repress them: to witness what they do to us. Notice for example the pull of the senses or the lure of success in terms of the tensions and the boost that they can give us, as well as the lurch that comes with loss and failure. Then there's the 'I'm not like this, I should be like that' of nagging doubt and conceit. To acknowledge these as they are, rather than follow them or pretend they're not happening, is the beginning of renunciation. We start by letting go of the blindness around self-view. We can be open about how we shut down and hang on and the results of that.

As we enter the turbulence of meeting the floods, often in the direct contemplation of mind, we meet who we seem to be at any given time and check out what that identity is based on. Is there ease or worry, contentment or guilt? Then it can be addressed. So renunciation is a doorway to meditation, not a denial or repression. Repressing the sensual instinct just by verbally condemning it doesn't go very far. Even when you want to be pure and non-attached, irrational emotions can suddenly trip you up. Instead, rather than focusing on the objects that desire brings up, we can develop the skill of directly looking into and through the energy of desire. We can access the energy that is carrying the thoughts and images. We can notice that energy in the mind's restlessness, blockage or passion. And through cultivating the mind, we can steer that energy along channels of goodwill or embodied calm that give it a longer-lasting well-being than the quick fix of sensuality.

Notice in a straightforward way how the energy of the floods tosses the heart around. Then, rather than react to this, judge it or even to try to fix it, a mind that is attuned to renunciation knows the 'no-option' attitude: 'This is the way it is right now.' That clear

acknowledgment and emotional acceptance also help to shift the focus to a deeper place beneath the floods. So just as these floods manifest in terms of thoughts, emotions and energies, the way of reversing them is threefold: intellectual, emotional and energetic. Having an intellectual understanding of the illusory nature of attachment and the benefits of letting go is a good start, but you need to have the emotional acceptance of their presence. That truthfulness collects and focuses the mind and makes it capable of turning the energy of the floods around. You don't cross over through good ideas alone.

Instead, the energy of the floods has to be met. That is, as you steady the heart to directly meet the waves of experience, you feel their energy. This first contact manifests as a disturbance, a ripple in the stream of conscious moments. Something feels touched, struck, and it shivers. Then comes the second contact, which we interpret as 'I'm being affected/touched' and 'That affected/touched me.' This secondary impression, the one the heart makes, is what we make out of contact. It's where our psychologies of being offended or needed or appreciated kick in. And good or bad, we really buy into that; that's where 'I' as an active subject arises. It feels like you're being moved or even thrown around in a series of familiar responses, although the basis of all that is just a habitual impression stirring the heart. Yet out of that will arise all the voices of doubt, and the stories of what I am.

This is why this stage of meeting the flood with *pāramī* is so dynamic and transformative. In the figurative description of the Buddha's Enlightenment, it's said that he was beset by the host of a great demon called Mara; and this is a good way of depicting and getting some perspective on all those nagging voices that come up when you practise any of the perfections. You've probably heard these: the ones that whisper, 'Why bother?' or, 'Why shouldn't I have what she has? It's my right!' and, 'I can never do this, I'm too weak-willed.' This is where the Buddha overcame Mara — by knowing all that as just an activity, and it can be given

up. You have the possibility not to act like the self that it creates as stuck in the flood. Isn't that an opportunity? You can stop making anything out of the ripples and the waves of contact. Thus the agitation and stirring abates, until even when the ears and eyes and the rest of it are receiving impressions, the heart remains steady.

Accepting the Flow of Experience

So you keep your wisdom sense open for the voice and the feel of hankering for things, the forces that get bound up in views and trying to prove how good you are. It's a revelation that has its embarrassing aspects: we once had a monk at the monastery who was very grim about Dhamma practice, and took delight in seeing the down side of life. One of his favourite words was 'putrid': he could talk about the body being putrid, the food being putrid and life in general as being rather putrid. When we were having a tea break at the end of a day of work on building the monastery, he would say, 'Look at how the craving for sweet things arises.' He'd make you feel guilty about drinking a cup of tea. But then one day, he was going to the kitchen and passed the place where all the slops go. An 'After Eight' mint chocolate had fallen off the table into the slops bucket. It caught his eye, and before he knew what had happened, his hand was in the bucket and he was fishing it out and eating it. He'd lost the control that the view had given him. His renunciation hadn't penetrated to the more instinctual level.

Being willing to acknowledge and meet the floods takes great heart. Ajahn Chah said that being a monk is knowing about letting go, but being unable to do so for ninety percent of the time. Just seeing that certainly crunches the ego. However with truthfulness there's a necessary development. You start to come more from the heart, the sense that works in terms of relating to experience rather than fixing and organizing and making yourself into what you think you should be. So as we witness the limitations of knowing Dhamma through our ideas, we grow in the emotional strength and capacity to relate to the floods. We come to a more

measured and patient approach, and we don't get hung up on being or not being something. Then we can be with the grasping in a clear but non-judgemental way. For purity you have to transcend rather than repress the flood; you have to know the pull of pleasure, feel it and relax it. You have to get to sense how attraction works, and how to release that energy by referring to the awareness of it. This is a heart inclination rather than a technique, and awareness is brought to the fore through patience and kindness. So you give up the ideas of who you are and how things should be, and instead breathe patience and kindness into the grasping and the agitation.

I remember one time sitting quietly on the lawn in back of the monastery, and the thought arose in me to do some meditation. However, once I'd decided that I should be calm and undistracted, I noticed the sound of the pigeons flapping their wings. 'Flap-flap-flap, flap-flap-flap!' So I thought, 'I can't sit here!' Then some people walked past. 'I can't sit here. People are walking around.' Then there was the sound of their voices. 'Noises, noises! I can't sit here!' So I practised with 'just sitting.' Not meditating, but just sitting here and being with what was happening. There were waves of agitation coming up around sights and sounds, and then the ideas started up. I thought, 'I've got to go somewhere else at five o'clock; I've got an appointment. It's a quarter to five! Mustn't be late' — even though the appointment was only a three-minute walk away. Then the emotional reactions kicked in: I didn't like this agitation, so I found myself getting irritable with my stupid mind. However through all this, I kept coming back to just sitting here, and 'it's all right.' Letting the sights, sounds and agitation roll through and deepening into 'it's all right.' It may sound unimpressive, but it cut off some suffering.

So it is: one can create pressure out of 'trying to meditate' to the point where you lose composure and awareness, and become unable to simply open up and accept the flow of experience. You get snared by the meditation demon.

This probably happens for most people — thoughts coming up in the mind, holding tight to those thoughts and then getting that itchy feeling that says you've got to do something! When this kind of thing comes up, it's like Mara's tickling you under the nose with a feather to see if he can get you going. If the feather doesn't work, he starts coming with a little stick and a poke: 'I've got something to do, can't just sit here!' Have you ever sat on retreat and found out how many urgent things there are to do, that you simply have to get done ... and then as soon as you leave the meditation hall you think, 'It's not that important, really. I don't really need to do that.' But then you feel embarrassed at leaving the hall and think, 'I'm pretty stupid. What will the others think of me?' So you decide you'd better leave the retreat altogether. As long as you hold onto some idea of what you should be, ignorance has you on the run. Therefore when you sit and meditate and you feel that geyser bubbling up in the mind, don't even think, 'Oh, I'm too agitated now. I can't meditate.' Instead, go beneath the topic and be with its energy. Feel it in your body, and as you do so, breathe through it without aversion, but with a kindly and gentle attitude. There's all the time in the world to be with the mess of the mind. This is practice; this is letting go, isn't it?

So when energy feels like it's trying to throw you out, just open your awareness, widen and soften. This may ask you to bring forth all your *pāramī*; it may ask you to be more complete and real than your daily life activities do. Sometimes it feels like being on an edge where you can only find footing for a moment. But a moment at a time is all you need, and in reality it's all you have. So you abandon the time-bound historical personality and let the wave pass through you. It's like standing in the sea and allowing waves to arise, splash over you, and then subside. If you keep moving back from the wave, it follows you. It follows you up the beach and it catches you anyway, but it catches you running away from it. If you stand still and let the wave roll over you, you stand your ground against *dukkha*. You see that it is just of the nature to arise and cease. You know that you're not that wave, and you're not someone who has, or shouldn't experience, waves. You're not

hooked up to sounds, sights, views, or to their absence or to being somebody who experiences this. If you make a person out of this process you're caught in the flood. This is the ultimate purpose of renunciation: to give up these attachments, this sense of an unconscious need to be something and of not being enough right now. We give up and relinquish attachment to all of that, so that instead of getting lost and drained, we fill up with the rich heart of awareness. With the shift of letting go, you have another place to stand.

Enlightenment Comes Through Relinquishment

Enlightenment involves derailing and deconstructing the sense of lack. It is getting rid of that piece of psychology that in every moment says, 'There's something else that I should be having right now. There's something else that I should be right now. There's somewhere else that I could go right now. There's somebody else who's got it better than me right now. I'm not complete right now. I need to be something right now.' Enlightenment comes when we are free of that and not gratifying it with, 'Oh, now I can do this. Now I can do that. Now I've got one of those. I'm getting there. I'm nearly getting there. Now I can watch my breath. Now I can sit in *samādhi* ... I've got there.' Following these, the hunger doesn't go away. It can take on more interesting shapes, get more technical, but it doesn't go away through filling oneself. It resolves through renunciation. We have to let go of that black hole of 'not enough.'

This is because although it feels like a hole, a lack, it's actually a block. It's the accumulated pressure of the floods. What is needed then isn't filling it, but releasing it. On the psychological level this means working against the *bhava-vibhava* currents. What feels wrong at this time? What shouldn't be here right now? Whatever it is, *accept* it. The more you don't want it, the bigger it gets. How do you want things to be right now? *Relinquish* it. The more you want it, the farther you push it away. Daily life practice is to keep working against that *bhava-vibhava*, especially the *vibhava* that keeps saying, 'I'm fed up with this. I've had enough of this. I don't want to be in this situation. I can't stand this another minute!'

Accept it; sidestep the topic and welcome the energy as it arises. I find this very helpful when the mind panics. Then as I look into that I see that it all nestles down inside that sense of lack, of being deprived of my space, my time, or my peace of mind. The cry for peace of mind can get pretty aggressive when it comes out of the place of hanging on!

However, the detail of the practice is that letting go is dependent on cultivating strengths and clarity. Release requires relative fulfilment. In terms of Dhamma, this fulfilment is the flowering of the seven factors of Enlightenment: mindfulness, introspective investigation, energy, rapture, ease, concentration, and equanimity. This may sound like a tall order, but these are the factors that start to form as you meet rather than react to, or get swept away by, your personal world. So when you want to know yourself, rather than affirm, deny, please or annihilate yourself, that interest supports mindfulness and introspective investigation. You bring a steady witnessing to your mental content, you bear it in mind and enquire into it: 'Is this useful; does it lead to my welfare or that of another? How stable and reliable is this thought or emotion?' This supports the *pāramī*: you see how certain intentions, such as generosity and ethical clarity are beneficial, and so on. The *pāramī* then support the Enlightenment Factors, because they give you worthy intentions to keep energising, just as you withdraw from unskillful ones. And this brings clarity and happiness to the mind.

In meditation, when you focus on this happiness it becomes rapture — an uplifted, suffusive energy — and ease, a contented feeling. Focusing on these brings around concentration, and that supports equanimity — an evenness of energy with a spacious feel. These Enlightenment factors are **transpersonal** in that the habitual identity, delineated by skeins of thought, mood swings and reactions, is in abeyance. But the leading edge and generator of these factors is through the correct handling of the personal world with its choices, responsibilities and random input. The transpersonal is correctly entered through handling one's personal life in the light of the perfections.

It's important to note and practise that, because one can enter transpersonal levels of the mind without the proper preparation — say through drugs, or through incorrect use of yogic practice, or even through meditation. When people put too much attention onto subtle energies, or are too eager to get out of their personalities, a vital connection is broken. Then deluded, seemingly Enlightened states can occur, which are difficult to get out of. Or someone can lose their sense of who they are and can have a breakdown. This is why the Path requires integration of all levels, and *pāramī* play a big part in that. The renunciation aspect of this vehicle is there to train us: whatever manifests on any level is not to be clung to, not as my self or any cosmic self. When that lesson is learnt right down to the ends of one's psychological nervous system, then the transpersonal can open to the Beyond.