

Pāramīs (3 of 10) Renunciation

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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We are continuing with the topic of the *pāramīs*. In Sanskrit, they are known as *pāramitās*. Sanskrit-derived Mahayana Buddhist traditions have a somewhat different list of six that is quite famous. The Theravāda tradition that we're part of has this list of ten that I'm teaching.

The third *pāramī* is usually translated into English as “renunciation.” There's a rumor that the topic of renunciation is not a very popular topic for Western Dharma teachers to teach about. That is rather a pity because I think renunciation is a fantastic, wonderful virtue and quality. Maybe one reason why some people hesitate to teach it, and why some people are even frightened and put off by the concept of renunciation, is that it has a lot of negative connotations of letting go of

things that maybe we shouldn't let go of. This includes the idea that letting go means we somehow become less of a person, or that we have to let go of things that are valuable parts of life, or things that we're attached to.

I think the word “renunciation” has a religious origin. I believe it literally means “to announce again.” I think it comes from monastic life, when someone makes a formal public announcement that they are now entering into religious life as a monastic. In that sense, renunciation is almost a sacred act. Likewise, the similar word “sacrifice” sometimes implies painfully giving up something that we don't want to give up. Again, it implies that having to sacrifice something means a diminishment or something unfortunate. But apparently, the original meaning of the word in Latin was “to make sacred.” Here we have a religious connotation.

It is the same way in Pali: the Buddhist word *nekkhamma*, translated as “renunciation,” has a very positive association. In my reading of the ancient texts of the Buddha, it has more to do with what is gained than what is lost. Certainly, it is a letting go of something, and it's a shift, but it's also a stepping into something. When you step away from something, you also step into something else.

The story I like to tell about what we gain in the process of renunciation is about getting snowed in for the winter with all your extended family in a one-room cabin. At the end of winter, after being all cooped up, when the snow has melted enough to open the door, *nekkhamma* is like stepping out into the open mountain air and the extensive pastures. It's a delight and a wonderful thing to go forth out of the cabin. One of the etymological meanings of the word *nekkhamma* is "to go forth" in that way – to leave the dusty confines of a life that is constricted, like being locked up in a cabin in the winter.

The idea is that renunciation is a movement that opens toward something beautiful. Freedom is strongly associated with the idea of renunciation. And if we associate renunciation with letting go, it also has to do with what we let go into. We don't just let go of our clinging, attachments, and resistance because they're painful. We can also let go because those painful movements of the mind and heart keep us from what is sacred. They keep us from what is best in us – from peace, happiness, well-being, groundedness, sensitivity, and compassion. Clinging keeps us from the beautiful qualities of the other *pāramīs*, the ten virtues.

I feel that renunciation is something to be really deeply appreciated and valued. When you ask inside whether you should renounce something and let go of it, if you feel as if doing so makes you less than, or it's a drag to

let go, then it's probably not wise to let go. It's wise to be careful about what you are doing. The renunciation we are talking about in Buddhism should also make us happy. There should be some degree of joy, or opening, or feelings of satisfaction or rightness in what we are letting go of.

Certainly, sometimes we have to let go of things that we want, even things that are valuable, for the sake of other people – for the sake of our children if we have kids, parents, or neighbors who are sick. I wouldn't say that we jump with joy when we let go of our plans for the day in order to take a neighbor who's sick to the emergency room. But hopefully, doing that has a deep feeling of rightness. If we let go and we're resentful, deeply discouraged, or depressed by what we've done, that's very unfortunate.

If we let go well – that is we understand why we're doing it, and we're letting go into what's best for ourselves and others – there's a great opportunity in letting go. Maybe unfortunately we had to let go of our plans for the day, but it feels like everything is better. It feels right to take our neighbor to the ER, sit there with them, and care for them. We feel that of course that's the right place to be.

As the third *parami*, renunciation follows the first two. The first is generosity, which is a giving of something. It

is a kind of renunciation, but it is renunciation that is not obligatory. It is done from an inspiration of generosity. We can feel how profoundly beneficial letting go of something as a gift can sometimes be. Here, we are beginning to learn the value of letting go and giving up something.

It is the same way with the restraint involved in *sīla* – living a life of ethical conduct, behaving in ways that are ethical, wise, or don't cause harm. This also is not meant to be a drag, but rather, something that frees our integrity and provides a certain kind of freedom. The Buddha talked about the bliss or the happiness of *sīla* – the happiness of living an ethical life. *Sīla* is a kind of restraint. We restrain ourselves from killing, lying, sexual misconduct, stealing, and intoxication. We start to feel that restraint is not just about losing something. We are gaining something in the process. Then we are ready and prepared for renunciation as a continuation of that.

But with renunciation, we are talking about something that is more than behavior – like the behavior of generosity, or the behavior of restraint – how we act with our bodies and mouths. Now we're beginning to go inward. We are talking about the renunciation of things that the mind-heart is holding onto – things that the mind-heart is doing and valuing. This is a deeper movement of letting go within the mind and heart itself.

With that letting go can come something really wonderful: the joy of renunciation, the joy of letting go.

Without some letting go, there is no Buddhist path. Some people resist that or are even angry that we have to do it. But almost any endeavor that we're serious about doing in our life involves letting go. It usually also lets in something else that is good.

For example, if we decide to get an education because we want to do something of service for the world, that might take all our effort for a while. We have to let go of many other things we're doing that we don't have time for while we're engaged in this educational project. Or maybe we decide to be a parent. There is a lot of letting go in being a parent. In fact, if a parent doesn't learn to let go, they are probably in trouble. Hopefully, a parent can learn to let go, especially in the early years of raising young kids. If they don't learn how to let go in a way that's graceful and brings joy, the frustration and anger that can come are sometimes not very pretty.

In certain situations, we are asked to let go. The course we're taking requires a lot from us, so we have to let go a lot. One example – I don't know if it's the best example – is an athlete who gives themselves fully to what they're doing and goes all-out. The other day I was hiking up in the mountains here, and in the middle of the summer, there was a high school track team out

running. It was beautiful to watch these young high school students running in the mountains. It was almost like watching deer. I felt their joy and delight in running. But maybe they were doing that instead of other things.

It is the same way with the Buddhist path. It's very, very valuable, and some people really feel committed to it. The practice does require some letting go of other good things, in order to meditate every day, or to go on retreat, or to really make it a central focal point of one's life. The degree of renunciation that people practice in order to follow the path of freedom and liberation varies from person to person, by their circumstances, their interest, their intentionality, and their vision of what's possible.

Each of those (meditation, retreats, living the Dharma) is valuable, but they all require some renunciation, some decision: "I'm going to do this, and not something else." I've seen some people who don't understand that, and are trying to do everything and also squeeze in meditation and Buddhist practice, as if they can have their cake and eat it too – as if they can have everything and add enlightenment on top of that.

I think that to enter the Buddhist path wisely and beneficially, some degree of renunciation, along with careful reflection and wise consideration, is necessary. Hopefully, we realize that renunciation is actually

important. It is not a diminishment – it's a letting go of other things, and a letting go into one of the most beautiful, profound, and meaningful things a person can do – the path of liberation.

That is what the Buddha did. The classic understanding of the ten *pāramīs* is that they are what the Buddha cultivated for many lifetimes to prepare himself to become a Buddha. They are foundational. That mythology applies to us as well. There is a time and place to become wise, appreciate deeply, and feel the benefits and the happiness of renunciation.

You might spend the next 24 hours on this topic of letting go and giving up, where the word “giving” means generosity, and “renunciation” might mean doing something sacred. What are the best possibilities that you know of in renunciation and letting go? What do you gain in the process? How do you benefit? How does the world benefit from your renunciation, your giving up? Reflect on that and think about it. Think about when you've already done beneficial renunciation, and what you've learned from that. How does renunciation apply to following the Buddhist meditation path in a way that benefits you? Talk to friends and read about it. Spend the next 24 hours building momentum through the *pāramīs*. Spend time with renunciation.

Thank you.