RENUNCIATION: THE HIGHEST HAPPINESS - Sister Siripannà

On March 29-31, 1996 Sister Siripannà, from the Amaravati monastic community in England, assisted by Sister Thaniyà, offered a weekend program at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies entitled "Renunciation: The Highest Happiness." These are just a few excerpts from that rich and diverse program.

I once saw a cartoon strip about a little character called Hagar the Horrible. It really summed up for me what so many people seem to feel about the theme of renunciation. Hagar is climbing a very steep mountain, and in the first frame you see him going up, laboring away. In the second frame you see this very wise-looking sage with a long white beard sitting on the top of this mountain. And Hagar says to him "Oh great sage, please teach me the secret of happiness." In the third frame, the sage says, "Simplicity, self-restraint, renunciation." And in the fourth frame you can see Hagar pausing, and saying "Is there anyone else up here I can speak to?" In a way, I think that says it all, doesn't it?

> This is what should be done by one who is skilled in goodness and who knows the path of peace: Let them be...contented and easily satisfied, unburdened with duties, and frugal in their ways. (Metta Sutta Sn 143-4)

When we find out what the spiritual path involves it sounds to our worldly mind like a deprivation. There is a part of us that feels renunciation means to lose everything we love; having to deprive ourselves of what is pleasant and enjoyable in life. This is understandable, for this is really the only way that the worldly mind can conceive of letting go of seeking fulfillment in pleasant experience.

Yet I'm sure that within all of you there is also something else, something beyond that mind that is always wanting and craving and trying to hold on to our identity and experiences, that recognizes and resonates to this word renunciation. Whenever I've talked about this theme with other people, often they say that although the word horrifies them in a way, there is also a fascination, an echo of something we intuitively long for. This is the aspect of renunciation that I hope to tap into as we explore this very deep theme. As the contemporary Indian thinker Raimundo Panikkar says, "Not everyone has the inclination to take up the vocation of monasticism, but all of us have some part of us which is a monk or a nun; and that should be cultivated." So as we consider these teachings and reflections that speak to that part of all of us which is a monk or a nun, it is not necessarily something that involves having a shaved head or wearing a robe. It is an attitude, a way of approaching life, which essentially boils down to giving up seeking our fulfillment from the experiences of our life, of needing them to have a particular quality, and giving our energy instead to understanding experience itself.

When we understand this, we can start to glimpse that **renunciation is not a matter of doing something or having to create something, or getting rid of something or exterminating something in life. Rather it is moving towards non-contention, a sense of rest and relaxation—not having constantly to try and manipulate and control and evade and maneuver any more.** We are able to open in a fearless way and relax into the experience of the moment, whatever its quality may be. In opening to receive life, we still engage in the conventional level of reality--the social level of moral values, identities, mother and father, livelihood and mortgages. If we grasp these things and expect complete fulfillment from them, we will always be disappointed. But if we see our life as an opportunity to understand Dhamma--the way things are--that is renunciation. This letting go is very freeing. Whatever comes to us is Dhamma, and there is a joy in being in contact with Truth, whatever its particular flavor. Renunciation can sound like passivity, a "door mat" philosophy, but actually it is the opposite. True response-ability--the ability to respond wisely and compassionately to life--naturally arises in the non-attached mind. There can be both activity and letting go.

I have seen the misery of pleasures.
I have seen the security involved in renouncing them:
So now I will go.
I will go on into the struggle.
This is to my mind delight.
This is where my mind finds bliss. (Sn 424)

The theme of renunciation is not very widely talked about, and even less widely understood. Obviously one cannot come to a complete understanding of such a topic in one weekend—it is really a lifetime's endeavor for each of us. But we may be able to give you some meaningful food for thought, some building materials that you can take away with you. At the Amaravati monastery we have quite a lot of study groups, and we have quite a lot of familiarity with the Buddhist scriptures. But our investigation of the tradition is always coming from a very experiential point of view, which interests us far more than scholarship for its own sake. My own study has always been of the heart. We are always encouraged to talk about our own experience and our own practice. It seems to me that's really the only way that it's worth using the teachings—that is what the Buddha offered them for. He was always encouraging people to think for themselves and to develop their own understanding. It is from this perspective that I draw your attention to certain texts and quotations from the Buddhist tradition. Reading the text is actually only a small part of the enterprise of study—it is far more important to try and understand for yourself what the Buddha is saying, and to try to bring this understanding alive in your lives.

I do not say that you can attain purity
by views, traditions, insight, morality or conventions;
nor will you attain purity without these.
But by using them for abandonment,
rather than as positions to hold on to,
you will come to be at peace
without the need to be anything. (Sn 839)

The Buddha offered some quite specific and very practical teachings on the subject of renunciation in the Pali Tipitaka. One of these is called the Sabbàsava Sutta (MN 2). Sabbàsava means "all the àsavas," a word often translated as 'taints'. Perhaps, though, a more immediately understandable translation of àsavas would be "outflows of self," the way our sense of being someone tends to flow out and collide with the world. The sutta is a useful examination of how we can let go of—how we can renounce—these aspects which are sometimes described as "the states that defile, that bring renewal of being, give trouble, ripen in suffering and lead to future birth, aging and death." The text gives a simple outline of various areas of our life and how we can work to free ourselves from the trouble that comes when we don't really understand the way things are. It starts by examining the insight into the unsatisfactoriness of attachment to any form of identity, to any form of self, to conditions—to any experience at all. This arises as a natural consequence of seeing into and starting to understand the transience of the experiences we have. I think each one of us has had some glimpse of that unsatisfactoriness. And yet for most of us it is a very different thing to move on from that—to really live in a way which expresses that understanding. The Sabbàsava Sutta shows us how to take this insight, which is quite accessible to anyone who looks carefully at life, and to really put it into action so that we can start to free ourselves. It's putting it into practice that's the difficult thing, not the actual insight itself.

After the sutta considers the insight, seeing clearly, which is the foundation of all our practice, it goes on to explore very practical ways in which we can support and actually put into practice letting go, abandoning

that which is hindering our life in everyday situations: 1) restraining—a wise use of the senses that does not give rise to outflows of self. One manifestation of the insight into impermanence is that one starts quite naturally to restrain oneself; 2) using—how we use the things of our life, the material objects, our homes, our clothes, our food, and more subtly, how we use the time in our life; 3) and 4) enduring and avoiding how to bring insight and clarity into the more unbearable aspects of our life. We have to endure some things and we have to avoid some others. We consider carefully which things are worth enduring and which things are best avoided. 5) removing —how we can actually remove and free ourselves from things which are unwholesome or harmful in our life; and 6) developing--how, through letting go of what is unwholesome, we move toward what is supporting enlightenment, freedom, peace, and what is supporting wholesome, beautiful mind-states.

> The days and nights are relentlessly passing;
> How well am I spending my time?
> This should be reflected upon again and again
> by one who has gone forth. (AN 10.87)

Let us start by reflecting a little bit around **one particular aspect which supports renunciation, restraining—both restraining the senses and moral restraint. U**ntil we have at least a glimpse of the futility of grasping—of constantly seeking and manipulating and chasing after pleasure as an end in itself—then sense restraint doesn't actually make much sense. And if it doesn't make much sense, obviously we're not going to do it. And yet, the Buddha repeatedly pointed out that restraint is the absolute bedrock of the practice of letting go of the world, of renunciation. If we are just completely lost in the flow of desire, there's no possibility of finding perspective, of understanding more deeply. There has to be a reining-in—a turning against the stream, before there can be any sense of perspective or clarity.

> Lose the greed for pleasure.
> See how letting go of the world is peacefulness.
> There is nothing that you need to hold on to
> and there is nothing that you need to push away. (Sn 1098)

In the Sutta Nipàta there is a verse which says: **"Those who leave one thing to take up another, and follow attachment, never relinquish desire. They are like monkeys who let go of one branch only to grasp another, only to let it go in turn."** (Sn 791) This mad monkey mind swings through the trees, endlessly chasing after sweet fruits, on and on and on, and never ever ever gets enough. This is what we must start to look at, find out for ourselves. In many texts the Buddha explains the danger inherent in sensual pleasures and the blessing of renunciation. What do we make of this phrase, "The danger of sensual pleasures?" The Buddha's only concern in all the teachings he gave over 45 years was with two things: he was addressing the issue of dis-ease or suffering (dukkha) and the end of suffering. This was his only interest. So, when he talks about the danger of sensual pleasures, he's talking about it in relation to suffering. It's not the danger that sensual pleasures are bad in themselves, or evil; but if we have the wrong relationship to the sense realm, then we'll all find (if we reflect on our own experience) that **just reacting to the sensual world is a continual experience of unsatisfactoriness.**

> Whatever bliss in the world is found in sensual pleasures,
> and whatever there is of heavenly bliss--
> These are not worth one sixteenth part
> of the bliss that comes with craving's end. (Ud 2.2)

After pointing to the dangers of sensual pleasures, the Buddha next speaks of the blessings of renunciation. My own experience, in a monastic life where by necessity there has been a lot of sense restraint, is a tremendous sense of freedom and relief. There is a real ease and relief in not having to be obliged to run after the world all the time. It really has to be experienced to be believed—how wonderful it is, what a privilege it is. And yes, there is sometimes this little wanting voice that whispers (and sometimes screams!) "I want that. I want it." Believe me, it's there. But it is not something I trust anymore. It is just not something I want to follow. It is a liar! This becomes clearer and clearer over time.

> Who so has turned to renunciation,
> Turned to detachment of the mind,
> Is filled with all-embracing love
> And freed from thirsting after life. (AN 5.55)

In monastic life we stop just following desire because we want to understand it rather than be deluded by it. The attention has to turn inward so that we can start to understand the very mechanism of how we grasp the sense realm itself. With this understanding we can learn to let go.

> Whatever is not yours, monks,-- abandon it!
> When you have abandoned it,
> that will lead to your welfare
> and happiness for a long time.
> And what is it that is not yours?
> Material form is not yours--abandon it!
> Feeling is not yours--abandon it!
> Perception is not yours--abandon it!
> Formations are not y ours--abandon them!
> Consciousness is not yours--abandon it!
> When you have abandoned it,
> that will lead to your welfare
> and happiness for a long time. (MN 22)

Now, we talk a lot in this kind of way, but when you come down to real life, how do you actually do it? The Buddha gave some very simple but clear suggestions—ways that we can begin to ground ourselves more in our experience, to have some kind of anchor from which to contemplate this constant driving force in the mind that is always moving towards sense experience. One of them I find so clear and simple, and is probably well known to most of you: mindfulness of the body.

> "This is how a monk trains himself in restraint: A monk seeing objects with the eye is not drawn to attractive objects, is not repelled by unattractive objects. He remains with firmly established mindfulness of the body, his mind being unrestricted." (SN 35.206)

This is very useful training as to **how we can anchor ourselves more amidst sense experience without being drawn in to it.** The body, being the first foundation of mindfulness, is the most easy within which to sustain attention—and the least deceptive. Our body is a very honest thing. It doesn't tell us lies, like the mind that rationalizes and tries to convince us it has good reasons for following its wishes and whims. So the body is a very good place to use as a first base for our expeditions into the more hair-raising spheres of the mind, and it's where attention should gravitate towards as a kind of anchoring post.

The image is often used of this post firmly stuck in the ground. When there's something fixed in one place, and you start pulling against it, you notice there's a tugging. But if you have no reference point, then the mind is just constantly shooting off here and there and--oops, there we are again swinging through the trees. And we haven't noticed because there was nothing to refer to, there's no contrast to movement. Anchoring the attention within the breathing (when we are in a situation where it is possible to be that refined), or as we sit here, feeling the body pressing against the seat; feeling the whole body, the posture, sitting, standing, walking, lying down—this is anchoring the mind in the body. A very simple thing, and yet it does start to give us a tremendous possibility; now the mind hasn't been drawn out, grabbing hold of something—but has a space within it. A space within which it can see what's going on.

So we start to contemplate sense experience with an inner questioning: "How am I seeing this?" instead of just seeing something and "Oh, I want it!" Your whole energy has shot out through your eyes and you've completely lost that post, that centeredness. Instead, turning inwards, we notice "Ah, the eye has seen something attractive." We can reflect on that. This is something that can be known. We can notice our habitual response to a pleasant sight, for example, or a particular sound, or a memory, or the way someone speaks to us, the tone of voice, a thought: "How am I receiving this? How does it feel?" This very simple awareness is in itself restraint. And it's the beginning of a true renunciation. When we step back a little there comes to be this sense of detachment, which allows the mind to begin to reflect. This allows a clarity to begin to arise in the mind, a sense of brightness. And within that brightness we can start to understand when it is appropriate to follow—when a desire is valid and it's going to help and be something useful to follow—and when it's going to just lead to these vexations and fevers that are so unsatisfying.

> The impulse "I want"
> and the impulse "I'll have" --lose them!
> That is where most people get stuck.
> Without those, you can use your eyes
> to guide you through this suffering state. (Sn 706)

One of the joys of the Buddhist path is that it is something we are taking upon ourselves. Nobody is judging us except ourselves. And there is room to experiment. It's a gradual teaching, a gradual path. So if we have a little bit of insight we can let go of a little. And we see the result. And then maybe it's three steps forward and two steps back. But if we always have this attitude of inquiry, of interest, we avoid falling into this trap of coming from the "should" position.

Just reining in our impulses in an attempt to conform to an ideal is a willful restraint that does not necessarily lead to renunciation. Renunciation is an inner freedom, a sense of ease. There are people who grasp hold of the idea that we should be restrained, we shouldn't have too much fun and we shouldn't do this, and we shouldn't do that. "A proper Buddhist, a real meditator wouldn't do that." People come into the monastery and they say things like "Oh, I know I shouldn't have, but I had fish and chips last night. And I did enjoy it." Well, for goodness sake, if you are going to have them, enjoy them! There is this little voice in us that grabs hold of the idea and is trying to live to an ideal, whereas in fact we still want to do it.

You really have got two choices: you can want to do it and do it, or you can want to do it and not do it. But don't want to do it, do it, and then feel guilty about it. Do one or the other, do it tally, and determine to learn from it. If you are caught by guilt and judgment and self-hatred because you think you shouldn't be doing it, then there's no opportunity for understanding. That's a very contracted mind-state; it can't reflect. We have to be clear enough and compassionate enough to allow ourselves to indulge sometimes--but really watch the effect. Be clear enough to notice how you feel. Does it feel as good as you thought? Was it worth it? What are the consequences to yourself and to others?

The restraint of mindfulness leads to understanding, and understanding leads to peace. This is the middle way, falling between two extremes: not constant indulgence, nor on the other side a kind of "shouldn't" accompanied by the guilt and the clamping down and tightening up that says, "I'm going to get my act together." This is actually falling into the other extreme of repression, or self-hatred--which is really a form of self-mortification.

> When he does not think:
> "This is mine" or ""That belongs to them;"
> then, since there is no self there,
> he cannot grieve with the thought,
> "I do not have" (Sn 951)

A very useful simile for understanding our relationship with sensual pleasures is offered by a wise layman called Citta. In this story from the Samyutta Nikàya he is speaking to some senior monks: "Venerable Sirs, it is just as if a black ox and a white were joined together with a single collar or yoke. If someone were to say, 'The black ox is the fetter of the white ox, the white ox is the fetter of the black'--speaking in this way, would he be speaking right?" And the elder monks reply: "No, householder, the black ox is not the fetter of the white ox, nor is the white ox the fetter of the black. The single collar or yoke by which they are joined--that is the fetter there." And Citta replies: "In the same way, friend, the eye is not the fetter of forms, nor are forms the fetter of the eye. Whatever desire and passion arises in dependence on the two of them--that is the fetter there. [The same is said for the ear, nose, tongue, body and mind] The mind is not the fetter of ideas. Nor are ideas the fetter of the mind. Whatever desire or passion arises in dependence on the two of them—that is the fetter there."

Reflecting on this, one realizes that something very important is being said here. The problem does not lie in sense experience—in alluring or unattractive sights or sounds or tastes or thoughts or emotions. Nor does it lie within the fact that we have to see and hear and taste and touch and smell and think. If we're not careful, we can start to make some mistaken assumptions. When we start to wake up to the disease inherent in the constant bombardment of sensory experience, we can start to feel that the experience itself is the problem.

Sometimes you see this amongst people who meditate, or are very committed to a spiritual path, when it seems they want to withdraw more and more from strong, difficult, or complex experience. And it can become a very contracted, fearful, un-alive form of living if one is not careful. One becomes more and more frightened of being stimulated too much by life, and from a kind of weariness of strong experience one wants to get away from it. We can do this in meditation, too, except we call it something nice: we call it 'getting concentrated' or focusing the mind. But sometimes the attitude behind that, if we are not honest and careful, can be a sense of wanting to shut things down, to "get away from." Or, alternatively, sometimes we can start feeling averse to being a sensitive creature which has eyes that see and ears that hear and a mind that thinks, thinks, thinks. Sometimes we can wish to not exist, to somehow not have to feel, not have to think.

> Màra says to a group of young monks:
> "Do not abandon what is visible here and now and run off to distant things."
>
> And the young Monks reply:
> "We have abandoned what is distant and run towards what is visible here and now. The Lord Buddha has said (worldly) pleasures are distant (of uncertain result), produce much suffering

> and despair, and are a continual disappointment. But this Dhamma is visible here and now, immediate (in result), inviting one to come and see, guiding one onward and capable of being experienced by the wise." (SN 4.3.1)

Actually there is no problem with the sense realm when we are firmly established in knowing that it is just as it is. The sense realm has its own quality of suchness. Some of it is ghastly, some of it is wonderful, some of it is blissful, some of it is terrible and tragic. This is the way it is. And we are sensitive beings—we are always going to feel the world. Rather than feel it less and less, as we become more open we actually feel it more and more. And if we practice correctly, more and more deeply, we allow the world to enter us. But the escape in the case of sense pleasures is not poking out our eyes or stuffing wax in our ears. And it's not blaming "it" or "them" out there for our sense of unsatisfactoriness. Unpleasant people and things and experiences are always going to exist--but where is the actual problem? The problem lies in the grasping of the desire to get rid of, the desire to have, the desire and passion that arise in dependence on having senses and upon sense objects. The beautifully simple image of two oxen yoked together says a lot, doesn't it? Where is the fetter?

> There are two extremes which should not be followed, bhikkhus, by someone who has gone forth:
> Devotion to pursuing sense pleasure, which is low, vulgar, worldly, ignoble and produces no useful result;
> And devotion to self-denial, which is painful, ignoble and produces no useful result.
> Avoiding both these extremes, bhikkhus, the Middle Way that a Tathàgatha has Awakened to gives vision and insight knowledge, and leads to peace, profound understanding, full realization and to Nibbàna. (Mv 1.6)