

Renunciation
Houston Zen Center
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In life, and particularly in the life of a mind such as human beings have, if you look at almost any topic and study it long enough, you realize that it is connected with and depends on everything. When you first start looking at the topic of renunciation, you may think it's some limited thing, but the more you study it, the more you realize that it is interconnected with all aspects of Buddhist practice. In particular, renunciation can be seen as the key for entering into the practice of wisdom united with compassion, or compassion united with wisdom.

I have met many people who have a very deep sense of compassion, who really care for the suffering of many beings and really want to devote their lives to helping suffering beings become free of their suffering. I have met many people like that. So there is compassion in this world. But most people who are compassionate also still have some attachment, or considerable attachment, attachment to the very beings for whom they have such good wishes. For example, many parents would virtually give up their lives for their children. They would do anything to prevent their children from suffering and to relieve their children's suffering. Many parents are like that. Some children are like that toward their parents, too. Some brothers and sisters would give their life for each other. Some husbands would easily give their life for their wife, and vice versa. If you have kidney problems, because of genetic similarities, a member of your family might donate a kidney for you. You might also be willing to give a kidney to your brother, sister, mother or child. I know a woman who gave her kidney to her daughter. You have two; you can give one away. Giving like this is compassion. But it is also possible to give your kidney or give your blood or give your life away with no attachment to the other person that you're giving to, and with no attachment to the outcome.

If we are giving, generous, and compassionate to beings, but we think that they are other, and we are attached to them, this attachment will eventually undermine our compassion. It will severely undermine it after a while until finally we will give up our compassionate work, because we will be burned out by the drainage that occurs due to attachment to beings and results. We can be very helpful while still being attached to outcomes. We can be very helpful while still being attached to the people we're helping. However, every time we help people with that attitude of attachment and the belief that people are separate from us, we gouge a little out of our spiritual energy, and if we help many people, we will eventually run away from the work of compassion to save our own life.

On the other hand, if we are devoted to the welfare of this world and have no attachment, then every time we do something beneficial or helpful to beings, it doesn't drain us and doesn't drain them. This compassion joined to wisdom is a compassion which can fully function in the world. This compassion includes virtuous activities, such as giving, ethical conscientiousness and study, patience, vigorous effort and concentration, as well as all kinds of meditation. To realize these practices and to unite them with the wisdom that makes it possible to "not grasp" at these very practices, or at the results of these practices, we practice renunciation. Renunciation is a way to enter that united and perfectly pure compassion. It is a wisdom which understands interdependence in such a way that it is perfectly clear that there is nothing to

grasp. To have that wisdom is essentially love and compassion. Renunciation is a way to enter into that united practice of wisdom and compassion.

In many ways, renunciation is very close to being wisdom itself. But it is a little bit different from wisdom, in the sense that it is almost like the practice of entering wisdom. Wisdom is, in a sense, simply giving up all your views, all your opinions, all your truths, and all your falsehoods. That's what renunciation is, too. Basically, renunciation is to give up, to surrender, to give away anything that hinders being with what's happening. Anything can hinder being with what's happening if you hold it, if you cling to it.

Last weekend I was going to Vancouver to do a retreat studying renunciation and I saw a newspaper sitting on a seat at the airport with the headline, "Fear and freedom are at war." That was the headline. I didn't exactly disagree with that. Fear and freedom are not necessarily at war, but I do see a relationship between fear and freedom. In a sense, if you are afraid it's hard to be free. In another sense, I feel that when I am intimate with fear I am free. Another headline that didn't get in the newspaper that week could have been, "Intimacy with fear is freedom." Or, "Freedom: intimacy with fear."

In the same newspaper there were many other articles that used the word "fear," fear of this, fear of that. I feel it these days on this planet and in this country. People in the United States are more aware of their fear than they were three weeks ago. I hear so often now the word "security." People seem to be very concerned about security. They want security. People have always wanted security. People want to be free of fear. Now that we are aware that we want security, many of us are aware that we do not feel secure. Many of us feel afraid. But I think that freedom from fear is intimacy with fear, and security arises from intimacy with insecurity. I think fighting insecurity produces more insecurity. I think that denying insecurity interferes with security. Facing insecurity and facing fear is the path, the practice of realizing freedom from fear and from insecurity.

Renunciation is to let go of worldly affairs. What is a worldly affair? A worldly affair is not going shopping. That's not a worldly affair. A worldly affair is not brushing your teeth. A worldly affair is not changing diapers. A worldly affair is not going to the doctor. A worldly affair is not selling an apple. A worldly affair is to attach to something that takes you away from what's happening. A worldly affair is when, if you are afraid, you do something to try to not be where you are and how you are. That is a worldly affair. A worldly affair is a distraction from reality. Renunciation of worldly affairs means that you let go of anything that takes you away from what you are experiencing. Renunciation is the way to enter pure presence with what you are experiencing. Many of us often experience horror, sadness, fear, insecurity, desire for security, and the desire to be free of fear. We experience these things. These things are okay, but to grasp them takes you away from them.

Similarly, to meet a person and to grasp the person, to try to possess him, distracts you from just being with him, and distracts you from what it is you are experiencing in being with him. It is the same with fear. If you grasp it or reject it you lose the experience of the fear. But the experience of the fear, if you are intimate with it, is within the situation of realizing fearlessness, security and freedom. So renunciation is crucial for freedom. It is crucial for security, and it is crucial for working for the welfare of beings in a

world where we have all these experiences, in such a way that we can be present with what's happening and be part of healing the wounds of our planet.

I would like to talk to you about meeting whatever happens with no mind, which is another way to talk about renunciation. Whatever you meet, whoever you meet, whatever you meet in terms of your own feelings, your own thoughts, your own sensations, whatever you meet when meeting beings, whether friends, neighbors or enemies, whoever you meet and whatever you meet, whatever comes to you, meet it with no mind.

“No mind” means not your regular mind. What is a regular mind? With a regular mind I meet a person. Let's say it's a woman and I say a woman is different from a man. I say it's a good woman or a bad woman. I have these opinions and that's how I meet her, and I grasp those. I hold them as self-evident, true, or whatever. This is our usual way of meeting people. Renunciation is to meet people and give that up, even though it still goes on. Some part of your mind is consciously or unconsciously calculating what gender this is. That's not going to stop. You've got built-in equipment to gender identify everything that comes your way. Meeting whatever comes with mind is going to continue more or less indefinitely. The practice of renunciation is meeting it in another way, namely, giving up, letting go of the distinctions that your mind is making. For example, I can see someone and think: “This person is an ordinary person,” or “This person is not a Buddha. I know Dave. Dave is not a Buddha.” My mind makes a distinction and says, “He's not a Buddha. He is just an ordinary Texan.” I might look at someone else and my mind says, “Oh, he's a Buddha. He's a Zen teacher. He's practically a Buddha.” There is making that distinction. The mind does that, but renunciation means to let go of that, to give that up, because that way of meeting Dave, of calling him a Buddha or not a Buddha, takes me away from the meeting with Dave. To meet someone and to hold on to the way he appears to you takes you away from being with what is happening.

Another way of putting this instruction is to meet whatever comes with complete relaxation. That's renunciation, too. Usually we don't meet whatever comes with complete relaxation. You might meet an old friend. For example, I might meet Jim and think, “I feel pretty relaxed around Jim.” But I still haven't relaxed this thing that is “Jim.” Complete relaxation means letting go of the tension and also of the view of who this is. You do have a view of who this is. But relax. Let go of it. Don't grip it. Let it go. This is renunciation.

The really big thing that is happening with each meeting is that I think I am meeting that thing that is out there, separate from me. That's the big view to consider relaxing with. How about letting go of that? Letting go and renouncing that view is perfect wisdom. This is an amazing idea to be able to let go of some of this, not to mention to let go of it all.

Imagine having a practice in which you could relax and meet anything. For example, here comes cancer. Boom. Relax. Here comes a super insult. Boom. Relax. Here comes a great complement. Boom. Relax. Here comes a tremendous insult. Boom. Relax. This is an amazing thing. This is one of the main things that attracted me to Zen. There is a story about a Zen teacher who relaxed when insulted and also when he was praised. I was impressed by this. When I saw him relax after being insulted, I thought, “Wow.” When he relaxed after being praised, I thought “Yes.” Both ways: whatever comes, don't grasp it. Whatever comes, don't ask for seconds. Whatever comes don't ask for an alternative. Don't ask, “Could I have a

different reality? Let's not have that one." This is an amazing accomplishment. I thought if I could be like that I would have no problems and I would no longer be a problem. I still think so. I am still trying to be relaxed, whatever comes. That's why I come to Texas, to see if I can be relaxed when I get here. I'm testing my relaxation.

A man came to see me recently and said, "My wife is really mad at me." He said, "Our house is full of stuff, and she wants me to get rid of it. But I'm not getting rid of it fast enough for her, so she is enraged. I agreed with her. But just when I'm ready to start moving some of the stuff out, somebody tells me something about a really urgent task that I must perform and if I don't they'll punish me, like for business or something. So I feel that I will be punished if I don't do it."

We don't really think that it is our job to move stuff out of our house. We don't usually get paid to move stuff out of our house. We usually get paid to move stuff into our house. You get paid to move stuff into your house and your wife screams at you in a big way. When he was talking I could hardly wait until he was finished, so I could say, "Great!" I said to him, "My wife says the same thing to me. She says, 'Don't die and leave me with this house full of stuff that I have to deal with.'"

So for the last two years I have been gradually trying to move things out of my house so that when I die it won't be a big problem to people. But the most important thing is if before I die the house gets emptied. That's the most important thing. Renunciation is to empty your house. Empty it. Empty your house.

If you empty your house, you will get closer and closer to emptying your body and mind. If you empty your body and mind and your house, then the natural flow of your life will be unimpeded, and wisdom and compassion will be realized. Energy is trying to flow, according to the way the universe is functioning. It's trying to flow where it should flow. The question is whether we are holding on to stuff and blocking and clogging up the passageway. I said to this person, "You're afraid not to do these tasks because you will be punished. But if you empty your house, and these people tell you about these essential tasks, and threaten you with punishment, you won't be afraid."

When your house is empty, you're not afraid. There's nothing to hurt you when your house is empty. When nothing can hurt you because your house is empty, you are not afraid to do what your wife asks. You're not afraid of her hurting you or anybody else hurting you, because there's nobody to get hurt anymore, because you gave up everything.

But again, people think, "Empty my house—all of it?" Someone up in Vancouver said, "Should I get rid of my toaster?" Lots of people think it's not too hard to get rid of your toaster. But some people tell me that it's actually unhealthy to eat bread untoasted, so those people would be afraid to lose their toasters.

By the way, emptying your house does not mean emptying the stuff that other people have put in the house. It means emptying your house of the stuff you put in it, the stuff you care about. You don't have to get rid of things in the house that other people are attached to. They have to. The things other people put in the house are the things that come to meet you. Your house is empty. You've got an empty house, and other people come and put stuff in your house. This is the stuff you meet with an empty house. You've

already got an empty house, and people come and dump garbage in your house. But when your house is empty, really empty, you meet that garbage with complete relaxation, because before the garbage comes into this empty house there is total life energy flowing through the house, which meets the garbage and says, "Hi. Welcome, garbage." It says, "Welcome."

At the end of the morning service, we chant the Heart Sutra which ends: "Gate Gate Paragate Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha." We can translate this as "Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond." That's perfect wisdom. That means your house is empty, empty, gone beyond empty, gone completely beyond empty. The last two parts are "Bodhi, welcome." "Enlightenment, welcome. Welcome, enlightenment." In other words, "Welcome. I'm ready, because I don't have anything." We don't say, "A little bit later, enlightenment, I'm a little bit busy right now. Some people have asked me to do some stuff, and if I don't do it they're going to punish me, so I can't be enlightened right now. I've got to do this first. I've got to get my toenails painted and brush my teeth. I have to pay my bills and then I can welcome enlightenment."

You may think, "Oh no, I think I would welcome enlightenment, if it came." But enlightenment is always coming, every moment. If the house is not empty, if you haven't renounced worldly affairs, if you haven't renounced anything that takes you away from this suffering, from this fear, then you are not really ready to say welcome to enlightenment. Saying welcome to enlightenment is exactly the same as saying welcome to garbage. You say welcome to whatever comes.

The usual mind does not say, "Welcome." First, it says, "What is it? Garbage? Well, then, no, thank you. Is it jewels? Okay, fine, come on in." But before it says, "Come in," and before it says, "No, thank you," it checks to see what it is. It doesn't say "Welcome," and then see what it is. The usual mind discriminates how this will work for Number One. "Is this going to hurt me or help me or what?" The usual mind is afraid of everything. It asks, "How bad is it?" and then says, "Oh, that's not too bad. It's my wife," or, "It's not too bad, it's my husband," or "It's not too bad, it's my kids." But people are afraid of their kids. People come home from work and they say to themselves, "Okay, ready? Can I open the door now and see what happens?"

I heard a guy on the radio, a Dr. Spock of our times, saying, "If you're a working mother, cheat a little bit at work. Don't work too hard. Save a little bit of your energy so that when you go home and you open the door and all hell breaks loose you can meet it." A lot of mothers are afraid to open that door, fathers too. And the children. It's frightening, if you have anything in your house. But if you empty your house, this amazing thing can happen in your life, because there is an inexhaustible energy flowing through this world, and it doesn't miss any spots. Great energy is flowing through all of our bodies, and if we just have no attachment, if we just practice renunciation, then there will be enough energy to meet our own children. There will be enough energy to meet your husband or wife. There will be enough energy to meet whatever comes, and even to meet it without slipping back into grasping what you're meeting and blocking that energy again. I know I'm talking about a really big, amazing thing, to empty your house. But emptying your house is not as hard as emptying your body and mind. However, it is what you do first. Empty your house and then meditate in the full true sense. If you don't empty your house, you can meditate somewhat. I think most of you have been meditating somewhat. I'm talking about getting ready to do the real meditation that is possible for human beings, a meditation that can happen when your house

is empty. Until your house is empty, you are somewhat hindered, or severely hindered, by what you're holding on to in your house. You're somewhat or severely obstructed in your meditation by what you're holding on to, by what I'm holding on to.

If you want to do the Buddha's meditation someday, then you have to open up the house. You have to let go of absolutely everything that is interfering with that total love, with no attachment. Of course, today, we probably won't be able to start such a practice and continue from now on with never a break. Even if today you were to decide, "Okay, today, I think I'm going to empty the house," when you get there you might say, "But not this, and not that."

You should also check with your family about this. One of the rules of this sort of practice of emptying houses is that you must consult with your family before you give anything away. It's a complicated thing sometimes to actually do it. That's why as part of this practice the great priest Eihei Dogen says, "We vow with all beings from this life on, throughout countless lives, to hear the true Dharma, that upon hearing it, no doubt will arise in us nor will we lack in faith; that upon meeting it we shall renounce worldly affairs."

"To hear the true Dharma" is the way you hear when your house is empty. When your house is empty, when you actually meet the true Dharma; when you actually meet the true teaching of the Buddha, you will renounce worldly affairs. If you could really meet it, you would let go of all the stuff that's clogging your life, and vice versa. When you let go of all the stuff, you will meet the true Dharma. Then when you meet the true Dharma, you will maintain the Buddha Dharma, and in doing so the great earth, this great planet, and all living beings will attain the Buddha Way.

Dogen also says, "Our past evil karma has greatly accumulated, indeed being the cause and condition of obstacles in practicing the way." Because of our past actions, it is going to be hard for some of us to do this practice. Because we have habits of not letting go of stuff, we have habits of getting more stuff. Part of what is happening in this world today is a knock at the door saying, "Time to let go. It's time to let go."

Dogen goes on to say that if we quietly explore the farthest reaches of causes and conditions, this practice is the practice of a verified Buddha. By confessing and repenting in this way, by revealing our lack of faith in practice, by revealing that our house is stuffed full of stuff and that we have trouble letting go of it, by revealing and confessing, we never fail to receive profound help.

All buddhas used to be attached to things. When we admit that we are still attached to things, we receive help from the buddhas to let go. When we confess that we are still holding on and gripping our self-concern, our selfishness and pettiness, over and over, when we actually say, "I would like to let go of some of this stuff. I can see that it is hindering me and hindering others. I can see it makes everything more complicated. I can see it makes it harder for me to love. I can see it. I admit it," when I admit that I am not practicing renunciation, the power of that admission melts away the root of resisting renunciation.

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