THE BENEFITS OF RENUNCIATION

Renunciation permeates the path of awakening. From the first time one practices redirecting attention away from a distraction back to focusing on the sensation of breathing, renunciation is being cultivated. It is considered one of the Paramis, the qualities of mental function that are to be perfected during the practice leading to awakening. Nina van Gorkem is a well-respected commentator on Buddhist psychology, and she has this to say about this Parami:

Renunciation (nekkhamma) has the characteristic of departing from sense pleasures and existence; its function is to verify the unsatisfactoriness they involve; its manifestation is the withdrawal from them; a sense of spiritual urgency (saóvega) is its proximate cause. (The Perfections Leading To Enlightenment, p. 9.)

The function of renunciation supports the Parami of generosity (dana), fostering the discipline that overcomes craving and clinging to a particular view about life, most often regarding material objects. Generosity is manifested through renunciation. Renunciation also supports the manifestation of other Paramis such as patience, lovingkindness and equanimity.

Another term which is applied to renunciation is detachment. Here are comments from an article posted on Access To Insight, entitled “Detachment And Compassion In Early Buddhism”, by Elizabeth Harris:

“Viveka and viraga are the two Pali words which have been translated as “detachment.” The two, however, are not synonymous. The primary meaning of viveka is separation, aloofness, seclusion. Often physical withdrawal is implied. The later commentarial tradition, however, identifies three forms of viveka: kayaviveka (physical withdrawal), citta-viveka (mental withdrawal), and upadhiviveka (withdrawal from the roots of suffering)….

…Viraga literally means the absence of raga: the absence of lust, desire, and craving for existence. Hence, it denotes indifference or non-attachment to the usual objects of raga, such as material goods or sense pleasures. Non-attachment is an important term here if the Pali is to be meaningful to speakers of English. It is far more appropriate than “detachment” because of the negative connotations “detachment” possesses in English. Raga is a close relation of upadana (grasping) which, within the causal chain binding human beings to repeated births, grows

from tanha (craving) and results in bhava—continued samsaric existence. The English word “non-attachment” suggests a way of looking at both of them. The Buddhist texts refer to four strands of grasping (upadana): grasping of sense pleasures (kamupadana), of views (ditthupadana), of rule and custom (silabbatupadana), of doctrines of self (attavadupadana). All of these can also be described as forms of raga or desire. To destroy their power over the human psyche, attachment to them must be transformed into non-attachment. Nonattachment or non-grasping would therefore flow from the awareness that no possession, no relationship, no achievement is permanent or able to give lasting satisfaction; from the discovery that there is no self which needs to be protected,

promoted, or defended; and from the realization that searching for selfish sensual gratification is pointless, since it leads only to craving and obsession. Phrases which overlap with attachment in this context and which can help to clarify its meaning are: possessiveness in relationships, defensiveness, jealousy, covetousness, acquisitiveness, and competitiveness. Through non-attachment, these are attenuated and overcome. There is nothing yet in this description which points to a lack of concern for humanity or the world. The emphasis is rather on inner transformation so that destructive and divisive traits can be destroyed, making way for their opposites to flourish.”

Mindfulness of breathing, even in its initial stage of practice, cultivates renunciation. As mentioned above, every time one disengages from a stimulus affected by craving and clinging, renunciation is being developed. In the brain, craving operates as neural stimulation moves from the amygdala to the nucleus accumbens and then up to the areas of the brain that initiate behavior. At the same time, the prefrontal cortex is activated, which, when influenced by mindfulness, sends a signal back to the amygdala and nucleus accumbens to reduce the potency of the signal to the behavioral activation areas.

I’ve often suggested that practitioners cultivate the intention to not scratch an itch. The “itchy” neural pathways stimulate the amygdala, which regulates alerting the mind to distress. The amygdala stimulates the nucleus accumbens, which then activates the premotor cortex. Accompanying this cascading process, the association and verbal fabrication areas of the parietal brain develop a narrative such as “I can’t stand this itch—I must scratch it!”. When mindfulness is activated, the brain areas associated with self-awareness are coordinated with the regulating functions of the prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex sends a neural signal to the amygdala-nucleus accumbens network, reducing the activation. This is renunciation in action, otherwise known as self-discipline.