Understanding Renunciation

Or

Let Go and Let Dharma

*Nekkhamma* is the Pali word that is translated as *renunciation*. In the structure of Buddhist doctrine, it is one of the *paramitas*, those mental qualities that are to be perfected to realize Awakening. Using the word renunciation requires no alteration in its definition; it literally means to give up something for spiritual benefit.

In the various 12-step groups, “Let Go and Let God” is recommended to renounce addictive behaviors and, more fundamentally, let go of the assumption that one’s ego can control the various challenges of life. Of course, the Buddhist view of life doesn’t involve a deity who is in charge; rather, the Dharma, that is, the lawful harmonic of the universe can bring order and peacefulness when a person’s internal conditions allow that to unfold.

One of the primary goals of Buddhist practice is to make use of the Dharma to overcome the potency of greed, hatred and ignorance. In terms of renunciation, this involves giving up greed (by cultivating generosity), giving up hatred (by cultivating lovingkindness) and giving up ignorance (by cultivating clear awareness). Renunciation is also considered to be a key element of Right Intention, part of the Wisdom aggregate of the Noble Eightfold Path. In the *Magga-Vibangha Sutta*, the Buddha says the cultivation of Right Intention includes *the commitment to renunciation, to freedom from ill-will and to harmlessness*.

Renunciation has two levels of operation: The first is the ability to intentionally redirect attention away from identification with unwholesome mental formations such as craving something pleasant or craving to avoid something unpleasant; the second is the ultimate renunciation of the process of craving and clinging and this is often termed *relinquishment*.

Most of us will deal with the first level of renunciation, which provides primarily psychological benefits. When I notice my attention has shifted away from pure sensory awareness, typically breath sensations, I can investigate the onset of the selfing process and determine whether the emerging self-state organization is wholesome or not. When unwholesomeness is discovered, that process is renounced, and attention is rechanneled back to the neutrality of pure sensory awareness. *During basic mindfulness of breathing meditation practice, the redirecting of attention back to the breath sensations establishes and strengthens renunciation*. The Buddha compared this level of practice to cutting weeds off at ground level—of course, the weeds would sprout up again with enough nurturance, that is, the recurrence of craving and clinging. When a person persists in this process, the ability to renounce mental “weeds” grows stronger, and this establishes the conditions for the best use of vipassana (insight meditation) to investigate the process of self-state organization with a relatively clear and serene quality of awareness, the next level of renunciation, which can lead to the experience of Nirvana.

The focus of the second level of renunciation isn’t psychological, but liberation from the *process of craving and clinging*. The practice of vipassana involves investigation into the process through which the mind creates the misperception of an autonomous and enduring self. In terms of the Buddha’s analogy, vipassana seeks out the roots (craving and clinging) of the weed of selfing and starves them of nurturance. Through persistent investigation of how the selfing process operates, that is, the transitory and illusory characteristics of thoughts and preoccupations, dispassion develops. Passion is the fervent, persistent identification of the thoughts as a self that is permanent and reliable. Dispassion “starves” that identification process, and disillusionment sets in. Disillusionment can be unnerving and depressing, but this is because there is still some “feeding” of the belief in the illusion of a separate self. When this preoccupied identification is clearly understood, a person can see the futility of any attachment to “the tyranny of I, Me and Mine”, and in this way the roots of selfing “dry up”. This is relinquishment, and Nirvana is experienced. Nirvana is translated as “What is known when the fuel of craving and clinging is used up.”

This doesn’t mean that the personality is void and impotent. After his experience of Nirvana, the Buddha continued to interact with the world for 45 years, negotiating with his renunciates and with the political powers of the era, creating the traditions that endure to current times! The personality still formed, but the choices that made were not affected by craving and clinging; rather, they were affected by kindness, compassion, generosity and equanimity. This possibility exists for us today, when we can set our lives to the task of renunciation.