

Renunciation

December 30, 2011

The passage we chanted just now, The Analysis of the Path: There are two factors that I'd like to talk about tonight. One is right resolve, and the other is right concentration.

There are three parts to right resolve, or what the Buddha in another passage calls mundane right resolve: the resolve of renunciation, the resolve of non-ill-will, the resolve of non-harming. Of the three, the last two are the easiest to agree with. You may have trouble not holding ill-will for people, but it's not too hard to see that training the mind not to have ill-will is a good thing. The same with not harming.

Renunciation, though, is something else.

The idea of renouncing our dependence on sensuality for our happiness is something a lot of people resist. For them, the happiness in life depends on sensual pleasures, and not only the pleasures but also the fascination we have with those pleasures. In fact, that's what the Buddha's actually talking about when he's talking about our attachment to sensuality. It's not so much the things, it's our attitude towards them, the way we weave stories and make plans: how we're going to gain this nice sight or that nice sound, or good aromas, good tastes, good tactile sensations. We really feed on our fascination with these plans.

We think that if you had to deprive the mind of that fascination, it would starve, and would get all twisted up, like Vanessa Redgrave in *The Devils*, where she walked around with her head at a ninety-degree angle. She was a nun, Oliver Reed was a priest, and you looked at the first two minutes of the movie and you knew where it was going to go. I actually walked out of the movie, because I said, "I don't need to see this." But most peoples' attitude to sensuality is like the that of the film: that if you give up sensuality it's very unnatural and you're going to get twisted and sick.

Well, there's a lot of the Buddha's teachings that are unnatural. But then again, true happiness is also unnatural. It's not going to happen if you simply let things flow their natural way. And so you have to decide: Are you just going to go the same old natural way you've gone before, or are you going to try something new?

Because if you're attached to sensuality, then you're really going to fear death. This is one of the main causes for fearing death: We're attached to all the fascination we have for the sensual pleasures in the human realm and we don't

want to lose them. But when you realize that this really is weakening the mind and getting in the way of a higher happiness, then you can look more favorably on the idea of maybe giving these things up.

And this is one of the reasons why we practice right concentration.

In fact, the Buddha himself makes the connection between right resolve and right concentration very clear when he talks about transcendent right resolve. It comes down to the factors of the first jhana, the thinking and evaluating that go into getting the mind to settle down with a sense of well-being, a sense of fullness and ease that comes from seclusion: secluding yourself from all your sensual thoughts. You find that there are certain parts of the mind that really thrive when they can put those kinds of thoughts away and just be with the sense of the form of the body in the present moment.

The Buddha talks about three different levels of becoming. There's sensual becoming, form becoming, and formless becoming, "becoming" here meaning the identity you take on when you're planning your happiness around a particular kind of pleasure, and the world that you inhabit in order to gain that pleasure. You know the old story about the alcoholic going into a house and knowing very quickly where they keep the liquor in the house, because that's where the alcoholic finds his pleasure. Those are the signs, those are the cues that the person attached to that kind of pleasure is tuned in to. But then you're tuned into other people who are tuned in to that same pleasure as well.

One of the monks was talking about that when he was younger, he complained to his mother that he had a friend who really seemed to have a lot of success with women, and he didn't have any. And his mother pointed out, well, would you like to hang around with the kind of women he's having success with? And he had to admit, No. If that's where you find your pleasure, you're going to be finding other people who find that kind of pleasure in the same way, and you have to look at those other people: Are these the people that you want to hang around? Do they embody the kind of person you'd like to become? This is part of that world of becoming that you take on when you're fascinated with a particular kind of pleasure.

So what we're doing as we focus on the breath and get to know the body from the inside, is that we move from the sensual level to the level of form. And there's a sense of well-being, a sense of ease that can come as we simply inhabit the body from inside. The form of the body comes from the movement of the breath through the body. That's what gives us a sense of the shape of the body. This is not a tactile sensation. This is something else. This is what they call proprioception, the sense of the body as felt from within. It's a different level of pleasure, it's a

higher level of pleasure. And by developing this level of pleasure, you can pull yourself away from the fascination with sensuality.

It helps, but it doesn't do everything. You have to develop a lot of discernment as well. But, having this alternative pleasure makes it a lot easier to step back and see, well, that fascination with sensuality is really something you'd rather give up.

The Buddha himself said that it was hard for him to give up sensuality, but when he realized that there was an important level of well-being, happiness, bliss even, that was blocked in the mind because it couldn't give up its sensual pleasures, he became more and more willing to let them go.

And it's one of the ways in which you become less fearful about death. Even though you'll have to abandon this body, at least you've learned something about the true well-being of the mind. It doesn't come from all of its fascination about dressing up this sensual sensation, or that one, or trying this narrative or tweaking it here or tweaking it there. It comes from getting the mind to be still.

Ultimately, as you focus on the breath, the breath gets more and more refined, to the point where you don't even have a sense of the in-and-out breath, and the shape of the body begins to dissolve away. The body begins to feel just like a mist of little dots. If you focus in on the space between the dots, that goes into another level of becoming, or another level of well-being, called the formless level. There's no shape to it at all. And as you get solidly settled in with that sense of space, you can turn around and you see that there's just a sense of awareness there with the space. It's just that—space and awareness—and you focus more on the awareness rather than the space. This awareness gives you something a lot more solid to stay focused on, regardless of what happens to the body as the world begins to crowd in, crowd in, crowd in, as you get older and approach death. You just basically step out of the way. Don't let the world come in and squash you.

And having a sense of a separate awareness is really important. Once you've reached it in the concentration, then you can start seeing how it applies to other things as well. The Buddha talks about learning how to see form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness as something separate; sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations as something separate. There's an awareness that's not touched by any of these things. You have to dig deep down into this awareness right here right now to get to that level of awareness. But this is how you find something that really is of value, really is reliable, something that really is safe. So when you have to leave the body and you have to leave your sensual pleasures, you don't feel threatened. There's no fear, at least in that area.

And particularly if you've really seen the true Dhamma, as the Buddha said, that totally ends your fear of death. You know that there's something there that

can be touched inside, that's not subject to time or space. Because death happens in time and space, this thing is not touched by the death, or aging, or the illness, or the birth or whatever. That's when you find the essence of the teaching.

The Buddha's teachings are not simply to make it easier to live happily in the world or lightly in the world. That's one of the side benefits, but the real benefit is that you find a happiness not touched by aging, illness, or death. It's outside of space, outside of time, outside of worlds entirely. It's something of real worth. It's not just something that will help you while away the time, or keep you happy while you're alive and then abandon you, like so many other things in life.

When the time comes to go, this sticks with you. And when you find this, you find that the mind develops a strength that it wouldn't have otherwise: a strength that's totally independent of its old attachments. The mental food you used to feed on is no longer appealing. You don't need that food. You've found a happiness, a well-being, that doesn't have to feed.

So this is why it's a good idea to have a more favorable view of what it means to abandon sensuality, to develop renunciation. We're not getting starved or twisted here. We're finding something of real worth, and not the flashy lights and the tinsel of ordinary pleasures. This is genuine gold.