

Truly renouncing

The core practice of early Buddhism is renunciation, that is, the letting go and cutting off of unwholesome states of mind so that we become liberated individuals. From the early texts, we know that there are two ways: renouncing as a monastic and practising meditation as a lay person.

True renunciation depends on the commitment of the monastic or the lay person to Dharma training. Living as a monastic, truly keeping to the Vinaya, is like taking the high road to nirvana. On the other hand, the laity would mostly take what might be said to be the good old country road, hilly and winding but a pleasant journey, much slower, but capable of reaching the same goal.

As a rule, those who take the monastic course should be serious meditators, those we are unlikely to chat with online, but have to meet personally for any useful spiritual training. Such monastic meditators are the dhyana-attainers. Attaining dhyana means they have transcended the limits of the five physical senses and have tasted pure mental pleasure.

This is as if we have graduated with a PhD; so philosophy 101 is a breeze; or we have the very first mint issue of Action Comics #1 (1939), so we would not think much of the newsstand copies.

Even if we do not work for PhDs, we could still graduate as good teachers. Even if we do not collect all the first editions of books, we could still enjoy reading them. In fact, most of us could easily afford newsstand comics, rather than collector's editions. The Buddhist lay life, then, is a fun life, like playing football. Football is not merely kicking the ball about, but it is the football rules that make it fun. The Buddhist lay life is defined by the five precepts, which keep us on the human level, so that we can direct our energies to mental cultivation or meditation.

Meditation is here best understood as progressive renunciation. When we seriously make an effort to meditate, we are effectively getting into the state of a renunciant. The very first thing we do in meditation is to find a conducive place and sit as comfortably as we can so that we can forget about our body after a while. This is a bodily renunciation.

After sitting for some time, we might begin to feel some discomfort. Again here, we should simply ignore it if possible. Otherwise, try to observe with an open mind, "What is this pain?" We would notice that it is a process of rising and falling of feeling. If we do not let our negative mind to return and colour the pain, then this is a feeling renunciation.

Once we are physically comfortable, we go on to work with our thoughts as they arise. The usual way is to simply ignore them and keep our focus on the meditation object (say, the breath or lovingkindness). If thoughts do arise, it is best to simply let them come and let them go. Never follow them. If we can do this comfortably over time, then this a mental renunciation.

Another kind of renunciation is that directed to blissful feeling or an experience of some mental brightness, often known as "the sign" (*nimitta*). This sort of feeling or experience, if it is truly blissful, should be silently enjoyed for as long as we like.

When we feel some sense of familiarity with it, then it is time to let it go gently, so that a higher state would arise. This is a higher renunciation.

Finally, when we are fully free of bodily sensations, thoughts and feelings, we might go on to attain deep concentration, even dhyana. Then, whether we are monastic or lay, we have truly “renounced the world.” This is true renunciation.¹

If we patiently bear the initial pains of starting meditation, the fruits will come in due course. Good meditation begins by a total acceptance of ourselves just as we are. Then we leave the past where it should be, and we do not cross the bridge of the future until we reach it. Good meditation empowers us to renounce the pains of the past – they are gone; it teaches us to renounce the future -- it never comes. We have a good sense of what needs to be rightly done now.

In our practice, we must gently keep bringing the mind back to the meditation-object, and constantly extend the horizon of our lovingkindness. We are laying the foundations of emotional strength. We grow emotionally stronger by first identifying and overcoming our inner weaknesses, our negative emotions. Then we work on discovering our positive emotions, or inner resilience by recalling happy memories and focussing on positive actions. We constantly remind ourselves that whichever way our lives go, people change and they may not be always there for us, and that things, too, are not always what they seem to be.

In other words, what we really are – the truth about ourselves – is not *out* there or in what we *have*. Our true being lies in what we really *are*. Just as the sun and its light are not two separate things, even so our life and love cannot be separated. Thinking makes it so. The examined life is the one that truly feels: we do not *think* happy, we *feel* happy. Happiness is a direct experience of true reality: it is to see ourselves as a word embracing other words on this page, completing what needs to be said here.

As our inner happiness grows, we need less worldliness, less religion: we no more need any parent-figure or guru-figure, or any kind of power-figure. Our locus of control stays within us: we become emotionally self-reliant, without any need for the approval of others, or any measuring ourselves against others. Yet our happiness is capable of inspiring happiness in others. We have a clear vision of our true self and liberation.²

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¹ This reflection is based on Piya Tan, *Bhāvanā* = SD 15.1: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/15.1-Bhavana-piya.pdf>

² See SD 17.8c: (8.4) Downside of meditation (the danger of cults); (8.5) Who should not meditate. Link: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/17.8c-Meditation-consciousness-piya1.pdf>