

Wanderers of today

To truly become a monk or a nun is to renounce the world. “World” here has two important senses. The first is an “external renunciation,” which is beautifully described in this famous sutta passage from **the Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2):

“He abandons all his wealth and relatives, shaves off his hair and beard, puts on the saffron robes, and goes forth from the household life into homelessness. Having thus gone forth, he lives restrained in body, speech, and mind, content with the simplest food and shelter, delighting in solitude.”¹

This passage is a reality check for us today when we see or hear that most “monastics” have more comfortable residences than most of us, have regular meals from in-house cooks, eat whenever they are hungry, wear fancy robes (some of embroidered silk), have their own vehicles and bank accounts, own a range of electronic gadgets, enjoy recreational activities in special areas on their premises, and have servants and volunteers to serve their every human need. Some might say that they are enjoying their good karma.

Good karma aside, if we look deeper, we will see a more vital aspect of this external renunciation. True Buddhist monastics do not really “give up” their families”: their parents are still their parents, as are their siblings their siblings, and relatives relatives. What they give up is the “biological” family concept and worldliness. What they take up is a vision of a universal and spiritual family.

Notice how easily most of us speak of our problems to trusted monastics, things which we would not even share with our own parents, or spouses, or partners, or friends. We have faith in these monastics that they are more than parents or spouses or friends to us.²

Sadly, not all monastics can help or heal us. They are themselves in dire need of helping and healing. The reason for this is simple. Many of them have turned to the cloth because of some personal problems or failures, some of which they are not themselves aware of. If they are serious about their monastic tutelage, sutta learning and Dharma training, they are likely to better themselves and inspire us. If not, they are likely to be more worldly than we are likely to be.

Even for those who have renounced the world with a true sense of samvega, they may not be experienced or skilled enough to counsel us. At least, they renounced the world for a good reason. For, samvega is the kind of uprooting emotion that overwhelms Siddhattha when he sees the 4 sights of the old man, the sick man and the dead man, and is inspired by the fourth sight of a happy holy man.

The healing works because we have faith in the Dharma, so that we believe what they tell us. What really works is our faith. Of course, there are cases where a monastic’s wisdom and compassion actually work to heal our heart and renew our faith in the Dharma. But this is rare if we do not already have faith in the Dharma in the first place. The bottom line is that it is really the Dharma that helps us.

This same Dharma helps the monastics, too. For that reason, the Buddha lays down the rule of “guidance” or tutelage (*nissaya*):

“I allow, bhikshus [monks], an experienced monk to live 5 years in dependence [tutelage], but an inexperienced one, all his life.” (V 1:80)

¹ D 2,37.3 @ SD 8.10: [link](#).

² Of course, we are thinking of truly good and skillful monastics who are willing and able to help and heal us when we need it. In contrary cases, we often have iatrogenic sufferings (those caused by the supposed healers themselves): see eg Bad friendship, SD 64.17: [link](#).

Note that the Vinaya rule says that even an “experienced,” that is, “capable,” monk, should still spend at least 5 years, that is, 5 rain-retreats, with a competent teacher. And if the monk is not capable (meaning he lacks knowledge of Dharma-Vinaya, or is not disciplined enough, or is still self-centred), then he needs to remain under tutelage all his life. This means that he should not be wandering around “doing Dharma work” or starting a “retreat centre” of any kind.

There are a number of reasons why a new monk (of 5 rains or less) might “break dependence” or renege on the tutelage (it is part of his ordination vow to observe tutelage or dependence). One common reason for this failure is cultural. Say, a westerner or westernized candidate ordains into a monastery in Sri Lanka, Myanmar or Thailand. In due course, he perceives that the teacher, or the monastery, or the natives, are not very “sophisticated” or not up to his standard (whatever that might be), he decides to go on his own and wanders the world.

Of course, it is wise to seek a proper new teacher if we discover that the old teacher or monastery is indeed not Vinaya-centred or Dharma-inspired. However, most aspirants to renunciation do not rush into being ordained. They would first stay with the monastic community for a while so that both the monastery and the aspirant can get to know each other better. Meantime, the aspirant would perform various duties and chores as a lay practitioner, usually under the 8 precepts (that is, the 5 precepts along with the rules of celibacy, of not taking food during forbidden hours, and of living a simple life).

When both sides are ready, only then the aspirant becomes a postulant, and in due course is ordained. In other words, he is being prepared for spiritual renunciation. True renunciation begins with the disciplining of the 5 senses (body and speech) and the cultivating of the mind. But this is only the beginning of the journey on the noble eightfold path in this world.

One of the first things that a renunciant learns – if he is following the monastic teachings of early Buddhism – is that he has to get rid of his layman’s views of pleasures, status and thinking, especially a layman’s view of monasticism. If he is diligent enough, then he would see that right view is not about who’s right, who’s wrong: right view is about personal transformation by becoming morally virtuous and mentally peaceful. This is an important meaning of “putting the teaching above the teacher.”

Another vital learning for a renunciant is what truly enriches him – the wealth and wisdom of the suttas. The key to this treasury is a mastery of Pali. Even if we are not good in Pali, we can always get a key from the key-holder or lock-smith to open the treasury door: we can study the many good translations we have today.

Then, we would discover that reading the suttas by themselves can be boring: our boredom is directly proportional to the level of defilements we have! The secret is to find the joy in the suttas: this is found in those parts which we can connect with at once, and build up from there. Then, we move from joyful word to joyful sentence, tasting the blissful spirit, linking them together into a radiant vision of inner peace.

By now, we would discover that studying the suttas by themselves would not awaken us. If we could awaken merely by reading, we might as well become professional scholars and career priests with academia, and benefit from the word of the teaching alone. The spirit of the teaching can only be seen with closed eyes, and the door to this treasury is our breath.

Breath meditation deepens our inner space; lovingkindness cultivation broadens our hearts with growing openness. The beautiful breath of our meditation calms our minds to see the truth by clearing away the clouds of ignorance. The unconditional love that we feel brings forth joy in us so that we see the beauty hidden by the skin of craving. Only the calm and clear mind is able to enjoy the truth and beauty of the suttas, so that we can joyfully share them with others.

If we are renunciants, this truth and beauty strengthen and enrich our lives so that we can devote ourselves to our meditations to discover deeper joys and higher truths about ourselves, and to be free from the self even in this life itself. Otherwise, we may end up like wanderers of the Buddha's time, to become wanderers of today.³

However, when we, as renunciants, monastic and lay, see no good reason in running after the world and wealth, we start to walk mindfully. When we reach the Bodhi tree, we to stand and gaze in amazement at it. Then we sit in blissful peace in its shade, and, when the time comes, we truly sleep happily as the Buddha does, and always waking up in compassion for all.⁴

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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³ This reflection is based on **Wanderers of today**, SD 24.6b: [link](#).

⁴ This last paragraph puts together a few beautiful teachings, eg: on master-minding, see **Vitakka Saṅṭhāna Sutta** (M 20,6.2), SD 1.6: [link](#); on sleeping happily, see **(Hatthaka) Āḷavaka Sutta** (A 3.34), SD 4.8: [link](#); **Suppati Sutta** (S 4.7), SD 32.13: [link](#); also Dh 169; the Buddha's dhyana as his "great high heavenly couch," see **Venāga,pura Sutta** (A 3.63,5), SD 21.1: [link](#); also **Saṅkhitta Dhamma Sutta** (A 8.63), SD 46.6: [link](#).