

Practicing Self-Restraint

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is to help you regain a connection to the sacred.



back to Anchorage, we stopped in a roadside diner. In the men's room there was a large sign over the urinal that stated in bold letters: "The tendency to celibacy is not an inherited trait." I laughed out loud and said to my friend upon returning to the table, "You never know where you are going to find a teaching of the dharma."

It really was a teaching, not just about celibacy but about how spiritual renunciation practices can seem anti-life. If you view all renunciation practices in this manner, you may be missing an opportunity in your spiritual development to greatly enhance your happiness. Life everywhere is sacred, not just on the tundra, and the ultimate purpose of skillful renunciation practices is to help you regain a connection to the sacred.

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO I went to Alaska with a friend to hike in Denali National Park, the home of Mount McKinley. I found it to be just as majestic as I had been led to expect, but what was unexpected was the strong sense of the sacred I felt each day I was there. This sense of the sacred came not from the breathtaking scenery nor the amazing variety of wildlife but from the feel of the earth itself—the tundra, with its soft surface and frozen subsoil. It was as though I was directly touching the vulnerable core of nature. It was such an intimate act that I created a ritual of asking permission each day before hiking on the tundra. Although I have a daily meditation practice, I sat very little while there. Being out on the tundra was meditation itself. It was the time of year when the wildflowers were blooming, and seeing these delicate flowers amidst the barren harshness was to witness the determination of life to surge into existence.

After leaving the park and starting the long drive

There is within you an instinctive drive to immerse yourself in life, to partake of its pleasures, to make your mark. Sexual urges, the need for personal power, the desire to be creative, and the wish for recognition are all part of this instinct. This drive is a movement into life. When it is in balance, it provides vital energy for engaging in life and forms the basis for a healthy ego. When it is off kilter, you experience apathy and depression or, conversely, a type of manic energy.

Harder to understand is that you also have an instinctive movement toward self-restraint, an inclination to participate in something greater than fulfilling your ego's desires. It is a movement to free yourself from the endless cycle of wanting one thing after another and the fear and anxiety that accompany the wanting. Think of it as the intuitive urge to be free from ego-centered striving, which drains the joy out of being alive. It is one reason why people find being a parent so meaningful; the selflessness that comes from

unconditional love is bigger than the ego. It is also why people enjoy serving those in need. This instinct toward restraint has the same goal as your drive to immerse yourself in life—to find happiness.

Renunciation takes the practice of restraint to the next level and is recognized in most religious traditions as a vital step toward finding a center of being other than the ego. It is most visible with nuns and monks who have renounced the life of a householder, forsaking sexual pleasure, marriage, family, and material possessions to devote themselves to their inner development. We admire, even envy, these men and women for the simplicity and integrity of their lives, even though we are unable or unwilling to renounce that which keeps us constantly scrambling.

Of course, renunciation is not the exclusive property of nuns and priests. But if you are living the life of the householder, how do you approach life with exuberance while managing to avoid being enslaved by its false promises? You may ask, aren't you supposed to be happy? And aren't material and emotional rewards the basis of happiness? The answer is more complicated than a simple yes. You know from experience how endless the world of wants is. You desire creature comforts, emotional reinforcement, security, and the power to control yourself and your environment. This thirsting, known as *tanha* in Pali, leads to emotional clinging. You come to believe your happiness and peace are dependent upon these desires being met, which never seems to happen. Monks and nuns use renunciation to free themselves from this cycle of misery. Renunciation practice simplifies life and creates spaciousness. When desire arises for that which has been renounced, there is still a struggle, but the struggle is focused on working with the desire, not on how to get the desired object.

You may be thinking to yourself that you will pass on any exploration of renunciation practice and just stick with hatha yoga and meditation. But first consider this: There are three renunciations you can practice, any one of which will dramatically change your

life. None involves giving up your job, marriage, or sex life, or even forsaking buying that new car you've been dreaming about. Yet if practiced diligently, these practices will bring you greater happiness and inner peace.

Surrender Self-Righteousness

THE FIRST OF THESE renunciations is giving up your attachment to being right—right in your opinions, judgements, or interpretations. You know this inner experience of attachment to being right; you are all puffed up with judgement and rigid in your convictions. You may feel flushed or indignant, defensive, or martyred.

This practice means renouncing the need to be right in your interactions with those around you—your significant other, colleagues at work, even your children. It also means forsaking your attachment about being right about your story, which may involve having been wronged or not receiving proper care or recognition in the past. In this practice, you release your attachment to that story even though you still feel it is the truth. You renounce being right in regard to the future and monitor yourself for ways in which you set yourself up so that you can say to yourself or others, “I was right all along!”

In practicing this renunciation, you are not supposed to abandon what you feel to be true. Quite the opposite. You more fully embrace your truth. You state it clearly, stand up for your values, and fight injustice in your own life or wherever you encounter it. It means simply that you cease to be attached to your truth. It is what you believe; therefore, you live it, bearing in mind that there is no monopoly on truth, that God is not whispering in your ear, that there is no justification for sitting on a throne of righteousness where you either tolerate or condemn those who have a different truth.

An example of this in my own life shows up in how I regard the death penalty. I am absolutely convinced that the death penalty is a mistake. I find it morally indefensible to kill in the name of punishment. So many people sentenced to death are later proven innocent that it

seems obvious to me that it is an unconscionable act. It is easy for me to be judgmental about those who take a different view on this subject. Yet when I reflect, I see that my belief is only a view. It does not entitle me to feel self-righteous, and it is clearly wrong to condemn others when it is their view, not them, with which I have issue.

This same perspective applies to personal situations. You may have had an abusive or neglectful parent, or a manipulative relationship in which the other person was dishonest. Your feelings still are only a view; they are not absolute. You stand up for them for they are your truth. It is not only your right to do so, it is your obligation, but you do so without attachment. If you were to discover you were wrong, it would be okay because your self-esteem is not based on being right. Instead, your worth comes from being someone who stands for your truth and remains open to new understanding.

Stop Measuring Your Worth

THE SECOND RENUNCIATION is giving up measuring how successful your life is by how well your desires are met. Most people measure the success of their lives in just this manner—are they getting what they want in material objects, relationship, recognition, or personal health? It takes so little reflection to see for yourself that this is an unreliable manner for measuring the worth of your life. I am not saying you should give up your desires or forsake moving toward them. Desires—be they physical, emotional, or spiritual—are part of the ecology of your life. They are the flowering of the tundra in the midst of the harsh conditions that surround all of life.

Desires are useful for creating goals, for organizing your time. You can have skillful goals, ones which keep you in a healthy balance and change and mature with your life experience. It is just that you don't determine your self-worth by the outcome or success you have in reaching those goals. Instead, you measure the success of your life by how well your actions reflect the intentions that are formed by your core values. To practice

this renunciation requires that you trust that your life will turn out as best it can if you just constantly act from your intentions, mindfully learning from whatever circumstances arise.

Whenever I give a dharma talk on renunciation, I often get negative reactions to this one. One entrepreneur angrily stated that he had to measure life by how well his desires were met; after all, he had employees, stockholders, and creditors depending on him. I asked him if he really believed he controlled the success of his company and if market conditions, good fortune, the acts of his competitors, the creativity of those with whom he worked, his own creativity, or even his health for that matter were within his power. Of course, he had to say no.

We are all subject to conditions beyond our control. This is an overwhelmingly reliable guideline for life choices, yet it is so hard to accept. You cannot control outcome, but you can be responsible for your intentions. To assume more is not only unrealistic, it is hubris. By focusing on your intentions, you align your attention with the area where your diligence can actually manifest. In making this shift, you also free yourself from the endless greed to have things just as you want them.

Give Up Being the Star

THE THIRD RENUNCIATION is to give up being the star of your own movie. Without ever thinking about it, most people experience each arising moment from the point-of-view that it is happening to them. One of my teachers, Ajahn Amaro, illustrates this point by asking, "Have you ever noticed that when you get on the highway at rush hour that it is everyone else who is the traffic, never you?" This perspective leads you to make personal much of what is in fact impersonal. It causes you to make small things important which you later realize were not important. It adds tension to many moments of your daily life that is not inherently there.

It is your movie, you are definitely in it, and it is critical that you play your part. You certainly want to do it as best you are

able. But the center of the movie is not you; rather, your part is arising in a much greater panorama of family, country, culture, time, and circumstances. This is illustrated in the *Bhagavad Gita* when Lord Krishna tells the warrior Arjuna on the battlefield that much of life is about simply fulfilling the duties and responsibilities of the part one is cast into by birth and past actions. This understanding, Krishna assures Arjuna, is critical to finding freedom, to liberating the mind from delusion. It is why cultivating your values and intentions matters so much. You never know what part you will be required to play under what circumstances, so there is nothing to rely on but your core values and living them as best you are able.

When you start to realize that there is a "star" feeling in you, no matter how little you may think of yourself at times, new understanding becomes available. You realize that much of your anxiety about what might happen is self-induced pressure that comes from identifying with the perspective from which you are experiencing an event, like the traffic example. You mistakenly believe you are somehow supposed to make everything turn out just right. The unfolding of life has no center—or said another way, every point is equally the center. From either understanding there is no star; no one, including you, has to take all the pressure, to rise to the performance of the star. It is the unfolding of life itself that is at the heart of each moment. You only have to respond appropriately from your core values.

Each moment of life really weighs almost nothing, despite how heavy we often feel. The heaviness comes from our delusion, which causes us to try to either hold onto the moment if it is pleasant or push it away if it is unpleasant. Appearances to the contrary, we are not separate. Every moment of experience is made up of interconnecting conditions which are totally dependent on one another for the moment to happen.

When you practice this renunciation, a sense of spaciousness arises in your life. You may even experience an ease to your life because you cease to be seduced by

the mind's tendency to be reactive.

Touch the Sacred

EACH OF THESE renunciations can be practiced by you just as you are today. Some years ago I started with not being the star of my own movie. I could see that I was quite attached to being the star of my own movie. Yet I could also see that this brought stress, not happiness. So I