

### 3. Renunciation

April 13, 2017

Imagine something that would taste really good to you right now. What could you really get into? A bowl of fresh, ripe cherries? A pint of your favorite beer? A doorstep of fresh-from-the-oven home made whole grain bread, dripping with butter? Now imagine that I'm giving you a big plate full (or glass full) of whatever it is. You can smell it. You can feel the ice-cold glass. You can pick up a cherry by the stem. You are welcome to it. You know it's not good for you, though, right? It has too much sugar or too much fat or whatever. But here's a large helping of it, and it's all yours. What do you do? Do you laugh off the downsides, and eat the whole thing? Do you just eat some of it? Do you feel conflicted inside? Do you leave it untouched, and feel the deep disappointment?

Now imagine that I bring you the same thing, only this time I tell you that this particular batch has been recalled because it is infected with salmonella. It'll taste just the same, but if you eat it, you'll be really sick by tomorrow morning. What do you do this time?

New scenario: now it's Lent, and you decide you're going to give up this favorite food for 40 days, because you can see how much you are attached to it. For 40 days you crave it, but you also feel good because you are giving it up as a spiritual practice.

But the person sitting next to you, they decide that for Lent they are going to give up food that is infected with salmonella. How do you feel about that? More to the point, by day 30, how do you feel? Are you getting pretty desperate for that food? Or maybe you've gotten through the season pretty well, but you can't wait for Easter so that you can splurge on whatever it was you gave up.

Here's the big question: who experienced less discomfort about the food over Lent? You, or the person who gave up salmonella-infected food?

Renunciation is the third of the Most Excellent Practices. The ultimate goal of renunciation is to reduce your suffering. The person next to you was practicing renunciation. You were practicing asceticism. (practicing strict self-denial as a measure of personal and especially spiritual discipline).

The difference is that the person next to you had once enjoyed that favorite food, but as soon as they saw and understood for themselves that eating it was going to make them suffer, suddenly they just didn't want to eat it anymore. We are not encouraged to give up pleasure, but suffering. The problem lies in being able to see clearly what it is that leads to suffering, and we are so good at fooling ourselves about what we're actually looking at.

The practice of Renunciation, then, is the practice of observing and knowing for ourselves through experience what leads to our suffering. The more clearly we see it and more directly we

experience it, the more naturally and easefully we will let go of it. So basically, any form of mindfulness meditation is a renunciation practice, since the goal of mindfulness is to “see things as they really are.” You will see actions or thoughts or beliefs or mind-states that lead to suffering as leading to suffering, and as a result you will naturally let go of them.

Since the basic root of dissatisfaction is hanging on to stuff or fighting against stuff (grasping and aversion), you can help the process along by doing exercises that highlight areas in which you are clinging or pushing away. This is where practices that might look like asceticism to other people come in. You can choose to abstain from your favorite food for a period of time, in order to observe your reactions to the abstention. You will immediately and more clearly see your craving and the mental games you play trying to hide the underlying cravings or excuse giving in to it. But be clear: it is not the abstention that develops your spiritual prowess. The abstention is only a tool to help you see where your cravings lie, so that you can then explore them more deeply until you finally experience and know for yourself that this thing you crave can never supply satisfaction. At that point you will naturally loosen your grip on the craving, and the thing or activity you abstained from will no longer hook you. You can go back to eating that bowl of ice cream every day, but you will no longer be attached to it; you will no longer crave it, and you will be able to take it or leave it without any internal conflict.

Let me give you a real-life example of how this works.

Last week I had some major issues with my laptop which eventually ended with me erasing my hard drive and installing the operating system fresh. Of course I did a complete backup of my hard drive, as I do regularly, but it turns out that there was a bug in the backup software. The long and short of it is that I lost all my emails. All of them. Five years’ worth of business communications, personal conversations, family discussions... All of them lost, forever.

A few years ago, I would have lost it. I would have written to Apple and insisted on them doing something (though what I’d want them to do, I’m not sure!). I would have thrown things around and kicked walls. I would have remained angry and upset for at least the rest of the day, if not longer. I would not have been able to concentrate on anything else.

Instead, after trying everything I could figure out to do, and studying the online discussions, I came to a point where I knew I wasn’t going to get those emails back. I paused. I thought, “oh, bugger.” I thought, “this is going to be pretty inconvenient next time I want to refer back to an old email.” I thought, “Hmm. Well, I’d better get on with this talk I’m researching...” and I returned to

working on this very talk that I'm giving now. Just like that. Easy. No internal conflict, no having to try to talk myself out of being angry.

The reason this happened is because over the past 10 years I've been watching my thoughts and actions and reactions during my meditation. I have been learning about my tendency toward anger and blame, and how that doesn't actually solve anything. I've learned about the obsessive rumination that I get caught in when I feel helpless, and how that prevents me from focusing on anything else. At first, I could do no more than observe these reactions. I understood in my head that they were not doing me any favors, but I couldn't control them. Over time, though, I've seen more and more clearly how these reactions lead directly to my own discomfort, and I have experienced the freedom of *not* reacting in that way, so now, without even realizing that I'd gotten to this point, I discover that I have renounced the angry, blaming, obsessive response. That is to say, I just naturally did not react that way. And the result was a beautifully spacious, unencumbered acknowledgement of the situation followed by a return to the activity that I had been doing and which needed completion. I know that I will experience frustration, perhaps anger or anxiety later, when I need those emails, but I'll deal with that when it arises. Right now, I want to be in the present moment and do what is appropriate now, and my renunciation of that habitual reaction cycle enables me to do that.

## **Renunciation Exercises**

1. Consider what renunciation is and isn't, and set an intention to observe yourself in order to see things as they really are, so that you can start to understand how things you think or do lead to suffering.
2. As you do your regular meditation, whatever style you do, try to pay attention to anything that you notice causes unsatisfactoriness. For example, say you become physically uncomfortable. Is there any clinging or resistance to that? Where is the suffering? Is it in the pain, or in the fact that you don't want the pain to be there? Can you imagine what it would be like if you were able to not care about the pain? (Don't try to not care. Just notice where the suffering is.)
3. If you want to, try abstaining from something for a few days. Chose something that you have control over. Don't chose to abstain from anger, for example, because you won't be able to choose whether or not to be angry. But you could choose to wait five seconds before you speak whenever you feel angry. You might start with something simpler: abstain from a food, or from watching TV. Set your alarm clock an hour earlier for a week and make yourself get out of bed. Observe your craving and your reactions.

Next week we will discuss your experiences with these exercises, and I will guide you in a meditation aimed specifically at strengthening our Renunciation practice.