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Renunciation

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by

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Renunciation

I.



he idea of renunciation has never been a particularly attractive one for most people, even when its importance as an ideal has been admitted. For much of the Western world today, however, renunciation seems not so much unpalatable as unfamiliar, and indeed all but incomprehensible. This was not always so, of course. The people of the Middle Ages were well acquainted with the traditional Christian conception of this world as something which presents many snares for the soul, and is of little importance when compared with the eternal life to come. That this conception has ceased to be as influential as it once was, is the result of a number of complex historical processes, but as far as present-day attitudes are concerned, the factor of the greatest and most immediate importance would probably be the rapid development of science and technology in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

Science has, I think, influenced people's attitudes towards the world in three ways. Firstly, it appears to

have confirmed by its achievements the ancient Greek philosophers' faith in the ability of human reason to fathom all the mysteries of the universe. Secondly, these impressive achievements have led people to feel the physical world, which has up till now been the province of scientific investigation, is the only world worth investigating, and even the only "real" world. And thirdly, by providing, through the technology which it has made possible, an abundance of good things for our enjoyment, science has encouraged a preoccupation with the objects and pleasures of the senses, and a corresponding indifference to those things which are presumed to lie outside the range of the senses.

If, then, this world we perceive is the only reality, and the senses and the reason are the only valid means of knowledge, it follows that renunciation of the world is pointless, and that aspiration to a reality which transcends the reason and the senses is bound to be futile.

There have always been many people who would agree with this, and materialist philosophers were not lacking even in the Buddha's day. But I think it would be true to say that ideas of this nature have never been so widely accepted as they are in Western and Western-influenced countries today. Even religious thought has been affected, and a number of

progressive Christian theologians are trying to adapt their doctrines to the spirit of the age by glossing over the element of renunciation in Jesus' teaching and Christian tradition, and stressing, after the Jewish fashion, involvement in the world rather than detachment from it. A similar tendency can be observed elsewhere: in many of the "new religions" of modern Japan, for example, or in the writings of Indian thinkers like Radhakrishnan and Sri Aurobindo.

In light of all this, Buddhism must be considered somewhat unfashionable. Some critics have accused (and still accuse) it of being pessimistic, nihilistic and life-denying. Of course, Buddhism is not pessimistic. In fact, it is the most optimistic of religions, for it teaches that man can perfect himself here and now, and free himself by his own efforts from all suffering and unhappiness. Nor is it nihilistic. As the Buddha has often pointed out, he taught only the annihilation of suffering and ignorance. And if Buddhism is life-denying, it is only because it is death-defying, for life and death are inseparable. Nevertheless, these critics have sensed an important truth about the Dhamma; that it is essentially a teaching of renunciation. In one sense, Buddhism is more "this-worldly" than any other religion, since it takes as its starting point, not some remote and transcendental Being or Act, but the

world as it is experienced by ordinary living beings. In another sense, however, it is more “other-worldly” than most, for according to the Buddha, the world as we know it has three fundamental characteristics: it contains nothing that is permanent; it is, for that reason, essentially unsatisfactory to those who see it as it really is, and are not led astray by superficial appearances; and finally, it contains nothing worth consideration as “me” or “mine,” nothing that is in any way unchanging or substantial. These three characteristics are the basis of the Buddha’s Teaching, and the second of them, known as “ill” or “suffering,” is the theme of the Four Truths which the Buddha expounded in his first sermon.

There is nothing ambiguous about this. The Buddha was well aware that much pleasure and happiness is to be found in the world as it is ordinarily experienced, but he insisted that these pleasures were transient and therefore relative and limited, and that true happiness is only to be found by renouncing what is worldly, transient, relative and limited, and seeking instead what is transcendental, unchanging, absolute and unlimited. This absolute state (if one can describe it so) is what is called Nibbāna. It can be defined, if at all, only in negative terms, for what is completely transcendental is necessarily indescribable. It is certainly not a God creating and sustaining the world,

nor is it a Godhead which is the source or substance of the world. In fact, although it can be attained by those still living in the world, it really has no connection with the world whatever, and for that reason its nature cannot be conveyed by means of such an earthbound thing as language, although the poetic (i.e., non-literal) use of language may certainly be able to suggest something of its quality, as in the following famous passage: “There is, monks, a realm where there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor wind... neither this world nor the next, neither sun nor moon. There, monks, I say there is neither coming, nor going, nor remaining; neither deceasing nor being born. Without foundation is it, without continuity, without support: this is the end of suffering” (*Udāna*).

II.

Buddhism, then, is a teaching of renunciation. It remains to see what is renounced and why. The Buddha said: “What I teach is just ill (or suffering) and its cessation.” What is renounced, then, is ill, suffering, unsatisfactoriness. But what is unsatisfactoriness? Here is the Buddha’s answer: “Birth is ill; old age and

decay are ill; death is ill; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are ill; not to get what one wants is ill. In short, the five groups that are the object of clinging are ill." These "five groups," taken together, constitute the totality of what we call a "being," and what that being feels to be its "self." They may be translated as follows: form or matter, feeling, perception or ideation, motivation or mental activities, and consciousness. It is oneself, then, that is the source of suffering, and it is self that must be renounced if one would be free from suffering. This is a truth which is recognised by most religions, but only in Buddhism is it fully understood. The feeling of "self," the deep-rooted sense of "I-ness," involves the desire for the continued existence of self. It generates, in other words, greed and attachment, both for the self and also for those things which enhance the existence of the self and make it feel secure, such things as sense-pleasures, possessions, kinship with others, and so on. It also generates hatred for or aversion from what is anti-self, that is, from those things which threaten the continued existence or the happiness of the self by attacking it (or whatever it identifies itself with) or by frustrating it in any way. Thus the self can never be really happy, for it is continually agitated by desires and fears which bind it tightly to the world, and cause the "ill" for which the Buddha has prescribed the cure.

It will be seen from this brief analysis that the self and the world are interdependent, our emotional responses to the world strengthening our sense of self, and our sense of self causing the illusory appearance of a permanent and substantial world with objective qualities of desirability and undesirability. Therefore, renunciation of the world and the renunciation of the self are but two aspects of the same thing, and what we see as the world may, on deeper analysis, be found present within ourselves. So the Buddha said: "In this very body, six feet in length, with its sense-impressions, its thoughts and ideas... are the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the Way that leads to the cessation of the world" (AN).

III.

In the practice of renunciation, three stages may be distinguished. First of all, there is outward renunciation, as when a man or woman leaves the household life to become a monk or a nun. Outward renunciation has no intrinsic value, and may theoretically be dispensed with, but there is no doubt that it makes true renunciation very much easier. True

renunciation is a matter of the heart and mind rather than the body. It is renunciation of the world of desires and aversions within, rather than of the world of “objects” without. Finally, there is the ultimate renunciation, which is the renunciation of one’s “self” in its entirety, and the consequent destruction of all ill.

To illustrate the traditional Buddhist method of renunciation, I should like to examine a stereotype passage which occurs, with slight variations, at a number of places in the Pali Canon. It describes the ideal life of the monk, beginning with his first hearing of the Dhamma and concluding with his attainment of Nibbāna. It starts as follows:

“Suppose that a Perfect One (*Tathāgata*) arises in the world, an Accomplished One (*Arahant*), fully Awakened, complete in knowledge and conduct, knower of the worlds, sublime (literally “well-gone”), incomparable, trainer of those to-be-tamed, teacher of gods and men, Awakened (Buddha), blest (*Bhagavant*). Having thoroughly understood, by his own supernormal insight, this world with its gods, its Māra (the personification of death), its Brahmā (the most exalted of the gods), its ascetics and brahmans, its gods and men, he declares his knowledge. He preaches the Truth (*Dhamma*), good in its beginning, good in its development, good in its consummation. He makes known the holy life in all its fullness and

purity.

“A householder, or a householder’s son, or one born into some good family, hears that Dhamma. Having heard it, he comes to feel faith in the Perfect One. Possessed of this faith, he reflects thus: ‘The household life is cramped. It is a path choked with dust. To leave it is to come out into the open air. It is not easy for one who lives at home to lead the holy life in all its perfect fullness and purity, bright as mother-of-pearl. Surely I should now shave off my hair and beard, go forth into the homeless life.’ In course of time, he gives up his possessions, be they many or few, and his circle of kinsmen, be it small or large, shaves off his hair and beard, puts on the yellow robe, and, leaving his home, goes forth into the homeless life.”

So far, this is outward renunciation. Now the new monk must turn his attention to the world within. The first step is to free his mind from the domination by unwholesome emotions and sense-desires, and to this end he begins to discipline himself by strict observance of morality. The text continues: “So he lives the homeless life, observing self-restraint according to the rules of the Order, possessed of good conduct, seeing danger in the slightest offence, accepting and training himself in the precepts.” There follows a detailed account of over forty things which the monk must shun. The first seven are of basic

importance, for they are the most general in character. They are also worth looking at because they stress the positive qualities of mind which the monk should be developing at this time, thereby helping to dispel the impression, which a series of prohibitions tends to give, that observance of the moralities is something dry and negative. In fact, just as one only renounces Saṃsāra in order to obtain Nibbāna, so the sole purpose of renouncing bad or unwholesome qualities is to allow good or wholesome ones to take their place. The wording of these first seven precepts makes this quite clear:

“Here, the monk, having abandoned the taking of life, continues to abstain therefrom. Having once used stick and sword, now feeling shame, he is kind and compassionate to all living things... Having abandoned the taking of what is not given, he continues to abstain therefrom. Taking only what is given, he waits for the gift. Committing no theft, he lives as one who become pure... Having abandoned unchastity, he is chaste and keeps aloof, abstaining from coition, from the practice of the village-folk... Having abandoned false speech he continues to abstain therefrom, and is a speaker of truth. Pledged to truth, he is reliable and trustworthy, never lying to the world... Having abandoned slander, he continues to abstain therefrom. What he hears here, he does not

repeat elsewhere in order to raise a quarrel against the people here. What he hears elsewhere, he does not repeat here in order to raise a quarrel against the people there. Thus he reconciles those who are divided, and encourages those who are friends. Harmony is his pleasure, his delight and joy, and he speaks words that creates harmony... Having abandoned harsh speech, he continues to abstain therefrom. Whatever words are gentle, pleasing to the ear, affectionate, touching the heart, polite, pleasant and agreeable to the people—such are the words he speaks... Having abandoned trivial chatter, he continues to abstain therefrom. His words are timely, in accordance with the truth, meaningful, concerning the Dhamma and the Discipline and the Order. He speaks words that are worth treasuring. They are uttered at the right time, are accompanied by reasons, are well-defined, and profitable.”

These are the first seven moral observances. The rest concern other things to be avoided, such as harming vegetation, and various activities connected with mealtimes, personal adornments, entertainments, games, trading, and so on. The section on morality concludes as follows:

“Then the monk, being thus complete in morality, sees no reason for fear on any side, as far as self-restraint in his conduct is concerned. Just as a ruler,

duly anointed, whose enemies have been crushed, sees no reason for fear on any side, as far as enemies are concerned; so the monk, thus being complete in morality, sees no reason for fear on any side, as far as self-restraint in his conduct is concerned. And, possessed of this noble group of moralities, he experiences unalloyed happiness within himself."

So far, the monk has progressed through two stages of renunciation. First, he has publicly renounced the world and left the household life. Then, by strict self-discipline, he has ensured that no moral lapse on his part will cause him to become entangled once again in the life that he has left behind, and his success in this self-discipline has given him a confidence and a happiness that he never had before. Thus, he has made his initial, outward renunciation secure. Now he is free to turn his attention to renunciation of the other, inner world, of the psychophysical life which is his "self." He begins by endeavouring to become detached from the activities of his senses, and of his mind and body, by the practice of mindfulness. He will now observe the things which impinge on his senses, watching to see that he does not react to them in an unwholesome or "unskillful" manner. Thus morality becomes mind-control. Then, when sense-impressions are no longer capable of agitating his mind unduly, he learns to become aware of his bodily

actions as he performs them, contemplating his body disinterestedly, as though it were somebody else's:

“How is the monk guarded as to the doors of his senses? (1. The senses are considered metaphorically as so many doors through which impressions enter the mind.) Having perceived a form with his eye, he does not fasten on its general appearance, or on its secondary characteristics. (2. In other words, he does not allow himself to become fascinated by it, or by any aspect of it, or to feel that it is “mine.” He simply watches with equanimity as phenomena come and go.) As long as he lived with his faculty of sight unrestrained, he fell prey to craving and unhappiness, to evil and unskilled states of mind. So he undertakes restraint, watching over his faculty of sight and restraining it. (And similarly with the other faculties: hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and cognizing things with the mind.) The monk, possessed of this noble restraint of the faculties, experiences unalloyed happiness within himself. And how is the monk mindful and aware? The monk, in going forth or returning, is clearly aware of his action. So also when looking ahead or looking around, when bending his arm in or stretching it out, when wearing his robe or carrying his alms bowl, when eating, drinking, chewing or tasting, when defecating or urinating, when walking, standing, sitting, sleeping, waking,

speaking or keeping silent; in all this he is clearly aware of what he is doing. Thus is the monk mindful and aware.”

The monk has now shaken off most of his worldly desires, and has gained a considerable degree of detachment from himself. As a consequence, he is perfectly content with his lot and with his few necessary possessions: “He is contented with the robes that protect his body and the alms food that protects his belly... Just as a bird carries its wings with it wherever it flies, so the monk is contented with the robes that protect his body and the alms food that protect his belly, and he has only them with him wherever he goes. Thus he is content.”

Now, having surrendered attachment both to the world and to his own body, the monk can concentrate all his efforts on the true source of ill, which is his mind. Sitting in a quiet spot, he strives to cleanse his mind of what are known as the “five hindrances.” The text describes the process as follows:

“Having given up covetousness for the world, he remains with his heart (or mind) free from and cleansed of covetousness. Having given up ill will and hatred, he remains with his heart free from ill will and hatred. Friendly and compassionate to all living things, he remains free of them. Conscious of light,

mindful and fully aware, he cleanses his heart of sloth and torpor. Having given up restlessness and worry, he remains free of them. Inwardly calm, he cleanses his heart of restlessness and worry. Having given up doubt, he remains having passed beyond doubt. No longer uncertain of what is skilful (or wholesome), he cleanses his mind of doubt.”

Having brought about a subsidence of the five hindrances, he is filled with an exhilarating sense of freedom. The Buddha compares his feelings of relief and happiness to those of a man who has just discharged a debt, or recovered from a painful illness, or been freed from prison, or released from slavery, or who has safely crossed a dangerous wilderness. This subsidence of the five hindrances, and the ensuing calmness and happiness of the body and mind, make it possible for the monk to attain what is called the first “absorption.” This is the first of a series of levels of consciousness which can be achieved by the successful practice of intense concentration of the mind—a process which is often called, rather vaguely, “meditation.” The attainment of these absorptions not only produces a blissfulness that is far beyond the range of worldly pleasures, it is also (and this is more important to the Buddhist) makes the mind an instrument of knowledge that can transcend the limitations of the senses.

After attaining the first absorption, the monk passes on to the second, third and fourth, shedding successively thought conception, the exhilarating and blissful sensations that arise in him, and finally all feelings of happiness and unhappiness, pleasure and displeasure. He is now in a state of pure mindfulness and equanimity, and his mind—which has become “composed, purified, spotless, undefiled, pliant, workable, firm and imperturbable”—is capable of that direct and penetrating insight into the true nature of existence which brings deliverance. Now he has left the world a long way behind, but he must turn his mind back to it, if he would complete the process of renunciation; for the final deliverance comes, not from looking away from the world or the self, but from seeing through them. So he scrutinises his self, his body and his mind, noting that “this is my body, possessed of form, composed of the four elements, springing from father and mother, built up by solid and liquid food; a thing impermanent by nature, fragile, perishable, and subject to total destruction. And this is my consciousness, bound up with and dependent on it.”

At this point he is said to be able to acquire certain supernatural powers if he wishes, including the ability to recall his own innumerable past lives, and the direct awareness of the death and rebirth of other beings in

accordance with their past actions.

His final deliverance, his ultimate renunciation, comes now with the destruction of what are known as the *asavas* (Pali) or *asravas* (Sanskrit), a word which defies translation. (Literally, it means a flowing in or a flowing out.) These “cankers” (as they may be called for convenience) epitomise the forces which bring about continued existence or “becoming,” and their destruction involves complete and perfect understanding of the conditioned and unsatisfactory nature of becoming, as it is summed up in the Four Truths. “It is as if,” the Buddha says, “there were a pool of water in the mountains, limpid, clear and still, and a man were to stand on the bank and see with his eyes the various shells, the gravel and pebbles, and the shoals of fish moving about or at rest.” So the monk, “with his mind composed, purified, cleansed, spotless, undefiled, pliant, workable, firm, and imperturbable, directs his mind to the destruction of the cankers. He knows as it really is: ‘This is ill, this is the origin of ill, this is the cessation of ill, and this is the Way that leads to cessation... These are the cankers, this is their origin, this is their cessation, and this is the Way that leads to their cessation.’ Knowing and seeing thus his heart is freed from the cankers of sense-desires, the canker of becoming (that is, the desire for continued existence), and the canker of ignorance. Free, he

knows that he is free, and he understands: 'Exhausted is birth, the holy life is fulfilled, what was to be done has been done, there will be no more of the present state.'"

With this final and certain insight, renunciation of both self and world becomes complete, and the monk, now an *arahat*, has attained the deathless state, Nibbāna.

IV.

Having considered the theory and practice of renunciation as it is set forth in the Pali texts, I should like to conclude by examining some possible misconceptions concerning the nature of renunciation in general and Buddhist renunciation in particular.

First of all, one may note that the text quoted in the previous section deals with the life of a monk. This is true of the great majority of the discourses in the Pali canon, and some people have concluded that Buddhism teaches a path of total renunciation which can only be followed by monks and nuns. To show that this is a misunderstanding, one need only point to

the many instructions on political, social, moral and religious matters which the Buddha addressed to lay people. One might also mention the many lay men and women throughout Buddhist history who have successfully followed the Buddha's Teaching even to the threshold of Nibbāna. And finally, there is the fact that, although a discourse may be addressed to monks, it is not necessarily intended for them exclusively. So the Commentary to the Greater discourse on Mindfulness (DN 22), for example, says: "The monk is given here as an example of those dedicated to the practice of the Teaching... Whoever undertakes that practice... is here included under the term 'monk.'"

Nevertheless, while the Buddha never neglected his lay followers, it cannot be denied that he gave more attention to his monks and nuns. It is as if, he says, there were a farmer with three fields; one good, one middling, and one poor. He would sow the good one first, then the middling one, and he may or may not sow the poor one. These three fields the Buddha likens respectively to his monks and nuns, his lay followers, and "recluses, brahmans, and wanderers of other sects." Just as the farmer sows his crop in the fields, so the Buddha teaches Dhamma to all impartially, even to the last of the three groups, for "if they were to understand even a single sentence, that would be a

blessing and a happiness for them for a long time” (SN). It is clear, however, that, as the farmer will expect a greater yield from the first field so the Buddha expected his teachings to bear more fruit amongst his monks and nuns than among the laity. The reason is that the Dhamma, as has been said, aims at an inner renunciation, and the outward renunciation of the monastic life consequently provides the best conditions for its practice. To perfect oneself in morality, mindfulness and concentration is no easy task, and monks and nuns are not hampered in their pursuit of it by having to worry about earning a living, about money, property, family, and all the daily noise and bustle that distracted the householder’s life even in ancient India, and no doubt do so still more in our modern urban civilization. In short, although the Path of renunciation is theoretically open to all, whoever and wherever they are, yet success in following it can be greatly affected by one’s outward circumstance, and a layman will have to overcome many more obstacles than a monk.

What, then, of the weaker vessels among the laity who may not have the opportunity, the ability, or even the desire to renounce the world? It would be a mistake here to imagine that the Buddhist is called upon to make an immediate, once-and-for-all choice between Saṃsāra and Nibbāna, renouncing the world

in the same spirit as the candidate for Christian baptism renounces Satan and all his works. For a start, there is no need for the Buddhist to hurry unless he truly desires to do so. An infinity of deaths and births stretches before him, and he has plenty of time in which to prepare himself for renunciation if he is not yet ready for it—provided, of course, that he continues to lead a morally blameless life, thus ensuring that he will continue to be born in more or less favourable circumstances in future.

Again, there is no sharp distinction in Buddhism between the saved and the damned. There are many degrees of spiritual development, and, as a skilled teacher should, the Buddha always adapted his message to the needs and capacities of his audience. To those who were aware of the hollowness of worldly things he taught the path of final deliverance, while to those who were still in love with the world he simply pointed out the way to lead a good life, one which would bring as much benefit as possible, and as little harm or suffering, for themselves and others. He never demanded more from anybody than they were capable of at any given time, saying that, just as the great ocean deepens gradually as one goes further out from shore, and does not plunge down abruptly, so “in this Dhamma and Discipline the training is gradual, the practice is gradual, the progress is

gradual. There is no abrupt attainment of the ultimate knowledge (i.e., the liberating insight of him who has won Nibbāna)” (Udāna).

So there is no need for anybody to try and plunge into deep water before he has first learned to swim in the shallows. Such a procedure would in fact be very dangerous, as the Dhammapada warns (verse 311): “As a blade of grass will cut the hand when wrongly grasped, so the ascetic life will drag one down to hell if wrongly taken up.” And the disciple need not lack for means of self-improvement even at the beginning of the path. Devotional practices, living as blameless a life as possible by observing the precepts, trying to be kind to others and speak and think kindly of them, study of and reflection on the Dhamma, degree of self-knowledge through mindfulness, and some practice of meditation perhaps; all of these things, among others, are within the reach of the most worldly-minded, and will have a good result. One does not have to be a saint, or even a monk or nun, to attempt them. Patience and persistence are all that is necessary to ensure progress. Here one might recall the words of the Dhammapada: “Do not underrate goodness, thinking ‘it will not come to me.’ By falling drops of water a water jug is filled, and a wise man will be full of goodness, even though he accumulates it bit by bit”(122). And again: “Let the wise man gradually

remove the impurities from himself, as the smith from silver, bit by bit and from moment to moment”(239).

A second misconception is that renunciation is a gloomy and depressing business. A biographer of the Christian mystic St. John of the Cross says that on a first reading of his work: “Few persons, however spiritually minded, will fail to find it repellent. It strikes a deadly chill, not only into the unhealthy heat of sense-affection, but into the glowing warmth of what one had hoped and believed to be pure love of God. It calls on one to go out from God-given light into a black and unknown darkness.” I think that, God aside, many people are repelled in a similar way when they first encounter the Buddha’s Teaching of renunciation, which may be one reason for the recurrent charges of nihilism and pessimism. The reason for this reaction is not far to seek, and the clue lies in the words “unknown darkness.”

For most people, the pleasures of the senses (and in Buddhism, one must remember, this can include the pleasures of the mind) are the only pleasures, the only source of happiness that they know. Naturally, they do not take kindly to the suggestion that they give these up for some far-off and indescribable goal. But it is only ignorance that makes the goal appear dark. The darkness is, as it were, only the objective counterpart of a subjective blindness, and, in fact, as those who

have had experience of this forbidding “darkness” repeatedly assert, the successful abandoning of sense-pleasures brings a happiness far greater than anything that they had known hitherto.

It is not difficult to see why this should be so, when one considers the way in which sense-pleasures come about. A sense-pleasure arises from the gratification of a desire, in the following way. First of all, a desire arises and creates a kind of tension in the mind of the being which feels the desire. Since this tension is felt as unpleasant, the being is then impelled to get rid of it by gratifying the desire. When the desired object is obtained, the desire is gratified, and the tension in the mind is relaxed. From the relaxation of the tension flows a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment, a greater or lesser degree of happiness or pleasure. Now, as long as existence continues (for the continuity of existence itself is, in the Buddhist view, contingent upon the desire for it), desires of one kind and another will be continually arising, at every moment, and agitating the mind. This means that the relaxation of tension, and hence the pleasure of happiness, which comes from their gratification can never be anything but temporary and incomplete.

If, then, happiness comes, not from desire itself (which in fact causes pain), but from its subsiding, it follows that the renunciation of sense-desires, so far

from making one miserable, really opens up the only path to true and lasting happiness. And when the goal has been attained, becoming has ceased, and the mind is no longer troubled by the arising of any kind of desire. The result must be a state of calm and imperturbable happiness that ordinary beings, still enmeshed in worldly desires, can scarcely comprehend. Even the temporary quiescence of the mind in deep “meditation” is said to create a sense of bliss that far surpasses anything in ordinary experience, and in this way to give a foretaste of the unutterable peace of Nibbāna. It is important to bear all this in mind, otherwise it might be easy to imagine that Buddhism is “pessimistic” and that Buddhists seek to renounce the world out of hatred for it. But there is no more un-Buddhist emotion than hatred, whether for the world or anything else, and to attempt renunciation for that reason would not be only futile but deadly. The correct motive for renunciation is rather that given in the Dhammapada (290): “If by surrendering a slight happiness one may realise a great happiness, the wise man should give up the slight happiness, considering the greater one.”

Another error would be to suppose that Buddhists, like followers of some other religions, think that one should renounce the world because it is corrupt, or evil, or ugly; but no Buddhist has ever held such a

view. It is not that worldly happiness and beauty are non-existent, or sinful, or even worthless. It is just that they are flawed by their transience and their liability to change into suffering and ugliness. The Buddhist ideal is to feel neither attachment in the case of happiness and beauty, nor revulsion in the case of suffering and ugliness, but simply to observe things as they really are, with equanimity and perfect freedom of mind.

A different kind of mistake is to think that renunciation is impossibly difficult, only to be achieved, if at all, by a superhuman effort of will and forcible suppression of natural desires. Of course, to sever the ties that bind one to the world are rarely an easy or a pleasant task, and strict self-discipline and persistent effort are necessary until the goal has been attained. Nevertheless, renunciation should never be forced. The man who has to force himself to renounce the world only shows that he is not yet ready to do so, and he must learn to be more patient, for otherwise he will only strengthen his bonds instead of loosening them. We do not have to compel ourselves to abandon the games and toys of our childhood; we simply outgrew them. So should it be with one who renounces worldly pleasures and preoccupations. Even though he may not yet be entirely free from nostalgia for these things of his spiritual childhood, he

is beginning to outgrow them, and he no longer truly desires them. For him, renunciation, while it may be difficult, is not a forbidding and distasteful task. It is, on the contrary, the only way to genuine and lasting happiness. True renunciation does not involve “driving Nature out with a pitchfork”: it is simply a question of learning to let go.

Finally, I would like to consider the objection that renunciation is a flight from the world’s problems, a selfish escapism. I think that enough has already been said to show that renunciation is by no means an easy way out of anything. On the contrary, it requires a considerable effort of self-discipline. Again, the aim of renunciation is to overcome the ills of the world, to understand and destroy the suffering that is at the root of the world’s problems, and not run away from it. As for the charge of selfishness and lack of concern for the welfare of others, it could be answered in a number of ways. First, one might point out that, in the Buddha’s words, “it is not possible for one who is himself sunk in a mire to pull out another who is in the same situation. But it is possible for one who is not sunk in a mire to pull out another who is”(M.N. No.8). In other words, no one can give effective help to others unless he has first helped himself. Nobody can solve for others problems that he has not yet solved for himself, and that is why self-development must precede

altruistic activity.

Secondly, one might reply that not only is deliberate selfishness impossible for a true follower of the Buddha, for he will be aiming at the destruction of “self,” but also, as was seen above, kindness and compassion towards all living things are enjoined on the monk as an indispensable part of the path. After he has succeeded in his aim, and attained final deliverance, he will continue to live only for the sakes of others, in order to pull them “out of the mire.” The Buddha himself set the example in this, and when his first sixty monks had realised Nibbāna, he sent them out singly to preach with those words: “Go your way, monks, for the benefit of the many: for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the benefit, the happiness of gods and men” (*Vinaya, Mahāvagga*).

Finally, it should be remembered that compassion for the world and detachment from the world are not incompatible. On the contrary, they are inseparable, for compassion is purest only where it is totally disinterested. It is easy to see that if I help another from some ulterior motive, such as expectation of a reward, my compassion, if compassion is present in me at all, will be tainted by self-interest. What is perhaps not so obvious is that if I am in any way concerned about my action or its results, if I *care* about

the person I am helping, my motives are still touched with selfishness, for I am identifying myself (my self) with my action or with the other person. Furthermore, since a sense of self is an indication that ignorance has not been completely eliminated, it shows that I am not yet "out of the mire," and my help will, for that reason, be less effective than the help of someone who is completely disinterested. Thus one arrives at the paradoxical conclusion that perfect compassion can arise, and perfect help can be given, only where there is perfect detachment, and that those who have totally renounced the world are precisely the people who can be of most benefit to it. The clearest illumination of this is the life of the Buddha himself. He began by renouncing the world, and finally transcended it. And yet, despite the fact that he had nothing whatever to gain from it, he spent the remainder of his long life, after his Awakening, tramping on the roads of north-eastern India in order to help "beings" which he knew full well had no substantial existence. There is no doubt that he did this out of the purest compassion, for being totally disinterested in the matter, he could have had no other motive; and to the extent of the help that he was able to give, twenty-five centuries of Buddhist history bear eloquent witness.

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