

CAN WE JUSTIFY RENUNCIATION?

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Many westerners who have been brought up on a materialist culture are often bemused by the Asian preoccupation with renunciation. Why, they often ask, do Asian religions preach the ideal of giving up the worldly pleasures to be derived from the physical body and from material wealth? Is it not unnatural to deny the perfectly human emotions of love for family, attachment to property and so on? They cannot understand why indulgence in worldly pleasure is considered a hindrance to spiritual development. It is this inability to understand “the ideal state” in the minds of followers of Eastern religions which have led Westerners to dismiss religions like Buddhism as being pessimistic and life-denying. Buddhism has been branded as an impractical religion which has no relevance to the needs of modern man.

To begin with, when we talk of “Western” man we should emphasise that we are not merely referring to the Caucasians from Europe and America. Rather we are talking about the growing number of people (Asians included) who are a part of what can loosely be described as “Western” cultured. Western culture refers to those aspects of modern civilization which lay greater emphasis on the development of science and the attainment of man’s physical well-being through the adequate provision of food, shelter and clothing. It also refers to those aspects of civilization which lay great emphasis on the commercialization of sensual pleasures.

“By Eastern” is meant those people (Caucasians included) who are increasingly disillusioned by the belief that the attainment of material well-being can bring happiness and that renunciation, or turning one’s back on worldly pleasures, is not required of all who consider themselves Buddhists. In Buddhism there are two sets of rules. One set applies to those who have voluntarily given up their attachments to the attractions of the physical world. The other set of rules applies to the householders who still find pleasure in things like property that is acquired honestly, love for family, concern for communal welfare and so on.

Buddhism is dismissed as being “unrealistic” by people who fail to recognize that the Buddha had clearly made a distinction between the two. Hence Buddhism does not condemn the lay life. The three principles of SILA, SAMADHI and PANNA are meant for all human beings, but have different connotations for the laymen and for the monks.

No life is permanent, no object is permanent. One who cannot recognize this basic truth is bound to suffer the pain of disappointment when one or the other is taken away. Only one who truly sees that attachment is futile because nothing is real or permanent can be considered truly happy. When one realizes that the pleasures to be derived from attachment are meaningless, he is freed.

But Buddhism does not demand the same degree of renunciation from everyone. While all human beings are required to recognize the transitoriness of existence, they are only required to practise non-attachment to the level of their mental development.

The Buddha knew that human beings are all different in mentality. Those who have developed their wisdom to a higher level can perceive the futility of attachment. Those who are less highly developed spiritually are still attached to the world, and Buddhism does not condemn them. The Buddha taught that people must understand the real nature of existence and work towards final realization not in one brief life-span, but over many countless lives. To illustrate this, the Buddha has stated that all the bones that went to make up his innumerable lives could be stacked up higher than a mountain!

So, when we hear Buddhist stories of men and women renouncing their worldly possessions, we must understand that this does not happen in one glorious divinely ordained moment of realization, but that it is the result of countless aeons of diligent effort. And not every human being is expected to make the renunciation the moment he says, "I am a Buddhist". Rather, he is expected to make a "firm determination" to realize the transitoriness of life and to free himself from attachment to it. After this, he must strive heedfully, life after life, to free himself from all forms of attachment which tie him down to existence.

Here we must remember that realization cannot come by divine intervention. True insight must develop spontaneously within oneself by one's own effort: "No one saves us but ourselves; The Buddhas merely show the way".

Of course, there are countless stories which show how the Buddha helped his disciples to arrive at that spontaneous realization. Being the greatest teacher the world has ever known, and given his total understanding of the human psyche, the Buddha always varied the methods he used for helping people gain their spiritual salvation. He varied his lessons according to whether his disciples were dull or intelligent, lustful or celibate, quarrelsome or friendly, optimistic or pessimistic, greedy or generous, totally attached or only marginally so and so on.

Critics often point to the Buddha's own renunciation to try and prove how impractical this religion is. They say that renunciation is impossible in the modern world.

In fact they try to condemn his renunciation, saying that he was cruel and it was unfair of him to desert his wife and child. But from a Buddhist point of view, he did not **desert** them in the sense of having left them without a sense of responsibility. He never had any misunderstanding with his wife. He too had the same love and attachment towards his wife and child as any normal man would have, perhaps even greater. His love was not merely emotional or selfish, but he had the courage and understanding to detach himself from that emotion and selfishness for a good cause. Buddhists consider his sacrifice all the more noble because he set aside his personal needs and desires for a greater ambition, namely to serve all of mankind for all time.

The Four Encounters – the sight of a sick man, an old man, a dead body and the calm face of a hermit which Prince Siddhartha saw one day while driving along the streets of his father's Kingdom sparked the prince's Great Renunciation. Then, during dead of night he departed from his palace, leaving his wife and son behind to discover the cause of human suffering.

The main purpose of his renunciation was not for his own happiness, peace or salvation but for the sake of mankind. If he had remained in the royal palace his services would have been confined only to his family or his kingdom. That is why he decided to renounce everything in order to maintain peace and purity, to gain Enlightenment and then to enlighten others who were suffering in ignorance. One of his earliest tasks after gaining his Enlightenment was to return to his palace to enlighten the members of his family. In fact, when his young son Rahula asked the Buddha for his inheritance, the Buddha said that Rahula was heir to the richest wealth, the knowledge of the Dhamma. In this way the Buddha served his family, he paved the way for their salvation, peace and happiness. Therefore, no one can say he was a cruel or selfish father. He was more compassionate and self-sacrificing than anybody else. With his high degree of spiritual development the Buddha knew that marriage was a temporary affair while Enlightenment was eternal and for the good of all mankind. Besides, the Buddha knew that his wife and son would not starve in his absence and when he gained his enlightenment, he was able to give them something no other father could give; the freedom from slavery to attachment.

Prince Nanda's Renunciation

There is a rather amusing but true story that happened during the time of the Buddha himself. It also helps to illustrate what an excellent teacher the Buddha

was, and how he used his deep knowledge of individual personalities to help them gain Arahantship or the ultimate freedom from mental defilement. Prince Nanda, the step-brother of the Buddha, was getting married. The Buddha, with his superior knowledge knew that Nanda was ready to renounce the world but because of some mental defilements which remained in his mind, he was still attached to the world, hence his desire to get married. The Buddha knew that sooner or later Nanda would realize that marriage was unsatisfactory and decided to help him from regretting later and causing more pain to his bride. But the Buddha wanted Nanda to attain full realization through his own insight, without having his “salvation” forced on him.

So while the celebrations were about to begin, the Enlightened One appeared in Nanda’s palace. Of course, Prince Nanda paid homage to the Buddha by offering him alms. The Buddha placed his alms bowl in Nanda’s hand and without saying a word, turned around and walked away. Prince Nanda could not tell the Buddha to take back his bowl because that would be discourteous. So, out of respect for his most illustrious brother, the Prince followed him, hoping that the Buddha would take back his bowl. But the Buddha walked all the way to his dwelling place and the Prince had no choice but to follow. On reaching the Buddha’s dwelling place, the Enlightened One asked the Prince if he would like to be ordained as a monk. Again out of respect, he agreed although he was reluctant.

The new monk was now residing with the Buddha but naturally the poor young man was very unhappy, thinking of the beautiful bride he had left behind. The Buddha observed him and after a few days he asked, “Nanda, why do you look so sad? Are you unhappy about something?” Nanda confessed that his mind was still attached to the girl he had left behind. He said she was the most beautiful girl in the country, and he loved her more than anything else. The Buddha then used his supernormal powers and took Nanda to a place where beautiful celestial maidens dwell. Nanda was overwhelmed and the Buddha asked him whether he would like to take one of those beautiful damsels as his bride. The young man was overjoyed and immediately said he would accept.

Having seen the beauty of the celestial beings he had reduced the attachment that he had towards his betrothed. This is the fickle nature of human mind.

Thus the young Nanda’s remaining mental defilements were removed when he realized that beauty and lust are inconsistent and impermanent and would finally fade away and give rise to unsatisfactoriness. He gave up his worldly craving finally and soon afterwards become an arahant, free from attachment and craving.

It was on this occasion that the Buddha uttered verse number 13 in the Dhammapada: “Even as rain penetrates an ill-thatched house, so does lust penetrate an undeveloped mind”. The Buddha succeeded in helping Nanda develop his mind so that lust would never penetrate it again.

Many people who belong to materialistic cultures do not understand the Buddhist concept of renunciation. They criticize Buddhists who give up the worldly life and say that Buddhism denies life, that it is pessimistic and that it makes unrealistic demands on its followers. The story we have just read may draw many reactions. For example some people may ask, “Was the Buddha not being harsh when he helped the young man to give up his bride?” The Buddha only decided to help Nanda because he knew that the young man was spiritually ready to renounce the world. Through a long period of mental training Nanda had attained a level where he was soon to be released from all delusion. The Buddha merely provided the final impetus to remove the remaining defilements that clouded his mind. If the Buddha had not done so, Nanda would still have renounced, but after marriage, and this would have caused more pain.

Then we can ask why the Buddha did not make Nanda meditate earlier, that is, before he was shown the celestial nymphs. The reason is that if the Prince had not seen the nymphs, he would not have shifted his emotions and he would have continued to be deluded by the thought that his love for his bride was permanent. By making him become enamoured of the nymph, the Buddha showed Nanda clearly how impermanent everything is. It was this realization of impermanence which helped Nanda achieve the state of Arahant hood – where there is no unsatisfactoriness to result from attachment.

While the sight of a celestial maiden’s surpassing beauty was enough to make Nanda realize the impermanent nature of his attachment, the following story is different. This is the story of another young man who was also deeply in love, but he had already begun to realize that love was mere attachment which would prove unsatisfactory in the end. But realization alone is not enough, the mind must also make the supreme effort to detach itself from the object for which it craves so strongly. In order to convince himself that her beauty would fade, he began to meditate on the 32 impurities, but the more he tried to forget, the more strongly he loved her. Then he decided that he must follow the example set by the Buddha in Nanda’s case. He began to meditate on her beauty. Then he imagined her more alluring, more desirable and each time he saw her beauty as surpassing anything he had imagined before. Finally, he set his mind on this great imaginary beauty of hers and concentrated on that. After some time he went to visit the girl for whom he had such a great attachment. But when he saw her in reality he was disappointed because she did not match up to the

beauty he had visualized her to possess! Finally he was able to break himself free from his strong attachment and attained complete freedom.

The point of this story is that each person must understand his own character and mental disposition in order to seek an object to meditate upon. It is only when the object of meditation suits one's character and temperament that he will be successful in removing the mental impurities which defile the mind and prevent it from attachment to the world of sensual pleasure. There are many stories which show how the Buddha selected suitable objects of meditation to help his disciples gain arahant hood. Perhaps people are confused by the word "renunciation". In Buddhism, renunciation is not an escapist concept, when a man throws away all his responsibilities and runs off to the jungle to pass his time under some tree or other. It is a mental attitude of non-attachment to the things of the world. A householder can continue to fulfill his obligations without craving and an undue selfish desire to create more wealth and to satisfy pleasure. It is not necessary to shave one's head or wear saffron robes to show renunciation. Of course one who retires or "goes forth" is in a better position to be freed from desire, but it is not a pre-requisite. The donning of symbols of renunciation should only come after the mind has developed detachment and craving has ceased.

In all this, there is one thing we must constantly bear in mind and that is, it requires a great deal of effort. One must clearly know what causes the defilement in the mind and "make every mindful effort" to eradicate it. The first few steps are the hardest, but each effort makes the next stage easier and we improve very slowly. Do not forget: the Buddha himself spent many lifetimes preparing himself to discover the path of deliverance. He has made the task easier for us, because we can follow his example. He cannot save us, we must do that for ourselves, but his incomparable teachings show us how to gain final deliverance from this endless process of birth and death.