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Buddhist Hour Radio Program 915
Broadcast on Mountain District Radio 97.1FM
6 November 2016

The Practice of Renunciation

It is true for many of us that we seem to be perpetually caught in the gravitational orbit of our habitual sense of 'I'. We have stumbled upon the great benefit available from learning and practicing the Buddha Dhamma, but do not generate from our side enough sense of urgency and purpose to begin to overcome the power of this mental undertow that has kept us ignorant and suffering until now.

Our worldly views and refuges resurface with such persistence it is difficult to live in accordance with what we know would be more beneficial having studied the Dhamma or in other words, to live our life with Buddha Dhamma on top.

In 1998 our Founder John D. Hughes wrote an article about the role of the World Fellowship of Buddhists which is reprinted in part below and was published in full in our publication Buddha Dhyana Dana Review Volume 8 Number 3, 1998 page 53:

"The Role of the World Fellowship of Buddhists"

In this World of materialistic progress, we may notice, the nature of human mind, types of problems, and the Law of Nature (sacca-dharma) remains the

same as ever. As to the nature of human mind, we are still tempted and governed, more or less, by our own defilements. For example, we feel happy with gain and miserable with loss. We hardly cope with problems arising from our own defilements. Apart from this, all types of problems in this World, for example, social, environmental, and economic, have existed in this World from the beginning. They only vary in degree. We have to struggle with them in all times. Finally, the Law of Nature (sacca-dharma), as revealed by the Lord Buddha, has never changed. It is timeless and enlightens the way toward the end of all problems.

Having learned all this, we may know how to cope with the problems and challenges.

1. Since the World problems remain the same, we have no need to search for new things to cope with. The only thing we should do is to try to understand the Law of Nature which is the truth of the Universe. As to the nature of mind and its relation to defilements, we need to clearly understand it in accordance with the Buddha's words, that is, "Mind is superior to and governs all things". Our mind originates our speech and action, that is; a good mind yields a good speech and a good action, and vice versa. Knowing this, we should try to attain spiritual development through a proper education, meditation, and so on, and practice accordingly. Particularly, young people today are our future. If they are educated properly according to the Lord Buddha's teachings until they can cultivate their moral consciousness and sense of responsibility, they will grow up to become good human beings in their adulthood. They thus will positively contribute much to the World. Our future truly depends on our youth's spiritual training.

2. We need to propagate the Lord Buddha's teachings as we declare in our WFB's Charter and resolutions.

The World Fellowship of Buddhists is well aware of these challenges of the World. We are working and preparing some new projects in order to help Buddhists and others cope with them properly. For example, according to the WFB resolution 12/2521 (1978), "all Regional Centres of WFB in different parts of the World should make special efforts to propagate the ethical teachings of the Buddha, the science of deliverance, to educate the misled people to give up their psychological craving for drugs and lead a useful and law-abiding life to provide opportunities for citizens from all walks of life, as well as cooperating with the leaders of other religions to find out ways and means of solving this serious problem."

3. We need to initiate globalisation through a positive scientific technique and promote an interdependent cooperation. What we need is a healthy World not a prosperous World. We have enough of a material growth. Now, we need a World that we can live together in harmony and peaceful happiness.

The article above states our modern problems of living are not new. The fundamental conditions we experience as human beings living in the world remain the same as ever because of the nature of our human mind and the Laws of Nature which govern our existence.

The Buddha Teachings however identify the urgent need for us to not be mesmerised and dominated by our ongoing struggle just to live in the world as that approach will never produce an end to the problems which will continue to appear endlessly in our future experiences.

The Buddha points the way each for himself and herself to remove our short sighted and limited world-view through understanding our existence is framed by the nature of our mind and the Natural Laws which govern us.

With regard to the nature of human mind, the article above identifies “we are still tempted and governed, more or less, by our own defilements. For example, we feel happy with gain and miserable with loss. We hardly cope with problems arising from our own defilements”.

Our worldly views and refuges resurface with such persistence it is difficult to live in accordance with what we know would be more beneficial having studied the Dhamma or in other words, to live our life with Buddha Dhamma on top.

According to the Macquarie Dictionary (1991) to renounce means "to give up or put aside voluntarily." 1.

Daniel Odier in his book “Nirvana Tao, The Secret Meditation Techniques of Taoist and Buddhist Masters”, 1986 writes:

Renunciation, the third Paramita, can be considered the foundation stone, not only of the other virtues but also of meditation. Renunciation is the basis of everything in Buddhism. Renunciation can be the greatest stumbling block on the way to meditation. Its realisation is an extremely important step in the disciple's life. The Buddha, as Jesus, and nearly all the great teachers, make it the primary virtue that allows one to enter easily into the contemplative life and to arrive quickly at the realisation of the teaching. The greater the renunciation, the faster the progress.

The renunciation is the second obstacle that Westerners prefer to forget in the study and practice of Buddhism. Everyone who is honest with himself (or herself) knows that without sacrifices and efforts no method will permit the blossoming of concentration and the interior vision” 2.

There are many differences between minds that have worldly refuges on top and minds that have Buddha Dhamma Refuge number one.

To begin with, the worldly refuge minds will allow little or no space for moment by moment Buddha Dhamma learning and practice. The available mental space of worldly minds is being unceasingly occupied by any number worldly concerns such as, for example; dwelling on problems or issues, being distracted, the urge to be busy, our refuge in physical comfort, the desire to be entertained, restlessness, day dreaming and so on.

These worldly minds are in a Dhamma sense out of control.

Then there are our worldly refuges which we always choose to deal with first and sometimes exclusively as an unquestioned priority. These could be our job, our family, our wealth accumulation. However the Dhamma points out to us that at the approach of inevitable death, nothing except the Dharma and having practised good actions in this life, can be of any use.

Our fully occupied mind is creating the fully occupied life we live in where there is simply no time or mental space left. You may put work as number one but there's other things above work. You need to leave space for Dhamma.

Even when we feel we are being a “good” Buddhist, we have confidence in Buddha’s Teachings and participate in Buddha Dhamma activities, we must be awake to the more subtle ways in which our worldly minds can undermine us.

In the words of the Tibetan Lama Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden, former spiritual leader of the Tibetan Buddhist Society of Australia, in his book *Meditations on the Path to Enlightenment* (1996):

“With the laziness of procrastination you have a willingness to practice Dharma but a sense that there is not time for it now. You postpone engaging in virtue until later. There are so many excuses! 'At the moment I do not have sufficient intellectual knowledge of the Dharma to be able to practice properly. I will wait until the children leave home and then do a degree in Buddhism so that, when I do come to practice, I will do so properly.' Another may think, 'If I do anything, I want to do it wholeheartedly. I'm too busy to devote a high level of effort now, so I will carry on with business until I amass a large amount of money and can retire. Then I will be able to devote myself to the Dharma.' Or else, 'You cannot gain realisations without doing a lot of meditation. I have no time at the moment to meditate because I have to nurse my sick old mother. When she has passed away I will have time to meditate, so I will practice Dharma then.' There is usually a major misconception of what Dharma is and how to go about it that supports the attitude of procrastination.

Never fall into the trap of waiting for the right circumstances to be able to practice Dharma according to some pre-conceived notion as to what constitutes practice. Whatever your present circumstances they are perfect for you to apply the Dharma in the most effective manner according your specific karma. You are a unique individual. Your circumstances are unique, and you can uniquely apply the Dharma according to those particular conditions” 3.

Renunciation – The Third Perfection.

Renunciation is the path factor which tackles our craving head on. It can be developed with great power, power enough to put a crack in our worldly refuges and ignorant world view because it is based on the truth and our coming to the Right View of our real situation in human birth.

The practice of the Perfection of Renunciation in Buddhism follows the Perfection of Dana (generosity) and the Perfection of Sila (Morality). Renunciation is altogether an extraordinary Blessing to our mind and our life as we can begin to unbundle the dead weight we have been carrying around with us of our craving, dislike and ignorance.

To develop renunciation it is not necessary to leave the home life and become a monk or a nun although the process of becoming a monastic suggests a person must already have got to the point where they willingly choose to not follow worldly pursuits and living a conventional life.

Geshe Michael Roach, an American Buddhist Lama in the Tibetan tradition, has recounted many times the circumstances that led him to consider studying the Buddha Dhamma and then becoming the first American to complete the eighteen year Geshe Degree under his Master Khen Rinpoche's guidance.

In his early 20's having received a scholarship to Princetown University USA during the period of one year Geshe Michael's Brother committed suicide and then his Mother died in his arms. This double tragedy which stopped him in his tracks, led him to question and then renounce the conventional lifestyle and belief system which he had unquestioningly been following.

Geshe Michael has since said that quite a number of Western Dhamma practitioners he knows personally came to the Buddha Dhamma as a result of some sort of personnel misfortune or tragedy. Whilst many Westerners have found the Dhamma through many other means, it does illustrate that when confronted with a direct experience of the harsher realities of life some people will begin a process of renunciation looking for something that makes more sense to them, or that has more meaning for them.

Obviously there are many others who do not.

Instructions and meditations to develop the first level of renunciation are found in Buddhist texts from every tradition. These meditations focus on such things as:

In this life, death is inevitable.

In this life, the time of death is uncertain.

At the approach of inevitable death, nothing except the Dharma and having practised good actions in this life, can be of any use.

There is not a single place in the whole of samsara where there is no death.

In this life it is just as likely that I will die today, than live until tomorrow.

According to the Buddha's own words to be born as a human being is itself inconceivably rare. Our unenlightened minds struggle to comprehend what the Buddha is talking about because we simply don't know the truth about our existence directly for ourselves.

One Buddhist Teaching likens us to being asleep in a house that is burning down but we are not aware of the fire. The Buddha is trying to get us to wake up to get out of the house.

The Tibetan text 'Parting From Four Attachments' states:

“We should vow that we will make this human life that is free of the eight unrestful states and endowed with the Ten Right Conditions, infinitely meaningful by taking Refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and developing the Enlightenment Thought”. 4.

The Ten Right Conditions referred in this quote are the conditions that will allow a being to firstly meet the Buddha Dhamma and secondly to benefit from this precious meeting. They are:

- 1 Being born human
2. Being born in a centrally located place (having access to members of the Sangha).
3. Having sound organs.
4. Having not committed the five negative actions which produce vast negative results such as killing your parents, drawing blood from a Buddha, etc.)
5. Having a sincere belief in the Buddha's Teachings.
6. Having been born at a time when the Buddha Dhamma is in the world.
7. Having been born at a time when the Buddha has turned the Wheel of the Dhamma.
8. Having been born at a time when the Teachings of the Buddha are alive, not just an empty shell.
9. Having other practitioners to set an example.
10. Recognising the need to depend on Right Livelihood.

Five of these ten conditions are outside our control having been created by the efforts of the Buddha and his Sangha.

These various teachings guide us to discover as a knowledge that we are right now experiencing the absolute best conditions possible, we are sitting on the greatest Treasure that can ever be found. As the renowned Ariya Bodhisattva Shantideva wrote we are like a blind man who has stumbled upon a jewel in a rubbish heap.

These teachings are also like a mirror that reflect back to us our wrong conceptions and attitudes thereby giving us the possibility to correct or change them to allow our mind to become pure and clear so we can live a more wise and beneficial life.

As we become more experienced practitioners we can begin to recognise that although we have made the Dhamma a higher priority in our life and maybe don't get caught up in the particular worldly refuges as we used to, we are still operating with minds or logic systems that cause us a lot of problems and difficulties. These are often more subtle traits which maybe not so easy to recognise such as wishing to have control of our environments such as our home or have control over others who we live with such as our husband, wife or partner, needing to be recognised, needing to be praised, having an aversion to being blamed, we may be too pedantic, too heavy or rigid in our views and reactions, too much of a perfectionist, and so on. These types of behaviours reflect that more or less we are still struggling with our own defilements.

We require a level of insight into ourselves at this point and this is where having a Buddhist Teacher to help can be a great blessing. The practice of investigation of the Dhamma needs to be well developed to help us navigate our way in developing more wholesome minds and to correct our view.

There is a Buddhist story about the life of a Zen Monk who lived in Japan in the 1300's. The monk had essentially practiced by himself but after staying at an old temple in the country he was asked to become the next Abbot which he agreed to do. He was a good Abbot who helped the monks and laypeople and he initiated work to rebuild some of the old temples around his district which had fallen into disrepair.

His name and reputation grew over the years and eventually the monk was asked to become Abbot of a famous Temple in a large city which would be a great honour. However after consideration he recollected he had seen other monks be befriended by the rich and obtain many worldly benefits as a result.

He chose to stay living in humble conditions in the country where he had lived for eight years eating just two bowls of food per day. He chose to continue to

restore some of the old temples rather than build new ones which he could have done. There is the idea that new temples, new houses, are better to live in which we often believe today also. Yet this monk chose to rebuild the old temples which monks could live and practice in.

It turns out that now today in Japan it is some of these old temples that monk restored that still exist and are National Treasures of Japan.

If you look closely at that story you can see that the monk did not have work on top, he did not have Buddha-Dhamma-looks-like-Abbot-of-a-large-and-famous Buddhist-Temple on top, he had Buddha Dhamma practice on top which is pretty heroic.

May the merits of this article help all beings experience renunciation as a knowledge on the path to enlightenment.

References

1. Delbridge, Arthur. (C. Ed.) The Macquarie Dictionary. Published by the Macquarie Library University, NSW 210, Australia. 1991
2. Daniel Odier. Nirvana Tao, The Secret Meditation Techniques of Taoist and Buddhist Masters, Published by Inner Traditions, Vermont USA, 1986
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4. Parting From Four Attachments, contains four stanzas by Jetsun Drakpa Gyaltzen and a commentary by Konchok Lhudrub. A second copy of the text with a Commentary by Khentse Wanpo was also used.