

Renunciation: What are we really giving up?

When students of Tibetan Buddhism hear that the renunciation of every worldly thing [home, family, friends, property, fame, duration of life, and even health] is a precious goal, the prospect of living like a yogi in a Western world can seem just too hard to contemplate.



But if we look at what Nagarjuna (often referred to as “the second Buddha,” circa 200 B.C.E.) said – “Acquiring material things or not acquiring them; happiness or unhappiness; interesting or uninteresting sounds; praise or criticism: these eight worldly dharmas are not objects of my mind. They are all the same to me...” – we can see that he was advocating a change of mind, not necessarily a total abandonment of things.

Nancy Patton asked Yangsi Rinpoche, the reincarnation of the renowned practitioner and Lharampa Geshe Ngawang Gendun, how to deal with the eight worldly concerns: attachment to praise, comfort, good reputation, and gain; and aversion to their opposites, blame, discomfort, bad reputation, and loss. Rinpoche said:

“Generally speaking, the point is to renounce all attachment or aversion to these worldly things from the mental point of view. It doesn’t mean that you have to give up everything. What you have to give up is how you are grasping at things; how you perceive objects or situations, thinking that they are the essentials of this life. It doesn’t mean that you have to give up your own self.

“Let’s imagine a fancy car: Some people would say, ‘Oh, it’s so important! I have to have it.’ It’s the *concept* of having that car that becomes so important. It’s about how we perceive and respond to things. We are responding by having strong expectations, and we are grasping at what it means to us. Yet another person may have a fancy car and be not at all attached to it as such. For example, when His Holiness the Dalai Lama is in Dharamsala, he sometimes rides in a Mercedes Benz, and some people might say, ‘Why does he have a Mercedes Benz?’ [Certainly it is a safe and reliable car and many prominent people choose it for those reasons as well as for its status, but] from His Holiness’s side, he is not grasping at it; it’s no big deal to him. The main thing to consider is, are you having this kind of car to show off, or do you have another point of view toward it? If you have it so you can show off, it’s better not to have that car; instead have a regular one – or get the bus.

“Renunciation, from the lam-rim point of view, applies not only to this lifetime but to all future lifetimes and to all samsara. It is a huge way of thinking. But when it comes down to this present life, we need to understand how to renounce current situations, how to overcome the mental pressure on ourselves.”

NP: *So it’s not just a question of being attached to things, but also to praise, blame, what people think of us, our place in the world?*

“Of course, every action we do has to be a good one, but what sometimes comes with it, in real life, are expectations of praise, recog-

nition, all that stuff, which are not necessary and should not be connected with our actions. When people praise you, it doesn't mean you don't accept, but the temptation and your focus should not be conditioned by expectations of praise and acknowledgment. It's important to correct your motivation. If you are doing something just to get praise, consider instead that you are simply doing it because it is necessary and important.

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"By avoiding worldly thoughts, you do what you need to do, and it becomes clear cut, and the feelings of being worthy or not worthy are avoided naturally.

"Say you have to speak in front of a large group. You get nervous, and why? Because we have expectations that we might do it wrong. It's your ego at work, trying to protect yourself, but the main thing is to say, 'Okay, I'll spend my mental energy on studying and then just do what I have to do.' Boom! You are not nervous. That's just a small example of how the ego mind works.

"What people really think of us doesn't matter. Society is always trying to shape how we should be. This is what fighting the eight worldly dharmas is all about, especially for the young, who are influenced by the media, their music, their peers. 'This is how you should look, what you should wear, how you should talk.' Renunciation needs mental discipline."

NP: *What advice would you give to newcomers to Tibetan Buddhism?*

"Many times, people who become interested in Tibetan Buddhism try to rush in. It's best not to change immediately. It's important to stay with your own culture and faith, at the same time taking whatever advice is useful. If by the process of learning you feel confident, and it feels good, then it becomes an individual choice. Attend teachings, go to a center, do your research. His Holiness the Dalai Lama often gives this advice: 'Take your time.'"

NP: *There are many aspects of Tibetan culture that students like to adopt, some becoming more Tibetan than the Tibetans. How to cope with this tendency?*

"It's not necessary to adopt everything! It's fine to have an altar and water bowls and thangkas in your home, and a mala in your hand; it's part of a spiritual practice, as well as part of Tibetan culture. Buddhadharma and being Tibetan is all mixed. Some Tibetans want to wear jeans!"

NP: *Some of us go to our guru with a 'self-pity mind' saying 'I'm not as good as I'd like to be, I'm so unworthy.' This handicaps us spiritually and makes us dependent on the guru for reassurance. How to overcome this?*

"There are some situations where you need to get advice, but there can be too much giving over of entire authority to the guru, even the way you walk and talk. That's too much! It's very important to use your own grown-up judgment. It's absolutely fine to ask questions related to your spiritual practice; that's most important in your life, but not if it is your ego wanting commiseration.

"Also, sometimes people think that if they ask many questions to the teacher and bring many problems, they will become closer to the teacher. It's not necessary to create questions and problems so that you have the opportunity to see the teacher or become close. Doing this is just the ego mind. Generally speaking, becoming close with the teacher is good, but if it is done with the ego mind, it is absolutely wrong. You are using that path to increase your ego, instead of decrease it. So the advice is, before you go see your teacher, examine your motivation carefully." ☉

Yangsi Rinpoche is currently based in Seattle, Washington but travels around the U.S. and Europe with a busy teaching schedule. His book Practicing the Path: A Commentary on the Lamrim Chenmo is published by Wisdom Publications (www.wisdompubs.org).