

Renunciation, Compassion, and Devotion

by Kokyo Henkel

What is the path of Buddha-Dharma, and where does it go? If we're just starting out in the practice, we may have a few ideas of what this path is about, and if we've been practicing many years, we probably have more ideas about what it is. We might have set out with various ideas but now are just practicing, having forgotten why we came. That may be a good thing – just doing it – but practice may also have become a kind of unconscious habit; we're just going along with the routine because that's what we do. We're "Zen practitioners." So it may be helpful sometimes to stop and reflect: What is this path really all about? What is growth on the path, deepening of practice, spiritual evolution? Asking such questions could arouse thoughts of self-judgment or self-centered striving, or a stronger selfless aspiration to live in accord with truth for the benefit of all.

This path is designed to deepen various aspects of practice and realization of Buddha-Dharma, qualities of mind and heart, and we can check if these qualities are evolving to discern whether we are on the right track. If not, then our practice may be slightly off; we may have fallen into a rut or a complacent place, and we may be wasting our precious time. We may have found a kind of comfortable plateau where we feel like our practice has worked to some extent; it's worked enough that life goes more smoothly than before we started practice, and now we're kind of coasting along. It's very natural to have plateaus in practice, but when we have rested at a certain level for a while, then we might be ready to make a little more effort to deepen our practice and realization of Dharma.

Three qualities of mind, and three practices, deepen as practice deepens: renunciation, compassion, and devotion. Most spiritual traditions have many classic forms of renunciation, basically limiting or restricting the things we tend to habitually hold on to, such as comfort, food, sleep, sex, entertainment, possessions, choice, and control. Such renunciations are very similar in most traditions, and those classic forms can be really helpful at different phases in our practice, depending on what we're especially caught up in, which things pull us out of our present experience of contentment. Another less intimidating name for renunciation is simply "letting go." Letting go might take those traditional forms, or it might even take opposite forms.

As a young man in my twenties beginning Zen practice, I wholeheartedly took up such classical renunciation practices, sometimes with wonderful results, but sometimes in a quite contrived way. It wasn't always really renunciation; it wasn't always really letting go. Some of these forms of practice are like that; we can do them in order to look like or feel like we're renouncing something, but actually we are building up a sense of self or identity. Though actually the whole purpose of renunciation practice is to let go of a strong sense of self and its supposed needs, if we are not paying attention, such practice can have the opposite effect. So for me, over time it became a kind of renunciation practice to let go of some of those classic renunciation practices. This is kind of a tricky business because renunciation practice is never static. It's a constant balance. The middle way is very elusive – we let go of something and then we get attached to "letting go," so we let go of that way and we think we won't fall back into our old habits because we've already let them go. Unfortunately, it doesn't work quite that way! In fact it's very easy,

after really having let go of something, to then get a little lazy. Suddenly we notice, there it is again; the habit has redeveloped itself.

In the end, letting go comes down to being present and aware of what we're holding onto, and releasing our grip in that moment. Zazen is like an all-encompassing renunciation practice. Since we emphasize a particular upright posture, if we sit still long enough we'll find some holding on; one has to let go of the wish to move or to do something more interesting. It's renunciation to just patiently let go of those urges to move or do something else. To do this may seem like a small thing, especially for people who've been doing it for awhile, but it's actually profound to just sit still and let go, not only of moving physically, but also mentally. Zazen is letting go of moving, letting go of thoughts about past and future, and ultimately letting go of all conceptual elaboration, and this is an endless lifetime practice. Nobody finishes zazen practice, ever! In Zen we say "practice and realization are not two." We don't do practice over here, and then have realization over there. Renunciation is a moment-to-moment practice of letting go, and a moment-to-moment realization of the freedom of having let go, a process that we can check on to see how it's going. Do we have any deeply held habit patterns that for many years the practice hasn't seemed to reach? We probably do, and they present the place to practice, the very place to let go, whatever the habit is – whether its impatience or conceptual thinking.

Another practice and quality of mind to develop, closely related to renunciation, is compassion. Compassion is bringing in the element of other living beings, opening our hearts to others. In Buddha-Dharma, compassion is defined as the wish or desire that living beings be free from suffering and discontent, and the willingness to help however we can. Since we are living beings, we can have compassion for ourselves as well as others. And again, the practice and realization of compassion are not two. We can cultivate it and develop it, and the way we do that is quite related to renunciation. By just letting go of our own habitual holdings, letting go of our own self-concern as well as our resistance to experiencing our own discontent, our compassionate heart naturally starts opening to others more and more, is able to relate to others' pain more intimately, and naturally wants everyone to be free.

One important connection between renunciation and compassion is to see that letting go is freedom and ease. If we want others to be free from suffering, what do we really want for them? How are they going to be free from discontent? Though we can give them food if they're hungry or help in other ways, to be completely relieved *they* actually have to let go. So we could say that compassion is actually the wish for others to renounce. This is one way the two practices are very connected: If we want to have complete compassion for others, if we want them to be completely free from discontent, then we wish for them to be able to let go of whatever they are holding on to so that they can be free. If we want that realization for others, but then hold onto our own fixations, that's a little funny, isn't it? So in order to fully practice compassion, we have to continuously let go of our own self-cherishing, not only in order to be open to others, but also to verify our trust that letting go *is* freedom from discontent. The more we verify that for ourselves, the more sincerely we can wish for others also to be able to let go. In this way, renunciation and compassion are the same mind – renunciation arises from contemplating one's own discontent, and compassion arises from contemplating others' discontent.

A third practice and quality of mind to develop is devotion to Buddha. The Buddha is the historical teacher who set the wheel of Dharma in motion – who first taught the path to complete liberation – as well as all Buddhas throughout space and time who have fully developed renunciation, compassion, and devotion. Buddha is unhindered effortless complete practice and realization of awakening for the benefit of us all. We can think of Buddha as a particular person or people, or we can think of Buddha as Buddha Nature itself, which is inconceivably permeating all of us, all the time. Buddha is our true nature, which is already fully let go, fully compassionate, and fully devoted. We can be devoted to this inconceivable all-pervading spontaneously present Buddha Nature that we seem to be temporarily obscuring with our conceptual thinking, habitual self-cherishing, and doubts. Though we feel as if we're not quite in touch with Buddha, through hearing about Buddha Nature, contemplating it, and opening to it more and more, we begin to trust more and more that the sun behind the clouds is always shining, and that experiencing its light and warmth is just a matter of renouncing our fixation on the clouds. Part of letting go of grasping the clouds is opening the heart of compassion, and both of these are fueled by the practice and realization of devotion to Buddha. We can also be devoted to the practices of letting go and compassion. We can walk down the street with the intention to be totally devoted to walking without thinking of doing something else, devoted to everybody that we pass on the street as expressions of Buddha Nature who also may seem to be not quite content, and devoted to offering each footstep we take to Buddha.