

REASON FOR RENUNCIATION

By

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Renunciation of Prince Siddhartha

Critics have condemned Siddhartha for His manner of leaving Home and Kingdom. Some describe it as a 'callous abandonment of wife and family'. Yet what would have happened if he had not left so stealthily and had approached His loved ones for a formal farewell? They would of course had implored Him to change His mind. The scene would have been hysterical, and quite possibly the little domain of His father Rajah Suddhodana would have been thrown into turmoil. His intention to seek the truth would have had to be aborted by His father and wife who would prevent Him from His renunciation plans. At the age of 29 years, Siddhartha was a full blooded, young man in the prime of life. As it was, the temptation not to abandon all He had known and loved in order to seek the truth must have formidable. During His final moments in the palace, He visited His bedroom and looked at His slumbering wife and their newborn child. The great impulse to remain and abandon His plans must have caused Him agony. Certainly in those days in India, it was considered a noble thing to forsake home and loved ones to become an ascetic to lead a holy life. All things considered, it would seem that Siddhartha was right in boldly and quickly achieving His plan.

He renounced the world not for His own sake or convenience but for the sake of suffering humanity. To Him the whole of mankind is one family. The renunciation of Prince Siddhartha at that early age was the boldest step that a man could have ever taken.

Detachment is one of the most important factors for the attainment of enlightenment. The attainment of enlightenment is by way of non-attachment. Most of life's troubles is caused by attachment. We get angry; we worry; we become greedy and complain bitterly. All these causes of unhappiness, tension, stubbornness and sadness are due to attachment. When we investigate any trouble or worry we have, the main cause is always attachment. Had prince Siddhartha developed His attachment towards His wife, child, kingdom and worldly pleasures, He would have never been able to discover the remedy for suffering mankind. Therefore, he had to sacrifice everything including worldly pleasures in order to have a concentrated mind free from any distractions, in order to find the Truth that can cure humanity from suffering.

In the eyes of this young Prince, the whole world was burning with lust, anger, greed and other defilements which ignite the fire off our passions. He saw each and every living being in this world, including His wife and child, suffering from all sorts of physical and mental ailments. So determined was He to seek a solution for the eradication of suffering amongst suffering humanity, that He was prepared to sacrifice everything.

Two thousand five hundred years after His renunciation, some people shed crocodile tears or criticize Him for His action. His wife, however did not accuse him for desertion when she realized the purpose of His renunciation. Instead, she gave up her luxurious life to lead a simple life as a mark of respect.

Here is how a well-known poet saw the renunciation of the Buddha.

'Twas not through hatred of children sweet,
'Twas not through hatred of His lovely wife,

Thriller of hearts – not that He loved them less,
But Buddhahood more, that he renounced them all.

Dwight Goddard

Renunciation of Venerable Ratthapala

On one occasion, the Buddha was wandering in the Kuru Country accompanied by a large number of bhikkhus and eventually arrived in the town.

The Brahmins who lived in that town heard of the arrival of the Buddha had heard of his nine virtues, namely that that he was Accomplished (Araham), Fully Enlightened (Samma Sambuddho), Perfect in Knowledge and Conduct (Vijja Carana Sampano), Sublime (Sugato), Knower of the worlds (Lokavidu). Incomparable Guide of Gods and Men (Satta Devamanussanam), Enlightened (Buddho), Blessed (Bhagavati). They had heard further that He described this world with its gods, its Maras, its Brahmas, this generation with its ascetics and Brahmins, with its princes and its men.

This knowledge he gained by his own self-effort. He taught a doctrine excellent in its beginning, excellent in its middle, excellent in its end. He had proclaimed the Holy Life, perfect and pure. They decided it would be good to set eyes on such an Accomplished One as he.

So they all went to his presence and after paying their respects, sat before him in reverence. There upon the Blessed One instructed them in the Sublime Dhamma.

Now in that company was a young man, the son of a leading member of the community, called Ratthapala. Listening to the Buddha, this thought occurred to him: “As I understand the Teaching, it is not possible to live the Holy Life and the same time continue as a householder. I must shave off my hair, put on the yellow garb and go forth into the homeless state.”

Having thus made up his mind, the young man waited until the assembly had dispersed and approached the Buddha to request that he be admitted to the Order. The Buddha however urged Ratthapala to obtain the permission of his parents first. (This was in accordance with the promise the Buddha had made to his own father, Suddhodana, after he had ordained his son Rahula).

So the young man proceeded home and begged his parents permission to join the Order of Bhikkhus. But both Ratthapala's parents did not pay attention to it, saying that he was their only son, much loved by them.

They explained that even if death parted them, they would have been unwilling to be separated from him. How much more difficult it was now, when he was still alive, for them to allow him to go from the home to become a monk.

The young man entreated them three times but they were adamant and refused him as many times. So Ratthapala refused to take food though the old man pleaded with him, the son remained resolute. Even his friends could not persuade him to change his mind.

Finally they reluctantly gave their permission but on condition that he visit them again after his ordination. The permission obtained, the young man proceeded forthwith into

the presence of the Buddha and sought refuge once more. This time he was admitted to the Order and received his Higher Ordination within a short period.

The Buddha then continued his travels and eventually settled at Jetavana in Anathapindika's Park. The Venerable Ratthapala meanwhile lived the ascetic life alone and in due time, by diligent effort attained the Supreme Bliss of Arahant hood. He proclaimed, "Birth has ceased, the Holy Life has been lived, the task is completed, there is no residue after this."

Arahant Ratthapala then remembered his promise to visit his parents once his mission had been accomplished and he had attained the fruits of the Holy life. So he approached the Buddha for permission to visit his parents and the Buddha, reflecting that Ratthapala was incapable of reverting to his old life with its attachments, consented.

When he arrived at his own town the Venerable took residence at King's Garden and the following morning, went on his almsround and finally came to his father's house. As some time had elapsed between his going forth and his return to his birthplace no one recognized him immediately. Even his own father simply regarded him as another monk and exclaimed in anger, "It is because of shaven headed one like this that our own dear son has left us." so, instead of the normal practice of receiving alms or polite words, the monk received only abuse.

Just then Ratthapala noticed that a servant woman was about to throw away some stale porridge and asked that it be given to him. As the woman was pouring the porridge into his bowl, she recognized him from some characteristic features of his hands and feet and reported the matter to the Venerable's mother. She in turn hurried to her husband with the news.

The parents were naturally horrified to see their dear son sitting by the wall of the ancestral home eating stale porridge and entreated him not to behave as if he had no home to go to. The Venerable replied, "There is no 'home', householder, for those like me who have gone forth into the homeless state. I did come to your home, but I received only abuse."

The old man begged him to come inside, but the Venerable replied that he had already eaten for the day and was not in need of any more food, but accepted the invitation to the meal for the following day, and returned to his resting place in the garden.

Ratthapala's father immediately set to work getting ready to entice his son back to the life of the householder. He hid a vast amount of gold behind a screen and instructed certain ladies to dress up their best attire to remind him of his worldly pleasures.

When Ratthapala arrived the following day the father offered him his ancestral wealth but the young man simply remarked that all that gold should be thrown away as it was nothing but a source of sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair.

Then the ladies came to him, and he addressed them as "sister". This upset them so much. The Venerable turned to his father and asked, "Householder, if there is a meal to be given, then kindly give it. Please do not harass us as it is fruitless." After the meal, the Venerable delivered a sermon on the defilements of the body. The body is subject to disease, is a skeleton wrapped up in skin and those who understand will not waste their time adorning it with clothes, jewelry and make-up. He further explained that those who had attained the Further Shore could not be trapped by baits like promises of wealth and family pleasures. He returned to the Garden again.

Now the King had heard of the Venerable's presence in the garden and decided to pay his respects. When both the Venerable and the King were seated, the King proceeded to ask him some questions. He said the people sometimes renounce the worldly life after undergoing four kinds of losses namely,

loss through ageing,
loss through sickness
loss of property
loss of relatives

He wanted to know why Ratthapala had decided to renounce the worldly life even though he was still young, was in the best of health, belonged to one of the richest families in the city, and was blessed with family and friends.

The venerable replied that the Blessed One had given four summaries of the teachings, upon knowing, seeing and hearing which he had decided to renounce the world.

The first summary

“Life in any world is unstable; it is swept away”.

The King was asked to consider how as a young man of twenty five he had great athletic prowess but now that he was eighty years old, he had no such strength. Sometimes he even “meant to put my foot here and I put it elsewhere.” Realizing the first summary, Ratthapala had decided to renounce the worldly life.

The second summary

“Life in any world is unstable; it is swept away”.

The king was asked to consider that being afflicted with a certain disease, he could in no way share out his pain and thus reduce its sharpness. Realizing the second reason, Ratthapala had decided to go forth from the household life.

The third summary

“The world has no shelter and no protector”

The King was asked to consider that though he had a rich store of material wealth and comfort in this world, he could not in any way ensure the same in the life to come. He would only be able to enjoy the fruits of his action. Realizing the third reason, Ratthapala had decided to go forth from worldly life to religious life.

The fourth summary

“The world has nothing of its own; it has to leave all and pass on”.

The King was asked to consider whether or not he would succumb to greed for power and wealth and continue to subjugate every other country without being contented. The King agreed that there would be no end to one's greed for power and wealth. Realizing the fourth reason, Ratthapala had decided to go forth from worldly life to holy life.

When the King had heard these four reasons why Ratthapala had decided to turn his back on the mundane world, the King was full of admiration and exclaimed, “It is wonderful Master Ratthapala how well that has been expressed by the Blessed One who sees and knows, who is accomplished and fully enlightened.

The Venerable Ratthapala then concluded the discussion with the following stanzas:

Futility of life

1. "I see men wealthy in the world who yet
Give not, from ignorance,
they gathered riches
But greedily will hoard away their wealth.
Through longing for still further sensual pleasures.
2. A King who by his force conquered the earth
And even lords the land the ocean bounds,
Is yet unsated with the sea's near shore
And hungers for its further shore as well.
3. Most other men as well, not just a King,
Encounter death with craving unabated;
With plans still incomplete they leave the corpse;
Desires remain unsated in the world.
4. His relatives lament him, rend their hair,
Crying 'Ah me! Alas! Our love is dead!'
Then bear away the body wrapped in shrouds,
To place it on a pyre and burn it there.
5. Clad in single shroud, he leaves behind
His property, impaled on stakes he burns,
And as he died, no relatives or kin
Or friends could offer refuge to him here.
6. Then while his heirs annex his wealth, this being
Must now arise according to his deeds;
And as he dies, nothing can follow him:
Nor child nor wife nor wealth nor royal estate.
7. Longevity is not acquired with wealth,
Nor can prosperity banish old age;
Short is this life, as all the sages say;
Eternity it knows not, only change.
8. The rich man and the poor man both shall feel
(Death's) touch, as do the fool and sage alike;
But while the fool lies stricken by his folly,
No sage will ever tremble at the touch.
9. Better than wealth is understanding, then,
By which the final goal can here be gained;
For, doing evil deeds in many lives;
Men fail, through ignorance, to reach the goal.

10. As one goes to the womb and to another world
Renewing the successive round, so others
With no more understanding, trusting him,
Go also to the womb and to another world.
11. Just as a robber caught in a burglary;
An evil-doer, suffers for his deed;
So people after death, in the next world,
The evil-doers, suffer for their deeds.
12. Sense-pleasures, varied, sweet, delightful,
In many different ways disturb the mind.
Seeing the peril in these sensual joys.
O King! I choose to lead a holy life.
13. As fruits fall from the tree, so also men,
Both young and old, fall when the body breaks,
Seeing this too, I have gone forth O King!
Better by far is the monk's life assured."

Extract from Ratthapala Sutta

Songs of Ratthapala

Full of high confidence I left the world
And joined the order of the Conqueror.
Blameless my going forth has been, and free
From debt I live my allotted share.

Looking on sense-desires as fire alight,
On gold and silver as a (noxious) knife,
(On life) from entry in the womb as ill,
And on the fearsome perils of the hells:

Seeing, I say, great evils everywhere,
There was I with anguish sore beset.
Then to me pierced and wounded as I was,
Came fourfold victory: o'er sense-desires,
O'er rebirth, error, ignorance, Victory!

The Master has my fealty and love,
And all the Buddha's bidding has been done,
Low have I laid the heavy load I bore,
Cause for rebirth is found in me no more.

The goal of which I bade the world farewell,
And left the home to dwell
Where home was not,
That highest good I have accomplished,
And every bond and fetter is destroyed.

Theragathas