

## Cutting the Ties That Bind: The Path of Renunciation



*Do not be afraid. I am rich.  
I will fill you with my wealth.*

—The Gospel of the Savior

One of my spiritual heroes is Mahatma Gandhi. History records his heroic exploits in freeing India from British rule and vastly improving the lot of the Indian people. Many people are familiar with Gandhi's lasting model for non-violent civil disobedience. Like Jesus, the Mahatma was a living example of ahimsa, or non-violence, in the face of oppression. And, like Jesus, Gandhi not only turned his own cheek, but taught his people the value of overcoming violence and hate with peace and love.

For Gandhi, the search for truth required that he follow the path of renunciation—being in the world, without being of it. The practical application of renunciation was, for Gandhi, and all others who have ever taken such vows, to strip away virtually everything in life that stands between oneself and God. While much of Gandhi's autobiography is devoted to the actions and events of his life on the world stage, it also chronicles his journey of self-conquest through gradual transformation.

The Mahatma was born Mohandas K. Gandhi in Porbandar, India, in 1869. His family was one of privilege, and his young life was one of ease and comfort. At the tender age of thirteen, Gandhi married his life-long wife, Kasturbai. As a young adult he took

up the practice of law, and looked forward to a life as a typical and successful member of the middle class, with all the materialism such a life implies.

Then Gandhi's life began to change. By the time he was assassinated many years later, the Mahatma owned only seven possessions: his spectacles, his begging bowl, his loincloth, his sandals, and one copy each of the *Bible*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Koran*.

Sitting at the feet of my own guru from India (Eknath Easwaran) during the 1960s, I loved to hear him tell stories about the Mahatma (Great Soul), whom he had met as a child. One such story had to do with Gandhi's attendance at summit meetings with other world leaders: Joseph Stalin, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill. Gandhi was deeply bothered by both the smoke and smell of cigars, so whenever he attended a summit he would intentionally seat himself next to Winston Churchill, just so he could light his cigars for him. By these physical acts, Gandhi conquered his aversion to smoke, and practiced compassion at the same time.

Another favorite story is about a mother who came to Gandhi one day with her young son in tow. "Gandhiji," she pleaded, "please tell my son to stop eating sugar." Gandhi told her, "Come back in three days." Puzzled, the mother did as she was asked and went back home. When she returned with her son three days later, Gandhi told the boy, "Stop eating sugar." The mother then asked Gandhi, "Why didn't you just tell him to stop eating sugar three days ago?" "Because," the Mahatma said, "three days ago I hadn't stopped eating sugar myself."

Inevitably, the day arrived in his married life when Gandhi decided it was time to let go of sex and take a vow of celibacy. His long-suffering wife was not at all pleased by this decision, but she understood her husband's purpose in taking this vow. Difficult as it was for her, Kasturbai always supported her husband's feats of spiritual athleticism in the end.

What Gandhi practiced in life, he practiced in the act of dying as well. Eknath Easwaran, in his book, *Gandhi the Man*, describes the last moments of the last day in Gandhiji's life:

Gandhi was in Delhi, consuming every waking moment in a last plea for Hindu-Muslim unity. When it came time for the prayer meeting he walked to it briskly, as he always did, with his arms on the shoulders of two of the ashram girls. A

dense crowd had gathered to hear him speak. As he walked to the platform through the crowd, Gandhi held his palms together in front of him in greeting. As he did so, a young man blinded with hatred placed himself in Gandhi's path, greeted him with the same gesture of his hands, and fired a gun point-blank into Gandhi's heart. Such is the greatness of this little man's love that as his body fell, nothing but the mantram that was deep within him came to his lips, *Rama, Rama, Rama*. It meant *I forgive you, I love you, I bless you*.<sup>13</sup>

Saint Francis of Assisi renounced the world in a slightly different way. The story goes that Francis, being born into a wealthy family like the historical Buddha, one day had a mystical experience of God that immediately changed his life and the way he looked at material possessions and social status. Unlike Gandhi, who let worldly things drop away one at a time, Saint Francis was said to have taken all of his possessions, including the clothes he was wearing, and thrown them out the window of his father's house, into the eager arms of those less fortunate. Then Francis, quite naked, walked out the front door and never looked back. From that moment on, Francis devoted every moment of his life to the service of God through his service to the sick, the poor, and the outcast.

The path of renunciation has never been a popular path for the vast majority of the human race, and it is especially unpopular for those of us who live in a culture that worships power, possessions, and pleasure above all else. For Christians—outside of Catholic monastic traditions—Jesus' clear call to leave the world in favor of the Kingdom of God has been pretty much ignored.

Nevertheless, Jesus, Krishna, the Buddha, and Lao Tzu all considered renunciation a necessary part of the spiritual path that cannot be avoided if one wishes to achieve enlightenment in this lifetime. But the path of the renunciate is a path that only a few will ever take in any age. Such a journey is even harder to contemplate for those of us who live in a materialistic culture that places little value on spiritual pursuits.

Neither do we have any cultural models. There may be Catholic monasteries and nunneries where voluntary poverty and celibacy is practiced, but even these few mod-

<sup>13</sup> Eknath Easwaran, *Gandhi the Man: How One Man Changed Himself to Change the World*, Tomales, CA, Nilgiri Press, 2011, p. 166.

els are safely hidden away. We don't have the benefit of living in a spiritually oriented culture where temples, wandering sadhus, monks, and nuns with shaved heads and begging bowls are integral parts of the social fabric. In our culture, poverty is usually seen as failure, and celibacy is only practiced by pre-teens.

But every once in a while we might catch a glimpse of what it really means to devote one's entire life to God, and to nothing else. For me, the clearest memories of what it means to become a renunciate come from the 1960s and '70s when I was young, didn't own much anyway, and had taken up the hippie lifestyle—which had a natural disdain for all things material.

After graduating from seminary in 1970, I was ordained by the American Lutheran Church, and became the national Church's one and only pastor to the "Counter Culture." I didn't exactly look like a Lutheran pastor—not with my long hair, beads, bells, bell-bottoms and bare feet—so the Church really didn't know what to make of me. The bishop, the pastors, and the laity supposed I looked the way I did so that I could better minister to young people. And I didn't try to convince them otherwise.

The focus of my ministry was a halfway house I opened to take in young people with a variety of problems: teenagers, as well as young men and women who needed counseling and emotional support as much as they needed food and shelter.

The national office of the Church funded the ministry to the extent that it paid for the facility and my meager salary. With no allocation for food, I had to raise money outside of the Church, but I was never able to generate enough money to pay for the staff I badly needed. However, I could offer volunteers room and board in exchange for time and talent. For young people back then, food and



shelter was often more than enough. Voluntary poverty for the Counter Culture was actually a source of pride—being both a spiritual lifestyle, and a political statement.

Our very first volunteer was a young man who did the cooking for the household. David was twenty-two years old, and was a very gentle soul. His warmth seemed to be generated by the energy of light alone, and he was not materialistic in any way.

All of us loved David, which is why we were all very happy for him when, after a number of months with us, he met the girl of his dreams and asked her to marry him. Even though this meant he would be leaving us to live with his new bride, we wished David all the happiness in the world.

David was also a very handsome young man, and his fiancé was both a wonderful person and quite beautiful. The pair were a storybook couple, and we thought of them as a fairy tale prince and princess who would live happily ever after.

Finally the wedding day rolled around, and I performed the simple ceremony. We all kissed the bride, congratulated the groom, and threw rice as David and his princess got into their carriage and headed off on their honeymoon.

The trouble with fairy tales is that they don't always have happy endings. As the newly married couple were driving down the Big Sur coast—with its narrow two lanes and hairpin curves, high above the roiling sea—something happened that caused David's car to veer off the road. It crashed through the barriers at the edge of the perilous cliffs and became airborne. We never learned what caused the accident, or exactly what had happened. All we knew for sure was that David and his beautiful bride plunged a thousand feet to their deaths—on the happiest day of their lives.

We were still grieving for these young people the day Steven came to us. Like David, he had no possessions other than the clothes on his back. And no shoes. Stephen had stopped wearing shoes years before, he told us, because—if you wear shoes, the whole earth is covered with leather (or rubber or whatever.) The point being that you can't truly feel the earth unless you walk upon it with bare feet.

Steven, like David, was an especially gentle soul, and all of us quickly came to see him as a sadhu, a wandering holy man. Steven's words were soft and kind, but the major influence he had on the household was due to the example he set. Steve was a

vegetarian, so the house became vegetarian. Steven wore no shoes, so we took ours off as well. Now we could actually feel Mother Earth supporting us.

Once a week my wife would go to the supermarket with fifty dollars—all that we could afford to feed a dozen people for a week—and a general shopping list from Steven. From this, Steven provided three meals a day, seven days a week, using just what we had available, and none of us ever went hungry.

As a spiritual discipline, Steven fasted one day a week, so several of us started fasting one day a week as well. Twice a year—the week before Christmas and the week before Easter, Steven would fast for seven straight days. He prepared a feast on Christmas day, and again on Easter Sunday. He served dinner and sat down with us, sharing grace and our company. And while the rest of us stuffed ourselves like turkeys, Steven maintained his fast.

Although Steven never bought anything for himself, he encouraged me to buy—for the house—all seven albums by the Moody Blues. He then turned us on to the profound spiritual message in these recordings, and we probably listened to every album—Steven's Bible—a thousand times.

One day, after several years had passed, Steven announced that it was time for him to move on. He said his goodbyes, and we all had tears in our eyes as we hugged him. Then the young sadhu turned and walked out of our lives forever. He left with just the clothes on his back . . . and no shoes.

Steven was a rare example of what it means to be a spiritual "athlete." He was a hero in that he had succeeded in conquering himself. Most of us, at least in this lifetime, won't become renunciates. But we can gain inspiration and strength from hearing the stories, and reading the words, of those who have.



There was a wealthy man who said to himself, "I should fill my storehouses with grain, and then I will be secure." This was his intention, but that very night he died.

*The Gospel of Thomas; parallels: Matthew, Luke*

Jesus sent out his disciples saying, "Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts. Take no bag, no staff, no sandals, nor a second tunic—for the laborer is worth his food."

*The Gospel According to Mark; parallels: Matthew, Luke*

Do not store up for yourselves earthly possessions, which moths and rust can destroy, and robbers can steal. Rather, store up heavenly treasures which cannot be destroyed or stolen. For wherever your heart is, there is your treasure as well.

*The Gospel According to Matthew;  
parallels: Luke, Thomas*

It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.

*The Gospel According to Mark; parallels: Matthew, Luke*

People think that all they gain in life is really theirs. They boast of their wealth, and revel in it. But by being addicted to the gratification of their senses, they will create hell for themselves.

*The Bhagavad Gita*

With a heart unattached to the outer world, those who seek Me find joy and happiness.

*The Bhagavad Gita*

The desire for wealth can not bring happiness. Instead, anxiety results from the desire to keep it. Wealth creates dissatisfaction, and the loss of it is like death. Those who seek wealth only increase their desires.

*Santiparva Mahabharata*

Those whose happiness is within, whose peace is within, whose light is within—that person becomes free.

*The Chandogya Upanishad*

People believe that their property and family belong to them. But nothing belongs to us. So this false belief can only lead to suffering.

*The Dhammapada*

A bird, wherever it goes, is happy because it is free of burdens. The monk who travels is happy with a single set of robes and a bowl for his daily food. He goes here and there, taking with him only the bare necessities.

*The Khuddaka Patha Sutra*

One buries treasure in the belief that it will be needed in the future. It is far better to act with charity and goodness. One who controls himself builds up hidden treasure that no thief can steal.

*The Khuddaka Partha Sutra*

There are two paths: one is directed towards wealth, the other towards freedom. The monk who understands this renounces worldly desires.

*The Dhammapada*

Fame, power, wealth, and pride—such things bring about their own doom.

*The Tao Te Ching*

The wise man moves about, not caring about home or possessions. He lives simply. His feet leave no footprints. Thus, the perfect person is one whose vessel is empty.

*Chuang Tzu*

A wealthy man can never be at peace even if he owns mansions full of gold and jewels. Then he has to guard his wealth against theft. In the end, this will destroy him.

*The Tao Te Ching*

Those who are concerned with their lives make themselves miserable. Even when they have what they want, they aren't happy. They only want more.

*Chuang Tzu*

What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?

*The Gospel of the Egyptians; parallels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John*

Those who seek pleasurable things already have their treasure. But the pleasures of the world are an illusion. Gold and silver are without substance.

*Dialogue of the Savior*

Go and sell what you have, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have riches in heaven.

*The Gospel According to Mark; parallels: Matthew, Luke*

Those who love life will lose it. Those who hate life in this world will preserve it in eternity.

*The Gospel According to John*

Insatiable desires only lead to ruined souls.

*The Bhagavad Gita*

Things of the world are transitory. If one dies without first having realized the Self, there is no happiness here, or hereafter.

*The Chandogya Upanishad*

Eternity can not be realized by those who are deceived with the illusion of worldly things.

*The Upanishads*

One who has renounced the world reaches the highest pinnacle.

*The Santiparva Mahabharata*

One who renounces the world does no harm to others.

*The Majjhima-Nikaya*

Right resolve is to renounce money and gold.

*The Kevaddha Sutra*

Re-birth is a certainty for those who crave sensory pleasures.

*The Majjhima-Nikaya*

If you wish to be free from old age and rebirth, become an island unto yourself, and eliminate all your imperfections.

*The Dhammapada*

The person who lets the world control him no longer possesses his inner self.

*Chuang Tzu*

That person is wise who leaves gold buried in the mountain, and pearls beneath the sea.

*The Tao Te Ching*

True riches come from giving out of one's abundance to those in need.

*The Tao Te Ching*

As fresh as morning breeze, feeling reborn, I wander here and there without a care in the world. Let others chase after wealth. I am content with the gifts provided by Mother Tao.

*The Tao Te Ching*

The disciples of John marry, but my disciples remain chaste like angels in heaven.

*The Book of John the Evangelist*

A man who is married should not leave his wife, but someone who is not married should not marry.

*The Gospel of the Egyptians*

Not everyone can accept these words, but only those who are ready. There are eunuchs by birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

*The Gospel According to Matthew*

Lust keeps humanity in bondage as long as people seek after those things that change and pass away.

*The Book of Thomas the Contender*

One who has recognized the Self within, and who is free of lust and anger, achieves ultimate freedom.

*The Bhagavad Gita*

Those who seek God alone should leave home. The ancients understood this, and had no desire for families.

*The Upanishads*

The highest achievement results from mastering one's senses. Wisdom comes when we are no longer interested in worldly things.

*The Santiparva Mahabharata*

The wise man ceases seeking worldly pleasures. Thus, he reaches the highest goal.

*The Santiparva Mahabharata*

Only by renouncing passions of the flesh can one be truly free. This is not possible for the householder.

*The Teviggā Sutra*

As long as there is even the slightest desire on the part of a man for a woman, the mind is still imprisoned.

*The Dhammapada*

One rises to the greatest virtue when he becomes celibate.

*The Kevaddha Sutra*

To escape bondage one should renounce the world—no matter how difficult this is.

*The Itivuttaka Sutra*

Where passions are established, heavenly things cannot be realized.

*Chuang Tzu*

A wise man does not desire or value things of this world.

*The Tao Te Ching*

Physical hunger must be satisfied, but the wise man pays no attention to what his eyes see.

*The Tao Te Ching*

If our inner eye were to suddenly open, lust and greed would cease to exist.

*The Tao Te Ching*



## Wisdom and Knowledge



*The foolish reject what they see, not what they think;  
the wise reject what they think, not what they see . . .*

*Observe things as they are and  
don't pay attention to other people.*

—Huang-Po

Most of us aren't born with wisdom, although wisdom is latent within us. Knowing this—wishing to become wise—we may go looking for wisdom, but find that it eludes us time and again. We may read hundreds, even thousands, of books—all of the world's sacred scriptures, all of the teachings of all the spiritual masters who have ever lived—and still, wisdom may escape us.

True wisdom may be gained through living life, and learning from it. But wisdom is ultimately a product of the intuitive mind, not the thinking mind. Gnostic Christians called the opening of the intuitive mind "gnosis," or knowledge. Gnosis is not intellectual knowledge, but a deep understanding of how Reality works.

Gnosis, Knowledge, Wisdom—whatever we may choose to call the knowing Self within us—is what happens to us after we exhaust the intellectual mind. Life's "aha!" experiences are flashes of insight that come to us in an instant, without effort. Gnosis happens when our thinking minds are looking the other way. Zen Buddhists refer to such sudden insight as "satori," and Christians might call it "revelation."

Gnostic Christians spoke of gnosis as "secret" knowledge, yet it is secret only to the extent that most of us don't have spiritual "eyes that see." We miss the deep meaning of life due to our craving for material existence. And if we ever transcend our limited perception, gnosis will come in a flash of insight, not from a well thought out paper on philosophy.

If we are unable to see the Kingdom of God, both within us, and all around us, it is only because our perception is focused on the kingdom of Earth. When Jesus was questioned as to whether or not he considered himself a king, he replied that his kingdom was "not of this world."

Many *New Testament* scholars today like to think of Jesus as a wisdom teacher in the tradition of the Greeks. But Jesus taught the wisdom of God, not of men. In his book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Marcus Borg, a *New Testament* scholar and professor of religion at Oregon State University, calls Jesus' wisdom, like Lao Tzu's and the Buddha's, "world subverting wisdom." Such deep insight flies in the face of conventional wisdom and encourages people to look at life in entirely new ways. It suggests that happiness may be more important than pleasure, and serenity more important than achieving, acquiring, and "being right." Like a Zen master, Jesus used parables and aphorisms to shock people out of their conventional thinking.

The wisdom tradition of Jesus was even more pronounced in Gnostic Christianity. The word for "wisdom" in the Hebrew Bible, and in Gnostic Christian texts, is feminine in nature, and when translated into Greek becomes "Sophia." Gnostic Christians allegorized Sophia as the divine Mother, and in some texts Sophia was featured as the spiritual consort of the Christ.

Most of us recognize that intellectual knowledge is not the same thing as wisdom, and yet (and I am the greatest of all offenders) we often act as if our intellectual mind will eventually produce profound spiritual awareness. Jesus, the Buddha, Krishna, and Lao Tzu tell us that it cannot. The intellect, for all of its merits, is not in charge of perception.

Wisdom and knowledge find  
those with a pure heart.

*Dialogue of the Savior*

Be wise like the fisherman who caught  
many fish. He kept the biggest fish,  
and returned the rest to the sea.

*The Gospel of Thomas*

The wise person who seeks truth is  
fortunate. Once he has found it, he is at  
peace, and nothing can disturb him.

*The Book of Thomas the Contender*

Understand what is here and now and  
you will understand all mysteries.

*The Gospel of Thomas*

I abide in hearts out of compassion,  
replacing ignorance and darkness  
with a shining lamp.

*The Bhagavad Gita*

The wise, meditating on the Self, recognize  
God who is hidden within the darkness.  
Joy and sorrow are left far behind.

*The Upanishads*

Mastering the senses, one achieves wisdom.  
Attaining wisdom, one finds inner peace.

*The Bhagavad Gita*

When ignorance is overcome through  
knowledge of the Self, God is revealed.

*The Bhagavad Gita*

Choosing the path of wisdom, become  
aware of those things which lead you  
forward, and those which hold you back.

*The Buddha*

Studying many scriptures is pointless  
if one does not practice the wisdom  
contained within them.

*The Dhammapada*

Wisdom is achieved by those  
who overcome their natural  
resistance to diligent practice.

*The Dhammapada*

Wise is that person who sees  
reality behind the illusion.

*The Buddha*

Perfect wisdom comes spontaneously  
to those who seek it.

*Chuang Tzu*

The fisherman forgets the fish trap  
once he has caught the fish. It is the  
same with words. Once the idea is  
grasped, words become useless.

*Chuang Tzu*

If one is seeking wisdom, there  
is no need to leave home.

*The Tao Te Ching*

With the sight and hearing of a child,  
the wise person makes no distinction  
between this and that. He simply  
sees what is in front of him.

*The Tao Te Ching*



Wisdom is the seeking of truth, and anyone who seeks the truth will avoid the traps in life that destroys the spirit.

*The Book of Thomas the Contender*

Do not give to dogs what is holy, and do not cast your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot, and then turn and tear you apart.

*The Gospel According to Matthew; parallel: Thomas*

Seek wisdom earnestly through learning. Practice wisdom by being faithful, loving, and charitable.

*The Apocryphon of James*

Wise people and fools cannot live together because it is like mixing oil with water.

*The Book of Thomas the Contender*

Understanding immortality, those who are wise do not seek for truth among those things which are impermanent.

*The Upanishads*

Those who are wise should not disturb the peace of those who are ignorant.

*The Bhagavad Gita*

Once you have understood the Self, seek the wisdom of yoga [union with the divine], In this way you will free yourself from karma [action].

*The Bhagavad Gita*

Once knowledge is comprehended, those who are wise find peace. Those who lack knowledge will find no joy in this life or the next.

*The Bhagavad Gita*

The body is a fragile thing. It must be protected against evil by the strong walls of wisdom.

*The Dhammapada*

If fool comes into the presence of wisdom, he still can't comprehend it.

*The Buddha*

Those who are wise mold their lives in the same way carpenters shape wood, farmers water crops, and archers aim their arrows.

*The Buddha*

Wisdom comes by cultivating the mind. Cultivating the mind comes by associating with positive people, following the dharma, and maintaining right attitude.

*The Buddha*

Wisdom is knowing others; enlightenment is knowing oneself.

*The Tao Te Ching*

A wise man teaches others without using words.

*Chuang Tzu*

A wise person finds value in things others throw away, and gets rid of things others find valuable. In this way, he becomes fit to guide others.

*The Tao Te Ching*

Those who are wise have an inner light, so they succeed in helping others.

*The Tao Te Ching*

Everyone who understands what I am saying can be compared to a wise man who built his house on rock. The rains fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against his house, but it did not fall because its foundation was rock.

*The Gospel According to Matthew; parallel: Luke*

Defend yourselves against the world. Erect fortifications to protect yourselves so that the world does not rob you of your birthright. If you do not do this, then those things that you fear the most will come to pass.

*The Gospel of Thomas*

Who, then, is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant who remains faithful, for the master will set him over all his possessions.

*The Gospel According to Matthew; parallel: Luke*

Wisdom has been achieved by the yogi who has gained control over his sense organs and sees everything in the world as equal, whether it be rocks or gold.

*The Bhagavad Gita*

Among those with virtue there are four types of people who seek Me: those who experience sorrow, those who seek knowledge, those who seek pleasure, and those who have attained wisdom. Among these four types of people, it is the wise person devoted to Me who surpasses all others. I am dear to him, and he is dear to Me.

*The Bhagavad Gita*

At the end of many births, the wise person takes refuge in Me—realizing that all things are the Self. Rare and wonderful is the soul that achieves this state of consciousness.

*The Bhagavad Gita*

The wise are no longer influenced by the vagaries of life or the opinions of others. They are like rocks which cannot be blown away by the wind.

*The Dhammapada*

Those who are unaware of the true nature of life, and who do not follow the dharma, are those without wisdom. Wise are those who achieve balance in life. They become serene and are immune to good and evil.

*The Dhammapada*

Those young in the dharma may lose their vigilance, but those who are wise will guard it carefully—for they treasure it above all things.

*The Dhammapada*

Earth and sky exist for aeons because they have no personal desires. Wisdom is found by people who live for others. The wise do not seek to be first, but to be last. Those who deny themselves find security in being selfless; thus, they are fulfilled.

*The Tao Te Ching*

Wise is the person who has no preferences for one thing over another. He allows his heart to become empty of desires.

*The Tao Te Ching*

Once you have achieved understanding, let that be enough. Do not show off. Give up pride. To go ahead is to go backward. This is not the Way, and all things that oppose the Way will soon cease to be.

*The Tao Te Ching*

Be as wise as serpents and  
as innocent as doves.

*The Gospel of Thomas; parallels: Matthew, Luke*

The wise person keeps silent and  
controls his mind. That which he  
knows, he keeps to himself.

*The Upanishads*

Those who are wise take care of those  
who are virtuous and faithful.

*The Maha-parinibbana Sutra*

One who knows should remain silent.

*The Tao Te Ching*

