

# 2017-12-03 Renunciation And Loss

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renunciation, people, loss, life, retreat, kinds, relationships, roles, renounce, lost, simplification, letting, give, dependent, grief, simplifying, deeply, home, practice, anymore

## SPEAKERS

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I think that this time a year you're supposed to give, I'm supposed to give inspiring talks. But I won't. I think we'll see how it goes. But I want to talk about renunciation. But not just renunciation, renunciation and loss. And there's a wonderful, wonderful, there's a definitely a correlation and connection between the Buddhist practice and understanding of renunciation and that of the basic human loss that everyone, sooner or later will experience more likely sooner. So renunciation is you get a sense a little bit of its maybe power significance, and kind of the tenor of it. In the book in this in the Buddhist context, by looking at what it's associated with it one list of practices is associated with things like generosity, truth, wisdom, loving kindness, equanimity, kind of all kinds of wonderful things. So it's in that category, wonderfulness, even though doesn't sound that way, maybe another place renunciation is put together with compassion and kindness. And in the list of this, right, right intention. So those are things that are kind of associated with it, which I think are seen as good things. And the, if we instead of using the word renunciation, use the English word, simplifying simplification. Many people will say, Oh, yeah, that's great. Someone says, I want to simplify my life. Oh, that sounds good. I wish I could have something, someone's someone who can do exactly the same thing. You know, do exactly the same motions, same activities, and say, I'm gonna, I'm gonna renounce some things. Oh, okay. I'm sorry to hear that then. And I'm maybe even I wonder your sanity, it might be something unhealthy about what's going on here. And I think there's often a very strong reaction in English around this word renunciation, then maybe it's appropriate given maybe how it's used sometimes in the Western world Western context. And but you have to remember that it's a translation of a Buddhist word. And so, you know, in Buddhism, it has different connotations than English. What I like about the English word renunciation is its Latin roots. To the report, prefix means again, and negotiation means to speak up to say, and I think it's originally comes from the idea of a ceremony, a public ritual, where someone announces their choice to go into the religious life. And in doing that, there's, they're leaving behind a lot of, you know, their ordinary life and activities. And in doing so, you know, it's a big step for some people, they give up in a religious life, oftentimes giving up their sexual life giving up maybe their wealth, their money, their homes, maybe a lot of the relationships they have, maybe their, the, the image they have of themselves, about how they are in society. Many things are given up. And, but it is a kind of what I like about it is the idea that it's an announcement in a sense that it's a choice. It's something someone chooses to do in a conscious clear way, as opposed to letting go or giving up, which might not be even consciously done. It's like, you know, we say I let go or eventually, you know, it let go or it fell away or something. And that was great. But there's certain maturity associated with making a conscious choice, and hopefully, wisdom and having that kind of sense of autonomy and strength to be able to do that. And there was a, there is a monk named Ajahn Amaro, who once wrote an article that was titled, I don't know if he made the title, the editors of the magazine made the title that I think is a kind of a take on an old commercial. Some of you are old enough to remember this commercial perhaps, maybe I won't say it. But the monks have more fun.

And, and monks, Buddhist monks, you know, are represented observe this movement of conscious renunciation. And they give up a lot of what people think is fun and wonderful in life, they give up sex, and they give up a lot of recreation, listening to music, that you give up a lot, and lots of things. And so it seems like it could be a drag seems like it could be pretty dull and boring. In fact, when I was ordained as a Zen monk, as a Zen priest, it was a kind of public ceremony 1982. And my parents came to the ceremony. And my father, after the ceremony went up to the abbot, who had ordained me, and said, You know, I'm a little bit concerned about my son. And because I'm where I'm concerned, he's not his life is not going to be boring. And that was the that was his biggest concern, I was gonna have a boring life. My father sails all over the oceans of the world. And he thinks life is about having adventures. So you know, his idea of being a monk was like, Oh, you don't, that's it for your adventures. And whereas for me, the degree to which I led to pronounce life, went to Burma and was a monastic, I would say, was the happiest the most continually, continuously happy period of my life. Maybe I was by disposition suited for kind of monastic life, renunciant life. So it was easier for me than it is for a lot of people. But it was really, I felt more happy, and continuous non stop kind of way, in that kind of life, especially when I was a monk in Burma, not not so much because I was a monk. But rather, because of being able to delve deeply into meditation, I was on a meditation retreat for eight months. And to be able to kind of have that level of kind of simplification engagement with practice, it just brought me tremendous sense of joy and well being. And the and so in our tradition, to be passing that tradition, we're kind of a retreat tradition, where we put a lot of emphasis or value when going on meditation retreats. And so we all said, you know, our retreat center, the title of retreat says, you know, insight retreat, seven day inside retreat with, so and so, some people, that's the title, and insight and mindfulness is kind of popular these days, it's trendy, so all kinds of people will sign up and think it's a nice idea. And one of the examples of that may be how it's popular is there was one person that came a few years ago to whatever retreats and the person introduced herself as a some 90 She said, I wrote a book on mindfulness. I teach mindfulness in some kind of corporate level and then she said, but this is the first time I'm going to meditate. And I said, I said, Oh, first time on retreat, no first time to meditate. So you know, it's so mindfulness now can be associated with other things besides meditation and being on retreat, which you know, in our scene I think is much more dissociation and so it's good nice people come you know to our we are innocent little title inside retreat for seven days. We could just as well have titled it renunciation retreat. Come and be celibate for seven days. We may What if we titled it even celibacy retreat? What would we be popular when people come? And you know, you know, renunciation retreat, can you come and you kind of give up your own schedule, you give up your sleeping in in the morning, you give up eating what you want to eat, but you have to kind of eat what's given to you mostly, you give up your sex active sex life. People often don't give up their fantasies on retreat. But you know, their active sex life has given up and, you know, there's a giving up of concrete social conversations and people are silent for the time.

People give up the comforts of their own home and at our retreat center are given a little room single room, it's I don't know how big is it? Maybe 10 by 12. Is that reasonable size also have you been there? A little room. It has a little sink, some of them have and when Are you give up your all week? Or maybe maybe you shouldn't have said that? I mean, sex, that's okay. But But iPhones. Oh. And I think it's hard to give up these phones because I hate that I get the sense we're supposed to, when people sign up for our treats, they have to apply, they have to check off a box saying that they're not going to use their devices. But occasionally people still do they come they come to interviews and say, Oh, yeah, you know, I checked, I said, what we just talked about not doing it. And even agreed. And the only thing I can figure out, my best guess, in theory about this, is that it's so integral to it's like breathing. And so yes, they've given up their, what they what they thought cell phones were kind of, like giving up something. But it's inconceivable, you'd give up your, you know, something about the checking the

phone or something, and so anyway, so yeah, so that's more difficult than sex. And if we're at least, so for some people, perhaps, so. And then there's the kind of renunciation of money for the time of seven days without having to touch your wallet and money credit card. And it's, you know, it's a very different life. And some people when it's their first retreat will find it challenging. It's very challenging to step out of the ordinary life and ordinary circumstances and comforts of home and food and relationships and all kinds of things. I think it's fair to say that majority of the people who do it, by the end of it, really appreciate it a lot, and look forward to it next time. And they may even they look forward to it, they still don't think about they're doing renunciation. I don't know what they think. But you know, they simplification, you know, it's so nice to be simple and not to have a lot of the pressures and demands of life and responsibilities that we have to do and to really be able to spend time to kind of be because of that, to be focused internally with oneself, we really connect with oneself, but not to be self preoccupied. But really the opposite. There's a wonderful way in which we start paying attention carefully what's going on here, sometimes for some people the first time and we start seeing the limitations of being self centered and self preoccupied. And the kind of turning inside out or kind of dropping away of the kind of selfishness that sometimes is invisible, when we can, we don't renounce when we just kind of keep pursuing what we want and what we know all these things in our world. And so some people find it very satisfying, very meaningful, I don't know if they always find it joyful or happy, exactly, but often very deeply healing, very sane, wonderful thing to do. So we have this example of retreats that are kind of a kind of run into an event of renunciation. But please don't tell people that that's just for you to know. And the, the, but also meditation is a little bit that then also we don't think of meditation this way as well. But in meditation, you know, for the meditate for 45 minutes. You know, you put aside all kinds of things in your life. And we don't think of it renunciation because it's just temporary just for this, you don't even know me, you don't even think it's temporary. You just, you know you if you go, you know, if you go I don't know what if you go and brush your teeth, you don't think you're announcing anything. But while you're brushing your teeth, you're probably not having sex and probably not, you know, having your meal and probably not watching. Well, I was gonna say TV, but maybe I'm wrong. Thinking people bring their phones with them into the bathroom.

So we sit down to meditate in 45 minutes, there's a renunciation of many of the common things. And it's interesting to go through the list of things which are put aside. Certainly put a side concern with food, concerned with things involved with social relationships, other people, you might have thoughts like that, but you're not actually actively involved. You've put aside use of money, put aside use of entertainment, put aside your your roles that you live by, you might have all kinds of roles and self images that are important for you. identities that are very important. And to some degree, those roles the image you want to live by how you see yourself is put aside for that time. You might put aside your concern for the relationships you're in in your life. They're important for you, but for those times and meditating, you feel like I keep thinking about this person. This is not the time for It didn't. So you learn to let go of it and simplify your mind, simplify your mind. And the more simple and more concentrated more still the mind can become. The more things in a sense have been put aside, more things that we preoccupied and evolved in life. And it's quite phenomenal to get the mind very, very still and peaceful, and have a sense of well being and peace. That's not dependent on any of the things of the world that usually, our well being is dependent on the usual things we're preoccupied with. And so people start feeling the benefits of this radical simplicity of mind, where desires and aversions, resentments past and future, are put aside for this time, there's simplification. And it's for some people, it's a, you know, a sea change in their life, to discover a sense of well being that they've never known before, that is not dependent on getting what they want in their world, not depending on their relationships, or their job, or their house, or their home, or their car, or their entertainment or their status, or maybe even it's not dependent on their security, and their safety. In that moment sitting there, that's not the kind of what's, you know, a concern that's operating. So both these retreats, which are kind of renunciation, kind of

simplification. And meditation, which can be even more radical simplification teaches people a different way of being in the world a different thing. And some people will come out of retreats and out of meditation, and say, I know, I think I want to be finished with things. Some people come out of retreat specially, and really want to be done with certain kinds of behaviors, which they've been doing that they feel this doesn't really serve me anymore. Because people who meditate sometimes will make a decision, I think I'm done with this. One of the ones that often happens, I hear, like, you know, lately, and kind of this work environment of, I don't know if it's unique to Silicon Valley area. But people will say, you know, I don't want to gossip anymore. At the coffee machine at work or, you know, talking, you know, socially at work, there's a lot of talking about people and gossiping. And that's kind of the currency of how we have relationships there. And it's hard not to gossip, but I'm done. I don't want to do this anymore. There's a choice. And if they tell me, they're announcing it, and they're telling me what they've already decided, so they're announcing it again, it's an act of renunciation, I would like to stop doing this. And I'm saying telling you, because it's important for me, and I'm maybe struggling with this. Sometimes people's ethics change, and they renounce certain behavior, which they think is unethical. There are people for whom come and talk to me, who have worked at companies that are suppliers or working for the defense industry. And they after a while, they realize I don't know if I can do this anymore. This doesn't make any sense not appropriate for me. Or people who've had professions where lying was part of the profession. I remember the first time someone came not to me, but I was with another teacher. And the person came to the teacher and said, in my profession, we're expected to lie. And how can I be a Buddhist and lie at the same time? The person asked the question in all sincerity. And the teacher said, in all sincerity, you can't.

So yeah, that was interesting. So some people feel like they want to renounce or give up or avoid certain behaviors, because they know something that better and they kind of like having a clean cloth. You don't want to get the cloth dirty again. So having a clean mind, a simple mind, you don't want to make it dirty again. Some people will give up a lot of television watching. That's fairly common when people come back from retreat and say, No, no more. And then some people will come and tell me you know, after that retreat, I decided no more TV or I didn't even decide to just didn't, and that lasted for about two months. And then it crept back, and then I stopped meditating. And now now I'm coming back on retreat again. So that I can kind of reset myself and try to get I really, I really don't want to keep doing this lifestyle. And some people use retreats as a tool as a means to reset themselves and to kind of help them with this. You know, maybe the safer word is to say this simplification, this avoidance of behavior, which they don't feel like they want to do anymore. You know this renunciation. So, in Buddhism, the word for renunciation, the Pali word, the Buddhist word is neck comma, the ancient Indian word and the kind of connotations The word with etymology of the word is very different than this English renunciation, it has more than meaning have to go forth to go out. And the some of you know that the social dice example I like to use for this is that you're holed up in a mountain cabin in the snow, all winter long one room cabin with all your relatives, and maybe you love all your relatives. But, you know, three, four months of winter snowed in and one room cabin will not be able to get go out. As you know, it gets to be, you know, it gets to be a little bit of a challenge or claustrophobic after a while. And then finally, spring comes and the snow melts. And you're able to get out the door and out into the, into the natural world. And it just feels so great to go forth. Go out. And this sense of joy and expansiveness and openness to possibilities, is nothing more the feeling of the Pali word nekkhama. And that's, and in fact, becoming a monastic is called in Buddhism, going for it. And it's going forth. And, you know, maybe it's not completely the connotations nice to hear this for, for the way we relate to her domestic life. But the domestic life used to be called kind of dusty and confining. And so you go forth out of the dusty and confined domestic life, and so out into the open. So the idea is that renunciation is not a deprivation, but rather an enhancement of the person. We're not necessarily so much giving up, as we're gaining. And so to the to the flip side of renunciation, you know, there's something we're giving up

or avoiding or simplifying from doing. But there's also benefits from them. And so it's not a, I think it's it shouldn't be a, a rejection of the world things so much, unless they're unhealthy, unethical, or, or harming. But it isn't so much a rejection of them, as it is appreciating that it's beneficial to no longer do them anymore. That not doing them opens up new possibilities. And some of the things that people renounce are not bad things. I think everyone who lives a wise life has to decide at some point to choose between all the different options that have nice things to do, you can't do all the nice things that come along, especially in our society, where there's just so many things, you know, advertisements and shows and things and TV shows, and I don't know, just lots of opportunities. If you want to live a wise life, you have to not chase out every, every nice, pleasant opportunity that's there. But there has to be some kind of maybe simplifying or choosing and that has to go along. So sometimes we have we naturally will renounce avoid things that are actually healthy and good, not because we're rejecting them, but because we know that we can't do it all. And we're better off doing some things.

So the idea that realization is for our betterment interesting little poem by the Buddha, where he said that a wise person gives up a lesser happiness, for greater happiness. That is a very evocative idea that you have something good, you're happy and something, but maybe if you can get even happier, you would let go of that as well. And one of the happy options is, is, you know, pronunciation, and the simplifications ability to practice deeply for perhaps. And as I repeated myself, you know, some of the happiest times of my life and a consistent continuous way has been when I was living a renunciant life as a monastic or long retreats and the degree of happiness and joy and pleasure that I felt in that life was just astounding and wonderful. quite something. So, I said this talk would be about renunciation and loss. On Friday, so I heard someone gave a talk where he listed the fight, he was mostly talking about the loss in the context of people who end up in the hospital. And when you're in that people are hospitalized, there's often loss involved, and they have to deal with that loss, even if it's temporary. Sometimes it's permanent. And then someone said, Yeah, but these this list that he gave, also applies to people who are incarcerated and others situations in life. So these five losses, and these are the five losses that Buddhists that the chaplains, hospital chaplains are attending to when they meet with people in a hospital. It's not the job of a doctor to tend to people's ordinary kind of psychological losses so much. But it is the job of the hospital chaplain or the prison chaplain to tune into this pay attention to this, because often, that's a huge, huge issue for people. And these five losses are not just relevant for hospitals, or prisons, but also in everyday life, it's these kinds of losses that significant losses many people can have. So there's the loss of relationships, people die, people move away, they're no longer in our lives for some reason. People get hospitalized or, you know, flip over there, the people aren't visiting so much, and maybe not accessible. And so we're alone in the ordinary relationships we have, and are not there so much. And maybe there's something you see every day, maybe they still come visit you but you're alone. There's the loss of roles, people's role in life, some people are very identified with a role, it's very important for them. And so people retire and their role is not there. And it's very difficult for some people, some people celebrate, can't wait. But there's a role of being a parent, and child dies, or a child grows up, and moves out. And some parents find that there's an ongoing series of grieving as Karen parent and celebrating as kids grow up, because how we are as a parent changes as we go along. And so what was so fun and enjoyable to do when they were young for them and care for them. We can't do that anymore, they don't want us to do it anymore. And so, you know, it can be it's the role changes, and so this changing roles, and someone's hospitalized, many of their roles in their life, their work roles, their family roles, their place in the family, their, their role in their local community, for the time being, apparently is just not they're not operating. And they, you know, people in the hospital don't know who they are and couldn't care less that they were a CEO or something, something else is yours is person sitting there in a hospital gown. And so there's lots of roles that happens and people get sick and they lose their roles, people get injured or have a disability, and they can no longer fulfill all kinds of roles they had that were important for them.

There's the role of a person's image, self identity, how they see themselves. And there's a gap. Now, my image is to be this way, and I can't do this way anymore in the world and the identity are themselves. So I no longer there. There is a loss of functionality. People lose the abilities, physical functioning, mental functioning, all kinds of functions that they used to having. They can't do, they're in the hospital, they're bedridden, they're injured, and they can't get up and go out and do whatever they want. Prison the same things, people get injured and live a life their life is radically different, and maybe with a disability or people get older. And you know, it's for most people, ages aging, is involves a decrease of functionality, stamina, physical abilities of all kinds, mental abilities of different kinds. And so if our identity and our relationships were dependent on our functionality, how we function, how we could do things, and we no longer function at the level we did before, then things begin to shift and change. Talk to someone recently, who spent much of his life being an athlete playing on different teams and different things. And then he realized he can't he doesn't have the stamina and ability to keep up with that can't do it anymore. And a big huge part of what his life was about. No longer is there because he can't quite function, what's needed. And then there's material loss, that people lose their homes or lose their material objects and things many different ways. I've had friends who lost their homes and fires. One friend who went off to the beach with her car keys, car and driver's license and towel and came home and our house was burned to the Oakland fire. And everything in our office was our home. So everything disappeared. And we know probably some of you know people who lost their homes. In the northern California fires, there were thousands of people, thousands of homes that burned down up there and with almost no ability to kind of some places to kick the things out of the home. And so they lost all these family mementos, and photographs. So the kids growing up, and there was so meaningful and just material lost, so much was lost, so much was lost. And so then there's grief, there's anger, sadness, there's all kinds of, you know, it's very considered very heavy on the heart, to have these kinds of emotions in part of many people's lives is working, practicing with their grief, or sadness, their loss, all these different kinds of losses that go on. Sometimes it's just slow and gradual. Sometimes it's sudden and dramatic. And, but sooner or later, if you're a mindfulness practitioner, you, you're going to have to apply your mindfulness practice, to the experience of loss, because sooner or later, you'll experience if not some of these losses, all five of them. If you live, if you are fortunate enough to live to an old age, chances are you'll lose all of them as you go along. And so how do we practice with it? How do we relate to it? what's the what's the relevance of practice to these kinds of loss? So, what I'd like to suggest in a way, this may be provocative for you to reflect on and think about is that there's a lot of similarities between your pronunciation and loss. A loss is imposed on us was not our choice. We don't want it. renunciation is a choice. renunciation involves a degree of autonomy, capacity, hopefully wisdom, to make a decision. To put aside simplify, let go of certain things in our lives too long or not no longer have our lives dependent on certain things, or our well being tied up in those things, to be able to move into a different place different way about well being and peace, that's not so dependent on so many of the things that people often dependent on and preoccupied with.

So what if, on one hand, renunciation, can involve letting go of the of relationships, letting go of roles, letting go of identity and images, self image, letting go of functionalities, and letting go of our material world that we have, or our possessions? Perhaps a renunciant, someone who chooses practice, even if they don't think they're going to be around soon to renounce, as we do this practice go deeper and deeper in this practice. We are in fact, learning how to let go of all these things. Even if we still have them, even if we come back to them and live with them in a wise way. Even though we haven't let go of them. We learn how to have a peace or well being where we become independent from them. Is the loss. When there's sadness and grief, which is genuine, I don't want to diminish the importance of those feelings. But there's the Is there a new perspective that can be brought to the losses we have? Is it only a matter of processing the grief? It's only a matter of kind of being sad and going through grief kind of stages of grief that goes on? Or is there other ways of looking at loss and what's behind the loss and what our relationship to the things that we lost other way of looking at what goes on inside of ourselves,

what we're holding on to what we're what we've been dependent on and what we think we need for happiness or security, safety, something when there's a loss, that Buddhist practice kind of points to any maybe inspires and points to some other way or other perspective on how to be with us.

So for example, if people you know people lose a spouse who dies and under on this surface and not to say Exactly, it seems like on the surface is like, this is tragic. It's sad to have that. And we feel sorry for people or maybe it's something. But I've been in conversations with people where I try to at some point to explore what is it, it's so hard about losing a spouse. And sometimes what's hard was not losing the relationship. But losing the security that came losing the breadwinner, losing the status, or the relationships that came with being associated with that person, the circle of friends that came along with that person, and now their circle of friends has changed and people have so interested in, you know, because it turns out there were spouses, friends or something. And so it gets more, you know, look into, it gets more complicated, all the things that what what was associated with the meaning was meaningful and important, in that, you know, in that loss. And so, our material well being, what are possessions? What do they mean for us? You know, what do they, what are we really holding on to when we hold on to things? image, self identity? What do we if we're holding on and there's loss of it, and we're grieving at what was it we're holding on to what is the nature of the holding? Are we attached to where were the beliefs they're operating? Can we look more deeply? And is there something about the simplification radical, letting go, renunciation that Buddhist practice points to as a possibility that prepares us for lost the inevitable losses. And that's one of the one of the kind of really, I feel important things the practice has done for me is that I've had all kinds of ad loss in my life. And now I'm getting older, and I feel my functionality changing all kinds of ways. My stamina is not what it was, and all kinds of things or some people call it indignities. Is it? You know, maybe have already let go. So okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay, this too. And, you know, so you know, or would not be surprised. Oh, yeah. Yep. Yep, I guess it's that time. That's where comes to now, as opposed to own No. How could this be? This is a travesty, as opposed to Oh, yeah. Yep. I guess so. So to have the Buddhist practice, be a preparation for the losses that are going to be inevitable, it doesn't mean that you're going to be happy and joyful by everything that you lose. But it might change your understanding of it might offer support and what I find is that with some of the losses, like of people who die my life, that I feel it quite acutely, my heart gets broken in that experience. And I think in some ways, I feel the sadness, in a sense, more fully than I did when I was younger, that gave capacity to feel more deeply. But it's, it's kind of uncomplicated grief and sadness. There's a kind of clean aspect of it, it just kind of penetrates, pierces sharply, but it doesn't, you know, it doesn't come with a lot of other baggage and other needs that I have and attachments I have, and it doesn't come with a lot of secondary losses. That I'm it's so important that I think it's you know, and if you secondary losses, perhaps that are not really directly, you know, related to the person that has more to do with our attachments or something. So, what is your relationship to loss, maybe you sitting here in this house today with some significant loss that you're processing and working with, and I want to be very, very respectful of that, caring of it. And you're sitting in a religious tradition that puts in a central place, the appreciation of the value and the benefits of letting go simplifying, at least simplifying, psychologically, doesn't necessarily mean it's simplify with the things of our life and change our relationships and stuff, but to like, go deeply in our minds so that our hearts are not dependent well being of our hearts and not dependent on those things. So we know a deeper kind of peace.

So I like to think of that when people let go in a healthy way when people renounce in healthy way. The consequence of that is joy, kind of lightening up and if there isn't some kind of becoming lighter, some kind of well being, we kind of move towards the light, in a sense move towards some sense of this is healthy move towards health, then perhaps you haven't really understood what it is to let go. Or maybe you've let go of the wrong thing. And some understanding that you benefit as a result of this, even though it might be hard to do. So this is the season it's still getting darker and darker. And you're

supposed to we're supposed to inspire people and with light and cheer people cheer people up. And so maybe I didn't today. And but it's, you know, it's a wonderful time, this kind of, you know, that there's a kind of letting go and coming inwards and simplifying with the season getting darker and darker. And so we have a few more weeks of this. So why don't you take advantage of this season and figure out how you can become so much happier and a better person, if you can just renounce some things. So as it gets darker, just renounce. And then that way, when it comes to the solstice, and it starts getting lighter again. It'd be like you're ready to go forth. Go out into the open light and open space and be lighter and clear and freer. And so prepare yourself for the solstice by letting go may you enjoy it. Thank you.