Disenchantment and Dispassion

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 59:06

Earlier this week, Greg spoke about impermanence and how the seeing of impermanence is such a crucial part of how the mind lets go.

The instructions in the Satipatthana Sutta, which he read and reminded us of, appear in the refrain part of the sutta—a section that is repeated for every single exercise, for every single mindfulness practice the Buddha offers. A part of that refrain is recognizing the impermanent nature of experience.

I'll read it again. It's repeated for the exercises in the body, then for feeling and mind state, and then four or five times in the section on dhammas. So this refrain gets pounded in, and as Joseph said at one point in his reflection on the sutta, when the Buddha says something that many times in that space of time, we should pay attention.

A piece of this is around observing impermanence: "One abides observing in the body its nature of arising, or abides observing in the body its nature of vanishing, or abides observing in the body its nature of both arising and vanishing." Likewise for feelings, for mind states, for dhammas. "And one abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world." So there is this connection between the seeing of impermanence and non-clinging.

In another sutta, the Buddha is a little more clear about how this connection between freedom and the direct recognition of impermanence works—how they're related and what the unfolding of that process is. In this teaching, the Buddha uses the teaching on the five aggregates that Jaya mentioned last night: form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness.

The Buddha says: "Form is impermanent, feeling is impermanent, perception is impermanent, mental formations are impermanent, consciousness is impermanent. Seeing thus—seeing the impermanent nature of form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, consciousness—one experiences disenchantment towards form, disenchantment towards feeling, disenchantment towards perception, towards volitional formations, towards consciousness. Experiencing disenchantment, one becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, the mind is liberated. The mind is freed."

This passage points to the recognition of impermanence leading to disenchantment, disenchantment leading to dispassion, and dispassion leading to freedom. It is essentially describing a natural unfolding process. The nature of seeing impermanence is that disenchantment follows. The nature of disenchantment is that dispassion follows. And the nature of dispassion is freedom. It describes a path, a sequence of unfolding that happens in our practice.

These words—disenchantment and dispassion—are what I'd like to explore with you this evening.

The Pali for disenchantment is nibbida. I like the translation "disenchantment" because it points to how the mind has been enchanted by delusion, enchanted by the views, the ideas, the usual ways of relating to the world as permanent, as reliable, as self. Disenchantment comes about as we begin to thoroughly understand that the normal ways we've been approaching happiness, the normal ways we've been engaging in the world, are not a very reliable way to find happiness.

As we look at our experience with mindfulness, part of this rub of the dukkha that we feel—we start to see that dukkha is related to how we've been engaged in wanting things to be a certain way, wanting to get rid of things, to have things, to hold things. Our minds start to recognize that this has been useless. It's not been an appropriate or useful way to find happiness.

This teaching around impermanence points to how important impermanence is in helping to undermine those usual ways that we relate to experience. These are the three characteristics of experience, three ways that we tend to misperceive experience. Jaya mentioned them last night, using the word vipalasa—misperceptions, misunderstandings that we carry. We tend to take what is impermanent to be permanent. We tend to take what is unreliable to be reliable. We tend to take what is not self to be self.

This is the misperception that begins to be undermined by the perception of impermanence. And these three misperceptions are connected. Because we take things to be permanent, because we take things to have some kind of lasting quality to them, we assume them to have some kind of reliability.

As we open deeply to the impermanent nature of experience, we begin to understand very directly that these experiences that are changing, that are impermanent, are not reliable. They're not a place where we can find lasting happiness. The mind begins to open to that understanding of unreliability. All conditioned experience is impermanent. All conditioned experience, because impermanent, is unreliable.

Somehow the sense of believing that holding on to something will make me happy—the views or beliefs underlying these misperceptions—begins to be exposed. That sense of "me" is exposed as a misperception, partly through seeing what we take to be me. When we take something to be solid or stable as "me," we discover there isn't anything solid or stable in there.

What we take to be "me," when we start to look at it, it just falls apart. And so the nature of seeing impermanence is that it begins to undermine these misperceptions, helps us to begin to let go. We see basically that our habit of clinging is based on misunderstanding and illusion, and so we become disillusioned.

Another word perhaps for *nibbidā*, another translation we could use, is "disillusioned." We become disillusioned, we become disenchanted. Disenchanted with what we had been enchanted with—the idea that I can find some kind of lasting happiness through this manipulation of my world.

So we see that we've been caught by the spell of ignorance. Ignorance is basically that weaving of illusion, ignorance about conditioned phenomena, believing it to be permanent, reliable, and self. And so seeing that ignorance is happening is one of the steps towards this disenchantment.

We may not necessarily be able to see ignorance directly at first. Actually, the first times we can really clearly see that ignorance had been happening is when it falls away. We get a sense of a different way of experiencing things, and sometimes it's like, "Wow, this seems so clear. How could I miss this? How could I not see this—that holding on to things is suffering?" It just seems so obvious. And then, two minutes later, we're clinging again.

The first few times I experienced this, I thought, "I guess it's not that obvious." Because here I am clinging again, believing somehow that this is useful, that this is helpful, even as it's painful.

When that illusion falls away and then comes back, sometimes we get really frustrated. In my experience, having said, "Gosh, it seemed so obvious. How can I not see it now?"—we almost try to tie ourselves up in knots trying to get rid of that ignorance. But one of the things about that difference when ignorance falls away is that we've seen a different way of being. When it comes back, now we can know it's ignorance. We can see delusion working right there. We can feel the way it creates suffering.

And so this is the first step. Sometimes we see how we're clinging to something, taking it to be permanent and reliable, and yet having seen perhaps—and almost everybody, I think, has been reporting—that there have been times of seeing things in a different light. But then, of course, the delusion comes back. This is not a mistake. It's part of the way this gradual path works. The seeing of the delusion at work helps us to understand why the delusion is not so helpful and how it creates suffering.

In a way, if we use this enchantment analogy, what we start to see here is that we've seen the magic. The curtain's been pulled back and we've seen the magic. And yet now it feels like the curtain's drawn back again. But we know it's magic now. Even if we can't see how the levers are being pulled, we know it's magic. This is a difference. This is a step in the direction of disenchantment. Even though we're caught or woven in the spell, we at least know it's a spell.

Bhikkhu Bodhi has a description of the experience of disenchantment: "*Nibbidā* signifies the serene, dignified withdrawal from phenomena which follows when the illusion of their permanence, pleasure, and selfhood has been shattered by the light of correct knowledge and vision of things as they are."

That sounds like a nice description of disenchantment—the serene, dignified withdrawal from phenomena which happens in seeing the illusion. Well, in my experience, and certainly in the experience I've had talking to yogis, to retreatants, this terrain of disenchantment is often not a smooth place in practice. Becoming disenchanted, it turns out, is kind of painful. There are so many different levels of enchantment, and so the road is bumpy for a while.

Basically, this disenchantment—in terms of looking at things from the perspective of impermanence and

the unreliable nature of experience—touches very deep levels in our system, in our organism. Not just at the intellectual, obvious, day-to-day levels, but at very deep human-conditioned levels, deep in our makeup. Our system does not like this truth of impermanence. And when it starts to see it and really get the depth of that impermanent, unreliable nature of experience, our system kind of rebels. It goes, "No, no, that is not how it is. It should not be that way." And it's not happening at our rational level. It's happening much more deeply.

This "no" happens. And so there's a lot of exploration in the practice, on the path of practice, as we start to open to these levels of impermanence in experience. There are many different emotional or relational aspects to meeting impermanence—different flavors of our relationship as we start to see this truth.

I think it's connected to deep forms of resistance to seeing that truth. There's a real screaming from deep inside that says, "No, there should be some place to hang on to. There's got to be some place to land, some place where I can feel safe." So many different flavors of relationship seem to happen for a lot of us on the path.

One of the translations for nibbida is "disgust" or "revulsion"—sometimes it's translated that way. That's not my preferred translation because those words for us often have a sense of aversion in them. But the feeling of nibbida can sometimes have that quality. When we start to see the ways in which our minds are grasping after this impermanent, unreliable experience, our minds kind of shudder at that. Our minds go, "Ugh, don't do that." There can be a quality of almost revulsion or disgust. We start to recognize there's nothing for me in this experience, nothing worth clinging to in this experience. And the deeper part of our system that still wants to cling—this part that's starting to see—just feels this sense of "no," a sense of "there's nothing there worthy of clinging to." So it can have this quality of disgust.

But there are other flavors of what happens as we're in the terrain of disenchantment. Sometimes the flavor can be one of fear—with seeing just how fast things are changing and that there isn't any place to land. Sometimes the mind can feel like it's in free fall, and there's a sense of fear there, sometimes as strong as terror.

Sometimes the quality is what one of my teachers in Burma, Sayadaw U Janaka, named as a kind of homesickness that can happen in this place of disenchantment. That resonates for me because the ways that we used to be at home in greed, aversion, and delusion—those don't work anymore. So there's a kind of wishing that we could go back there sometimes, in this place before we've really understood the freedom of non-clinging. There's a wobbliness to the experience, a sense that there's nowhere really reliable to land and yet our mind still wants to land. So there's this homesickness: "I wish I had that delusion back. I wish I had that ignorance back so that I didn't see that this was the way things are." Homesickness can be a flavor we might see.

Disinterest can be another flavor. Sometimes, with the quality of rapidly seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—things happening in the mind, just these six things happening over and over again—it's like,

"Okay, enough already. I've seen this before. Do I have to keep watching this? Do I have to keep watching these six things over and over and over again?" The mind starts to get disinterested.

Some of that flavor of disinterest, at least in my own experience, is the loss of our old interest—related to that homesickness. We used to get really interested in these highs and lows, and it's like those aren't doing it for us anymore. The pleasant isn't giving us a kick, and the unpleasant isn't making us want to snap into control anymore. The mind isn't interested in engaging in the ways that it has. So the quality of disinterest can come in, sometimes feeling like boredom, sometimes feeling like wanting to pack up and go home. "I'm done. There's nothing to see here anymore."

So many different relationships arise as our minds begin to unhook from these very deep levels of clinging. And the practice unfolds through the noticing of these relationships, through the seeing of all these different ways in which we're feeling like, "Oh, I wish I had that back"—that quality of feeling homesick, or this feeling of disgust. This is not a mistake. This is the mind beginning to learn about letting go of something that it had held on to very deeply, very tightly. Our practice deepens through seeing these kinds of attitudes in the mind around becoming disenchanted.

And as the mind more thoroughly lets go of those habitual ways of clinging, it moves in the direction of this other word: dispassion. "Experiencing disenchantment, one becomes dispassionate." Dispassion—again, it's useful to unpack the word a bit. Because dispassion, on the surface of it... would I want to not have passion?

Do I even want that? If that's what freedom is about, is that what I want?

Again, the dispassion is connected to the loss of ways in which we had been passionate. We had been passionate about greed, aversion, and delusion. There's a weakening and a loss of that.

In this place of dispassion, basically the mind is really thoroughly starting to understand that holding on to impermanent, unreliable experience just doesn't make any sense. And so the old patterns of craving and attachment begin to weaken, to fade out. This term "fading out" is sometimes used as a translation for dispassion, because the term itself, *viraga*, actually has this literal meaning of fading out. I believe it's used in a more ordinary way to refer to how the dye in a cloth fades over time.

And so that image of a cloth fading—when we think about how a cloth fades, we wash it in soap, some of the dye comes out in the water. The cloth is just a little bit less bright than it was, but initially we don't really notice the difference. Then a second washing, a third washing, some exposure to the sun. We might start to notice that it's not quite as rich of a color as it was. A very gradual process, this fading out of dye.

I think this is meant to point to us that the process in our practice is also gradual—a gradual fading of these attachments and accumulations and cravings. There are perhaps even different levels of attachments we have that may fade at different times in our practice. The talk I gave on "relying on this, abandon that" almost speaks to this, where we can let go of something more painful by potentially holding

on to something that's more wholesome and more helpful. And that fades by relying on this. There can be a fading of that. But then we start to feel the rub or the suffering or the holding or the attachment here. And perhaps there's another "relying on this, abandon that." So there's this gradual releasing of various levels of attachment.

The Buddha spoke about this in his own experience. He said, "I abandoned the craving for sense pleasures. I removed the fever for sense pleasures and I abide without thirst, with a mind inwardly at peace. I see other beings who are not free from lust for sense pleasure, being devoured by craving for sense pleasure, burning with fever for sense pleasure, indulging in sense pleasure—and I do not envy them, nor do I delight therein. Why is that? Because there is a delight apart from sense pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, which surpasses even divine bliss." And by divine bliss, I understand him to mean the very deeply concentrated states. So there's a delight that surpasses even that. "Since I take delight in that, I do not envy what is inferior."

This passage points to these different levels of attachments that can fade: the attachment to sense pleasure, the attachment to states of concentration, the attachment even to any kind of state of insight or understanding—pointing to that teaching on the simile of the raft, where we let go of the Dharma even. Non-attachment to anything.

So this fading away happens in a gradual way, but it's not even just that. With dye, there's a kind of continual weakening over time. It doesn't maybe quite feel like that in the practice. It can sometimes feel like this dispassion or this sense of understanding—oh yeah, nothing to cling to here—but then the delusion comes back. There can be times within a day or even within an hour of a particular sitting when the mind shifts from being clearly disinterested and just not attaching to things, to being caught again, caught in the grip of wanting.

This speaks to the power of delusion, the power of ignorance, how deeply conditioned it is in us. But again, as I pointed out before, having seen some of that fade, when it comes back, there's a different relationship to it. We can understand it now as being caught—being caught in that web, the web of ignorance, enchanted again.

We can go from feeling like there's nothing to pick up, just deep freedom, to being back completely caught again, struggling with aversion. This is the nature of the unfolding of our practice. And it's not a mistake. It's just how our minds work. It points to the power of our conditioning, and so we really have to respect that—to not somehow feel like it's my fault that this aversion has re-arisen. It is the nature of that conditioning, the strength of that conditioning.

The text says, through dispassion the mind is liberated.

Liberation, freedom—actually, in certain texts the word for dispassion is almost equated with liberation, with Nibbana. There's one text that says: "This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is the stilling of all

formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbana." All of these can be seen as synonyms for Nibbana, different ways of expressing that freedom—the freedom from, the relinquishing of all attachments, the ending of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbana.

Another definition for Nibbana, which we've mentioned quite a few times here, is the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion. This is one of the most succinct definitions of freedom offered in the texts. We can experience this absence of greed, aversion, and delusion. Maybe first we experience it through the ending—we really clearly see the ending of greed, or we watch a craving fall away, or we see the ending of an aversion. We see a delusion and it just falls apart; a belief in our minds simply crumbles when it's seen as a belief. We can sometimes feel the release from that craving, release from wanting, release from aversion. It can be a lovely experience, that release—feeling like we're being released from a vice grip, let go of by that craving, by that clinging.

So that's sometimes some of the first ways we really feel that sense of the ending or the absence of greed, aversion, or delusion—when we see it ending. We see greed, aversion, or delusion falling apart, feeling that freedom as it ends.

And then, as the mind more thoroughly starts to understand the uselessness of clinging, more thoroughly starts to understand through recognizing the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience, that any kind of picking up is already suffering—the mind begins to understand this absence of greed, aversion, and delusion in another way. Not through seeing it end directly, not through seeing the cessation or the ending of greed or aversion, but through understanding the non-arising of greed, aversion, and delusion. The non-arising, the not picking up of craving.

Freedom is not about getting anything. It's not even about getting that experience of release.

Maybe we can start to understand this non-arising through a little thought experiment. Think back into childhood. When you were young, in the three to six age bracket, what was your favorite toy? Remember how attached you were, how much connection you felt, carrying it around with you everywhere, or however you related to that toy. I had a teddy bear that was about the same size as I was. I think I rubbed all the fur off of it and it lost its button eyes, and I still carried that thing around with me everywhere.

There's a period of time in our childhood where we begin to maybe forget about it sometimes, leave it, but then we go back to it. There was another favorite toy I had when I was a little older—a dollhouse with these little dolls and furniture. I loved arranging the furniture and making up stories about what the dolls were doing in the various rooms. I spent hours with this thing.

And there was a period of time where I had to hide that because the rest of my preteen friends, the twelve-year-olds, were starting to look down on dolls. It was a painful kind of transition. I still loved playing with my dolls, but it wasn't quite as satisfying as it had been when I was eight or ten. A little bit of

fading out there, a little bit of disenchantment with it, not quite as engaged in the stories anymore.

So for you, remembering back to some toy from your childhood that you really connected with, recall the slow kind of letting go of that. That's the disenchantment place—at a certain point, losing interest. That's the disenchantment place in the letting go. It's like we still see it in the corner of our room and it's like, yeah, not so interested anymore. There's that quality of disinterest.

Dispassion, the quality of dispassion—it's more like this: as an adult here now, how long has it been since you thought about this toy, this thing from your childhood? As adults, we don't even think about picking up that toy. There's neither interest nor disinterest in it. It's just not relevant anymore. That's the quality of dispassion. It's not interested or disinterested. There's just no relevance to picking it up. There's no bearing on the unfolding of life.

In hearing Jaya's talk last night, she quoted from one of the Mahamudra poems that she read the other week. I want to read a line from that because as I heard it last night, it resonated for me very much in this place of neither interest nor disinterest: "The noble way of Mahamudra never engages in the drama of imprisonment and release."

It's not even interested in release anymore—that feeling of letting go. There can be a place in time and practice where we're almost looking for the clinging to see it let go. And the mind starts to just realize: not picking it up.

Not to pick anything up.

So this practice that opens us to disenchantment, to dispassion, takes us right through all the ways in which we are enchanted. We don't get to be disenchanted by not seeing how we have been enchanted. We have to see how we've been enchanted for the mind to begin to release. We have to feel the enchantment, feel the unsatisfactory nature of that enchantment. Right in the midst of our suffering is this lesson on how we're holding on, how the enchantment is working, and how the mind can free itself from it.

Bhikkhu Bodhi has another beautiful quote about realizing freedom. In this quote, he uses the phrase "realizing the unconditioned"—the unconditioned being another way of speaking to nibbāna:

"Though the realization of the unconditioned requires a turning away from the conditioned, it must be emphasized that this realization is achieved precisely through the understanding of the conditioned. Nibbāna cannot be reached by backing off from a direct confrontation with saṃsāra, with suffering, to lose oneself in a blissful oblivion to the world. The path to liberation is a path of understanding, of comprehension and transcendence, not of escapism or emotional self-indulgence. Nibbāna can only be attained by turning one's gaze towards saṃsāra, by turning one's gaze towards dukkha, and scrutinizing it in all its starkness. The understanding of the conditioned is the way to the unconditioned."

So it's not a mistake, this struggle in the terrain of disenchantment. It's the nature of the path.

Freedom, then—the realization of the unconditioned, the relinquishing of attachments—there are some quotes I'd like to read about nibbāna. But primarily I want to highlight that nibbāna is primarily described in terms of what it is not. It's the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion. It is non-clinging, the ending of craving. It's not described as something, as some state or something we get. It is the absence of, the ending of, suffering.

Here are some quotes about nibbāna:

"The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this indeed is called nibbāna."

"Enraptured with lust, enraged with anger, blinded by delusion, overwhelmed, with mind ensnared, one aims at one's own ruin, at the ruin of others, at the ruin of both, and experiences mental pain and grief. But if lust, anger, and delusion are given up, one aims neither at one's own ruin, nor at the ruin of others, nor at the ruin of both, and experiences no mental pain and grief. This is nibbāna—immediate, visible in this life, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise."

"And for one thus freed, in whose heart dwells peace, there is nothing to be added to what has been done, and nothing more remains to be done. Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, even so neither forms, nor sounds, nor odors, nor tastes, nor contacts of any kind, neither the desired nor the undesired, can cause such a one to waver. Steadfast is the mind, gained is deliverance. This is peace."

Another definition of nibbāna: experiences no mental pain and grief. That sounds pretty good. Visible in this life. Attainable here and now. Not some transcendent kind of state—visible, possible to experience in this very lived experience. That's how I take that: visible in this life.

There's another poem I want to read to you, a description of a liberated person. These last quotes have described liberation—the absence of greed, aversion, delusion. This one is from the Sutta Nipāta, a set of sixteen poems called the Aṭṭhakavagga. I'll read a portion of one of those poems, which describes what a person is like when they're free. A different perspective on freedom—not describing the qualities of liberation, but what a person is like.

A question comes to the Buddha: "Having what vision, being of what character, is one called peaceful? Tell me about the Supreme Person."

The Buddha responds:

"A person who is not angered, not frightened, not boastful, not fretful, who gives wise advice, who is calm, restrained in speech—who is indeed a sage.

A person who is not attached to the future, who does not sorrow over the past, who finds solitude amidst sense contact and is not guided by fixed views.

A person who is retiring, not deceitful, not covetous, not greedy, not impudent, not arousing contempt,

who does not engage in malicious speech.

A person who does not relish pleasure, who is not arrogant, who is mild and of ready wit, who is not credulous, who by nothing is repelled.

A person who does not take on the training in hopes of material gain, who is unperturbed if they get nothing, who is not hampered by wishes nor greedy for flavors.

A person who is even-tempered, ever-attentive, who does not suppose that in the world they are equal, superior, or inferior, who is free of conceit.

A person for whom there are no tethers, who knowing truth is not tethered in any way, and in whom no wishes are found for existence or non-existence.

This is someone I call peaceful. They are indifferent to sense pleasure."

In them bonds are not found. They have overcome attachment. This is someone I call peaceful."

So again, this is a description of a person, but it's described largely by what's not happening. There are a few positive qualities mentioned here—mild and of ready wit, attentive, even-tempered—but mostly we hear what is absent: not deceitful, not covetous, not greedy. What's not here?

One of the things I appreciate about this kind of description is that it leaves room for personal expression. The absence of greed, aversion, and delusion doesn't mean that we lack feeling. It doesn't mean that we lack inspiration and connection to the world. In fact, it seems to be just the opposite. Greed, aversion, and delusion tie us up in internal spinning and knots. A tremendous amount of energy gets consumed by these forces. As greed, aversion, and delusion fall away, there's a tremendous release of energy toward connection, compassion, care—toward the expression of non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion. Expression through compassion, wisdom, love, generosity.

Greg mentioned, and Rebecca has mentioned, these monks in the Sagaing Hills in Burma that we've come across. I don't know whether I've met fully enlightened beings or not up in those hills, but the expressions of their freedom were remarkable. Two in particular come to mind in this moment.

One monastery we walked into—just entering the grounds, it felt like I was walking into an ocean of tranquility. It tranquilized me simply to enter the gate. And then I met the monk who lived there. I just wanted to hang out with him. He was so still and content. Michelle McDonald named him the Angel Sayadaw.

And another that Greg mentioned the other day, whom Michelle McDonald named the Happy Sayadaw—he was continually laughing. One day we would go to visit. I was the manager on the retreat, and we would take hikes in the afternoon to visit the monks. One afternoon several of us went to visit, and one of the people I was with asked Myatong Sayadaw if we could take his picture. He agreed and wanted

to go outside, so he went outside and one of the people aimed the iPhone at him. Now, in Burma, monks are not supposed to smile for photographs. He couldn't do it. He kept having to cover his mouth. He just could not stop smiling.

Really happy. Very different beings, both expressing freedom in their own way.

So the absence of desire from the world, this dispassion, doesn't mean a lack of feeling. I think the release from greed, aversion, and delusion actually creates the conditions for more connection, more love, more care, more compassion, more joy, more tranquility, more peace to express.

So what's your expression of freedom? What's your expression of freedom?

The sage regards nothing in the world as their own and does not grieve because what does not exist. Not blindly following religious teachings, such a one is truly called peaceful.

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