Non-Clinging and Freedom

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 57:54

I'm feeling a lot of happiness sitting here and seeing you, knowing what you're doing. A lot of delight. Even if it may not feel delightful to you, there's a deep, deep appreciation and joy that you are here.

We've said a lot that this is not easy—this commitment to watching our minds, seeing what's happening, how our conditioning plays out, the patterns and habits of mind, orienting and attuning to the impermanent nature of experience.

Sometimes practice is delightful, when we see something clearly or when we settle back and mindfulness is just right there, easily seeing phenomena come and go. Sometimes it's joyful. Some of that joy is because in those moments the mind has that measure of freedom—those moments of temporary nibbana that Greg mentioned—largely absent of greed and aversion, and maybe with greatly weakened delusion. It's a very happiness-producing state.

And yet, as the practice deepens, as we start to see our minds more thoroughly and settle below the story level, the narrative of our particular lives, we start to meet the ways our minds as humans sometimes just don't want to see the truths of impermanent, unreliable, not-self. Just don't want to see that. It can be very unsettling to begin to taste the deeply impermanent nature of experience.

And yet this is the path for us. As we start to see the deeply impermanent nature of experience, resistance arises around that. Basically, the feeling of just wanting there to be somewhere to stop, somewhere to land. Can't we just stop for a moment? Can't I just rest somewhere? The deeply impermanent nature of experience sometimes points out that there's nowhere to land. Groundlessness. And so the path unfolds through noticing how we're relating to that. It kind of points out where the deeper levels of human clinging are happening.

We've talked a lot about impermanence and its connection to understanding the unreliable, the dukkha nature of experience, and the not-self nature of experience. The Buddha pointed so much to the teaching of impermanence over and over again. He encouraged us to cultivate the perception of impermanence in many ways, in different places.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, in that refrain we talked about earlier in the retreat, there's an encouragement with each of the foundations, with each of the exercises, to notice the impermanent nature of experience: "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." And a few sentences later in that refrain, it says, "And one abides independent, not clinging to anything in this world."

There's a connection here between understanding impermanence and the release from clinging. This happens because seeing the impermanent nature of experience, our mind directly sees and understands that there's nothing to cling to, and that clinging will just produce stress and suffering in the mind. It directly understands, seeing that impermanent nature of experience, that it is unreliable. It is not a place where I could land and say, "I'll be happy here," because it's just going to slip away.

There's the understanding of not-self, the sense of self often being felt as a thing, something stable. The seeing of the impermanent nature of all experience reveals that what we take to be self is not what we think it is.

In one sutta, the Buddha more thoroughly emphasizes seeing the impermanent nature of experience. It's a teaching around the aggregates, and I'm going to condense this here into a fairly short paragraph: Seeing clearly that form, feeling tone, perception, mental formations, and consciousness are impermanent, one experiences disenchantment. Experiencing disenchantment, one becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, the mind is liberated.

Annie mentioned these words before—disenchantment and dispassion. I'd like to explore the process around what this part of the suttas is describing, what happens here. Seeing impermanence deeply, one becomes disenchanted. Becoming disenchanted, one becomes dispassionate. Let me unpack this a little bit.

Disenchantment is a translation of the Pali word nibbida. This disenchantment comes with a thorough understanding that the ways we usually engage in the world just don't lead to happiness. We see that the habit of clinging is based on an illusion or a misperception that there is something stable to cling to, something solid or stable to land on and hold on to.

The seeing of impermanence helps us recognize that the idea that I'll find happiness through clinging is a mistake, a misperception. It's an illusion. We become disillusioned, disenchanted with the idea that clinging and craving are going to somehow make me happy, do it for me.

We see this essentially through deep connection with directly seeing the impermanent nature of experience. This is not talking about an idea of impermanence. This is talking about the direct experience of impermanence.

Seeing, for instance, the arising and passing of sensation, sound, thoughts. Sometimes this experience of impermanence becomes quite strong. It becomes very rapid, and we're really directly experiencing the incredibly rapid nature of the arising and passing of experience. Sometimes we see mostly the arisings, sometimes the vanishings, sometimes both the arisings and vanishings together—as that sutta pointed to, the Satipatthana Sutta: "One observes the body in its nature of arising, in its nature of vanishing, or in its nature of both arising and vanishing." We can see impermanence in all of these ways.

When we see the arising of experience, we understand that it's coming into being as a conditioned phenomenon. It wasn't there before, and now it's here. So we understand that it has been conditioned.

When we see the vanishing, we understand something else. Sometimes when I began really seeing things vanish, I understood that the mind actually believed in their permanence. It was shocking when something went away, because there was a way the mind had latched onto it, created an idea about it, thought of it as stable somehow—and then it's gone. What happened?

So the seeing of impermanence at this level deeply undercuts these misperceptions, these ideas. We've been enchanted by the notion that there are stable things out there, that there's a solid sense of self. This enchantment becomes revealed as a mistake, essentially. We see we've been caught in the spell of delusion, enchanted by delusion.

Sometimes we feel this too in our relationship with dukkha, even with senses of self that we know are not so helpful. I was talking to one of you the other day, and the image came up: it feels like a comfortable old shoe, this habit, this pattern. It just feels so familiar. The mind gravitates toward that familiarity, even as we see that it's not so helpful.

Knowing that we're caught by that spell is the first step. We can be in this old shoe of the sense of "me," and we know it's just an illusion. We can know that but still not be able to convince ourselves to step out of it. Just noticing the nature of that experience, knowing that it is a misunderstanding—that's where we begin to see through the delusion.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, the monk, scholar, and practitioner who offered us recent translations of the suttas—a truly amazing gift, putting all of the suttas into more accessible language—had this to say about the experience of disenchantment. He often wrote commentarial descriptions around various suttas, and around one that describes this word disenchantment, he wrote: "Nibbida signifies, in short, the serene, dignified withdrawal from phenomena which supervenes when the illusion of their permanence, pleasurableness, and selfhood has been shattered by the light of correct knowledge and vision of things as they are."

A serene, dignified withdrawal from phenomena—that's how he terms this disenchantment. I would say that is perhaps the end result when the mind has thoroughly understood. But in my experience, at least in this terrain of seeing how the mind is enchanted and is becoming disenchanted, the process of becoming disenchanted doesn't feel as pleasant as this describes.

There's an image in the suttas describing this quality: a dog with a bone that has no nourishment left in it at all. The marrow is gone. It's such an old, dry bone that the dog looks at it and it appears useful, looks like something good might be there. But he picks it up and realizes—no, nothing there for me. That withdrawal, that sense of "there's no nourishment in this anymore"—that's perhaps where disenchantment has thoroughly penetrated.

But the process of becoming disenchanted has a lot more ups and downs to it. As we start to see the deeply unreliable nature of experience, our minds do not like this. We would rather it be any other way. We try

to bargain with reality. We try to figure out some way to construct a little pile of something that we can land on. So there are many emotional flavors in the relationship to deeply seeing the impermanent, unreliable nature of experience.

I think this is actually revealing the deeper human forms of clinging to wanting things to be stable. There are different relationships we may experience as the mind begins to grapple with the fact that reality is not what we'd like it to be. Getting what we'd like—we can do that. We can be on that cycle of getting something we want and being happy for a split second or two. And then there's the dissatisfaction, and we wonder if we can get something else we want. But we see the uselessness of that. Even seeing the uselessness of it doesn't stop us from keeping trying. Maybe there's something I can land on here.

At one point in my long retreat, I think I was at the Forest Refuge, I watched the mind do this over and over again. At this point, the wisdom was strong enough to know it was not going to find anything to land on. No place solid or stable to land on to say, "I can rest here. I can finally just be okay with this experience." And I could see that the mind just kept going into this loop: "There's got to be somewhere to land, somewhere to land, somewhere to land."

And my mind was okay with it doing that. It was just like, "Oh yeah, you're welcome to look. You're not going to find anything. Have at it. Try." Because I couldn't stop it. It was not self. It was a deep, conditioned, human wish for there to be somewhere I could settle and be stable. And so I couldn't stop it, but I could see that it was a futile process.

There would be times where the mind would kind of let go of that searching. And there would just be this okayness with the not landing, okayness with things as they are—impermanent, unreliable, not self—this okayness with that. And there would be such a release and a feeling of ease. And three seconds later, the mind was at it again. I just watched it over and over again.

So this process of disenchantment, it's meeting our very, very deep conditioning. Seeing it once or twice is probably not going to do it. It's a process of seeing and understanding the relationships. In seeing the impermanent nature of experience, there are many different relationships we may have to seeing impermanence—a few of those flavors.

One of them is this experience of nibbida, which is sometimes translated as disgust or revulsion. I don't particularly like that translation. I much prefer disenchantment. But sometimes the emotional flavor of seeing impermanence at this level can have that quality. It can feel like revulsion. Just don't want to see that. Or how you might feel, for instance, if you see something dangerous. And you know that way is really dangerous, like seeing a snake. There's a kind of recoiling that we have if we see a rattlesnake—the body, the being will just pull back and recoil from it. It's out of a sense of danger, but there can be a feeling of revulsion, like "don't go there."

So this quality of nibbida can have that flavor. That's not the most common flavor that I've experienced,

but occasionally that has come up—that feeling of just *ohh* with being impinged on by sense impressions, this continual impingement of changing sense experience.

Sometimes the relationship to seeing the impermanent nature of experience can be a feeling of oppression. There have been times where I've been sitting and just feeling like it's so much sensation—body sensation, seeing, hearing. It's like a chaotic experience of the being experiencing all the sense impressions, and just the wish for it to stop. Just, "Oh, this is too much." A sound feels like a screaming pain. A thought feels like glass going through the mind. Sometimes it just feels so intense, these sense impressions. Again, this is not the most common way that I've experienced it, but there are times when it feels very oppressive.

It can also bring up feelings of fear—as strong as even terror sometimes—to see how rapidly things are changing. Just the feeling of there's nowhere to land. That sense of things changing so rapidly. Fear can be a relationship that happens there.

Some of the easier, more tolerable ones include a feeling of homesickness. My teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya pointed to this one—that the homesickness is like wishing you could go back to that delusion. It's homesickness for delusion. But you can't go back, because there's enough clarity in the mind that the only way through is forward, toward seeing this impermanent nature of experience.

Sometimes, as the impermanent nature of experience begins to get more familiar, and perhaps you've let go of or seen through the terror and fear, the practice continues to deepen. The encouragement here is to notice. You're noticing impermanence, and you notice the relationship to it. That's the basic instruction. The practice deepens by noticing the relationship to what is happening, because that relationship to impermanence reveals different kinds of clinging, different levels and layers of clinging.

At a deeper level of clinging, sometimes the impermanent nature of experience just starts to feel really boring. It's like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know." Just really boring. The mind gets disinterested: "Yeah, it's another sense impression. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting—yep, yep, know that, yep." The mind just gets bored with it or disinterested. These are other flavors of the relationship to impermanence. It's really important to notice these.

Sometimes for me it's felt like, "I'm done. I don't want to practice anymore." When I first noticed that experience, that feeling of not wanting to practice, I felt betrayed by my mind. I thought I had to stop not wanting to practice, to transform that belief into wanting to practice. Then I actually heard somebody report their experience. I was with Sayadaw U Tejaniya, and the person before me was experiencing things a little ahead of me in the practice, so it was always inspiring to hear what was happening for her. One time she described, "Yes, not wanting to practice arose, and I noted it."

I was like, "You can do that?" It was eye-opening for me. So yes, you can do that. You don't have to convert not wanting into wanting. You don't have to somehow believe that the not wanting isn't there. You can just

know that it's there—and you're back in the practice. Not wanting to practice.

There are many relationships that unfold as we meet the deep experience of impermanence. When you start to see some of these flavors of relationship, know them. Be aware of them. Recognize there's this sense of impermanent experience, and there's confusion, and there's fear, and there's boredom, disinterest, not wanting to practice. Know the relationship to the experience.

Knowing that relationship is what helps the mind let go, to become free from that. We've been talking about this all along. As soon as we attend to something that is a form of greed, aversion, or delusion, the conditions of mindfulness weaken it. So this is the medicine: noticing the relationship.

I'd also say, just recognizing that this terrain of becoming disenchanted is the terrain of practice where it doesn't necessarily feel very pleasant—and yet it is the deepening of practice. There are times when the deepening of practice is not pleasant. A little bit of a shock. We don't put that in the brochure. I don't think we have a brochure.

As the mind begins to let go and to understand that it is not worth clinging, it moves through that disenchantment to withdrawal. But withdrawal is a funny word. Bhikkhu Bodhi termed it a serene, dignified withdrawal from phenomena. But really, it's a withdrawal from clinging. And that's where we get entangled.

The clinging is what ties us or tangles us to objects. What happens as the clinging falls away is that there are objects in the knowing and there's simply no entanglement with them. But it does not necessarily feel like withdrawal, in my experience. It can feel very intimate—in fact, even more intimate than being tangled with something, because the tangle, the greed, the aversion, the confusion, obscures some of the experience. So the falling away of clinging is a withdrawal from the clinging. The disenchantment is a withdrawal from the clinging. But the experience can be very intimate when the clinging has fallen away.

As this happens, the mind moves towards what's termed dispassion here. The Pali term for this is *viraga*. In this place, basically, the mind has thoroughly understood that holding on to impermanent, changing phenomenon makes no sense. The literal—the Pali literal definition, the word *viraga*—literally means "to fade out." I like that. The word is basically one that would be used about a piece of cloth that has been dyed a particular color and is set in the sun, washed, set in the sun, washed, set in the sun—the color fades out gradually over time.

So this term, *viraga*, for dispassion, speaks—even the use of the word here speaks—to the gradual nature of the process. It's a slow process, the way the mind begins to let go, to let go of clinging. And over the course of practice, we may experience deeper levels of letting go. The fading out is like the deepening of how the mind lets go of certain layers or levels of clinging.

At first, the first levels or layers of clinging might be the way the mind understands that attachment to sense pleasure is not really going to make me happy. We gain that understanding, and the major craving

and aversion around sense pleasure may begin to get a lot weaker. Many of you have probably noticed this over the course of your practice—how certain kinds of reactivity that had been so familiar are no longer quite so strong. Some of you have reported this on the retreat too, things that happened earlier on where you're now noticing that reactivity isn't arising anymore. This is the fading out. Those kinds of reactions are not happening.

So the first level of fading happens often around the major things—the major habits and patterns, the main ways in which our minds have habitually oriented towards finding happiness in various ways. That first level might be deepening through craving around sense pleasure. And then we start to find we're craving around the practice. We want those states of concentration. We want that peace. We want that ease. We want to see things really clearly. And so this is attachment, another level of attachment.

Possibly—I think I mentioned this a couple of days ago in the morning—the mind may cling to the practice, it may cling to states of concentration as a support for letting go of greater reactivity. But at some point we start to see that attachment, that clinging. And then that begins to weaken. That begins to fade out.

This experience of the fading out of clinging can come and go—the gradual nature of it. There may be times when the mind is so clear and it's just so obvious that picking things up and holding on to them is creating suffering. And the mind just won't go there. It's like you can even think of things that you might want and it's like, "Nah." It just doesn't go there. It doesn't want to pick them up. And then, ten minutes later, there we are, picking it up again.

This is how it works. It's so deeply conditioned. We get to see moments of clarity like that, and then we get to see the mind get hooked again. It's noticing it's caught again. Explore the possibility of not judging that. There are periods of time, maybe the first few years of practice, where it's like, "I've seen this already—why do I have to see it again?"

And at this point it's like, oh yeah, there it is again. It keeps happening. And yet, what I've seen in my own experience is that not only is it easier because I'm not reacting to the fact that it's coming up again—that's huge. What a relief that there's not that extra level of suffering around habits and patterns re-arising. But there's also the understanding that there's something more to learn here. There's still clinging, there's still craving. I'm glad that this is arising because I get to see the clinging and craving again. And the being with it helps to weaken it—so much easier when there's not that sense that it's a problem that this thing is arising.

So the dispassion has this fading out kind of process. There may be disenchantment and dispassion, and then maybe we're back to being enchanted. Disenchantment, a little bit of a sense of that dispassion of the mind just releasing the clinging—the clinging just dropping away.

There's another aspect of dispassion that feels like freedom. Freedom is not about getting anything. One

definition of freedom: "This is the peaceful. This is the sublime. That is the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana." So in this, dispassion is used as a synonym for nibbana—mind having let go.

Gil also mentioned another definition of nibbana that we've discussed before: the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion. Or we could say the non-arising of greed, the non-arising of aversion, the non-arising of delusion. And so another way to experience or understand dispassion is as the non-arising of craving, the non-arising of greed, aversion, and delusion.

The experience of release that we have when the mind lets go—there's a kind of delight to that. It feels good when the mind lets go. We feel the release from a vice grip. And that's the mind moving towards dispassion, that release. And yet, the release itself, that experience of release—it's something beautiful, it's sweet in a way. And yet the deeper form of release is that there's nothing left to release. The mind just doesn't even pick things up to hold on to them anymore.

So you might get a flavor of this. Try to feel into this a little bit. Think back to childhood—did you have a favorite game or toy or something? Maybe just remember a favorite toy. I had a big teddy bear that was about the size of me. It was my favorite thing. I carried it everywhere. It had no fur left. Both eyes were gone. And yes, I was very attached to it. And over time, you age, you grow up, you don't need that teddy bear anymore, you don't need whatever your favorite toy was anymore. Maybe you go back to it every now and then, but you find it's not satisfying you the way it used to. You lose your interest in it, you lose your dependence on it.

So this losing interest—that disinterest flavor there is kind of the stage we might say is, in the analogy, disenchantment. Losing interest in that. And then dispassion—like as an adult, when was the last time you thought about that toy? I didn't even think about this teddy bear until just now. The mind just doesn't even think of picking this up anymore. There's no interest or disinterest. There's no interest or disinterest around this toy to arise. This is the flavor of dispassion. There's no movement to pick up things to hold to.

And the practice deepens by seeing the ways in which we're enchanted, to be present for how we're enchanted, to see how we hold, to notice those relationships, feel that fear of loss, feel the disinterest, the boredom—all of those relationships. The practice leads through seeing how we've been enchanted.

Bhikkhu Bodhi writes about realizing freedom.

He uses the language "realizing the unconditioned." This is a term—the unconditioned. The mind free from greed, aversion, and delusion tastes a flavor of the unconditioned.

Here's how Bhikkhu Bodhi describes this: "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 samsara 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 samsara and scrutinizing it in all its darkness. The understanding of the conditioned is the way to the unconditioned."

This description of freedom in the suttas, in many places, is primarily described by what it's not. This freedom, this unconditioned—non-clinging, the ending of craving, the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion. It's nothing to pick up or own. There isn't any picking up or owning here. It's the non-arising freedom.

There's a sutta in the Sutta Nipāta where someone has asked the Buddha to describe what a liberated person is like. The questioner says, "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 and not greedy for flavors. A person who is even-tempered, ever attentive, who does not suppose that they in the world 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."

Most of that description is what they are not. It's interesting to me, this image of someone free from greed, aversion, and delusion. What is that? What does that evoke for you? This is someone who could be completely free, someone whose qualities the Buddha describes as free from greed, aversion, and delusion. There's a lot of room for different actions arising.

I think we sometimes have this idea that being dispassionate—even the word "dispassion" makes it sound like you don't care, almost. But free from greed, aversion, and delusion doesn't mean we lack feeling or action. Part of the issue here, around this idea that somehow being free would be a kind of boring place to be... There was a question in the bowl the other day about whether the Buddha sang or danced or laughed. And I don't know. I have no idea. But I think that question is based in perhaps this idea that what it sounds like we're talking about here sounds like it would be very flat. Freedom may sound like it would be very flat—completely chilled out, non-reactive in a way that just sounds flat.

I think that's partly because the vast majority of our lives have been guided by greed, aversion, and delusion. When greed, aversion, and delusion are running the show—get what you want, you'll be happy; get rid of what you don't want, you'll be happy—when they're running the show, they cannot fathom

there's another way to live. Those qualities of mind do not have the imagination to understand that if greed goes away, the problem goes away. If greed goes away, the suffering goes away. These habits or ways we've typically lived our lives—greed, aversion, and delusion think experience would be very flat without them. They cannot fathom a life with love, compassion, joy, and equanimity running the show.

We've said this before, but compassion acts, wisdom acts, love acts in the world. Without greed, aversion, and delusion, there are sixty-eight different possible expressions of freedom in this room—all of us, a different possible expression of freedom based on how non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion manifest in us. Love, wisdom, compassion—how they manifest in us. I've met some amazing people up in the hills of Sagaing in Burma, and they're very different.

One teacher, very calm—you just want to sit quietly in his presence. Another teacher laughs all day. There's a lot of room for different expressions of freedom.

What might be your expression of freedom? What might you be like without greed, aversion, and delusion? Don't limit yourself to some idea that freedom must be flat or lifeless.

Dispassion, you know, sounds flat. Why would I want dispassion? But it's dispassion around the habitual ways in which we've clung to things. It's no longer clinging. The absence of craving for the world doesn't mean an absence of feeling. There's a huge heart that resonates in empathy with the world. With greed, aversion, and delusion, that heart is limited. Without them, it's vast.

I bow to your practice. Carry on. Keep going.

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