Disenchantment and Dispassion

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:01:25

The topic tonight is an exploration of some of what happens to us on the journey, especially as we start to touch into and see these truths—the nature of experience as impermanent, unreliable, not self.

We might think that journey, as we begin to see these truths, would be smooth sailing. But actually, very deeply, our human system resists these truths, and so it's a bit of a bumpy ride at times.

I want to start with the possibility where the Buddha said this practice leads: freedom. We've said a number of times what the definition of freedom is. In some ways, when we say the word freedom, we think it's freedom to do whatever we want. But in this context, freedom means freedom *from*. Freedom from greed, freedom from aversion, freedom from delusion. And this is the definition for what the Buddha called Nibbana.

Nibbana, the ending of suffering, is primarily described by what it is not. It's non-clinging, the ending of craving, the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion. So it's not about accumulating or getting or having anything. It is this deep release. And in fact, the word Nibbana can be translated as release. It literally means something like "cooling."

The cooling process is understood to be a natural process. Greed, aversion, and delusion are often talked about as being fires—the fire of greed, the fire of hatred, the fire of delusion. When we have a fire, it's adding something; it's adding heat to the system. But when we stop doing that, when we stop adding that heat, the natural process is for that thing that was being heated to cool down.

So that's the imagery. Nibbana is really a kind of metaphor, an image, an analogy for what happens as we let go, as greed, aversion, and delusion are released, are given up. There's a cooling, a release from suffering.

I have some readings on Nibbana. These are from several different sources, gathered together by an author who put together a whole collection of readings on the Third Noble Truth. I liked the way they flowed together:

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

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 Nibbana, immediate, visible in this life, inviting,

attractive, and comprehensible to the wise.

And for a disciple thus freed, in whose heart dwells peace, there is nothing to be added to what has been done, and nothing 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, this is exquisite—the resolution of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbana.

There are a couple of pieces in these readings that are particularly inspiring to me. Maybe you don't think about enlightenment as being your goal. Maybe there's something about what we think of enlightenment—some altered state, or blissful floating, I don't know. We have ideas. But the Buddha basically says: the ending of greed, the ending of aversion, the ending of delusion. When lust, anger, and delusion are given up, one experiences no mental pain and grief. That sounds pretty good.

The other piece that really points to here is this: it is immediate, visible in this life. Here and now, it is possible. That description of Nibbana, of freedom—the falling away of greed, aversion, and delusion. Maybe we get little tastes of something approximating that, and we have a sense of what it might be like in this life. To me, this sounds achievable in this life. The ending of greed, the ending of aversion, the ending of delusion. And so this is what he says: it's possible in this very life.

The path that we're practicing here, what we're doing, what we're exploring—the perspective of mindfulness that's curious about experience as experience—begins to stabilize the mindfulness so that we can see what's happening. At first, we experience quite a few hindrances; that's what's been happening in our minds.

We get to see what's been happening, and so we see that. We see a lot of the hindrances. But over time—and many of you are experiencing at least even short stretches of the falling away of the hindrances—we get a little taste of that freedom, a little taste of that.

And as there are times of the falling away of the hindrances, we start to recognize some of the qualities of experience that all experience has in common. These qualities, these characteristics of experience that Nakaway spoke to: the impermanent nature of experience, the unreliable nature of experience, the not-self nature of experience.

The texts also offer some descriptions of what happens as we start to see impermanence. When the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates sensual lust, it eliminates ignorance, it uproots the conceit "I am." And that conceit "I am"—it's kind of the subtlest form of identification. The more obvious forms, the identity view, we've talked about a lot, seeing into how we identify. But even seeing through that, there can be just this subtle sense of "I am." And that's conceit. It's said to be one of the very last clingings that falls away.

And so the Buddha points to cultivating the perception of impermanence. He told his son to do this. He said, "Cultivate the perception of impermanence and it will uproot the conceit 'I am.'"

So the understanding of impermanence, seeing impermanence—and I actually said this to somebody today in the practice meeting—we can incline, when we notice that the mind is a little more stable, we can kind of incline towards: How is impermanence showing up? But seeing impermanence deeply is an insight. It's not something we do. It's something that's revealed. And yet there can be that kind of turning towards when we see that the stability of mindfulness is present. We could just kind of check: Is change being noticed right now? And how is change being noticed? But it's not so much a practice of something we do.

And again, the description here is that the clear seeing of impermanence leads to a process of letting go. And here's that description. You may recognize this list—Mario Line spoke about it the other night, the list of the five aggregates:

Form is impermanent. Feeling is impermanent. Perception is impermanent. Volitional formations are impermanent. Consciousness is impermanent. Seeing thus, one experiences disenchantment towards form, disenchantment towards feeling, disenchantment towards perception, disenchantment towards volitional formations, disenchantment towards consciousness. Experiencing disenchantment, one becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, the mind is liberated.

And so it describes a kind of natural process with seeing impermanence. There's this description of the mind becoming disenchanted with experience, basically. Disenchanted with the experience of the body and mind processes. And so these two words, disenchantment and dispassion, are descriptions of what happens for us as we start to see impermanence.

These two words I'd really like to explore. These two words are spoken here as being the natural result, in a way, of clear seeing. Seeing thus—seeing form is impermanent, feeling is impermanent, perception, volitional formations, consciousness—seeing that it's impermanent, one experiences disenchantment. One experiences disenchantment seeing impermanence. So it's not like it's saying you have to make effort to do this. It's the seeing of impermanence that begins to disenchant the mind, basically. Disenchant the mind with the idea that something will be worth clinging to.

So these two words, disenchantment and dispassion. A deep opening to the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience. We start to really thoroughly see—as we see the impermanent nature of experience, impermanence really kind of pokes holes in this idea that something would be worth clinging to.

Because whatever is happening, the steady mindfulness shows it to be changing—and actually changing quite rapidly. It doesn't last for more than a split second.

And so this disenchantment is becoming... we really begin to see that our usual ways of relating to the

world—trying to hold on to pleasant things, trying to navigate around and get rid of unpleasant things—this is just not the strategy. We actually see, when we see impermanence clearly, that there isn't anything to hold on to. What we think we're holding on to is also something the mind has made up.

This was kind of shocking for me when I first really recognized this. I realized that I could clearly see that the suffering was my mind doing something—holding on or pushing away. I saw that the suffering was created by the mind. And then I began to recognize that what I was clinging to was also created by the mind.

There is nothing that can be held onto. No wonder we suffer. We're trying to hold onto something that is not possible to hold onto. When we're holding onto something, we're essentially holding onto a perception—something that the mind has created. Everything that we experience is something our mind has created. And so we have the perception about what we're experiencing, and we cling to perceptions.

We can fool ourselves for a little while because perceptions can stabilize in the mind. Perceptions can stabilize for some stretch of time. This is actually the way concentration works—one-pointed concentration. In one-pointed concentration, we stabilize on a perception of something. It's called the nimitta. That is what the nimitta is: this perception the mind has made of the object that the mind clings to, absorbs into, shifts into. And it can only last for a certain amount of time. Even that level of stabilizing a perception will only last for a certain length of time. Most of our perceptions last way shorter than that.

Suffering is created by the mind. What we're clinging to is created by the mind. And the belief that we need to cling to it is a view created by the mind. It's all the mind having enchanted itself to believe that holding on to a perception will make me happy.

So we start to see that our habits of clinging are based completely on mistaken understanding, based on illusion, misperception. And so we start with seeing the impermanent nature of experience, and seeing that perceptions change very quickly also. What we're clinging to is changing quickly. We get disillusioned. It's a good kind of disillusionment. This is the disenchantment.

The reason we cling is because we have views and ideas—beliefs, essentially—that clinging will make me happy. But that's just enchantment that we've picked up through our own experience, through how we've been taught. And these beliefs around clinging to things making us happy—it's not just a few of us that do this. It is families, parents, it's what we learn. It's like the best that we think it can get is to hold onto something and be happy. We haven't had the understanding. Until we meet the Dharma, we probably haven't heard anything like: clinging, trying to hold on to things, will make you suffer, will create suffering.

So as we see the changing nature of experience, we see we've been caught in a spell of misperception, of ignorance, delusion. Seeing that that ignorance is happening, when we start to recognize that we've been caught in that kind of spell—seeing the spell, seeing the ignorance—is the first step to disenchantment.

Even recognizing the belief, the view, "having what I want will make me happy"—that's the delusion that's embedded in greed. "Having what I want will make me happy." Even recognizing that as a view is a beginning. We start to see that it's an idea, it's not the truth.

When views are not seen, we just take them to be true. And so we can begin to see through these delusions—beginning to see through the taking of things to be permanent that are impermanent, taking things to be reliable that are unreliable, taking things to be self that are not self.

These are fundamental misperceptions, views that we hold: that there are reliable things out there, that there are things that could be permanent out there that would make me happy if I just found them. So even though we may still be woven in the spell a little bit, we start to see through these views, these ideas. Maybe it starts at a reflective level. It starts by reminding ourselves, "Yeah, things change."

Bhikkhu Bodhi, the scholar monk who translated many of the suttas that we share here, wrote about the experience of disenchantment. The Pali term for disenchantment is *nibbida*. He uses that term here: "Nibbida signifies, in short, the serene, dignified withdrawal from phenomena which supervenes 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."

In my experience, it's not quite that easy. That may be the end stage of disenchantment, but we kind of go kicking and screaming through that process. Seeing that things are impermanent, unreliable, not self, uncontrollable often—some part of us as humans just goes, "No, it should not be this way." And so we resist. We resist as we start to see the impermanent nature of experience, the unreliable nature of experience. It's not like our minds just see it and go, "Oh yeah, no problem. I'll stop clinging."

The whole process of the path requires that we see impermanence over and over again, and see how we are resisting it. There are so many ways that we resist these truths, and this is part of our journey. It's not a mistake that we find ourselves in what can feel confusing—we start to see impermanence and think, "Oh, smooth sailing," but we find that the mind has relationships to this. It doesn't like seeing impermanence. Quite a lot of the time it goes, "No, it should not be this way."

So there are many emotional flavors of our relationship as we start to see impermanence, unreliability, and the changing nature of experience. I think a lot of these emotional relationships are to what is essentially the corollary of impermanence: unreliability. When we see that things are impermanent, we realize there's nothing there to rely on. And our emotional relationship is largely about this unreliability. We so want to have something to rely on. Our whole structure of how we've been raised as human beings is to find something to rely on. So seeing that there's nothing reliable, we don't like that.

There are many emotional flavors of terrain that we go through as we start deeply seeing the unreliable nature of experience, feeling into the vulnerability of being human. I think these different emotional flavors of relationship are connected to the deep resistance to these truths. They are ways that, seeing

these relationships, we're still clinging to not wanting things to be impermanent, unreliable, not self. When we start to see these emotional responses to impermanence, to unreliability, to the uncontrollable nature of experience, those relationships are revealing where we're still clinging.

So it's not a mistake. This is firmly on the path—seeing these relationships, these reactions to impermanence.

There's one translation of *nibbida* that sometimes describes it as disgust or revulsion. I don't particularly like this translation; I much prefer disenchantment. But there are times I've experienced the flavor of relationship to seeing things change as one of revulsion. It was kind of a surprise—just like, "Oh, yeah, I don't want to see this." It felt so wrong. And several suttas point to the understanding of the danger in clinging to things that are impermanent.

In a way, seeing the danger of clinging to something impermanent, the mind could recoil against it. It's similar to how we might recoil when we see a rattlesnake—there's a danger there.

I had this happen once. I was walking one evening at Spirit Rock, and there was a crack in the sidewalk. I was just about to step on it when it coiled up and started rattling. I was pretty mindful, and I don't remember feeling fear in that moment. But I watched the body step back. It just moved away from that danger.

This is perhaps another way to understand that sense of revulsion. When we see clearly the danger, the mind withdraws from it. This is that description from Bhikkhu Bodhi—the dignified withdrawal from phenomena, which supervenes when we really see the impermanent nature of things.

So with nibbidā, the mind understands the danger of clinging. Sometimes as we start to see the impermanent nature, we understand that way lies suffering. Clinging to that, that way lies suffering. The mind just says, "No, not going to go there."

There's another analogy, I think actually in the Visuddhimagga, describing how if a dog were to find a bone that had been completely dried out in the sun, with no nourishment left in it at all, he would go up to it, maybe sniff it, and just walk away. There's nothing here for me. And that's described as the dog having disgust for the bone. There's no nourishment there. It's not worthwhile, not valuable.

That's a sense of what we begin to see—that what we have taken to be nourishment, the clinging to something to make us happy, isn't actually nourishment. It's not moving us in a direction of freedom.

There are other flavors of relationship to seeing impermanence clearly. Fear. Mia spoke of this last night. Fear can arise with respect to seeing the changing nature of experience. And I think that fear comes up because of the understanding. As we see impermanence clearly, we recognize that it's not reliable. And the fear is: but there must be something that's reliable. If this thing isn't reliable, what can I rely on? So there's that movement toward searching for something reliable, a fear that we're not going to find

something we can depend on.

The whole path points us toward finding an ease and a happiness that is completely unlike anything we've experienced before—the happiness of not picking something up, of letting go, of not needing to have something be stable.

At times when impermanence is showing up in a very rapid way, when we're seeing things change so quickly, some of the early experiences can actually be very delightful. So this is also a relationship, and we can cling to that. It's like, "Oh, I figured it out. I'm enlightened." We see how things are just coming into being and falling apart and coming into being, and everything seems so easy. There's nothing to hold on to. It's like a magic show, and it seems so delightful.

So that's also a relationship worth noticing—that sense of "I figured it out," or the delight, the joy. At one point, talking to one of my teachers and describing this delight of seeing these truths, he said, "Okay, we have to talk about the imperfections of insight." The defilements related to insight. The ways we can cling to insight itself—like, "Oh, I've got it, I figured it out."

So, noticing these relationships. But sometimes when we start to see impermanence in that particular way, it seems like we know the object that's arising. It's clear. It pops into being.

We know exactly what it is, and then we see it fall apart. Sometimes impermanence is going so fast we don't even know what the objects are. We tend to like clarity. We tend to like knowing what we're seeing. And that kind of experience starts to feel uncomfortable. Sometimes things go so fast it can feel overwhelming. So that kind of experience of fear is like, "How do I navigate this?" That overwhelm or fear at the rapidity of change can even feel as strong as terror sometimes.

I'm going to say a few more, but before I go on to name a few more of these kinds of relationships—the path unfolds. This is a terrain, a place in the path where the path unfolds by meeting the relationship. And so when this is happening, our practice is not to try to force ourselves to be with the rapidly changing experience, but to be with the fear itself. And you may find in being with the fear that it also starts to rapidly change. So the path unfolds through noticing the relationships to impermanence, noticing the relationships to that unreliability, noticing the relationship to dukkha. Because that experience of things changing rapidly is a flavor of dukkha. It's a flavor of seeing the unreliable nature of experience.

A couple other experiences we may have around this exploration of seeing impermanence: my teacher in Burma, Sayadaw U Janaka, pointed this one out. He's the only person I've heard call it this. He says sometimes it can feel like homesickness. And to me, that flavor is, again, the flavor of disenchantment. It's kind of like, "I wish I could go back to not seeing this. I wish I could go back to believing that there was something reliable, or that experience was controllable." And so there can be a longing for what we had—that comfortable fit of our hindrances. We get a longing for that flavor of homesickness.

And then, as we start to see this nature of experience as impermanent more and more, we move through

some of these relationships. Then there can be another one that's just like boredom. Like, okay, I've seen this enough already. Another flavor can feel like oppressiveness—we feel like we're just being impinged upon. Like we're in a house with eighteen teenagers having a party and they're just poking at you. So much stimulation. It just feels overwhelming—that kind of being bombarded by sense impressions.

And then it can shift into this sense of just, "Okay, I've seen this, been here, done this—how long do I have to watch this?" Boredom is another relationship. Notice the boredom. Sometimes in this place it can shift from boredom to disinterest. It's like, yeah, this is just not interesting anymore. Had enough of this. It can also shift into the flavor of not wanting to practice.

All of these can be seen. I was practicing in Burma, and at this particular monastery we kind of lined up and got to hear the reports of the person ahead of us. I was fortunate to be last in line, so I got to hear everybody else's reports. This one person—who I could tell was further ahead of me on the path, this was a number of years ago—her reports were so clear. And at one point she described, "Yes, while I was practicing, not wanting to practice arose." And I thought, "You can actually report that?"

It was such an aha moment. It showed me that that state which had arisen in my mind—that too was just a state that had arisen in my mind. Not wanting to practice had arisen. It's something that can be seen. "Oh yeah, not wanting to practice is happening. Okay, we'll keep walking and I'll notice not wanting to practice." Simple.

Before that moment, I had this idea that somehow I either had to believe it and stop practicing—I actually felt betrayed by my mind. It's like, "No, I really know I want to practice. Why is it telling me I don't want to practice?" Or I had to get rid of it.

I thought I had to get rid of that arising because it was wrong. But it's just another arising. All of these relationships to seeing impermanence are just more arisings. They're ways that we're clinging, ways that we're relating to the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience.

So as our practice deepens through opening to these relationships to impermanence, the mind begins to move much more in the direction of actually letting go. And this is the dispassion—experiencing disenchantment, one becomes dispassionate. Again, it's the natural unfolding here. There's an image given of water flowing down a mountain. It's just the nature of water to flow down the mountain and gather in rivulets and streams and ponds and rivers. That's its nature. And likewise, from disenchantment, dispassion follows.

The Pali word for dispassion is *viraga*. The word has the connotation of—it's almost an analogy—it's used in terms of cloth. If a cloth is sitting in the sun for a long time, it will *viraga*. The dye in the cloth will fade. So *viraga* means to fade. The term itself suggests a gradual process. Think about how long it takes if a cloth is sitting in the sun, or curtains hanging at a window. How long it takes for the curtain to fade. It's a slow process, but it's also a very natural process.

To me, this whole process of disenchantment and dispassion is reflective of the gradual nature of the path. There are a number of analogies the Buddha gave around this gradual nature, and this imagery of *viraga* is one of them. Over the course of our practice, we may see the fading away of different kinds of attachments. Different levels of desire can fade. We might first start seeing the fading away of some of the ways we clung to our big reactivity. For me, the anger and the self-hatred—those were some outer layers of craving, clinging, and aversion that over the years I began to see. Looking back, it's like, yes, wow, at this point I'm not reacting in the same way that I used to. We see the fading. We're starting to see the fading away of the ways that we cling—a fading away of the attachment to wanting things to be my way. And then we might start also seeing a fading away of attachment to pleasant states of concentration, even a fading away of attachment to insight and understanding.

Over the course of our practice, we can see this. The Dalai Lama famously said, don't try to look at your practice day to day to see what has been released or let go of. But look back over five years, ten years. You will notice a difference. You will see that there are things that have been released. And we can see that the practice has contributed to that.

This fading away—it's not quite like the cloth hanging in the window where it's a gradual, continual fading. It's more like it comes and goes. We see a release of something, and then the next moment or hours later we've picked it up again and we're craving and clinging to that thing. So it's more like a wave, a wave that gradually dampens in the release.

There's that fading-out aspect of dispassion. There's also the letting-go aspect of dispassion. It's just the mind fundamentally letting go when we see that there is nothing to cling to. The mind lets go.

I said earlier that freedom is not about getting anything. All of the descriptions of freedom are about what's not here, what has been let go of. One definition of freedom—this is peaceful life—I read this earlier: "This is peaceful, this is sublime, the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana." Here, dispassion and nibbana are understood to be synonyms. This is the freedom. Dispassion is the freedom.

We may not like the word dispassion, but it really is losing the passion around greed, aversion, and delusion. That's what we become dispassionate about. Compassion, the sense of caring and connecting—that becomes stronger. The heart that is not tied up in the knots of greed, aversion, and delusion feels, connects, cares. The Brahma Viharas are a natural expression of a heart that is not clinging.

The feeling of mettā, the expansive feeling of mettā, at times may be touching into that. The feeling of muditā, the feeling of joy in the joy of others. The feeling of compassion, of feeling the suffering of others and not constricting around it. We might think about dispassion as being something very flat. But the quality of the heart that is open is anything but flat. It is so resonant and responsive to the world.

The letting go aspect of dispassion—we can think of it also as the release of suffering. And the feeling of

that, that's a flavor of what we touch into when we feel the release from suffering. Sometimes we can actually experience this. Like my description of seeing how craving let go when the person disappeared into the building. Seeing the release from that and feeling like I had been released from a vice grip. Sometimes we can get a taste of that, of the release. And as I described in that example, I got attached to wanting to see the release.

The deeper aspect of dispassion is the non-arising of craving. It's like it's not even picked up. So there's nothing to let go of because nothing has been picked up.

We might be able to feel into this a little bit if we think back to childhood. For disenchantment, think about what was your favorite game or toy when you were five. The attachment to that we had at the time—maybe not wanting to share it with friends, or maybe only under certain conditions. There's that kind of attachment. And yet there's a lot of joy and delight that we get from that toy. But as we grow up, I found there was a clinging, a kind of homesickness feeling. I wish I still liked playing with those dolls. I really used to like playing with those dolls. So that's a little bit of disenchantment. We're outgrowing what we had been attached to. We're seeing it's just not satisfying anymore. We're seeing that it doesn't provide what we thought it had provided. One begins to let go of that. There's this experience of just not being interested in that toy anymore.

As an adult—maybe now you've remembered that toy—but how long has it been since you thought about that? As an adult, we don't even think of picking up that game or toy. Interest or disinterest, neither one is relevant. There's not the picking up.

I'll close with a quote about freedom. The Buddha described another word for freedom. Nibbāna is a word used for freedom. Another is the unconditioned. That term also the Buddha defined as the ending of greed, aversion, and delusion—the unconditioned, the ending of greed, aversion, and delusion. Maybe a flavor of the unconditioned nature of freedom, again, is in the not picking up. Interest and disinterest are not relevant. There's not even the sense of needing to let go of anything. It's just not picked up. This term, the unconditioned, is used in this final quote. It is another synonym for freedom, nibbāna.

Though the realization of the unconditioned requires a turning away from the conditioned—everything in our experience is conditioned—it must be emphasized that this realization is achieved precisely through the understanding of the conditioned. Nibbana cannot be reached by backing off from a direct confrontation with samsara, the world of suffering. Nibbana 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. Nibbana can be attained by turning one's gaze towards samsara and scrutinizing it in all its starkness. The understanding of the conditioned is the way to the unconditioned.

And so this place of scrutinizing the conditioned in all its starkness—it feels that way sometimes. We feel the suffering of the world sometimes, and we feel ourselves constrict around it. This is our journey. It's not

an easy journey that we're on.

And yet, we also see, as we practice—all of you have seen the value of the practice. We go through these cycles of purity and purification, back and forth. And that is the fading of the dye, a slow process of the release of greed, aversion, and delusion.

Thank you for your practice. This is such a challenging and amazing path that you're on. Carry on.

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