

Disenchantment & Dispassion

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Television has taught us to think of ourselves as passive observers—that life happens to us and we're just simply watching and not able to make much of a difference in anything. This is a bad attitude, because actually we're shaping things.

If you search through the Buddha's teachings for the source of all things, he says, "All things are rooted in desire." In other words, our experience of the world is shaped by desire. What you experience right now is a combination of a few things: the results from past actions, actions in the present moment, and the results of the present actions. All combine to make your experience of what you're aware of right now.

In every case, there's the action: past actions plus present actions. And these are rooted in desire. You act because you want something. If there's no desire, there's no action.

This is how we continue creating suffering for ourselves. Our whole experience of the six sense-spheres, five khandhas: When you get into the details of these things, you see how much you're doing to create them.

The experience of the khandhas is shaped by fabrication, sankhara. You're aware of the six senses because you direct your attention there. Sometimes you direct your attention to the eye, sometimes the ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind. And wherever your attention is directed, that starts beginning to proliferate.

So this is the problem, that because of our desire we create suffering.

And that principle goes a lot deeper than you might imagine.

We tend to think well the basic raw materials of experience are neutral and then we move in with our desires. Actually, a lot of the raw materials of experience come from desire as well. This is what keeps things going.

This is why the whole point of the Buddha's teaching is to give rise to a sense of dispassion for these things. As long as there's passion for these experiences, we're going to keep on creating them, keep on churning them out—and we keep churning them out with no thought for quality control. This becomes the mind's basic default mode.

So this is the aim of the Buddha's teachings. In the final evening of his life, he talked about how people were paying homage to him in the wrong way. Actually, devas were paying homage with heavenly music, heavenly scents, etc., yet he said that that's not genuine homage for the Tathagata. True homage is practicing Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. And at that point he didn't explain what he meant, but there are other passages in the Canon where he defines it.

Practicing in accordance with the Dhamma is when you're practicing for the sake of disenchantment, dispassion, for the sake of release. That's practicing the Dhamma in

accordance with the Dhamma. All of his other teachings come down to this same point: to induce dispassion.

As when we chant the Fire Sermon. He says to look at the eye, and see it as on fire. Your ear is on fire, your nose, tongue, body, mind are all on fire—with the fires of passion, aversion, delusion, aging, illness, and death.

Some people think that when the Buddha's being very precise and philosophical, that's his genuine teaching, and that his other, more metaphorical teachings—like the fires in your senses—are simply there to stir up your enthusiasm. Well, the whole point of all the Dhamma is to stir you to practice.

All the teachings, whether they're philosophical or poetic, are meant to give rise to a sense of dispassion. Think of your eyes being on fire, your ears, your nose, your tongue, your body, your mind: The monks listening to the sermon didn't need a lot of philosophical terms. All they had to do was think in these terms, and they were able to induce a sense of dispassion. There are lots of stories where people were inspired by an image: water falling out of a dipper, the sound of a saw. That was enough to induce dispassion.

Other times, people required something more analytical. In other words, looking straight at whatever they were experiencing and just taking it apart: What are your experiences made up of? These little moments.

Think about the feelings you pursue. Everyone wants a feeling of pleasure. But how long do feelings of pleasure actually last? Not necessarily all that long.

Often they seem to be extended by your perception of them. You have an idea of pleasure that picks up on a feeling of pleasure. And that perception then lasts, even though the feeling is gone.

The Buddha compares perception to a mirage: There is water someplace maybe, but even so, it's not where you see it. Sometimes there isn't even water at all. It's just an illusion of the air currents. And when you get there to taste the actual water, there's none.

In other words, many times you look at your label of pleasure, but where exactly is the feeling of pleasure that corresponds to it? It's gone. It's just a memory now.

Then you think about all the energy you put into creating those feelings of pleasure. And all you're left with is mirages. It's enough to make you want to find something else, something that really lasts. And to do that, you have to turn away from your normal pursuits and start looking inside the mind.

Do that for the sake of disenchantment: The Pali word is *nibbida*. Sometimes people translate it as disgust or revulsion, something very strong. And sometimes you need the strong term, as only the strong term is really appropriate for this total sense of turning away from the things that you used to run toward. And the only reason you would turn away is you begin to realize that they don't offer the satisfaction you thought they did. You feel betrayed.

Yet you can't accuse them of any betrayal, because you were the one who pursued them.

You were the one who created them with your desires. It's not their fault.

That's where dispassion comes in. It helps you lose your sense of attraction to these things. But again, the attraction is not replaced by aversion. Simply the realization that they're not at fault. And so you learn how to stop creating more of them. This is an important part of the practice.

You focus on dispassion, then you focus on cessation. What are you ceasing? You're ceasing your participation in creating these things. It's not that you have to come back and browbeat yourself. You just simply stop.

Like a child who grows up enough to no longer be attracted to playing with dolls or with little toy cars: They lose their appeal. You grow dispassionate toward them. This doesn't mean you hate them. You just put them aside. But the idea of going back and playing with them and getting involved in the stories that you used to get involved with: You find no attraction to that at all.

So the whole purpose of the Buddha's teachings is just this: to undercut our sense of desire that keeps creating things.

And all the teachings—the teachings on the five aggregates, the six sense media, the properties of earth, water, wind, fire, space, and consciousness; and his more poetic teachings, the images in the poetry, the images in the suttas: They're all aimed at this direction—to induce that sense of dispassion, disenchantment. And through the dispassion, release.

Not that you're hoping to be sour about the world and just stay in that sourness. You're aiming at the point where you're no longer creating these things. And the fact that you're not creating these things then allows for something to open up in the mind. That's the whole point of the teaching.

So learn to use the Buddha's teachings for their intended purpose: to induce this sense of disenchantment, dispassion that opens out onto the deathless. This is how you practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma.

In other words, you're here not to continue with your old notions. You have to be willing to have a reversal inside the mind. Be open to that possibility. This might be a really good thing—to have a lot of your presuppositions questioned.

Ajaan Mun's students have said that one of his favorite topics for Dhamma talks was precisely this: practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. He came under a lot of flak during his lifetime for going against old Thai customs in the way he practiced. And he used to respond, "Well, the customs of any country, whether they're Thai or Lao or whatever: They're all customs of people with defilements."

The practice of the Dhamma in accordance with your defilements: That doesn't get you anywhere. So you want to do what the Dhamma requires. And the Dhamma aims at right here: the sense of disenchantment, dispassion.

That goes against a lot of every culture's values no matter where, whether it's an Asian

culture or a Western culture. All cultures are rooted in desires, just as all things are rooted in desire.

So you have to be willing to have a lot of your preconceived notions, a lot of your underlying presuppositions questioned. If you see where they're leading to suffering, okay, be willing to let them go. Because what waits on the other side of dispassion and disenchantment when they're done properly is total release, total freedom. That, as the Buddha said, is the one taste that permeates all the Dhamma: the taste of release.