

Samvega vs. Dispassion

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A group of monks were once going to head out to an outlying area of India, and so they went to pay their respects to Ven. Sariputta. He asked them, “The people there are intelligent. If they ask you what your teacher teaches, what are you going to say?”

Now remember, Sariputta himself once asked that question of Ven. Assaji and he got that famous teaching: “All things that arise from a cause: their cause and their cessation—that’s the teaching of the Tathagata, the great contemplative.”

That was enough for Sariputta to gain the Dhamma eye and see the deathless.

But the answer that he recommended the monks give to the people in that outlying district was different. He said to tell them as the very first thing: “Our teacher teaches dispassion.”

Now a lot of people would stop right there because dispassion sounds very negative. It sounds like disillusionment, resignation: You’ve looked around and seen that the things of the world don’t come up to your expectations for them, so you give up having expectations. That’s what it sounds like, but that’s not what dispassion means. We get it confused with samvega, and it’s important to clear up the confusion so that we can understand the difference between the two.

Samvega is when you see how disillusioned you are in life and you also have a sense of being trapped. You want something better than this but you can’t see any way out. That’s because there are still things there in the world that you’re feeding on or that you’d like to feed on, in terms of relationships, in terms of power, whatever: the things we emotionally feed on in terms of other people, other things. The reason we feel trapped is because part of us is still in there and we can’t let it go.

It’s like that famous monkey trap where they put a hole in a coconut and then into the coconut they put a little bit of fruit that the monkey wants. It can reach its hand in through the hole, but once it has its hand wrapped around the fruit, it can’t get its hand out. It’s trapped by its own greed.

That's samvega.

You look around and there's nowhere in the world that you can see any way out. Everybody's fighting over what little bit of food there is, emotional or physical.

The Buddha's image was of fish fighting over that last gulp of water in a dwindling puddle before they're all going to die.

And it's terrifying.

That's what samvega literally means: terror. It's sometimes translated as dismay, sometimes as urgency, but the word originally comes from a sense of terror.

You're trapped. You need a way out.

That's what pasada provides—the sense of confidence, that, yes there is a way out.

This confidence takes some of the heaviness away from that sense of terror, and turns it into a motivation to practice, because you realize that aside from the path there's really nothing. This allows you to put all your energy and pay all your attention to following the path.

Now one thing that can get in the way, though, is when we confuse samvega with dispassion. We're developing this path all the way to what? Dispassion? The mind asks that and it recoils a little bit, because it keeps confusing the idea of dispassion with samvega.

But dispassion is something different. Dispassion is when you no longer need to feed on these things, the things of the world. It comes from disenchantment, *nibbida*, and *nibbida* basically relates to this image of feeding. You've had enough of the food offered by the world and you don't want any more. You don't feel a need anymore to feed off these things, and that allows you to stop creating all the fabrications you've been creating around the the things of the world in an effort to dress up them up as food.

What follows is dispassion, and that's not a negative thing. You're dispassionate toward all that fabrication you've been doing, and so you allow it to stop.

That opens you up to something much bigger.

Occasionally they talk about an arahant as someone with no expectations, and it sounds pretty bad, but the reason he has no expectations is actually because he doesn't *need* expectations anymore. He's found something much better. Something completely satisfying.

Another difference between samvega and dispassion is that with samvega you need confidence to cure it, whereas with dispassion there's no cure because you don't need a cure. It's good in and of itself. As the Buddha said, it's the ultimate dhamma.

So as we're practicing, we want to keep these two concepts separate and work on the initial problem: that there's still something in that coconut that we want to hold onto, and you have to ask yourself what it is, why you're holding on.

The whole irony about that monkey trap, and it really works, is that all that monkey would have to do is let go of the bit of fruit inside of the coconut and it would be free. But it's so fixated on its desire for the fruit that it's trapped. It can't get away.

So you have to ask yourself: What are you still holding onto?

This is one of the reasons we practice concentration: to get the mind quiet so that you can really observe what's going on, so that you can see, when the mind moves to something: Why is it moving there?

We practice concentration together with restraint of the senses, all based on that principle that the Buddha taught to Rahula right from the very beginning, the principle of truthfulness. Why are you going for something? What's the allure? You have to learn how to be frank with yourself about that, so that you know exactly where you have to chip away. What is it about that little fruit inside the coconut shell that you're holding onto where you feel that you can't let it go?

What this means is that we get the mind quiet not just to have it quiet. There *is* a sense of well-being that comes from that, but that's not the escape. The escape comes in developing that sense of disenchantment, seeing that you don't need to feed off that allure any more—partly because you see that you've got something better, and partly because you see that there's really not much there.

You can take heart at the same time in realizing that at the end of the path is not a gray, dull area. Instead, there's total freedom.

Ajaan Lee talks about this in the very end of his book on the frames of reference:

In getting to the ultimate dhamma of dispassion, we see the clear line between what's fabricated and what's unfabricated, and then the mind goes beyond everything fabricated and unfabricated into total freedom. That moment is the highest possible dhamma. The people who have reached that point would never ever want to go back to their old attachments. There's no nostalgia at all. Resignation has nostalgia, but this doesn't have any nostalgia.

So you can take heart in the fact that this path really leads to a good place. It may be difficult and there may be times when it goes directly against the grain, but the goal is much better than anything you can imagine, partly because our imagination tends to revolve around things that we can feed on.

If you can't feed on this relationship, how about feeding on that power, or how about feeding on status or on praise from other people? The mind tends to circle around nothing but these different sources of food, and its imagination gets confined to those things.

So even though you don't get to nibbana or dispassion just by imagining them, at least you can imagine that they're good, and that they're better than you can imagine.

That can provide a lot of the motivation for sticking with the path and really committing yourself to it.