

Dispassion Is Freedom

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There's a story in the Canon where Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha's step-mother, comes to see the Buddha after her ordination and asks for a brief teaching that she can put into practice. He gives her eight principles for testing what counts as genuine Dhamma, genuine Vinaya.

The principles fall into three types. There are those that are related to the ultimate goal in the practice. There are those that are related to qualities we have to develop within ourselves as we practice, and the third type includes qualities that have to do with our relationship with other people—how our practice has an impact on others.

In each case, the Buddha says, you see when you take on a particular dhamma—and here “dhamma” can mean a teaching, a mental quality, or an action—and if it leads to a certain type of quality that's not in line with the Dhamma, then you know it's not really Dhamma.

In other words, you test things through your actions. Now, in some cases you can look at something and know where it's going to lead. In other cases you have to give it a try.

The ones having to do with the ultimate goal and are true dhamma are those that lead to being unfettered and to dispassion. Those two are very closely connected, because when the Buddha talks about things that fetter the mind, passion plays a huge role.

This goes against the way a lot of us think. We like to think that our passions are our expression of freedom. With sensual passion, you think of all the different sensual desires that you might want to indulge in, or the sensual fantasies that you might want to create—and there's a lot of freedom there, you think. You have a whole range of sensual pleasures that you can think about and plan.

If you get tired of sensuality, then there's the pleasure of form. The mind, as it gets into concentration and inhabits the body fully: That, too, seems to be a type of freedom. And then there's the pleasure of formlessness: You could have a passion for formlessness. When you've decided that even maintaining a sense of the form of the body becomes oppressive, and you'd rather just be there with infinite space, infinite consciousness, it all seems very wide open and free. But the Buddha says, there's a slavery there even in those forms of passion. It's a fetter that keeps us tied to coming back again, and again, and again.

The image he gives is of a two oxen connected by a yoke. Is one ox the fetter of the other ox? No, the yoke is the fetter that ties them together. And it's the same with the senses. When there's a fetter between the eye and forms: Is the eye the fetter of the forms, or the forms a fetter of the eye? Well, no. The fetter is in the passion that ties the forms to the eye, and through the eye to the mind.

Years back, I remember hearing a reporter complaining about a Buddhist teacher. This was back in the 70's and 80's. Lots of young people were going to hear this particular teacher, and the reporter sat in one of the classes this teacher was offering. The teacher was talking about how passion is the source of all our suffering. The reporter looked around the room, he said to himself, "These young people they haven't really seen the passion of life yet. How can you be telling us that passion is bad?"

Well, the Buddha didn't start the path with dispassion. He approached the topic of passion strategically. You look at the duties of the four noble truths. The duty with regard to the first truth, suffering, which is clinging to the aggregates: You have to comprehend that, and part of comprehension is getting past passion for them. The duty with regard to craving—the cause of suffering—is that you've got to abandon it. How do you abandon it? By developing dispassion. The third noble truth itself is dispassion.

It's when you get to the fourth noble truth that you have to think strategically, because there's a lot you have to develop there. Without any passion for the path, it's hard to develop virtue, hard to develop concentration, hard to develop discernment. So you do concentrate passion on the path.

As it says in that chant we have from the Ariyavamsika Sutta, you develop a passion for developing and a passion for abandoning: developing skillful qualities, abandoning the unskillful ones. You want to take your pleasure there. Make it your sport, shooting down your defilements when you see them. And try to do a thorough job, as thorough a job as you can.

It's only when the path is fully developed that you might think about what would be better than having to fashion the path. Getting to the goal would be better. And how do you do that? Through dispassion for the path.

For many of us, we have a very negative notion of dispassion. It sounds like depression, but it's not. It's more a maturing.

You might think of it as living in a village and getting involved in all the issues in the village of who likes whom and who doesn't like whom and who has mistreated whom, and all the

back and forth of village life. Then you leave the village and you go into the wilderness. You go up to the edge of the Grand Canyon, and just the vastness of the canyon makes you realize how small and petty all the affairs of the village were.

This is similar to an image that the Buddha himself uses. You get out into the wilderness and you realize all the concerns of people and all the concerns of the village just fade away. The mind feels a lot more expansive: That's dispassion. The mind really feels expansive because it's not concerning itself with little tiny things.

The Buddha tried to induce in his listeners a taste of dispassion when he gave the graduated discourse. You think of all the good things in generosity, the good things in virtue; the rewards of those things, but then you start thinking about the drawbacks. You work hard to get sensual pleasures and then they spoil you. As I've said before, it's as if samsara were a sick joke. You work hard to get all these good things and then, as you enjoy them, it's bad for the mind. They pull you back down.

As the Buddha says, when you can see that the drawbacks of that whole process and see even that it's degrading—you're working hard, you're working hard, working hard for something that's going to let you down: If you can develop some dispassion for that, that's when you're ready for the four noble truths and the duties of the four noble truths.

So think about the concerns you have as you go through the day, the things you actually are passionate about. We tend to regard our passions with a lot of pride. But look at the things that the mind actually goes for, and then ask yourself, "Is that putting the mind in a position of freedom, or is it putting it in a position of slavery?" In every case, you'll find that it's a slave to those activities.

This is when you start thinking that it might be good, as a first step, to develop some dispassion for sensuality, and ultimately to try to develop some passion for the pleasures of form and the pleasures of formlessness.

In other words, get the mind into concentration; look for your pleasures there, knowing that someday you're going to have to go beyond them. But in the meantime, these are your tools for pulling away from sensual passion.

After all, as the Buddha said, if you don't have an alternative pleasure to sensuality, then no matter how much you may know about the drawbacks of sensuality, you're still going to go back to sensual pleasures, back to sensual thinking.

So provide yourself with this pleasure of concentration. Be passionate about this

strategically. When you do that, your practice will be in line with the Dhamma and Vinaya. That puts the mind in a position where it can look favorably on dispassion, favorably on being unfettered.

Because you look at life around you: pandemics, insane politics... I remember reading about a pandemic a century ago, and the article was talking about how the government lied to people, and the whole thing got very politicized. And a lot of people died as a result. I remember reading about that at the beginning of the current pandemic, our pandemic, hoping that we had learned our lesson, but then the same thing's happening all over again.

The Buddha's right: Samsara just goes around, around, and around, and it never learns. It's like Talleyrand's comment about the Bourbon family, "They never forgot, but they never learned." In other words, they remembered old animosities, but they didn't learn any maturity. This is the type of world we keep coming back to.

So when you see dispassion as a good thing, that's when you're really on the path. As the Buddha said, if you think that nibbana is something dull, or that it would have any bad qualities at all, then you've got wrong view and it's going to hamper your practice. So learn to look on dispassion favorably—as freedom, as being unfettered—and that'll give your practice a real boost.