Disenchantment

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One of the underlying images in the Buddhist teachings is the image of feeding and drinking. Basically, we suffer because of our need to feed, our need to drink, our craving. We’re at danha in Pali. It also means thirst. Upadana, clinging. Clinging also means the act of taking sustenance. It’s the craving and clinging that cause us to suffer. Sometimes you hear it’s because the things we crave and cling to are impermanent and constant. But the passage of the Buddha points out that we can have a sense of passion and delight, which is another word for clinging. For the deathless, on a very high level of the practice, you can have an experience of the deathless and cling to it as an object. And that, too, is a form of suffering. So the problem isn’t with the objects. The problem is with the mind that finds that it needs to cling to things, feed on them. This is why we practice the Dhamma, is to strengthen the mind to a point where it doesn’t need to feed anymore. We practice concentration, and the Buddha compares the sense of pleasure and rapture from concentration to food for soldiers. The images of a fortress on the frontier, the soldiers are a right effort. And there’s a gatekeeper who’s very wise and keeps out strangers and lets in only people he knows. In other words, that’s mindfulness, which remembers to do away with unskillful thoughts, not let them have inroads in the mind, and to develop skillful ones. For these soldiers and the gatekeeper to do their work, they need a sense of well-being. Because so much of what we have to do goes against the grain. We’re so used to feeding, we’re so used to thirsting after things, that the idea of feeding and not thirsting is hard to get our heads and our hearts around. And the only way we can is to focus on the negative side of the clingings and cravings, to own up to the fact that this act of feeding entails a lot of suffering. That’s why we have the contemplation of the body, those contemplations of the mind. Contemplations of the world that we chanted just now. Contemplations of inconstancy, stress, not-self. There are other perceptions that the Buddha has us develop. Perceptions of distaste, he says, for every world. Every possible situation you can think of, he says, you want to look at the drawbacks. We’re used to doing that. It’s always looking for the details that look delicious, look enticing. And so in order to be willing to give up that kind of food, we need the food of concentration, a sense of ease, rapture, pleasure. Equanimity you can develop by focusing, say, on the breath and learning to carry that around with you. This evening I had a phone call from a woman who kept asking, “Well, after I get my mind concentrated, how do I develop discernment?” I said, “Well, just keep with the concentration.” She said, “But no, how do I get discernment?” I had to say about five or six times that in the course of developing concentration that you develop discernment as you try to maintain the concentration in all your activities. Just sitting and being still does not necessarily give rise to discernment. But if you try to carry that stillness around, it gives you an excellent vantage point from which you can notice how the mind slips out to feed on this or nibble on that, things it likes, things it doesn’t like. And if you have a sense of well-being as you go through the day, it makes it a lot easier to see the drawbacks of the things that you’re feeding on. This is how you develop a sense of nibbida, a word you can translate as disenchantment. It basically means losing your taste for things. That doesn’t mean that sometimes you hear revulsion or hatred. It’s more a sense of growing up, realizing that that kind of food you like to feed on, you don’t want to feed on it anymore. It’s like thinking back on the candies that you used to like when you were a child. I find it hard to believe that I used to like Hostess cupcakes and Twinkies and Mars bars. As you grow up, you develop a more sophisticated sense of food, of what’s nourishing and what is good. And that’s what we’re trying to do as we practice. Become a connoisseur of your breath. Become a connoisseur of the ease of the mind that doesn’t have to go sneaking out for food all the time. So you can develop this sense of distaste for the things that you used to like, but now you realize really are not good for you. And so developing this sense of distaste, the Buddha said, is practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. In some cases it comes easily, in other cases it’s hard. The drawbacks of some things are very easy to see. Then you’re very willing to give them up once you see them. In other cases, even when you see the drawbacks, you don’t want to give them up. Those are the difficult cases. Those are the times when you really have to push yourself harder. As the Buddha said, there are people who have strong passion, strong aversion, strong delusion, and those are the ones who have to engage in what he calls “painful practice,” which doesn’t just mean sitting long hours or doing walking meditation for long hours. It also means really looking in detail at the negative side of the things that you like, really taking seriously the fact that your life is very precarious. You could die at any time. So there’s no time to waste. There’s no time to fool around. These are the contemplations, he said, you’ve got to come back to again and again and again. So the practice is a combination on the one side of feeding the mind well with concentration, so you have the strength to do these other contemplations, to develop the perceptions that can give rise to a sense of disenchantment. You can give rise to a sense of losing your taste for things. As the Buddha said, once there’s disenchantment, that’s followed by dispassion. Because it turns out that the things you’ve been eating are things you’ve been producing. If you didn’t produce them, you wouldn’t have them to feed on. And if you have no passion for the producing, there’s nothing left. That’s why dispassion is followed by cessation. And that’s how we gain release. So look carefully at how you feed. And learn to see all the activities of the mind as it’s flowing out to this and flowing out to that. It’s looking for something to feed on. And see the stress in the act of feeding. That’s when you really see things in line with the Four Noble Truths. That’s when you develop appropriate attention. And the purpose of all this, of course, is release, the unconditioned happiness that comes when you’ve really trained the mind so it doesn’t have to feed on the things it doesn’t need anymore. This will involve building strength, conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment, getting these qualities really strong in the mind. But at the moment of release, you let go of those as well. At that point, there’s no feeding of any kind at all. The mind no longer has any hunger. And it’s only at that point that you can be free.

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