Dispassion & Delight

February 5, 2025

In the sutta we chanted just now, the Buddha says that all fabrications are inconstant, all fabrications are stressful, all dhammas are not-self. He said this is always true, whether there is the arising of a Buddha or not, these things are true. The question is, are these ideas always true? Are they always beneficial? Because the Buddha does have that passage where he talks about how there are things that are true but may not be beneficial. And we can find suttas where he actually chides people for applying the perception of inconsistency, or not-self, in the wrong way, in the wrong context. Usually it has to do with karma. And Chan Suat pointed this out sometime. He said the Buddha talks about the aggregates being not-self, the sense-fears are not-self. And then there’s that passage we chant again and again, “I am the owner of my actions. I’m responsible for these things.” And as the Buddha himself put it down, he would just say that all action leads to stress, because all actions lead to feelings, and feelings are stressful and not-self. What motivation do people have to do what is skillful? What do they have to do to follow the path? There was a study done years back. People in Sri Lanka were said to be very into the Dhamma, contemplating the three characteristics all the time. And they did a psychological study of them and found that they were suffering from mild depression. It’s because they were applying the three characteristics in the wrong way. One is seeing them as characteristics. The Buddha never uses that term. He calls them perceptions. We know the nature of perceptions. He says they’re like mirages. A mirage gives at best only a partial view of what’s over the horizon. It gives a lot of wrong information. If you take it too literally. Perceptions are like representations, sketches of something. We use them for purposes. We say it’s true enough for this purpose. But no perception can give you a 100% replica of what it’s representing. As the Buddha pointed out, even those fabrications that are stressful can have their pleasant side. If they didn’t have their pleasant side, we wouldn’t fall for them. So the perceptions may be true, but they may not serve the right purpose at the right time. You have to watch out for this. Otherwise you can get depressing. Especially if you turn the perception of not-self into a perception of no-self. Then you get the idea that there’s nobody there. You’re riding in a bus. You discover there’s nobody driving the bus. That gets depressing. You feel that you have no course of action at all. We have to remember that when the Buddha introduced the idea of these perceptions, those were people who, one, had already gained stream entry, and two, had learned the Four Noble Truths and the duties appropriate to those Noble Truths. It’s the Noble Truths that provide the context with their duties. A lot of the duties of the Noble Truths have to do with dispassion. You comprehend suffering, and comprehension means that you understand it to the point where there’s no greed, aversion, or delusion around it. No passion, aversion, or delusion. You try to abandon the cause of suffering. That means to develop dispassion for the cause. And the Third Noble Truth is when you succeed at developing dispassion for the cause. But then the Fourth Noble Truth, the duties to develop, and developing requires passion. The Buddha talks about this again and again. There’s so many aspects where he talks about you need to have passion for the Dhamma. You need to be passionate about abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful qualities. You want to be passionate about developing seclusion, which can mean both physical seclusion and the seclusion of concentration. If you’re not passionate about these things, you can’t do them. So the Buddha’s not telling you just give up. He’s saying there are some things you have to do and get enthusiastic about. That duty, eventually you’ll get dispassionate for the path. But before you get dispassionate for it, you have to develop it, see how far it can take you. So in the context of those duties, then you understand when to apply the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self, and when to put them aside. When you’re focusing on getting rid of your defilements, on getting rid of the hindrances that are standing in the way you’re concentrating, you try to see that your sensual desire is focused on things that are stressful. We have sensual desire. Why do we have sensual desire to begin with? It’s because we’re looking for pleasure, looking for ease. And when you contemplate the things that you’re focused on, you find that the pursuit of them is stressful, and whatever you get out of them is really inconstant, i.e. it’s unreliable. So the question is, is it worth identifying with that desire? Well, not really. Because you’ve got something better as you work on the concentration, that you don’t apply the perception of inconstancy, stress, and not-self quite yet to the concentration. Because you’re trying to get it solid. As the Buddha said, you’re trying to master it to the point where you can enter and leave at will, stay as long as you like. And to develop that kind of mastery, you have to really want to do this well. His instructions for concentration are there in his description of right mindfulness. One of the qualities is ardency. Or in the words of John Flynn, you have to be crazy about concentration. You have to be crazy about your meditation. Be the kind of person who wants to be with the breath at any spare moment. Have some passion for this skill that you’re working on. That’s how it develops. It’s not a tool just to give up. The Buddha’s giving us that training, and the training requires mastering some skills and enjoying it. There should be some joy in right effort, as you delight in abandoning unskillful qualities. You used to go for lust, anger, delusion of certain sorts. Now you realize that you don’t need that anymore. You’ve grown up. That’s what dispassion means. You grow up. And as you’re on the path, you want to delight in growing up. So dispassion is not depression. It’s maturity. And until the path becomes mature, you have to be passionate about it. When it does become mature, you realize it’s going to take you to something even better than it is. The Buddha’s not asking you to give up things without providing you with something better in exchange. So be passionate about the path. Realize you’ve got something really good here. You’ve got this opportunity. Dispassion doesn’t come all the time. It’s not the case that the teachings on right view, through right concentration, are available all the time. The tradition says there’s some whole universes that never have a Buddha. Imagine that. But we’re in a universe that has one. His teachings are still alive. It’s the Dharma like that. Sometimes we’re told that the Dharma is just a product of somebody who happened to live in another culture in another time. Therefore it has to be changed to fit our culture in our time. That’s the opposite of delighting in the Dharma. To delight in the Dharma is to realize there’s some teachings that have stood the test of time. Don’t need to be changed. You can take them as they are. Use them to train yourself. You’ve got some reliable guides. So delight in that. Delight when you’re able to let go of your defilements. Delight when you can get the mind to settle down and it stays. Delight in concentration when the mind can be on its own and have a sense of well-being that’s totally sufficient and sound. Delight in the fact that you’re on a path that leads to harmlessness, leads to an absence of conflict, total peace with nothing lacking. So let those thoughts encourage you. Be passionate about that goal. Then when the point comes when you’ve attained that goal, then you look at everything else that you’ve been holding on to and you realize you don’t need that anymore. You can let that go as well. But in the meantime be passionate about what you’re doing. Because that’s how it gets done.

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