

Dispassion

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There's a passage in the Canon where a group of monks are going off to a distant land, so they go to take leave of the Buddha. He tells them to take leave of Sariputta, too. So they go to see Ven. Sariputta. And he asks them, "When you go to this distant land and people ask you, 'What does your teacher teach?' how are you going to answer them?" So the monks ask Sariputta, "What would be a good answer to give?" And the first answer he gives is, "Our teacher teaches dispassion: the ending of passion." Then he goes on to say, "If the people are intelligent, then they will ask, 'Dispassion for what?'" That shows a big difference right there between people in that time and people in our time.

Most people, when they hear the word "dispassion," lose interest immediately. They don't care about what you might be advocating dispassion for. The idea that dispassion would come first is something that's not all that appealing. But for intelligent people, Sariputta says, you answer that their question by saying that the Buddha teaches dispassion for the aggregates. And then the next question would be, "What advantage does your teacher see in having dispassion for the aggregates?" The answer: "When they change, you don't suffer."

It's interesting that dispassion is the first thing Ven. Sariputta mentions. The Buddha himself at one point said dispassion itself is the highest of all dhammas, of all phenomena. The noble eightfold path is the highest of all fabricated phenomena. But dispassion is unfabricated, and it's the highest experience you can have.

Here again, the idea that dispassion would be better than anything else you could know sounds very strange. But the forest ajans talk about this a lot. They say it's like sobering up after you've been drunk. When you're drunk, you don't see things clearly. Only when you sober up do you finally see things clearly and free the mind from all the confusion and fogginess of being drunk.

Ajaan Lee compares dispassion to having been eating something and finally realizing that you don't want to eat it anymore. This is associated with dispassion very closely with disenchantment, which is the sense that you've had enough of a certain kind of food. He said that you spit things out. What you spit out, of course, is the five aggregates. You've been feeding on them. That's what clinging means: You've been feeding on them. And for most of us, the only pleasure we know in life is through satisfying our hungers by feeding. So the idea of going beyond feeding requires an act of the imagination to appreciate that it really could

be a good thing. But take an objective look at the nature of feeding. One, it's oppressive to the things fed on it. Two, it's oppressive for the person who needs to feed. You've always got to be looking for new sources of food, and fighting off others who want to take the food you've got. The Buddha's not taking as his alternative that you've got to starve yourself, which most of us think is the only alternative to feeding. His alternative is to find a part of the mind that doesn't need to feed. Dispassion is what leads us there. It's related to the duties of all four noble truths.

As the Buddha says, our duty with regard to the first noble truth is to comprehend it. And then in another sutta, he answers the question, "What does it mean to comprehend?" It means to understand each clinging-aggregate to the point of dispassion. You realize that you've been feeding off of form and feelings and perceptions and fabrications and consciousness: all these things that make up your sense of who you are. Now, though, you've found something better, and so you don't need to feed anymore. And you realize that all of this clinging and holding on is suffering. So you feel dispassion for the objects you've been clinging to, and for the clinging itself.

Similarly with the second noble truth—the origination of suffering, which is any one of three types of craving: for sensuality, for becoming, and for non-becoming. You try to develop dispassion for these cravings so that you can abandon them. The third noble truth is dispassion itself. The only truth that involves some passion is the path. You've got to have some passion to develop it. It's something you have to put together, to construct. And to construct it well, you have to want to do it well. Ardency, basically, means giving your whole heart to it. But then there does come a point where the path is complete, it's done its work, and so you have to let go of it, too. At that point, you have to develop some dispassion for the path as well. Only then will you be fully free.

So dispassion weaves its way throughout the teachings. This is why the Buddha said that the best way to show homage to him is to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. And then he said, in another sutta, "What does it mean to do that? It means to practice for the sake of dispassion." You could also interpret it as meaning not changing the Dhamma to suit yourself. You have to change yourself in order to suit the Dhamma. But both these meanings come down to the same thing. To change yourself to fit in with the Dhamma means that you have to think about dispassion in a good way and make it your aim. As the Buddha said, if you think of nibbana, dispassion, and disenchantment as suffering, one, you're wrong; and two, it's going to be hard to practice. So learn to see these things in the right light.

And the right light, he says, is to see renunciation as rest. See renunciation as a true way of finding peace in the mind. And in renouncing, we don't give up the feeding just by starving. We give up feeding because we find something in the mind that doesn't need to feed. This is one of the reasons why awakening happens in stages. You gain your first taste of the deathless with your first taste of awakening. It doesn't end all passion, but it does let you know that there is something better, something really good that comes with dispassion, and that there is a part of the mind that doesn't need to feed. That's basically when you're won over to the idea of dispassion, so that when the chance comes to finally let go totally, you're ready for it.

This is why practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma is a factor of stream entry. It's something you work on. Try to see dispassion as something positive: as true freedom. That gives you motivation.

It's paradoxical. This passion for the path has to be motivated by seeing the value of dispassion. But again, there are a lot of paradoxes in the path: things you have to develop that you will eventually have to let go of. In this case, you develop the passion to want to grow up, to stop feeding on the things you used to feed on. When I was a child, I used to save up my money to buy Hostess cupcakes: pure garbage. And now that I see that they're pure garbage, I'm glad I'm not eating Hostess cupcakes anymore, or wasting any more money on them. You can probably think of the things you ate as a child that you would find disgusting now. Well, that's basically how awakened people feel about the things they fed on before. We still like these things because of distorted perceptions. But when you get your perceptions right, you let go with a sense of freedom and release, not with a sense of depression.

This is one of the big misunderstandings about dispassion. There was a study done a while back about lay people in Sri Lanka who had the reputation for being really into the Dhamma. And the researchers came up with the conclusion that a lot of these people were suffering from clinical depression, saying that nothing in the world was any good, that there was no reason to want to accomplish anything at all. But that's not the kind of dispassion the Buddha's talking about. His dispassion requires a passion for the path motivated by the sense that there really is something worth putting all that effort into.

So learn to see dispassion in a good light and realize that even though it is the highest of all dhammas, there's something higher still, which is nibbana, the ending of dhammas. Ajaan Mun makes this point. He says that the third noble truth is not the final goal. It's the last step, the step that leads to nibbana. There's a duty that you have to do with regard to the third noble truth—you have to realize it

—but nibbana is not something you have to do. There's no duty associated with it at all.

Dispassion is something you move toward, something for which you create the conditions for in the mind. Ajaan Lee describes it as the point where finally the fabricated and the unfabricated make a total break. From that point, the mind is beyond all dhammas, even the dhamma of dispassion. It's totally free. But dispassion is the portal that lets you go there. We need it because we've been feeding on these things for so long and we have to learn that there's something better. And that requires that we see the feeding itself as a burden for the mind.

So try to get your views straight. When the Buddha says that the cessation of suffering is dispassion, learn to see that as a good thing. Use that perspective to give yourself some passion for the path. Ajaan Fuang used to say if you want to get good at the meditation, you have to be crazy about it; you have to keep at it. Every little sliver of time you might find to stay with the breath, you do that. Keep at it. Keep at it. So develop passion for the goal of dispassion. And then ultimately, you use dispassion to get to the point where the mind is beyond both.

The freedom the Buddha's talking about is that total. If we work in this direction, then we're practicing the Dhamma in line with the Buddha's intentions for why he taught the Dhamma and why he wanted people to practice it. That's how we honor his teaching. That's how we do honor to our own desire for true happiness.