

Dharmette: Disenchantment with Suffering

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on December 14, 2011

I'd like to read some verses from my translation of the *Dhammapāda*. I'm going to offer three of the verses to you as a challenge, to think about and reflect on – especially in a good way so that you don't quickly just dismiss the verses or think you know what they're about. You could accept the challenge by asking, "What's in these verses for me? How are they useful for me? How do I do this?" They are in chapter 20 of the *Dhammapāda*, entitled, "The Path." I'll read two of the introductory verses first, before the three that I want to focus on.

*The best of paths is the Eightfold [Path];
The best of truths, the Four [Noble Truths].
The best of qualities is dispassion;
And the best among gods and humans
Is the one with eyes to see.*

*This is the path
For purifying one's vision; there is no other.
Follow it,
You'll bewilder Māra.
Follow it,
You'll put an end to suffering.
This is the path I have proclaimed,
Having pulled out the arrows.* (Dhp 273-275)

"Having pulled out the arrows" refers to another verse of the Buddha where he talks about having been bewildered by all the suffering in the world, and his distress around how the world is. Sitting with himself, he realized that deep inside his own heart there was an arrow that was embedded. So, part of his suffering – that which he had to do something about – was to pull that arrow out from his heart. And that was his way of finding a solution to the suffering he found in the world. Those are the introductory verses, and now here are the three to challenge you:

*"All created things are impermanent."
Seeing this with insight,
One becomes disenchanted with suffering. ...*

*"All created things are suffering."
Seeing this with insight,
One becomes disenchanted with suffering. ...*

*"All things are not-self."
Seeing this with insight,
One becomes disenchanted with suffering. ... (Dhp 277-279)*

The interesting phrase here is, "becoming disenchanted with suffering" – as if it is a good thing. Maybe some of you think you are already disenchanted. But are you really? Are there ways for you to become disenchanted that might somehow be different, new, or more useful?

'Disenchanted' implies that you need to be disenchanted only if you're already enchanted. So, in what ways are you enchanted with suffering, or in the trance of it? In what ways do you overinvest in the importance of your suffering? And is there some kind of healthy way of becoming disenchanted?

'Disenchanted' is not the same thing as becoming free of your suffering. It's a step to becoming free. But to become disenchanted with suffering is to no longer be enthralled by it – to no longer put a tremendous amount of importance in your suffering, or to no longer overdo it. For some people, suffering is overrated [laughs]. Maybe this teaching is about giving up overrating it.

Suffering exists for many people. It's hard to deny that people suffer. Probably some of you suffer from time to time. This is not a denial of suffering, but a challenge to look and see what is your relationship to it. How do you hold it?

One of the ways to be enchanted with suffering is to make it much bigger than it is. For example, you get enchanted with suffering if you feel that if you are someone who is suffering, this is an amazingly big, personal flaw. Or you can be enchanted by suffering by assuming that if you're doing this life just right, then you would not suffer at all. Certainly, you can't let your Buddhist friends know that you're suffering, because Buddhism is to be free of suffering, and so you must be doing it wrong.

Or some people get enchanted with suffering because it's the only thing they really know for how to establish a sense of self, or to orient themselves.

Some people use their suffering as a way of getting attention from other people. Playing up suffering, being enchanted by it, and getting other people enchanted with your suffering is the name of the game. Some people are really good at playing it up.

Some people's suffering gives them a sense of value. They feel alive and connected to something, even though they're uncomfortable. The idea of not suffering is disorienting, because there's not something that's pumping them up, enchanting them, or giving them a sense of meaning. Some people, when they relax in meditation and the ordinary sufferings of life begin to fade away, at least temporarily, they find themselves quite disturbed by that. It's so foreign and troubling, that they want to rush back to the comfort of their usual suffering. Some people actually say that their suffering is comforting because it's all they've ever known.

So, what's it like to not be suffering?

I'm suggesting that there are different ways of being enchanted by suffering. Some people are negatively enchanted, where they abhor their suffering. They overrate it by saying, "This is terrible. This is the worst. This can't be." They inflate the importance and the value of their suffering.

There are people who just love to get together and share their suffering: "Let me outdo yours," and that's their connection – especially as one gets older. Some of you are getting older. Some of you are not getting older yet – you think [laughter]! But, I've noticed that I'm getting to be an old man now. I've noticed that people my age often talk about their physical ailments. They're enchanted with this and that about their bodies and doctors. There are all these conversations. For some of you with grey hair (or who should have it), is that true? There's a certain kind of camaraderie that comes with talking about it. Instead of gossiping about other people and getting a connection that way, you talk about health.

Part of the allure of being enchanted with suffering can be using it as comfort, protection, identity, or a support for relationships with others. Some people have huge identity issues built around being a victim – a personal victim, a social victim, or some other kind. They get juice from it; they get energy from their suffering. Some people hold it like a badge.

So, the challenge is:

- In what ways might you be enchanted with suffering?
- How do you relate to your suffering in unnecessary ways?
- What does it look like to become disenchanted, as opposed, to bringing it to an end?
- It would be nice to snap your fingers, be finished once and for all, get happily enlightened, and live happily ever after. That's nice; please do! But short of that, what would it look like if you became disenchanted?

The word 'disenchanted' in English might have some negative connotations. But, I'm suggesting that in this context, it's meant to be all good, because it means that you've been in a trance to begin with. You're enchanted in unhealthy ways. The word 'enchanted' means that some witch has come along and put a spell on you. You're in the spell, and you're not seeing clearly. So, what's a healthy way of breaking the spell? What's a healthy way of becoming disenchanted?

I think one of the things that happens in becoming disenchanted is that, while the suffering doesn't go away, it isn't being overrated anymore. Perhaps your suffering becomes ordinary, as opposed to extraordinary. There's something beautiful that can happen just by seeing suffering as ordinary. It's an ordinary part of life that:

- People suffer.
- I suffer.
- There's suffering.

I don't have to make a big deal out of it. I don't have to get frightened or alarmed by it. It's ordinary to have suffering. And there are all different types. It is in the ordinariness of suffering – the ordinariness of feeling it – that suffering may even have some value. Perhaps suffering is one of our teachers. It teaches us humility, empathy for others, and how to let go. It teaches us to be more grounded. So, we become people of the Earth – people who belong to these ancient cycles of birth and death, these ancient cycles of nature that come and go. This ancient lineage that we're part of, is to suffer.

If it's ordinary, if you're disenchanted and not in the spell of it – you're not for or against it in some big way. Then you're in a much better position to see it clearly for what it is – to see clearly what's really going on here in this life of ours. You can't see if you're in a spell.

So here the Buddha talks about: seeing with insight that all created things are impermanent; seeing that all created things are unsatisfactory in some way, for the purpose of clinging to or holding on to them; and that all things are not-self.

A later verse in the same chapter says:

Destroy attachment to self. ...
Cultivate the path to peace ... (Dhp 285)

So, this whole movement – this path, the Eightfold Path, the path of practice, the path of becoming disenchanted, the path of relaxing with our suffering – is meant to be a path that leads to greater and greater peace.

I hope that you'll take up my little challenge to explore yourself, and think about in what ways you might be under the spell of suffering, and in what ways might you break that spell and allow yourself to be ordinary with your suffering – and in doing that, be on the path to greater peace in your life.

Thank you.