

Dharmette: Disentangling the Tangle

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on January 3, 2018

The Buddha gave an interesting analogy. He was talking about two oxen tied to each other with a rope. He asked someone, "Is one ox being hindered or fettered by the other ox?" The answer to the question is, "No." The two oxen are being fettered or hindered by the rope between them. For some people, the tendency is to answer the question, "Yes." They think that if they're tied together, then one ox is hindering the other ox. But, the oxen are hindered separately, and the hindrance comes from the rope that holds them together.

The Buddha then takes this teaching analogy and applies it to our lives. He says that there is the object of what we see; there are the eyes; and there are the attachments, fetters, or ties that can connect those two. For example, if I'm attached to this wonderful bell, I see the bell. The attachment does not live in the bell. The attachment does not live in the eye. But according to the language of the ancient tradition, the attachment is in the relationship between the two, which is not the bell, not the eye, but the 'knot,' which is the word used in the text. Those two get entangled. So, is it the bell's fault when I'm being limited by my attachment to the bell? If it's the bell's fault, then I can just get rid of this bell. We can't have a Buddhist teacher attached to anything. So, if I'm attached to this bell, then I can put it in the garbage, and live happily ever after. If only it were that easy!

But we don't want to blame the bell. Now you could blame the teacher. Let's just dump the teacher as if the person or their eyes is the problem. Rather, it's the attachment. So, Buddhist practice focuses on untying the ties or disentangling the tangle, which is a famous little Buddhist slogan.

The Buddha went on with hearing. There's sound; there are the ears; and then there can be a tie, attachment or knot between those two. There's smell, the nose, and there can be what ties the two together. There's taste, the tongue, and there's what ties, hinders, or entangles the two together. There are sensations, and the body, and the tie between them. It's the same thing with the mind. There are emotions and feelings, and the inner eye that sees, perceives or knows that we're having emotions and feelings. There is also the relationship between them, which can be one of being entangled.

Central to this Buddhist practice is to not reject anything in the world, or anything within us. That is not to reject ourselves as the subject or the experiencer, but rather to investigate the relationship between the world and ourselves, or between ourselves as the observer or experiencer and what we are experiencing.

It's so easy to blame the other ox. It's so easy to blame the bell, or the thing that we're in relationship with and struggling with. Or we blame ourselves, the person having the experience or knowing it. But, it's wonderful that there is a middle ground where we don't have to take responsibility or the blame, or feel bad about ourselves. It's not what is out in the world that we have to reject. And there's something magical about discovering some freedom in the relationship between those two.

When we're not free, Buddhism calls that an entanglement, fetter, or tie. Somehow we're tied to things. So, can we discover the nature of those ties? Can we discover the nature of what that relationship is? Do we have a relationship of wanting more? Do we have a relationship of wanting less, or wanting to push away? Are we tangled up with our experience because we're seeing it through the lens of me, myself and mine? Or is it that whatever is happening here says that I'm a good person or a bad person, as opposed to just letting it be a simple experience?

We have emotions. There's a powerful way to give freedom to our emotions when we don't tie ourselves to them. We don't reject the emotions. We don't try to repress the emotions, but we're not tied to them. We're not entangled with them. We know them, and the knowing is free of what we know.

We also don't have to be entangled with our thoughts. Human beings can have all kinds of amazingly creative thoughts. I imagine that some of you are very creative (to say it in a polite way) in the kind of thoughts you can have. It's not a problem having those thoughts. But, it's a problem of how we relate to the thoughts – how we hold on, fight them, reject them, judge them, or how we judge ourselves because of them. There's a thought; there's a knowing of the thought; and between the two, there doesn't have to be anything that ties or tangles

them up. Instead, there can be vast emptiness and space. There can be a wonderful, glorious gap in which there is a sense of clarity, openness, or luminosity.

This morning I talked about the idea that there is a place of stillness, quiet, or peacefulness, which is not requiring anything in the world to change, except how we look. We look in a quiet way. We look in a peaceful way at whatever is difficult, easy, or wonderful. We hear in a quiet way. We taste, smell, and touch with stillness, peacefulness, and clarity. And with the mind, we know what's going on internally.

One of the ways that the Buddhist tradition talks about the whole purpose of Buddhist practice is to untie or disentangle the tangles. One of the greatest disentanglers is to disentangle yourself from your tangles. So, if from time to time, you find that you're entangled, attached, or caught up, then don't add another knot. There's just the tangle, the knowing of the tangle, and between the two, there can be peace. There can be stillness. There can be space and glorious emptiness.

This teaching points to the importance of dropping in, settling down, and showing up for our experience at the level of how it's immediately experienced. It points to the immediacy of seeing what you can see now, of hearing what you can hear now, of tasting, smelling, touching or tactilely feeling, and the immediacy of what you can know in the mind or the inner life right now.

So, if you're thinking about the past, you see that it's clearly happening in the present, and it's known in the present. Thinking about the future is a present moment experience. To somehow be able to settle back into this, we can then start discovering the rope that ties the ox. Perhaps if the ox becomes free, that's nice because oxen are strong. Maybe all of us can be oxen, or something like that.

I hope that, as we start this new year, your practice unties you from all the things that limit you, so that you can be strong, and walk through this world with your full strength, capacity, and confidence – like a mighty ox.