

Disenchantment

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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I'd like to start the talk this evening with a little story, a very short story that we find in the suttas^[1]. I'm modifying it just a little bit.

Imagine that there's a hungry dog—not so unusual—and it finds a bone. It's all excited. But this bone has been outside for quite some time. It's sunbleached. It doesn't have much nourishment left in it. It doesn't have any marrow. It doesn't have any meat. But it looks like a bone, and it smells like a bone. So the dog starts to chew on it. Of course, why not? Especially if you're hungry, right? It starts to chew on it, thinking there's something promising in this bone. And he discovers that there's actually no meat here. There's no marrow here. He's disappointed. He turns away and goes to do whatever he's going to do next.

It seems obvious. It seems uncomplicated. It seems pretty straightforward. Here is this dog who had a hunger, and thought the hunger would be relieved by this bone. He tried to get his hunger relieved, discovered it didn't work, turned away, and went to do something else. It didn't leave the bone because that bone was bad. And it didn't turn away because it decided, "Oh, I shouldn't be hungry," or anything like this. It was just this natural recognition that the bone couldn't provide what it wanted or what it needed.

And so this is one way in which we can understand this idea, this concept, this teaching in the early Buddhist literature about disenchantment. Disenchantment is not turning away because you're saying, "Oh, you shouldn't have any desire for anything, you shouldn't want anything." And it's not saying that objects out there are bad or evil in some kind of way. It's just saying that there's a natural turning away when we discover that objects and experiences can't give us what we're really looking for, what we're hungry for.

As humans, we have this hunger too. We have literal hunger for food and nourishment. But often we have this other hunger that maybe isn't named. Maybe we don't recognize so clearly what it is. Maybe it's obvious. This idea of a sense of peace, a sense of belonging, a sense of safety, maybe love. These are things that human beings are looking for. Of course they are. These are natural things to be expected. This idea of maybe having some well-being or just being at home in our life. Having these wishes, having these desires—these are not character flaws. These are not problems. They're not signs of bad practice.

We might have this idea sometimes that we should be immune to everything, or that we should be disconnected, or we should be detached. That's not what this Buddhist practice is pointing

to. That's not what it's about. Instead, can we have some compassion for the human condition, that we're looking for these things? Safety, well-being, love, belonging, peace. The list can be long. Maybe for you, there are some of these that resonate more than others.

What we often don't recognize is that underneath some of our desires, there's a deeper wish. We might not be so in tune with what these deeper wishes are. We might have this wish for approval. Of course we do. We don't want our actions in the world or our relationships to be met with disapproval after disapproval. Of course we don't. But sometimes what we don't see is that underneath this wish for approval is this idea of, "Well, I want to feel like I'm okay." And being okay can mean so many different things.

Or maybe there's this way in which we want to feel like we have a little bit more control over things. "I want to make this happen and make that other thing stop happening. Make those people over there behave differently. Make myself behave differently." We're just trying to control things. And maybe underneath that, there's this deeper wish of wanting to feel safe. "If I can control things, then I'll be safe."

Or maybe there's a way in which we want some success. However we define success, that definition will be different for different people. And maybe underneath that is this deeper wish: "I want to feel complete. I want to feel satisfied. I want to feel like I'm enough." And so we go out there trying to find these things.

The problem is not that we're looking for these things—feeling like we're okay, or enough, or safe. The problem is when we are looking to satisfy our hunger, so to speak, in places that can't provide it. They just can't. But we keep on looking. Of course we do.

And so suffering ensues when we keep on looking. It's a little bit like this dog who's gnawing on the bone thinking, "It looks like a bone, it smells like a bone. Usually these things are helpful, but this isn't." We have these expectations and then we discover, "Oh yeah, this actually isn't satisfying." This repeated dissatisfaction is *dukkha*^[2]. This suffering—the First Noble Truth that there is *dukkha*. And I'm using this single word "suffering" to stand for really terrible experiences, and also really minor ones, like, "Yeah, it doesn't feel very good, but that's okay. I'll just go watch another thing on Netflix."

So there's this way we might be looking for nourishment in these places where it can't be found. I had this experience when I was working in corporate America, working my way up the corporate ladder. I had a certain amount of professional success. I actually had a great job, an enviable job. I had a job that was in my field and took advantage of my training and experience. I had the respect of my peers. I had a lot of autonomy. My department felt like a good department. I worked for a company where I felt like we were doing good work in the world. We were making a difference in people's lives in a really good way. I felt proud to work there, to do

this work. I felt like, "Wow, I have this great job, plenty of money," and what I felt like was enough. I had this professional success, but I didn't feel quite happy or satisfied in the way that I thought I would. I felt like I had followed all the rules, done what was expected, and yet it didn't feel quite right. I didn't feel as satisfied as I expected to.

I felt like I couldn't find what this hunger was seeking. I couldn't determine what would be satisfying because I was so busy working. My life situation allowed me to stop working and go on a meditation retreat, which ended up changing my life. I never in a million years thought that I'd be sitting here giving a dharma talk. I was trained as a scientist, right? That's kind of like the opposite direction.

There's this way in which we discover that even if we are finding what we think is going to scratch that itch or put an end to all the seeking—a way in which we can finally rest, feeling like, "Okay, I finally made it"—it doesn't happen. I don't know if I've met anybody... well, there's a huge selection bias, right? Because the people that I talk to are the people that meditate. And if you have all your dreams coming true, you're not going to a meditation center. You're just out there living your dream life. You're not going to retreats, you're not talking to a meditation teacher. You're out there doing whatever it is you're doing. So the people that I see and talk to, of course, are the ones who are like me. They found, "Yeah, something isn't quite right. It's not enough."

I don't know if we would consider ourselves like a dog with a bone. Maybe there's something unflattering about this, but I bring it up because it's in the suttas. This is something in the early Buddhist literature that the Buddha is pointing to.

There's this way in which not only is it the suffering of not finding what we're looking for, but we just keep on seeking. Often, for the first decades, we do this: "Okay, it's not a problem. That relationship didn't work out, the next one will. That job wasn't quite right, the next one will. That friend wasn't the best, other friends will be. That house, that apartment, that city—that wasn't right, the next one will be." We do this, but there comes a time when we realize, "Is this ever going to end, this seeking?"

This seeking itself has this exhaustion. So, not only is it uncomfortable to always be looking, but it takes our life energy to seek completion in things that can't complete us.

And so this idea of disenchantment—it's not that things out there in the world are bad or unhelpful or no good. That's not the teaching. Life is life. There's so much beauty, joy, and happiness for us to experience and participate in. The problem is when we're expecting life to give us something that it can't give. That's the problem.

There's no need to turn away from the joy and the happiness. Many of you know these are integral parts of the path of practice. Happiness and joy are factors of awakening. But there's

this way in which we might be looking for this permanent or steady sense of well-being. But things change. There is nothing that's permanent in the way that we want it to be. We want lasting happiness. We want this reliable, steady happiness. Of course we do. But the world can't give us reliable, steady happiness because the world is not reliable and steady.

A question we can ask when we find ourselves having this suffering, when this seeking is happening, is: "What am I hoping to find here in this experience or this object? Is this actually nourishing?" I kind of like this word "nourishing." If this word doesn't resonate with you, you're welcome to find another word. But for me, nourishing feels like having warm soup on a cold day. There's this way the warm soup just feels right. But we want to have this continuously or always.

So the question we can ask is, "What am I hoping to find here in this experience, in this object? Is it nourishing? Is it supportive in the way that I really want it to be?"

This idea of disenchantment, the Pali word is *nibbidā*^[3]. It comes from the prefix *ni*, which means "not" or "without," and *vindati*, which means "finding"—not finding. It often gets translated as disenchantment. Sometimes it gets translated as disillusionment. Sometimes it gets translated as revulsion or disgust. Those tend to be older translations. More modern ones are using disenchantment and disillusionment. But I love this idea of disenchantment because it implies that we were enchanted, that we were under a spell. We thought that something was going to make us feel better in a way that was really satisfying.

It's not that things don't bring joy, happiness, or pleasure. That can be a trap, though, if we're always looking after pleasure. Pleasure and happiness are not the same thing. Pleasure and joy are not the same thing. That's a whole other dharma talk that I could give.

But this idea of disenchantment, it's not that we don't find anything. It's that we don't find the nourishment. It's that we don't find the refuge. Because the dharma, this practice, is not asking us to deny beauty or goodness. It's not asking us to pretend that pleasant things are unpleasant and that we have to turn away. Instead, it's asking us to see clearly. Can we see clearly what objects and experiences can provide and what they can't provide?

We have entire ginormous industries that are trying to tell you, "Buy this and you will be happy. Buy this and everybody will love you." Or maybe some of our political figures: "Dislike or hate those other people over there and then you'll always feel safe." Or, "Make sure that you do what these people over here are doing and then you will always be protected, you'll feel safe." So there is so much trying to tell us what things can provide. That's just the way that we created our economy and our political systems.

And so the dharma is asking us to look for ourselves, to see clearly: what do things actually provide?

How can we do this? How can we see clearly? Part of it is mindfulness. This is what mindfulness practice is so much about. We can appreciate that sometimes we sit together for 30 minutes, we have our anchor on the breath, the mind wanders, and we just come back to the breath, again and again. And it feels soothing, comforting; there's some settledness, a little bit of well-being that arises. But as the mind starts to settle down more, we can see more and more clearly.

When the mind isn't so distracted, we can start to see more clearly. We can start to see, "Oh yeah, I thought that this was going to provide the nourishment, or the safety, or the love, or the belonging that I'm looking for." When we're distracted, we don't even really notice that it's not. Mindfulness practice can do two things. One, it can help us notice the constant seeking that doesn't feel like it's ever getting satisfied, because often we're distracting ourselves from that. But mindfulness can also show, "Oh yeah, this object, I had these expectations. I thought it was going to be a lasting source of happiness. It made me happy for a little while, but it's not lasting."

So mindfulness can help us see clearly both our own experience of feeling undernourished and the failure of these things that we're pursuing to give us what we're looking for.

And when we start to see that, it's not like we have to force ourselves to turn away. It's kind of like this dog with the bone. The dog is chewing, chewing, seeking, seeking, and then it just realizes, "Okay, what I'm looking for is not here." And it just turns away. We don't have to force ourselves. We just have to be willing to see clearly. We just have to be willing to feel the disappointment. "Wow, I thought this was going to make me feel happy." And maybe it did for a short moment.

It's not asking us to abandon things. Instead, it's asking us to be present for our experience. And sometimes when we realize, "Oh, this isn't going to be a lasting source of happiness like I thought it was," there can be some sense of loss, some sense of grief, some sense of confusion.

This was the case for me when I left my corporate America job. I did feel a little bit confused afterwards, with a sense of loss. "Wow, well now what do I do? Now who am I? What value do I have in the world? How do I be in the world?" It was uncomfortable. It was not easy to see this, to make a change, and to decide to do something different. But this discomfort is often what precedes greater freedom. When we start to see how our identities get tied up with our professions, get tied up with having success or being seen a particular way, there's a sense of relief when we realize, "Oh yeah, I don't have to keep seeking in the way that I was doing before. I don't have to repeatedly ask my job to make me happy."

Maybe it's unfortunate that I had to leave before I could find that out. Maybe if I had more skill and wisdom at the time, I could have stayed and figured that out. For me, I just couldn't. I

wasn't able to. I had to step away. But I know some people who have been able to have a big shift in their relationship with their professional life, with their family life, their married life—whatever it is—without feeling like they had to abandon everything.

This disenchantment is about recognizing what it can provide and what it can not provide, gaining some clarity about it.

Rather than forcing ourselves into letting go, with mindfulness we can recognize what's happening and we can do some investigation. We can actively bring a little query when we find ourselves hitting our head against the wall. We can ask ourselves, "What is being promised here, and what does it actually provide? How long does this satisfaction last? And what is the cost of chasing this?" We can just ask ourselves these questions.

Maybe this is done by having a conversation with somebody, hanging out with a cup of coffee. Maybe it's a text exchange that happens for a while. Maybe it's a phone call. Maybe it's a journal prompt: what is being promised, does it actually give what it promises, how long does this satisfaction last, and what's the cost of all this seeking?

Maybe this is in meditation. And this is not meant to be self-criticism. This is not about saying, "Oh look, you thought it was going to do this and it didn't deliver." The inner critic might show up and say, "What are you doing? You should have known better." No, no, no. This is about compassion. This is about helping us find more freedom. This is about us finding what we really want.

Because something happens when we stop demanding that experiences and objects satisfy us in this really deep way. When we stop demanding that, then objects and experiences can simply be themselves. And it's amazing how delightful they can be when we stop asking them to be different. When we stop trying to get water from a stone, we can just appreciate the stone. How beautiful it is. What kind of stone is it? Why is it a different size than all the others? Why is it here? Maybe it's great to sit on if it's a big stone. Or maybe it's a little stone that you can paint hearts on and give to somebody. The stone can get turned back into a stone instead of trying to be something that delivers water.

So disenchantment, this turning away from what is not satisfying—in the suttas, this shows up as a critical part of liberation. It's a step on the way to liberation. In the Upanisa Sutta^[4], it shows up as part of this long chain of events that just naturally arise. There are twelve steps in the whole thing, but I'll just start with the last ones. Concentration—a certain amount of settledness—allows seeing things as they really are. Seeing that they don't provide what we want them to provide. Or it could be something more universal, like, "Wow, everything is impermanent and changing." And when we see that, we realize, "Of course, this idea of lasting satisfaction can't exist because there's nothing that's lasting in the way that we want it to be."

After seeing things as they are—"knowledge and vision of things as they are" is often how it's translated—then comes *nibbidā*, disenchantment. And then *virāga*^[5], dispassion. This is no longer getting tangled up with things. And then liberation.

So this disenchantment is an integral part on the way to more and more freedom. It might feel like, "Oh, this is going to make everything dull if I get rid of all these spells I'm under." But it turns out to be this beautiful way in which there's more ease, more freedom. Things are more alive when we allow experiences and objects to be what they are.

And not only do things become more alive or beautiful, having a little more of a sparkling quality, but the heart and the mind are no longer so tired and exhausted trying to get water from a stone, trying to get meat from a bone. We become more available to care for others, to care for ourselves, to make a difference in this world. To make the world the way that we want it to be, to be the change that we want to be. We have more capacity for that. We can make a difference for ourselves, for people we love, maybe for people that we don't even know.

So the path of practice is asking us to look. What am I hoping to find here, with anything? Maybe start with something that's a pain point. Maybe start with something that's easy to turn away from. "What am I hoping to find here? And is this actually nourishing in the way that I would like it to be?"

And then if we discover that it isn't, the heart just naturally lets go. The heart just naturally turns away. We don't have to convince ourselves. We don't have to do it because that's what a "good practitioner" would do. In exactly the same way that the dog, when it discovers the bone can't deliver what it wants, just turns away and goes elsewhere, the same is true for our hearts and minds. But first we have to discover. We have to experience it. It doesn't help just to hear somebody tell you about it or to read about it. You have to experience it for yourself.

And then the heart becomes lighter, quieter, maybe more tender, more free.

So disenchantment isn't the end of a love for life or an appreciation for things. It's not saying that we can't have anything delightful. Disenchantment is the end of asking life to provide what it can't provide. What only freedom can provide. The more and more freedom that we have, the less we're asking the world to give us what it can't give.

This freedom comes from seeing things as they are and just allowing the letting go to happen. It's this letting go that leads to the freedom. It's not something we force. It's not something that we demand. It's this natural cascade that arises.

When the heart and mind stop seeking in the places that can't deliver what we're really looking for, then it becomes not only free but available for whatever is arising next. Available to love others, love ourselves, love life.

Disenchantment maybe doesn't sound so inspiring, but it turns out to be a key thing that can make a big difference in our life. And with that, I'll end and open it up to see if there are some comments or questions. Thank you.

Q&A

Question: Is suffering the only way that one can get interested in the dharma? Or if someone is having a great time, experiencing so much pleasure and not suffering, can they somehow turn to the dharma, or is suffering usually the gateway?

Diana Clark: From my experience, what I have seen is that there are two gateways. One is suffering. The other is people having extreme experiences. For example, in the midst of a car accident, somebody was telling me how while the car was flipping over and over, they had this experience like, "Wow, life is not the way I thought it was." Or some people do psychedelics and they touch into something that felt more real than their whole life, and they want to explore it. So that's what my experience has been: suffering, or having an intense experience that they want to understand better or touch into again. Just having non-stop pleasure—I haven't heard about this. I'm not sure anybody has non-stop pleasure, though.

Question: No, I know. I mean, just like someone's having a great time—a movie star, a rock star—and they don't think anything is wrong with their life. Without that experience of suffering, could they somehow just have that moment without either of those two gateways?

Diana Clark: I don't know anybody who has. Let me say that. And then I'll just add that I personally think that rock stars and movie stars have miserable lives. They might not think so, but the only thing that I know is what the media is feeding us. So, I don't actually know.

Question: I was thinking when you talked about the dog that that was a really smart dog to turn away. I was thinking of a few bones that I chew on, and I know they're not satisfying. I'm seeing somewhat clearly, but I guess not clearly enough to be ready yet to turn away.

Diana Clark: Yeah. So, part of the way through—and this is uncomfortable—is to actually feel the "ugh," that feeling of, "I've been chewing on this for a long time and it's not giving me what I want. It's not deeply satisfying." And that is uncomfortable. The second thing is, it's uncomfortable to realize, "I've been doing this for a long time, it's not going to work, but what else am I going to do?" That feeling of disorientation, of "Well, what's the alternative?" is also uncomfortable.

Questioner: I just want to say this too, it seemed like in this other aspect of my life, this habit I had sort of lost its charm naturally. So disenchantment, I guess. That one just seemed to be easier. Naturally, I was like, "Oh, yeah. This really isn't bringing me much true contentment."

Diana Clark: Yeah. And so that's great that you could see this and it lost its charm. I love that disenchantment. Thank you, Lena.

Question: So what makes it enchanting? What is the magician that makes it so enchanting? What are their tricks, or is there some response to that?

Diana Clark: It's interesting that you're asking that, because sometimes we would say disenchantment is seeing the magician's tricks. Once you see how the magician does a trick, then it's not so interesting anymore and you just naturally turn away. But your question is: why do we think that these things will bring us the nourishment, or whatever we're looking for? Is that your question?

Questioner: Yeah. Like, why do we see them that way?

Diana Clark: Why do we see them that way? I think this is the human condition. I think this is part of what it means to be human. And certainly, I would say in the modern West, we are just bombarded with messages to do the opposite of what I'm talking about here. But I don't know why. I don't even know if there is a "why."

Questioner: I'm just wondering if "why" is even the right question. If we knew that, then we could maybe stop it, I guess, is what I'm thinking. If we understood it.

Diana Clark: Yeah. I think evolutionary biology probably has some role in there. So thank you. Anybody else? Yes.

Question: First and foremost, thank you so much for the talk. It definitely resonated. Going back to the metaphor of the dog chewing the bone, how might you bridge this: what if all your life you're chewing on this bone, you've been conditioned to chew on it, and at some point you realize—maybe through meditation you've surfaced the realization—that chewing on this bone doesn't necessarily give you contentment anymore? But because of the habit of chewing on that bone, it's almost so hard to rewire yourself, and you only really know, "Oh, that wasn't satisfying," a few seconds or a few days after you're done chewing on it. How does one connect the practice of insight with the practice of saying, "Okay bone, you're not my thing anymore and I'll find something else"?

Diana Clark: One of the most effective ways is to really feel the disappointment, like, "Oh, I spent all this time and I have all this momentum. I've been doing this for so long..." and just allow yourself to feel it. Don't tip into overwhelm, but feel it. So often we're distracting ourselves from that, like, "Oh yeah, I shouldn't be doing that," and then we quickly go do something else. This is where the dharma is asking us to see clearly, or maybe I should say to *feel* clearly. Feel the disappointment. So I would say that's step one: actually allow yourself to really feel it.

Step two is to respect the momentum that life has. Recognize, "Okay, I don't like this. It makes me feel uncomfortable. Wow, look at this, I'm doing it again." You can feel the discomfort of that, but also recognize that this isn't something that's going to end quickly. How could it end quickly if I've been doing it all this time? There are so many things we can do to change habits and let go of habits. I don't want to say that this is going to be easy, fast, or comfortable. But it is life-changing. It is deeply meaningful. It's deeply satisfying. It's what we're looking for.

Questioner: Thank you.

Diana Clark: Thank you. Thank you for your kind attention. Wishing you a wonderful rest of the evening and safe travels home. Thank you.

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1. **Suttas:** The discourses of the Buddha. [↵](#)
 2. **Dukkha:** A Pali word often translated as "suffering," "stress," or "unsatisfactoriness." [↵](#)
 3. **Nibbidā:** Often translated as "disenchantment" or "disillusionment." [↵](#)
 4. **Upanisa Sutta:** A discourse outlining the dependent origination of liberation. [↵](#)
 5. **Virāga:** A Pali word translated as dispassion, fading away, or absence of desire. [↵](#)

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