

Chris Clifford 10-29-2009



Chris Clifford has studied meditation at IMC since 1995. Over the years, she has sat many long retreats at IMS and elsewhere with teachers including Sayadaw U Pandita and Joseph Goldstein. She has served on the IMC board and has been offering basic meditation instruction for the last four years. She is a former software engineer. Currently she manages retreats for The Mountain Hermitage in New Mexico and volunteers tutoring ESL in California.

Wise Attention: Self-Image and Suffering (part 1 of 4)

Yoniso manasikara is the Pali word translated as *wise attention, appropriate attention, or skillful reflection*. One of the roots of *yoniso manasikara* is *yonī* or womb, and *yoniso manasikara* is sometimes called the “birthplace of wisdom.”

In *Wings to Awakening*, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, tells us that *yoniso manasikara* is the best mode for dealing with *asava*, also known as taints, mental effluents, pollutants, or fermentation:

The term "appropriate attention" (yoniso manasikara) can also be rendered as "wise reflection," "the proper approach," or "systematic attention." It is essentially the basic insight that enables one to see which issues are worth paying attention to, and which ones should be ignored. One ignores questions that lead to the proliferation of mental effluents, and pays attention to questions that help weaken them. Thus, the best questions for weakening the effluents are ones that lead the mind into that mode.

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/wings/part2.html#yoniso1-2g>

The *asava* are effluents that flow out of the mind and create the flood of the round of death and rebirth. They are like little sucking whirlpools that grab our attention and

prevent it from being skillful. The Pali word *asava* comes from a root meaning “to distill” and one translation of *asava* is *fermentation*. So, one of the connotations of *asava* is *intoxication*, and the *asavas* are sometimes referred to as *moral intoxicants*.

For example, one of the *asavas* is the effluent of sensuality. Sensuality is dangerous because it is so easy to become attached.

*Sensuality is like a firebrand.
It burns
those who
do not let go.*

— Therigatha 16.1

Another *asava* is the effluent of becoming:

We like to create little worlds for ourselves—this is called the effluent of becoming that comes fermenting up in the mind—and we’re really good at it. We can create all kinds of worlds: beautiful worlds, ugly worlds, delightful worlds, horrible worlds. The movies that play in the theatres are nothing compared to the productions we can create in our minds over and over and over again. We’re really good at it. We get our entertainment that way. It’s a game we like to play.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu Beyond Likes & Dislikes

A third type of effluent is the fermentation of ignorance, or lack of knowledge of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Noble Path.

Unwise attention increases *asavas*, but wise attention diminishes them. Unwise attention leads to “a thicket of wrong views”

“There is the case where an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person... does not discern what ideas are fit for attention, or what ideas are unfit for attention. This being so, he does not attend to ideas fit for attention, and attends instead to ideas unfit for attention... This is how he attends inappropriately: ‘Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what was I in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be

in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I be in the future?’ Or else he is inwardly perplexed about the immediate present: ‘Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where is it bound?’

*"As he attends inappropriately in this way, one of six kinds of view arises in him: The view **I have a self** arises in him as true & established, or the view **I have no self...** or the view **It is precisely by means of self that I perceive self...** or the view **It is precisely by means of self that I perceive not-self...** or the view **It is precisely by means of not-self that I perceive self** arises in him as true & established, or else he has a view like this: **This very self of mine — the knower that is sensitive here & there to the ripening of good & bad actions — is the self of mine that is constant, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and will endure as long as eternity.** This is called a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views. Bound by a fetter of views, the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person is not freed from birth, aging, & death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair. He is not freed, I tell you, from suffering & stress.*

"The well-instructed disciple of the noble ones... discerns what ideas are fit for attention, and what ideas are unfit for attention. This being so, he does not attend to ideas unfit for attention, and attends [instead] to ideas fit for attention... He attends appropriately, This is stress... This is the origination of stress... This is the cessation of stress... This is the way leading to the cessation of stress. As he attends appropriately in this way, three fetters are abandoned in him: identity-view, doubt, and grasping at precepts & practices."

— Sabbasava Sutta: All the Fermentations (MN2)

Our attention is usually rooted in hypotheticals or in the past. Wise attention, however, is looking at The Four Noble Truths right now. The best thing we can do to prepare for the future is to be here now.