

Chris Clifford 11-05-2009



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***Wise Attention: Wise attention to the unpleasant (part 2 of 4)***

Review

*Yoniso manasikara* is the Pali word translated as *wise attention, appropriate attention, or skillful reflection*. Wise attention is the union of mindfulness with wisdom.

The *asava*, or taints, 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*. One of the connotations of *asava* is *intoxication*, and the *asavas* are sometimes referred to as *moral intoxicants, fermentations, or taints*.

*When one attends wisely, unarisen taints do not arise and arisen taints are abandoned.* - MN 2:3

Last week, we discussed, “Taints to be abandoned by seeing” from the Sabbasava Sutta (MN 2)

Abandoning taints turns us toward peace of mind and equanimity, and we come to understand the Second Noble Truth, that craving leads to suffering. This week we will cover taints to be abandoned by *restraining* and taints to be abandoned by *using*.

Taints to be Abandoned by Restraining.

*"[2] And what are the fermentations to be abandoned by restraining? There is the case where a monk, reflecting appropriately, dwells restrained with the restraint of the eye-faculty. The fermentations, vexation, or fever that would arise if he were to dwell unrestrained with the restraint of the eye-faculty do not arise for him when he dwells restrained with the restraint of the eye-faculty.*

*Reflecting appropriately, he dwells restrained with the restraint of the ear-faculty...*

*Reflecting appropriately, he dwells restrained with the restraint of the nose-faculty...*

*Reflecting appropriately, he dwells restrained with the restraint of the tongue-faculty...*

*Reflecting appropriately, he dwells restrained with the restraint of the body-faculty...*

*Reflecting appropriately, he dwells restrained with the restraint of the intellect-faculty. The fermentations, vexation, or fever that would arise if he were to dwell unrestrained with the restraint of the intellect-faculty do not arise for him when he dwells restrained with the restraint of the intellect-faculty. These are called the fermentations to be abandoned by restraining.*

-MN 2:2

Before we can become aware of something, we need to have both a sense object and the corresponding sense. For example, we can see a ball, but we cannot see a sound. We can see things that are visible, hear things that are audible, smell things that have a

scent, touch things that have materiality. Once we put attention on a sense object using the appropriate sense, we become aware of that form. This is the moment of contact.

After the moment of contact, we may start exploring the object, and attach or create signs and features to it. This is when we become aware of the things that we like or dislike about the object. Once we attach “likes” and “dislikes” to an object, we are ready to crave it or have aversion to it.

*The meeting of eye, form, and eye-consciousness is called contact. Contact, according to dependent origination is the principal condition for feeling. Feeling and perception are inseparable. What is perceived as –this— is thought about in its differences and is thus diversified from –that— and from –me.— This diversification involving craving for form, wrong view about permanence of form, etc, and the conceit –I am—leads to preoccupation with calculating the desirability of past and present forms with a view to obtaining desirable forms in the future.*

MN 43.9

When our attention falls on something, we can see it, or feel it, or smell it with or without wise attention. With wise attention, we can see a form with our eyes, but not see signs and features. Signs and features are attributes we attach to forms, and are part of the way we can create our own reality. Walking through our homes, we find that perhaps 90% of what we have are forms that caught us with a sign or feature. That is, an object or form can appeal to us because it shows that we have good taste, or we can afford a status symbol, or it appeals to us on some sensual level. We may have tastefully erotic paintings or photos around the house because they call to the sexual and sensual hooks in us. We may have decorative furniture, or something that is shiny and bright, or a “state of the art” thing, or a “comfy-cozy” chair. Anything that is “cool” or causes a feeling to arise is catching us by its signs and features.

We can create our own “reality” in many ways. We can look at clouds or stars and see shapes. We can look at a blank wall or ceiling, or scrambled eggs, and see images emerge. An image of Jesus has appeared on toast and was put up for sale on eBay. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0gsr2Culweo>) . An image of the Virgin Mary has been found in a cheese sandwich (<http://www.waleg.com/archives/000371.html>). So how much of what we see or sense is real?

If we restrain our senses, we can be aware of a form just by using wise attention. We do not get hooked in by the signs and features. Or, if we become aware of a form using only wise attention, our senses are restrained, and the signs and feature do not hook us.

If we have a craving or feel a need for something, that craving leads us to tune in on the signs and features, rather than just on the sense object. If we become aware of a form, and we like it, love it, hate it, lust after it, or just have to have it, that is not our wise attention speaking – we have been hooked by the signs and features. If we receive a sense contact, and notice we are grabbing onto some feature or sign, some part of the form that appeals to or repulses us, we need to restrain that grabbing, clinging, or aversion, and just sense the form with our wise attention.

*I want it, I want it, I want it...(You can't have it!)  
Think how much you'll save...(You can't have it!)]  
I want it, I want it, I want it, I want it ... (You can't have it!)*

*Magic Bus, by The Who*

*It ain't much I'm asking if you want the truth  
Here's to the future  
Hear the cry of youth (hear the cry hear the cry of youth)  
I want it all I want it all I want it all and I want it now  
I want it all (yeah yeah yeah) I want it all I want it all and I  
Want it now*

*I want it all, by Queen.*

Notice the moment of grabbing after contact is made. It is like floating down the river, and reaching out to twigs and branches to slow your passage. It is like trying to grasp a rope while descending – feel the rope burns?

*"On seeing a visible form with the eye, hearing a sound with the ear, smelling an odor with the nose, tasting a flavor with the tongue, touching a tangible with the body, cognizing an idea with the mind, he lusts after it if it is likable, or has ill will towards it if it is dislikable. He abides without mindfulness of the body established and with mind limited while he does not understand as they actually are the deliverance of mind and deliverance by understanding wherein those evil unwholesome states cease without remainder. Engaged as he is in favoring and opposing, when he feels any feeling, whether pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, he relishes that feeling, affirms and accepts it. Relishing arises in him when he does that. Now any relishing of those feelings is clinging. With his clinging as condition, being; with being as condition, birth; with birth as condition, ageing and death come to be, and also sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. That is how there is an origin to this whole aggregate mass of suffering.*

*.... He becomes one who, on seeing a form with the eye, apprehends no signs and features through which, if he left the eye faculty unguarded, evil unwholesome states of covetousness and grief might invade him; he practices the way of its restraint, he guards the eye faculty, gives effect to restraint of the eye faculty. (Likewise, on hearing a sound with the ear, smelling an odor with the nose, tasting a flavor with the tongue, touching a tangible with the body, and cognizing an idea with the mind.) Possessing this noble ones' faculty restraint, he feels in himself an unsullied bliss.*

<http://www.buddhanet.net/cmdsg/bt-11.htm> (MN 38)

As an exercise, go somewhere that has a lot of random noise, e.g., a coffee shop. Close your eyes and listen to the sounds as if they were music. Don't try to make sense of the sounds, or identify them, or explain them. Just listen with wise attention. Let the

raw sensory input flow through you without adding labels, judgments, explanations, or reactions. What's that like?

Another exercise: hold your hand near your ear, but where you can see it out of the corner of your eye. Use one sense at a time. Rub your fingers together. First, defocus your eyes, and just listen. Don't attach any meaning to the sound. Listen to the fingers rasping together. What is that like, hearing the sound by itself without attaching context or explanation? Next, pay no attention to the sound, but just watch your fingers rubbing together at the corner of your eye. Put your attention on the movement, but don't explain it, and keep your eyes defocused. What is it like to see this movement without meaning? Lastly, try to just feel the fingers rubbing together. Don't combine the feeling with other senses, just feel the sensations, nothing else.

Compare these individual sensations with how we normally combine all our sensory inputs, attach meaning and ideas and combine everything to make a story. In the Road Runner cartoons, we often see Wile E. Coyote tricked into running off a cliff. He pumps away furiously, until he notices that he is running in mid-air, and there is no ground beneath him. As soon as he builds the mental picture of what he is doing, and creates a reality story, he plummets to the earth. Uh-oh!

Clinging can be useful sometimes, especially if we are mindful of it, and can turn it off when no longer needed. Sometimes we need to cling to something during problem solving. Mental proliferation can be a tool or a work-around. It can help us investigate what we are afraid of. When these reactions, labels, and judgments come up, what is it we want to cling to and why?

There is a difference between having a desire for something to happen and clinging. We may have a desire for all sentient beings to be well, be safe, and be happy without clinging to the outcome of that desire. We may desire to become Buddhas in this lifetime, and that is be okay, as long as we are not clinging to that as an outcome. Desiring a good outcome and clinging to a need for that good outcome are not the same thing.

*Taints to be abandoned by using.*

*"[3] And what are the fermentations to be abandoned by using? There is the case where a monk, reflecting appropriately, uses the robe simply to counteract cold, to counteract heat, to counteract the touch of flies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, & reptiles; simply for the purpose of covering the parts of the body that cause shame.*

*"Reflecting appropriately, he uses alms food, not playfully, nor for intoxication, nor for putting on bulk, nor for beautification; but simply for the survival & continuance of this body, for ending its afflictions, for the support of the holy life, thinking, 'Thus will I destroy old feelings [of hunger] and not create new feelings [from overeating]. I will maintain myself, be blameless, & live in comfort.'*

*"Reflecting appropriately, he uses lodging simply to counteract cold, to counteract heat, to counteract the touch of flies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, & reptiles; simply for protection from the inclemency's of weather and for the enjoyment of seclusion.*

*"Reflecting appropriately, he uses medicinal requisites that are used for curing the sick simply to counteract any pains of illness that have arisen and for maximum freedom from disease.*

*"The fermentations, vexation, or fever that would arise if he were not to use these things [in this way] do not arise for him when he uses them [in this way]. These are called the fermentations to be abandoned by using.*

*-MN 2:3*

Using is about our relationship to things that are required. We need clothing, food, and shelter in order to survive. However, the clothing does not need to be luxurious or designer brand for us to survive. We can survive on alms food, we do not need gourmet meals from the tasting menu. We don't need a mansion to shelter us from the elements. We just need to ask ourselves, what is it we are *using* this for?