

Chris Clifford 11-11-2009



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 to the Pleasant (part 3 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.

We continue our study of Sabbasava Sutta: All the Fermentations (MN2), available at <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.002.than.html>

The *asava*, or fermentations, taints, are effluents that flow out of the mind and create 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*.

What is aversion?

In Buddhism, there are three unwholesome personality types: *greedy, aversive, and deluded*. (Adapted from <http://www.tricycle.com/feature/which-buddhist-personality-type-are-you?page=0,0> and <http://www.bellaonline.com/articles/art46926.asp>)

Greedy:

As a kid, your nickname could have been Sparky.

Those with greed tendencies react with attraction. They are drawn to the new thing, the cool thing, and instantly see all of its good qualities. On the surface, this might seem positive - a gift for finding the good in anyone or anything. However, it can easily twist into a desire to possess the object of attraction. This

might translate into material greediness, which is what we usually understand 'greed' to mean. But it can also mean emotional greediness – a need to dominate the attention of those in your lives, or collect friends at any cost. Or it could manifest as greediness for new experiences - a constant restless pursuit of the perfect vacation, trendiest new hobby, or even spiritual experiences.

Aversive:

As a kid, your nickname could have been Eeyore.

While individuals of the greedy type react with attraction to new things, those of the aversive type react with repulsion, or at least distance. If you are of this type, your first reaction to something new is likely to be skeptical or suspicious. You are likely to look for flaws, or reasons something won't work or can't be true. You might frequently feel let down by others, and develop a simmering anger or resentment. In its worst form, this tendency manifests as hatred – the ultimate form of pushing something away.

Deluded:

As a kid, your nickname could have been Space Cadet.

This type tends to vacillate when confronted with something new, swinging from one opinion to another. You are particularly susceptible to the opinions of others, and your own view tends to change in accordance with what those around you in the moment think. You might have difficulty making decisions, or second-guess yourself as a matter of course once you do. You might have difficulty finishing projects, and you might have a tendency towards a particularly busy mind, as you are always spinning through different scenarios and options.

Suffering occurs when we encounter pain, and then struggle or resist it, showing aversion. There are many types of aversion, including:

Aggression	Anger	Annoyance
Anxiety	Apathy	Arrogance
Bitterness	Blame	Depressed
Despair	Desperation	Discouraged
Dissatisfaction	Embarrassment	Envy
Fear	Grief	Guilt
Hate	Helplessness	Hopelessness
Hostility	Humiliation	Hurt

Impatience	Irritation	Jealousy
Loneliness	Loss	Panic
Pity	Regret	Rejection
Resentment	Righteous	Sadness
	Indignation	
Self-pity	Shame	Self-righteousness

In our culture, we tend to maximize comfort. “Have it your way” is an example of trying to make things suit us, rather than take them as they are. We want to fix things so they are the way we want them, and we are adverse to discomfort.

One way to deal with aversion is to learn endurance. In sitting, we learn to endure unpleasant things – we don’t scratch that itch, or stand up and stretch.

" And what are the fermentations to be abandoned by tolerating? There is the case where a monk, reflecting appropriately, endures. He tolerates cold, heat, hunger, & thirst; the touch of flies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, & reptiles; ill-spoken, unwelcome words & bodily feelings that, when they arise, are painful, racking, sharp, piercing, disagreeable, displeasing, & menacing to life. The fermentations, vexation, or fever that would arise if he were not to tolerate these things do not arise for him when he tolerates them. These are called the fermentations to be abandoned by tolerating.

- MN 2.4

However, “endurance” and “tolerance” don’t capture the real sense of what we are trying to do. It tends to imply a “grit your teeth and deal with it” approach. “Acceptance” may be a better word to describe it.

In learning to accept or tolerate unpleasantness, it is important to recognize our reactive state. The Buddha described this in the Arrow Sutta:

The Blessed One said, "When touched with a feeling of pain, the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person sorrows, grieves, & laments, beats his breast, becomes distraught. So he feels two pains, physical & mental. Just as if they were to shoot a man with an arrow and, right afterward, were to shoot him with another one, so that he would feel the pains of two arrows; in the same way, when touched with a feeling of pain, the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person sorrows, grieves, & laments, beats his breast, becomes distraught. So he feels two pains, physical & mental.

- Sallatha Sutta: The Arrow (SN 36.6)

So we have two instances of pain. First, the physical pain, and second, the suffering we add to it by feeling sorry for ourselves, complaining, resenting, etc. There is even a third arrow, in which we react to our reaction. "Why can't I be a stronger person?" "If I were a real Buddhist, this wouldn't be causing me so much grief..." We have the occurrence itself, our emotional response, and then our attitude (e.g., I should feel this way.) Are we taking the impermanent as permanent? Are we taking the pain personally?

We need to recognize and allow our actual emotional reaction. But, rather than judge ourselves on the reaction, we should investigate the reaction and be open. "Why do we have this feeling?"

We also need to distinguish unpleasantness from aversion. Aversion is a reaction, while unpleasantness is a situation. Sometimes just seeing the ephemeral nature of unpleasantness makes it go away. The essence of enduring is to see what is unpleasant, and then see our reaction to it.

Avoidance is another way of preventing the taints or fermentations from arising. Not all avoidance is bad, and avoidance is not the same as aversion. Aversion is a reaction, and avoidance can just be a reasoned behavior. Avoidance can be simply staying away from situations that are likely to have bad or troubling outcomes:

" And what are the fermentations to be abandoned by avoiding? There is the case where a monk, reflecting appropriately, avoids a wild elephant, a wild horse, a wild bull, a wild dog, a snake, a stump, a bramble patch, a chasm, a cliff, a cesspool, an open sewer. Reflecting appropriately, he avoids sitting in the sorts of unsuitable seats, wandering to the sorts of unsuitable habitats, and associating with the sorts of bad friends that would make his knowledgeable friends in the holy life suspect him of evil conduct. The fermentations, vexation, or fever that would arise if he were not to avoid these things do not arise for him when he avoids them. These are called the fermentations to be abandoned by avoiding.

- MN 2.5

Avoidance can be about comfort zones, and knowing what our edges are. Certain situations could be okay with us, but only up to a point. Knowing and investigating what the edges are, investigating our beliefs about what happens beyond the edge, can result in expanding our comfort zones.