

Abandoning Effluents (2)

December 22, 2021

Luang Pu Dune, one of Ajaan Mun's most senior disciples, had a famous short explanation of the four noble truths, in which he said that the cause of suffering is the mind flowing out. The path to the end of suffering is the mind knowing the mind. This teaching fits in with what the Buddha taught about *asavas*, or effluents: the things that flow out of the mind and lead us to take rebirth again and again. He said there are three: sensuality, becoming, and ignorance. And he gave a list of seven ways to abandon them.

As I said last night, one of them is to pay careful attention to the questions you ask, to make sure you don't ask questions that are framed in the terms of becoming, and instead to look at things in terms of the four noble truths. That approach deals specifically with the effluent of becoming and the effluent of ignorance.

Of the remaining six ways of abandoning the effluents, four deal with the effluent of sensuality. In each case, they're designed to have you become more and more sensitive to what you're doing to create your own suffering. This is a case of the mind knowing the mind. In other words, you don't just stay at a still sense of awareness. You stay at awareness, and you also see how the mind does flow out around the things in the senses that it likes and that it doesn't like. In doing so, it's causing itself suffering. When you can see that, then you can begin to stop.

The four approaches are, one: restraining; two: using; three: tolerating; and four: avoiding.

Restraining has to do with restraint of the senses. In other words, you're very careful about how you look at things, how you listen to things, how you smell things, taste things, touch things with the body, how you think about things. You're very careful not to let the mind focus on things in a way that would give rise to greed, aversion, or delusion. In other words, you look at the sensory process not as one in which you're simply passive, reacting to things coming in at you. You realize you're out there looking for something. And the question is: Who's doing the looking? Greed? Aversion? Or discernment? You want your discernment to do the looking so that it can see things in terms of a causal pattern.

If you look at things with the purpose of trying to find something you like, it's going to aggravate your greed, aggravate your lust. You've probably noticed how you go through a crowd, and if you're looking for the beautiful people, you'll find them. That will aggravate your lust, aggravate your greed. But if you go through

the same crowd looking for the signs of aging, looking for the signs of suffering on people's faces, you'll find those, too. You see what you're looking for.

So what *are* you looking for? If you realize that this tendency of flowing out after the senses is a problem, you'll be very careful about how you look at things, and who's doing the looking. You want to look to see what's going to lead to long-term welfare and happiness. In other words, look for the results of your actions. That means, one, be sensitive to your actions, including the act of engaging with the senses. Two, look for the results of your actions. That way you'll become more skillful in how you engage with sensory objects.

The same principle applies to using the requisites, which is the second approach. We have that reflection on why we eat: What is our purpose in eating? What is our purpose in using clothing, using shelter, using medicine? You want to make sure the purpose is in line with the Dhamma, because, again, your purpose in using these things will have an effect on the mind and on the world. If you eat more than you really have to, you're placing a burden on the environment around you. You're in debt to the people who provided the food, to the animals who may have been killed in the course of providing the food—or if you're a vegetarian, the farmers who had to work really hard out under the hot sun, who see their crops destroyed with the extreme weather we've been having. The more you eat, the more you're placing burdens on others. So you want to be very careful about why you eat, how much you eat. This approach, too, makes you sensitive to what you're putting into the process. You're also sensitive to the results. That's what it means for the mind to know the mind as you can become more and more skillful in your engagement with the requisites of life.

As for tolerating, that has to do with painful feelings and hurtful words. This is an area where we tend to think that we're on the receiving end of bad things, and we're not really sensitive to how much we're contributing to the pain around those things. You have to remember the Buddha's teaching on pain. There's the arrow of pain itself, but then we shoot ourselves with more arrows around the pain: our thoughts of getting upset around the pain, the things we tell ourselves about the pain, the perceptions we have—in other words, the way we fabricate around the pain. Those added arrows, the Buddha said, are the ones that really go into the heart. The first arrow only goes as far as the body, yet we don't realize this because we're pulling it in.

So as you get more sensitive to the fact that, yes, it's your perceptions around the pain, the ways you talk to yourself around the pain, that really make all the difference, then you start seeing that you're not just on the receiving end. You're the one who's actively shooting yourself.

The same with hurtful words. The Buddha has you depersonalize them, because for most of us, the way we talk to ourselves about words like that is, “Why is that person saying that to me? Why am *I* the victim of that person’s words?” — as if we were the only people in the world who were the victims of hurtful words. The Buddha has you remind yourself: This is the nature of human speech. There are kind words and unkind words, true and false, helpful, unhelpful. So, when someone is saying unkind, false, and unhelpful things about you or to you, it’s nothing out of the ordinary. As Ajaan Fuang said to one of his students, “You’re the one who wanted to get born here in the human realm to begin with. This is the kind of thing they say in the human world. You’ve got ears to hear, so this is what you’re going to hear.” When you can think in those terms, it’s a lot easier to take the words and not get upset by them.

Or you could use the perception that Ven. Sariputta recommended: “An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear,” and just leave it there. Leave it at that. You know there’s part of the mind that says, “No, there’s more you want to say about this.” But the more you want to say about this will be the part that’s really harmful and hurtful to the heart. So here again, this approach makes you more sensitive to what’s flowing out the mind: what you’re doing around the pain, and the results of what you’re doing around the pain. When you can see that, at the very least, you can learn to do it more skillfully.

You can apply perceptions to the pain that don’t weigh the mind down. You see that the pain, your body, and your awareness are three separate things. See the pain not as a big block of unending pain, but moments of pain that come and go. But as they come, they’re not coming at you. As soon as they appear, they’re going away, going away.

So the mind knowing the mind is not just sitting there watching awareness as a stationary thing. It’s watching what the awareness is doing, what the mind is doing, and seeing what it’s doing unskillfully so that you can become more and more cognizant of how you are shaping your experience. You can see that you’ve been shaping it in such a way, flowing out in such a way that creates suffering.

Think of King Koravya. After he’s been thinking about aging, illness, and death, Ven. Rattapala asks him, “If someone were to say that there’s another kingdom to the east that’s weaker than yours, and you could conquer if you wanted to: Would you go for it?” The king, 80 years old, suffering from illnesses, says, “Yes, of course.” We’re a slave to craving. These approaches help us see how we’re volunteering for that slavery. But we have the choice of allowing ourselves to be free.

As for the fourth approach, avoiding, the list is strange. You avoid cesspools, you avoid wild bulls, wild dogs, snakes, chasms, things that are obviously dangerous. You also avoid getting into situations with bad friends, bad locations, like taverns or brothels. This applies to monks specifically, where your friends in the holy life would be suspicious of what you're up to, in places like that.

The list may mean one of two things. Either it has to do with the tendency that some people have when they say, "Well, I'm going to practice total equanimity. No matter what happens, I'll just put up with it." There are some things you don't have to put up with. If you tell yourself, "I will just walk through the cesspool if I have to. I will walk off the cliff if I have to," that kind of practice doesn't last long. It's basically being stupid. At some point, you'll *realize* it's being stupid and you'll just go back to your old ways.

The other meaning might be that the Buddha wants you to see that if you hang around with the kind of people who would want to pull you away from the practice in the sort of situations where you'd be sorely tempted to pull away from the practice, it's as dangerous as a wild dog, dangerous as a wild bull, a snake, a chasm, an open cesspool. So here again, the emphasis is on: What are you doing? Why are you putting yourself in danger when you don't have to, especially dangers to the mind?

So these approaches show the meaning of Luang Pu Dune's analysis. The mind flowing out is the cause of suffering, and the mind knowing the mind is the path to the end of suffering. These approaches sensitize you to what the mind is doing, and to the results your choices are giving rise to in the world at large and in your own experience.

So you turn around and look: "What am I doing? Why am I doing it?" And, as I said, we seem to be volunteers for slavery. But we have the choice. We can volunteer to walk the path to the end of slavery.

Remember that the practice is not just a matter of sitting here with your eyes closed. It's how you engage with your senses, how you engage with your requisites of life, how you deal with the painful things that come at you in such a way that you don't add to the pain, and you know how you avoid dangers. These approaches are all meant for you to see that you have a choice. You're actively shaping your experience. So far, you've been shaping it in a way causes suffering. But there's another way to shape it: by being more sensitive to your input, and that way allows you to bring that suffering to an end.