

Inner Civil War

September 23, 2014

There are four right exertions altogether:
the exertion to prevent unskillful qualities from arising,
the exertion to abandon any unskillful ones that have already arisen,
the effort to give rise to skillful qualities that have not yet arisen
and the effort to develop the ones that have.

With unskillful qualities, we try our best to prevent them, but there are times when we slip. They've moved in and invaded the mind, and we've got to do something about them. We can't just sit there and let them take over. At the very least, we want to maintain one part of the mind that recognizes that they aren't skillful and is determined not to give in.

In Ajaan Mun's final sermon, he compares the various aspects of the path to the different things a soldier needs to win a battle, such as weapons and food. And he identifies the soldier as the determination not to come back and be the laughing stock of the defilements ever again.

You've got to keep that determination strong. Even when the soldier isn't well fed and when the enemy is really strong, you've got to hold on to that determination.

The problem when an unskillful quality has moved in is that sometimes dealing with it is like a civil war. It's not an ordinary war between strangers. In a civil war, people who have been friends suddenly aren't friends anymore. That means they know each other very well, and sometimes the people on one side try to use their old friendships to insinuate themselves into the other side—for nefarious purposes.

So you have to be especially careful about the ways that unskillful thoughts insinuate themselves into your mind and then try to lay claim to it.

The Buddha gives five techniques for dealing with unskillful thoughts that have arisen in the mind, but all five depend on two things. The first is that determination not to give in, to recognize these thoughts as former parts of yourself that you no longer want to get involved with. The second is the willingness to see those parts of the mind as strangers.

This is where Ajaan Lee's image of all the different consciousnesses in your mind comes in really handy.

The desire to give in to lust, the desire to stay with your lust, or to stay with your anger: They'll say, "We're already here. What are you going to do about it? You've already made your choice to side with us."

Well, you can unmake that choice. You're not committed to it.

It's amazing how once the mind gets into a state like that and the unskillful state has taken over, it can claim, "OK you're committed, you can't leave," and you feel intimidated by its claim. You know that it's someone who's really not fair, someone who's really not honest, so why are you so committed to it? Actually, you can break off the engagement whenever you want. Learn to feel committed to your good impulses instead.

That's the first thing to keep in mind.

The second thing, of course, is to figure out: What does this defilement want? After all, it was a part of you at one point. It was something that you fed because it gave you some pleasure. By now, though, you should know better, so the question is, what are you still looking for? What in that unskillful mind state thinks that it's going to gain something? What are you going to get?

Look at it carefully, because often the underlying desire or expectation is something you don't expect. You've got all the reasons for not giving in and yet somehow there's a part of the mind that still wants to go with it. That means that it's got a hidden agenda. You need to question it, you need to thwart it, to make it confess what its demands and exceptions are.

Now, while you're holding it at bay, it will say, "You're going to give in at some point anyhow so why don't you just give in now?"

Don't believe it. And don't be scared by its threats to keep coming back. When you hold it at bay, *expect* that it will keep coming back, coming back and coming back. But each time it comes back, it will come back with something slightly different, and at some point it's going to slip. It's going to give you its real reasons. You'll recognize them: "Oh, that's what I thought I was going to get out of that."

The part of you that was still there in that defilement was still deceived, but now you've seen through the deceit. That's when you can really let go.

So your first line of defense is just that, to draw a line and say, "Nope, we're not going to step over this line, regardless," and then do whatever you can to strengthen your side and to weaken the other side.

And don't get frustrated because it takes time. After all, these defilements have been in charge for a long, long time, so they aren't going to give up easily. They've got their reasons. They've got their little pleasures that they use to tempt you.

And like people who have been in power a long time, they like to project the impression they've got a lot of influence, and that they're inevitable.

Well they're not.

As Ajaan Lee points out, there's the suffering that comes from just having a body and that's natural. But the suffering that comes from defilements is not natural and it's not necessary. It's simply a bad habit you've picked up.

This is one of the reasons why we work with the precepts. They give us some clear lines that we stick by, that we're not going to overstep whatever comes.

I remember Ajaan Fuang asking me one time—he had asked me to do something that was going to take an awful lot out of me, and I had objected—he said, "Are you afraid to die?"

Now, in most places, everyone would feel justified in saying, "Why yes, of course," but the way he said it made it sound like fear of death was something to be ashamed of.

If it's for the sake of what's good, you have to say, "I'm willing to die for it."

But then you see: Are you really going to die if you have to fend off greed or fend off lust or fend off anger?

No.

So what are you afraid of?

Even in cases where it *would* kill you to stick to the skillful line, what do you gain in the long run by giving in to what's unskillful? Nothing of any value.

So don't be afraid of your defilements.

There are times when you have to respect the fact that you can't quite get past them yet, but you want to see if you can fence them in, in the same way that you'd fence in a wild animal. It's going to use everything it can to get around the fence, and you'll learn a lot about a wild animal when it's fenced in like that you wouldn't learn otherwise.

It's the same with your defilement: Keep it fenced in. Say, "Nope I'm not going to act on that. It may be raging in the mind, but I'm not going to act on it." And in the course of its rages, you'll get to see it in ways that you don't normally get to see. This helps you gain some insight into what's driving it, why even though you've heard the Dhamma again and again and again, you'd still go for these unskillful things.

Maintaining that line is what allows all of the Buddha's other techniques to work.

For instance, the Buddha talks about replacing an unskillful thought with something more skillful. So you bring the breath to mind. As you're working with the breath, see where in the body you feel the irritation that aggravates your lust. Then see if you can breathe in a way that soothes that irritation. A good place to start is on the back of your hands and the top of your feet, then work up from those.

The Buddha's second technique is to look at the drawbacks of that kind of thinking: Where would it lead you? What rewards would it give you, and how do they compare to the rewards of *not* giving in?

If that technique doesn't work, the third technique is to look away. In other words, don't pay attention to it. Some defilements are like those tar traps that they set out for monkeys: Once you touch it, even just to shake it off, you're caught. So you just don't touch it. It can be raging, but you don't have to do anything with it. You've got the breath, so you stay with that instead.

If you can notice where the activity of following through with that defilement is churning away, not only in the mind but also at a spot in the body, find that spot. Breathe through it.

If none of these techniques work, put your tongue against the roof of your mouth and, as the Buddha says, crush your mind with your mind. In other words, whatever little tiny thought comes up, you just crush it with as much willpower as you have. The Thai Ajaans talk about repeating “Buddho” really fast as a way of blocking it.

And if even that fails? Ajaan Maha Boowa gives the example of a fighter who has been knocked down but still doesn’t give in, who yells insults at the opponent even as he’s down on the floor. In other words, the important thing is that even if the thought moves into the mind, you don’t let yourself see it as something good. Keep reminding yourself that it’s unskillful.

That’s your last line of defense, because one of the big problems with the defilements and the hindrances is that you tend to fall in with them so easily.

The things that you lust for really are worth inciting lust.

The things you’re angry about really are outrageous.

When you’re feeling sleepy, ah yeah, the body needs some rest.

The things you’re worried about really are worrisome.

Things you’re doubtful about really are doubtful.

You get taken in by these ideas so easily.

It’s good to step back and think about other people having these defilements, as when the Buddha talks about being mindful of things outside as well as inside.

When you’re overcome by lust, think about the things that other people lust for that you find really disgusting. So what’s better about your lust?

The same with other peoples’ worries: I got a phone call tonight from a monk who can’t move at all, can’t even flush a toilet, without fear that he’s breaking some rule. When you look at his worries and see that they’re outrageous, you have to turn around and look at *your* worries. You remind yourself: This is what worries look like from the outside. This is what lust looks like from the outside. This is what anger looks like from the outside. This is what laziness looks like from the outside.

Do you want to look like that?

That’s a very helpful reflection.

There are lots of different ways for dealing with unskillful thoughts that have taken over. The important thing is that you maintain the determination to stick with the fight no matter what.