

Smart About Lust

July 10, 2023

A few years after I came back to the States, a friend of mine from college who was teaching at a college in the Midwest invited me to come and speak to his classes. He was a professor of comparative religion and he wanted to expose his students to a real Buddhist monk. The school was something of a party school, so I didn't expect much in terms of the students' response. He told me afterwards that one of the responses that the students gave was that they were surprised to see a monk who was fairly intelligent and had an active mind. There was one woman who said she expected monks to be sub-human, and she was surprised to see that I actually thought for myself.

That's a fairly standard reaction among people who are attached to their passions, particularly attached to their lust: that anyone who's not giving in to lust, not following a life of lust, is a loser. All of the glamour, all the prestige, and all the intelligence seems to be on the side of those who give in to their lust: the pride that you're able to think thoughts of sensuality, think of the things and people you desire, figuring out how to get what you want out of the people you desire.

There's a belief that there's a fair amount of intelligence that goes with that. The people who don't follow their lust tend to be little goody two-shoes, not all that bright. They may be wise in the sense of the wisdom of books that have little wise phrases, one on each page, but they don't have any street smarts. They don't know how to get what they really want. The basic picture is of people who are dried-up, world-weary, who simply can't get it on with other people.

I must admit that when I first learned about arahants having no passion, no aversion, no delusion, it seemed awfully dry. But then I met Ajaan Fuang and other masters of the forest tradition, and the impression I came back with was totally different. These were the people who were really sharp. They had learned how to see that their lust, their greed, and their aversion were really dumb. They had seen through these things. They had figured them out.

So an important part of learning to overcome your lust is just that: seeing that it requires intelligence to overcome it, and that the people who give in to lust are the ones who are dumb. When you change your perspective that way, it tips the balance.

Now, we have to admit that our defilements are pretty clever in their way. They do figure out ways of getting what we want in the short term. And they're especially smart in making us feel that we're smart in giving in to them. They're like those websites that are affiliated with political parties. We all

know deep down inside someplace that the political parties don't care much about most people. They care about their wealthy donors. But you go to their websites, and they'll tell you the latest put-downs of the other side, their in-jokes about the other side, so that you feel that you're on their side, they're on your side. And we willingly allow ourselves to be duped this way.

You have to realize that the real intelligence comes in learning how not to be duped, learning how to figure out why greed, aversion, delusion, and lust have such power over the mind. Where does their power come from? If you've learn to see this as an intelligent quest, a real good use of your intelligence, to learn how to get past these things, that's half the battle right there, because it does require figuring things out. We're not here to just watch things come and go and say, "Oh, yes, they come and go. And the pleasure of lust doesn't last very long, so I might as well give it up." That's like saying, "The pleasure of eating doesn't last very long, so I might as well just stop eating." If you don't have something better to go to, you just keep coming right back.

The first step is learning how to develop good strong concentration, realizing that there is a sense of well-being that can be immediate, visceral, right here, as you spread feelings of ease and refreshment through the body simply by the way you breathe, simply by the way you relate the rest of the body to the areas where it's obvious that you're breathing, until you begin to see that, "Yes, the whole body is breathing." That gives you some support.

But then, the rest of the work is figuring things out. You see this in the teachings of the forest ajaans. As I've said many times, during my time with Ajaan Fuang there were a lot of things he wouldn't explain. He'd tell me that I was doing things wrong: setting up his hut, arranging things for him, or arranging a construction project in the monastery. But then when I was doing something wrong, he wouldn't say what the right way was to do it. It was up to me to figure it out.

As he said, his purpose was to get me used to figuring things out for myself. If everything were to be handed to me on a platter, ready-made, ready-solved, I wouldn't develop any intelligence, I wouldn't be able to solve problems on my own. After all, when you're off meditating on your own in the forest, there are a lot of times when something comes up and there's nobody you can run to. You have to figure things out right then and there.

The Buddha gives you some questions to ask. When lust comes, where does it come from? He uses the word *origination*. What is its origination? The origination isn't the object outside. It's something inside the mind itself. There's a thirst, a sense of lack, and then there's the thought that "Well, I could fill in this lack with thoughts of sensuality. Even if I can't get what I want, I can fantasize." Of course, fantasizing leads the mind to think more and more in terms of actually acting on those fantasies.

So, what's the origination?

And then, how does it pass away? In other words, what happens in the mind that makes it pass away. Does it stay constant or does it come and go? There are times when you'll notice that it's coming and going, but the fact that it comes back makes you believe that it must be deeply entrenched. Yet maybe that's not the case. It can last only for a certain amount of time, but then there's something in the mind that wants it back. What is that something? What is that desire?

This is where you start looking into the allure. What do you find attractive about lust? On the one hand, this is why we have the analysis of the 32 parts of the body, starting with your own body because that's the body you're most familiar with. But also, as the Buddha said, it's the one you're most attracted to. Ask yourself, "What in there is it that's really all that attractive?" You take it apart, part by part, and there's really nothing. So if this body isn't attractive, how can you assign attractiveness to another body? It's the same sort of stuff. You have a digestive system with all the digestive juices and the things that come out from digestion. Well, the other person has that too. What's the big deal?

Then you dig a little bit deeper, and you realize it's not necessarily the object that has the allure. There's your role as someone who can think up these thoughts, who, in your fantasies, is clever enough to get somebody else attracted to you. There's not just lust operating there. There's a lot of pride. And as I said earlier, there's that sense of intelligence: "I can figure this out, how to get what I want." But then what do you really get?

This is where you have to think about the drawbacks. As the Buddha said, there is a happiness that can come by getting past your passion, past your sensuality. The first step, as I said, is with the concentration. But then there's a higher well-being, happiness, pleasure—the Pali word *sukha* covers all of that—that comes with the deathless. Everybody who's attained the deathless says, "How stupid I was not to go for this." That's why people who gain genuine awakening don't become proud over the fact, because they've seen how stupid they were for so long.

So hold that in mind as an ideal. You haven't seen the third noble truth yet, but that's the whole purpose of the Buddha's talking about the four noble truths: There is that possibility for the cessation of suffering. And it's not just a lack of suffering, it's a very positive well-being. Anything that stands in the way of that has a lot of drawbacks.

This is why we bring out the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self to help underline the drawbacks of your fantasies so that you can develop dispassion for them and gain release, escape from them.

The Buddha compares sensuality to a fetter. It's like being in prison. Your defilements have managed to make the prison a nice enough prison so that you feel like you're actually pretty clever being there. But it's a prison nonetheless. When you get past it, you've escaped. You're free.

So you have to change your allegiance. The part of the mind that thinks you're smart for indulging in sensuality, you have to show it, "No. That's the dumb side. The smart side is what can figure lust out and get past it." Try to be active in taking this as a challenge. "Why is it that I fall for these things? Why is it that they keep having power over me?"

There was a famous French intellectual who decided to do a history of sexuality. It was going to be a multi-volume series, but after doing a couple of years of research on it, he finally decided sex was the most boring topic of all. It sounded cool in the beginning, but it's just the same stuff over and over again. Whatever variety there is in it gets pretty repetitive pretty fast. But freedom from sensuality—there's no boredom there at all.

So see it as a challenge. There'll be setbacks. But just make yourself up for the challenge. Tell yourself that this is a good use of your intelligence. And every time you come out victorious, don't listen to the voices that say, "Well, you're going to give in again tomorrow, so why bother?" Regard each little victory as important because the victories can add up. You keep using your insights. When the insights don't work, you keep trying to figure out new ones, new approaches. That's a really worthwhile use of your intelligence. The intelligence that goes into sensuality and lust is pretty worthless. You're taking a talent you have and trashing it. Appreciate the intelligence of renunciation and make it your sport.

You're not just being wise in the sense of little books of wise sayings. You're developing street smarts of a different sort: street smarts for the noble path. And there's a real satisfaction in seeing these things through.