

Abandoning Effluents (1)

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The third knowledge on the night of the Buddha's awakening, the knowledge that led to his awakening to nibbana, he called knowledge of the ending of the effluents. Effluents, *asava*, are things that flow out of the mind. They could also be translated as fermentations, things that bubble up in the mind and keep flowing back in a flood into samsara, engaging the mind in the process of wandering on, wandering on.

It was the ending of those effluents that freed the Buddha. He identified three: the effluent of sensuality, the effluent of becoming, and the effluent of ignorance. These are big issues. To think about the knowledge that led to the Buddha's final awakening while we're sitting here meditating, struggling with our own minds, may seem far away, but there's a sutta where he talks about abandoning effluents in seven ways. These seven ways are practices that relate very much to what we're doing right here, right now, in our practice as we meditate and as we go about our daily lives. So even though we may not be ending our wandering on anytime soon, we can work in the direction of bringing an end to our wanderings.

So it's good to know the seven ways that the Buddha outlined. The first has to do with putting an end to the effluents related to becoming and ignorance. He calls it abandoning by seeing. In this case, he means using appropriate attention as you look at different questions that come up in the mind, realizing that some questions are not worthy of attention, so you shouldn't bother yourself with them, and focusing instead on the ones that do reward your attention.

The ones that don't reward your attention have to do with your identity in the past, the future, or the present: "What was I in the past? What will I be in the future? Was I in the past? Will I be in the future? Do I exist right now? Do I not exist right now? What am I? Who am I?" If you get entangled in these questions, you end up in what the Buddha calls a jungle, a thicket, a writhing, of views: such as the view that you have a self or that you have no self, or various ways of knowing your self, either through the self itself or through its impact on the world outside.

All this may seem strange because, after all, some of these questions are the questions that led to the Buddha's first two knowledges: knowledge of his previous lifetimes and knowledge of how beings die and are reborn in line with their actions.

But he realized, after getting that second knowledge, that if he continued thinking in those terms, he was not going to be freed. After all, there had been people who had gained those two knowledges before him, and they'd gotten tied up in precisely the questions that he said should be put aside. They had seen that your identity changed from lifetime to lifetime, and that the changes either were or were not related to your actions. They got fixated on the question of: What is it stays the same throughout all those different lives? Or does anything stay the same throughout all those different lives? These questions pulled attention away from the big issue, which was the actions that determined the changes, toward speculation about what can't be directly seen. The real question is: What are you doing? And what you're doing is something you can see.

The Buddha realized that if you put questions of identity aside and focused on what you're doing, it led to the questions of: "What actions lead to suffering? What actions lead to the end of suffering?" This puts you in the context of the four noble truths. Those questions, he said, are worthy of attention. They avoid the problems of saying that you have a self, because once you have a self, then you start getting protective of it. If you say that you have no self, which the Buddha said is also a writhing of views, then the question comes: Why bother? Why bother being skillful if there's nobody here to suffer?

So it's best to leave those questions unanswered, and to focus instead on seeing the skillfulness of your actions as really being important, because your actions will make the difference. They can make you suffer or they can end suffering. They can tie you down or they can free you. When you find freedom, there's no need to ask who you are or who's being freed. There's just the freedom.

This is why, as we meditate, we're focused on the process of fabrication—the breath coming in and going out, the way we talk to ourselves, the images we hold in mind, the feelings we focus on—because these fabrications are things that we're doing.

In our practice leading up to meditation, we don't spend all that much time talking about the Buddhist philosophy of the world or your place in the world. The four noble truths don't talk about those issues at all. The way the Buddha would prepare you is through a life of generosity, a life of virtue. As for your reflections on your generosity and virtue, you ask yourself: What kind of actions lead to long-term well-being? And how do you relate to long-term well-being? After all, ordinary actions that are relatively skillful can lead to good results. But the results may change, will change. How do you relate to those changes?

You put in the extra effort to do well, but you have to realize that simply doing well is not enough, because the results of doing well will someday end. You've got

to do better. To do that, you have to look into your intentions. You have to look into the state of the mind behind your intentions.

This is why the Buddha, when he talked about the customs of the noble ones, would talk about how, in terms of your relationship to your requisites of daily life—food, clothing, shelter—you learn to be content with what you’ve got. At the same time, you learn how not to exalt yourself over your contentment—in other words, saying you’re better than other people because you get along with just a little. You see the danger in how you relate even to the rewards of skillful actions. It’s in seeing the danger that you get more and more focused on the four noble truths. The focus always is on how you’re thinking, how you’re talking to yourself, how you’re relating to the world around you, what’s going on in your mind.

There’s a passage in one of the commentaries that says that you can take that sutta on the four customs of the noble ones and you can derive the entire Dharma and Vinaya from it. The Vinaya comes out of the first three: your relationship to food, clothing, and shelter. The entire Dhamma comes out of the last custom, which is to learn how to delight in developing and delight in abandoning: delight in developing skillful qualities, delight in abandoning unskillful qualities, and tracking down more and more the subtleties of what may seem to be skillful to begin with, but may have some lack of skill lurking inside.

When you’re focused on these issues, then issues of becoming—your identity in the world—and ignorance—ignorance of the four noble truths—get weakened because you are applying the questions of the four noble truths: Where is the suffering? What is the suffering? What’s the best way to relate to that? What’s causing the suffering? What’s the best way to relate to that? What actions can lead to the end of suffering? What’s the best way to relate to those?

That line of thinking, even though it’s not knowledge yet, at least is conviction in line with right view. That’s how you work away at your ignorance—and also by learning how not to be concerned about: “Who am I? What am I? Where am I going?” That’s how you chip away at thoughts of becoming.

So even though you may not be able to chip all the way through, at least you’re chipping in the right direction as you’re focused on the appropriate line of questioning: “What am I doing right now? Is it skillful or unskillful? What can I do to make it more skillful?” That quality that the Buddha said lay at the heart of his awakening, which was not resting content with skillful qualities: If you see there’s room for improvement, you’re happy to improve, happy to try to figure out how to do it. If you haven’t figured it out yet, keep your eye out in that direction. This is how your practice gets closer and closer to final knowledge.

This is just one of the seven ways of working against the effluents, but it's probably the most important. This is why the Buddha put it first in the list, because it covers all the others. Once you're focused on the four noble truths, then you're going to be focused on the duties appropriate to those truths. And in carrying out the duties, all the other ways of dealing with the effluents get covered as well.