

In the “Nava Sutta” (The Ship), the Buddha describes the goal of the path as the “ending of the effluents.” It’s a description he uses often and it’s a good way to think about what dharma practice is all about. As human beings we’re subject to a variety of experiences: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, bodily sensations, mental impressions (thoughts, emotions). None of these experiences – whether pleasant or unpleasant – is a problem; our problems, our suffering, manifests in the effluents, the ways we add on to experience, the ways we oppose and pursue experience, the ways we corrupt experience, the ways we take what is and turn it into something else. The dictionary defines “effluent” as: (1) something that flows out or forth; outflow; (2) a stream flowing out of a lake, reservoir, etc.; (3) sewage that has been treated in a septic tank or sewage treatment plant. (4) sewage or other liquid waste that is discharged into a body of water, etc. The last two definitions are particularly telling. Our tendency, we could say, is to take our basic human experience and pollute it, defile it, give rise to an discharge of sewage. Strong

words perhaps, but when we look at what's coming out of the mind, we're hard-pressed to disagree.

The effluents are our painful thinking, our narratives, our unskillful physical and verbal actions, our unskillful ways of relating to our human experience. The Buddha was interested in learning how to relate skillfully to his position as a human being, how to make the most of his human life. What he learned is something that, as human beings, we can learn as well. But how? How can we make the most of our precious time in this human realm? How can we bring an end to the effluents?

As the sutta puts it, the ending of the effluents comes from knowing and seeing. In other words, from wisdom. Not the wisdom acquired by reading books or listening to talks, but rather the wisdom that comes from our own clear seeing. Herein we come to a key understanding, an understanding that lies at the heart of sutta and the heart of the Buddha's teachings. We reach our goals by attending to the causes that will bring us to them. We don't simply eliminate the effluents, any more than we'd eliminate pollution by simply draining the water in a stream: in effectively eliminating pollution we need to cut off its source, address its causes. In ending the effluents we aim to develop the causes that will bring about their ending. The Buddha's teachings rely on an understanding and respect for cause and effect.

We end the effluents through knowing and seeing. Knowing and seeing what? Our clinging. As dharma students, seeking an end to the effluents, we're asked to see the ways that we cling – in the sutta the Buddha delineates the five clinging-aggregates, form, feeling tone, perception, fabrications, consciousness; the five ways we cling when we're clinging to the facets of our experience – and we learn to see the drawbacks of our clinging. It's from clinging to experience, if it's a painful sensation in the body, or a mental impression such as anger, that the

effluents pour forth; we take what is, a sensation, a mental movement, and we grasp onto it, and we turn it into something else, we produce effluents. When we see clearly into our clinging, we become disenchanted with it, and, in turn, we become more and more inclined not to cling. When, through knowing and seeing, we stop clinging, the effluents cease to flow.

As we begin to learn that clinging is the linchpin, the act that triggers the thinking, the narratives, the unskillful actions, we begin to engender an interest in letting go of clinging. We begin to “wish” to end clinging and the effluents. But, as the sutta teaches, this wishing is not enough. Put another way, we can’t simply “let go.” It doesn’t work like that. As a teacher I learned many years ago that to instruct dharma students to simply “let go” of their clinging is not very good teaching. It’s certainly not how the Buddha teaches. Letting go, the wisdom that permits letting go, the Buddha tells us, will come when we engage in “developing,” and he goes on to list the practices that comprise developing: “The four frames of reference, the four right exertions, the four bases of power, the five faculties, the five strengths, the seven factors for Awakening, the noble eightfold path.” Knowing and seeing occur when the practitioner develops these elements of the path. Referred to as the Wings to Awakening, we develop these elements largely in the service of cultivating concentration. Specifically, the Buddha’s concentration, known as jhana. The heart of the Buddha’s path is the cultivation of jhana.

By developing jhana, practicing meditation, the practitioner is able to achieve clear seeing, wisdom, and this wisdom brings about the ending of the effluents. This schema represents, of course, an integral cause and effect relationship in the Buddha’s dharma: the development of concentration leads to the development of wisdom, which leads to release from suffering, the ending of the effluents.

We could say that the development of concentration through the practice of mindfulness of breathing is the “hard work” of dharma practice. It is where much of the time and effort is applied. The Thai meditation master Ajaan Lee compares the pillars of dharma practice, virtue, concentration and wisdom, to the three pillars, or pilings, that hold up a bridge crossing a river; concentration, he says, is like the pillar in the middle, built in the water and mud, it’s the most difficult pillar to build, it requires the most work.

Virtue, the first part of the Path, and discernment (wisdom), the last, aren't especially difficult. But keeping the mind centered, which is the middle part, takes some effort because it's a matter of forcing the mind into shape.

Admittedly, centering the mind, like placing bridge pilings in the middle of a river, is something difficult to do. But once the mind is firmly in place, it can be very useful in developing virtue and discernment. Virtue is like placing pilings on the near shore of the river; discernment, like placing them on the far shore. But if the middle pilings — a centered mind — aren't firmly in place, how will you ever be able to bridge the flood of suffering?

(Ajaan Lee)

In the Nava Sutta, the Buddha offers some wonderful metaphors to describe the “work” of concentration, the work that leads to the goal. The path is a *path of action* and he makes that critical point by giving the example of the hen and her eggs. In order for the eggs to hatch, for her chicks to be born, the hen must sit on the eggs, cover them, warm them, incubate them. She

must do the work, put in the time and effort. It's the only way she'll achieve the desired results. Simply wishing for the eggs to hatch won't do it; she has to sit on them.

As far as hens and eggs go, this may seem quite obvious; but when it comes to dharma practice we may fail to appreciate the laws of cause and effect; we may want our effluents to cease, our suffering to diminish, and yet we're not putting in the work, we're not sitting on our eggs. Sometimes when students complain they're overwrought with thinking, caught in painful narratives, what I have to tell them – with kindness – is that it's not the fault of the practice, the problem is they're not following the practice, they're not doing what the Buddha asks, they're not developing the causes that lead to the results, they're not sitting on their eggs. We shouldn't expect the effluents to end, we shouldn't expect our eggs to hatch, if we're not engaging in “developing,” if we're not developing the Wings to Awakening, if we're not practicing breath meditation according to the Buddha's instructions.

Simply wishing for things to happen won't make them happen. Simply talking about the dharma, simply listening to dharma talks online and feeling inspired won't make things happen, won't bring about an end to the effluents. It's a path of action. Again and again, in his teachings, the Buddha's emphasizes this. This is important to embrace in today's modern technological culture in which we're not so accustomed to being proactive, to putting determined effort into developing causes. Ours is a culture in which we lack respect for the principles of cause and effect. It's a culture in which we expect and demand results quickly, without having to put in much hard work. We click an icon on the computer and, voila, we have results, we instantly receive all manner of sense experience, information, stimulation; a few clicks, type a few words and numbers, we're able to purchase nearly anything, it'll be delivered the next day.

We're not used to making slow steady effort, the sort of effort the hen makes in sitting on her eggs.

Determination, patience, equanimity, are some of the qualities the dharma student must develop if she's going to bring about an end to the effluents, if she's going to find her way to peace, true happiness. She needs to learn some lessons from the hen. She needs to learn to sit on her eggs, knowing that eventually her chicks will hatch.

Knowing that we're going to get to where we need to get by going through a process, by attending to the causes that lead to the effects, is essential to our growth. We can learn to respect cause and effect by putting our efforts into developing the causes and recognizing the benefits in doing so, the results that eventually follow. The more we learn to respect cause and effect, the more we'll focus on developing the causes.

In my own practice, I often notice when I'm getting off track that I'm grasping after results, I'm focusing on results. Accordingly, I'll remind myself: develop the causes, don't worry about the results, forget about the results, just develop the causes. When I do that, I hit my stride, my practice unfolds; now I'm in harmony with the law of cause and effect, I'm in harmony with the dharma.

In the second metaphor the Buddha describes how when a carpenter uses an adze (a tool similar to an axe), he can't discern the wearing away of the wooden handle, he can't see the changes that are taking place in the handle as he holds it in his hand and fingers; however, he knows that the wood is very slowly wearing down. It's the same with dharma practice; when we make the effort, when we practice meditation, at first we may not be able to see results, but gradually we'll realize that things have changed, that the wooden handle has worn down. After using his adze many times, the carpenter can detect the changes in it with his naked eye; after

making determined effort to develop concentration, the dharma student begins to realize that the effluents have lessened. They've been lessening all along, but very gradually, imperceptibly. Now he's able to detect results.

It's difficult for students in their early years of dharma practice; they're often not able to see the changes that are taking place, the way concentration and wisdom are developing, the way the effluents are losing their power; after we've practiced for a number of years we're much more able to see our progress, we can easily detect that the wooden handle has eroded. And we move forward, buoyed by faith, knowing that if we continue to put in the effort, the effluents will fall away. So, if you're new, or for that matter a seasoned dharma student, remember this metaphor of the Buddha's. Remember: if you are developing the causes, developing the four frames of reference, the noble eightfold path, the seven factors for Awakening, if you are developing concentration, if you are diligently practicing breath meditation, you may not be able to see what's happening, *but something is happening*, you're chipping away at the effluents, you're moving toward a lessening of pain and suffering, you're moving toward a greater happiness in your life.

Lastly the Buddha provides the metaphor of the ship. After being at sea for six months, the ship is retired for the winter, and as it sits on the shore, its stays "wither & rot." A ship's stays are the ropes supporting its masts. Weathered by the long time at sea, moistened during the rainy winter, these ropes disintegrate. So it is with our effluents, our aversive and desirous and deluded thinking, our afflictive narratives, our unskillfulness; little by slowly, as we develop the causes, the ropes that bind us wither and rot. And we are free.

The Ship

Nava Sutta (SN 22:101)

Near Sāvathī. There the Blessed One said, “I tell you, monks: It is for one who knows & sees that there is the ending of effluents. For one who knows & sees what is there the ending of effluents? ‘Such is form, such its origination, such its passing away. Such is feeling.... Such is perception.... Such are fabrications.... Such is consciousness, such its origination, such its passing away.’ It is for one who knows & sees in this way that there is the ending of effluents.

“Even though this wish may occur to a monk who dwells without devoting himself to development—‘O that my mind might be released from effluents through lack of clinging!’—still his mind is not released from effluents through lack of clinging. Why is that? From lack of developing, it should be said. Lack of developing what? The four establishing of mindfulness, the four right exertions, the four bases of power, the five faculties, the five strengths, the seven factors for awakening, the noble eightfold path.

“Suppose a hen has eight, ten, or twelve eggs: If she doesn’t cover them rightly, warm them rightly, or incubate them rightly, then even though this wish may occur to her—‘O that my chicks might break through the egg shells with their spiked claws or beaks and hatch out safely!’—still it is not possible that the chicks will break through the egg shells with their spiked claws or beaks and hatch out safely. Why is that? Because the hen has not covered them rightly, warmed them rightly, or incubated them rightly. In the same way, even though this wish may occur to a monk who dwells without devoting himself to development—‘O that my mind might be released from effluents through lack of clinging!’—still his mind is not released from effluents through lack of clinging. Why is that? From lack of developing, it should be said. Lack of developing what? The four establishing of mindfulness, the four right exertions, the four bases of power, the five faculties, the five strengths, the seven factors for awakening, the noble eightfold path.

“Even though this wish may not occur to a monk who dwells devoting himself to development—‘O that my mind might be released from effluents through lack of clinging!’—still his mind is released from effluents through lack of clinging. Why is that? From developing, it should be said. Developing what? The four establishing of mindfulness, the four right exertions, the four bases of power, the five faculties, the five strengths, the seven factors for awakening, the noble eightfold path.

“Suppose a hen has eight, ten, or twelve eggs that she covers rightly, warms rightly, & incubates rightly: Even though this wish may not occur to her—‘O that my chicks might break through the egg shells with their spiked claws or beaks and hatch out safely!’—still it is possible that the chicks will break through the egg shells with their spiked claws or beaks and hatch out safely. Why is that? Because the hen has covered them, warmed them, & incubated them rightly. In the same way, even though this wish may not occur to a monk who dwells devoting himself to development—‘O that my mind might be released from effluents through lack of clinging!’—still his mind is released from effluents through lack of clinging. Why is that? From developing, it should be said. Developing what? The four establishing of mindfulness, the four right exertions, the four bases of power, the five faculties, the five strengths, the seven factors for awakening, the noble eightfold path.

“Just as when a carpenter or carpenter’s apprentice sees the marks of his fingers or thumb on the handle of his adze but does not know, ‘Today my adze handle wore down this much, or

yesterday it wore down that much, or the day before yesterday it wore down this much,' still he knows it is worn through when it is worn through. In the same way, when a monk dwells devoting himself to development, he does not know, 'Today my effluents wore down this much, or yesterday they wore down that much, or the day before yesterday they wore down this much,' still he knows they are worn through when they are worn through.

“Just as when an ocean-going ship, rigged with masts & stays, after six months on the water, is left on shore for the winter: Its stays, weathered by the heat & wind, moistened by the clouds of the rainy season, easily wither & rot away. In the same way, when a monk dwells devoting himself to development, his fetters easily wither & rot away.”