

209hh- The Simile of the Wet Sticks

By Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero

(A Summarised Transcription of a Hillside Hermitage Dhamma Talk)

Q: **Mn36-Mahāsaccaka sutta:**

“Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Vesālī in the Great Wood in the Hall with the Peaked Roof. Now on that occasion, when it was morning, the Blessed One had finished dressing and had taken his bowl and outer robe, desiring to go into Vesālī for alms.

Then, as Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha’s son was walking and wandering for exercise, he came to the Hall with the Peaked Roof in the Great Wood. The venerable Ānanda saw him coming in the distance and said to the Blessed One: “Venerable sir, here comes Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha’s son, a debater and a clever speaker regarded by many as a saint. He wants to discredit the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. It would be good if the Blessed One would sit down for a while out of compassion.” The Blessed One sat down on the seat made ready. Then Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha’s son went up to the Blessed One and exchanged greetings with him. When this courteous and amiable talk was finished, he sat down at one side and said to the Blessed One:

“Master Gotama, there are some contemplatives who abide pursuing development of body, but not development of mind. They are touched by bodily painful feeling. In the past, when one was touched by bodily painful feeling, one’s thighs would become rigid, one’s heart would burst, hot blood would gush from one’s mouth, and one would go mad, go out of one’s mind. So then the mind was subservient to the body, the body wielded mastery over it. Why is that? Because the mind was not developed. But there are some contemplatives who abide pursuing development of mind, but not development of body. They are touched by mental painful feeling. In the past, when one was touched by mental painful feeling, one’s thighs would become rigid, one’s heart would burst, hot blood would gush from one’s mouth, and one would go mad, go out of one’s mind. So then the body was subservient to the mind, the mind wielded mastery over it. Why is that? Because the body was not developed. Master Gotama, it has occurred to me: ‘Surely Master Gotama’s disciples abide pursuing development of mind, but not development of body.’”

“But, Aggivessana, what have you learned about development of body?”

“Well, there are, for example, Nanda Vaccha, Kisa Sankicca, Makkhali Gosāla. They go naked, rejecting conventions, licking their hands, not coming when asked, not stopping when asked; they do not accept food brought or food specially made or an invitation to a meal; they receive nothing from a pot, from a bowl, across a threshold, across a stick, across a pestle, from two eating together, from a pregnant woman, from a woman breastfeeding, from a woman in the midst of men, from where food is advertised to be distributed, from where a dog is waiting, from where flies are buzzing; they accept no fish or meat, they drink no liquor, wine, or fermented brew. They keep to one house, to one morsel; they keep to two houses, to two morsels...they keep to seven houses, to seven morsels. They live on one saucerful a day, on two saucerfuls a day...on seven saucerfuls a day. They take food once a day, once every two days...once every seven days; thus even up to once every fortnight, they dwell pursuing the practice of taking food at stated intervals.”

“But do they subsist on so little, Aggivessana?”

“No, Master Gotama, sometimes they consume excellent hard food, eat excellent soft food, taste excellent delicacies, drink excellent drinks. Thereby they regain their strength, fortify themselves, and become fat.”

“What they earlier abandoned, Aggivessana, they later gather together again. That is how there is increase and decrease of this body. But what have you learned about development of mind?”

When Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha’s son was asked by the Blessed One about development of mind, he was unable to answer.

Then the Blessed One told him: “What you have just spoken of as development of body, Aggivessana, is not development of body according to the Dhamma in the Noble One’s Discipline. Since you do not know what development of body is, how could you know what development of mind is? Nevertheless, Aggivessana, as to how one is undeveloped in body and undeveloped in mind, and developed in body and developed in mind, listen and attend closely to what I shall say.”—“Yes, sir,” Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha’s son replied. The Blessed One said this:

Undeveloped in Body and Undeveloped in Mind: “How, Aggivessana, is one undeveloped in body and undeveloped in mind? Here, Aggivessana, pleasant feeling arises in an untaught ordinary person. Touched by that pleasant feeling, he lusts after pleasure and continues to lust after pleasure. That pleasant feeling of his ceases. With the cessation of the pleasant feeling, painful feeling arises. Touched by that painful feeling, he sorrows, grieves, and laments, he weeps beating his breast and becomes distraught. When that pleasant feeling has arisen in him, it invades his mind and remains because body is not developed. And when that painful feeling has arisen in him, it invades his mind and remains because the mind is not developed. Anyone in whom, in this double manner, arisen pleasant feeling invades his mind and remains because body is not developed, and arisen painful feeling invades his mind and remains because mind is not developed, is thus undeveloped in body because mind is not developed, is thus undeveloped in body and undeveloped in mind.

Developed in Body and Developed in Mind: “And how, Aggivessana, is one developed in body and developed in mind? Here, Aggivessana, pleasant feeling arises in a well-taught noble disciple. Touched by that pleasant feeling, he does not lust after pleasure or continue to lust after pleasure. That pleasant feeling of his ceases. With the cessation of the pleasant feeling, painful feeling arises. Touched by that painful feeling, he does not sorrow, grieve, and lament, he does not weep beating his breast and become distraught. When that pleasant feeling has arisen in him, it does not invade his mind and remain because body is developed. And when that painful feeling has arisen in him, it does not invade his mind and remain because mind is developed. Anyone in whom, in this double manner, arisen pleasant feeling does not invade his mind and remain because body is developed, and arisen painful feeling does not invade his mind and remain because mind is developed, is thus developed in body and developed in mind.”

“I have confidence in Master Gotama thus: ‘Master Gotama is developed in body and developed in mind.’”

“Surely, Aggivessana, your words are offensive and discourteous, but still I will answer you. Since I shaved off my hair and beard, put on the yellow robe, and went forth from the home life into homelessness, it has not been possible for arisen pleasant feeling to invade my mind and remain or for arisen painful feeling to invade my mind and remain.”

“Has there never arisen in Master Gotama a feeling so pleasant that it could invade his mind and remain? Has there never arisen in Master Gotama a feeling so painful that it could invade his mind and remain?”

“Why not, Aggivessana? Here, Aggivessana, before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened Bodhisatta, I thought: ‘Household life is crowded and dusty; life gone forth is wide open. It is

not easy, while living in a home, to lead the holy life utterly perfect and pure as a polished shell. Suppose I shave off my hair and beard, put on the yellow robe, and go forth from the home life into homelessness.’

“Later, while still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life...(going forth and seeking enlightenment, Mn.26)...And I sat down there thinking: ‘This will serve for striving.’

Simile of the wet sticks:

1- “Now these three similes occurred to me spontaneously, never heard before. Suppose there were a wet sappy piece of wood lying in water, and a man came with an upper fire-stick, thinking: ‘I shall light a fire, I shall produce heat.’ What do you think, Aggivessana? Could the man light a fire and produce heat by taking the upper fire-stick and rubbing it against the wet sappy piece of wood lying in the water?”

“No, Master Gotama. Why not? Because it is a wet sappy piece of wood, and it is lying in water. Eventually the man would reap only weariness and disappointment.”

“So too, Aggivessana, as to those contemplatives who still do not live bodily withdrawn from sensual pleasures, and whose sensual desire, affection, infatuation, thirst, and fever for sensual pleasures has not been fully abandoned internally, even if those good contemplatives feel painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, they are incapable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment; and even if those good contemplatives do not feel painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, they are incapable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment. This was the first simile that occurred to me spontaneously, never heard before.

2- “Again, Aggivessana, a second simile occurred to me spontaneously, never heard before. Suppose there were a wet sappy piece of wood lying on dry land far from water, and a man came with an upper fire-stick, thinking: ‘I shall light a fire, I shall produce heat.’ What do you think, Aggivessana? Could the man light a fire and produce heat by taking the upper fire-stick and rubbing it against the wet sappy piece of wood lying on dry land far from water?”

“No, Master Gotama. Why not? Because it is a wet sappy piece of wood, even though it is lying on dry land far from water. Eventually the man would reap only weariness and disappointment.”

“So too, Aggivessana, as to those contemplatives who live bodily withdrawn from sensual pleasures, but whose sensual desire, affection, infatuation, thirst, and fever for sensual pleasures has not been fully abandoned internally, even if those good contemplatives feel painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, they are incapable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment; and even if those good contemplatives do not feel painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, they are incapable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment. This was the second simile that occurred to me spontaneously, never heard before.

3- “Again, Aggivessana, a third simile occurred to me spontaneously, never heard before. Suppose there were a dry sapless piece of wood lying on dry land far from water, and a man came with an upper fire-stick, thinking: ‘I shall light a fire, I shall produce heat.’ What do you think, Aggivessana? Could the man light a fire and produce heat by rubbing it against the dry sapless piece of wood lying on dry land far from water?”

“Yes, Master Gotama. Why so? Because it is a dry sapless piece of wood, and it is lying on dry land far from water.”

“So too, Aggivessana, as to those contemplatives who live bodily withdrawn from sensual pleasures, and whose sensual desire, affection, infatuation, thirst, and fever for sensual pleasures has been fully abandoned and suppressed internally, even if those good contemplatives feel painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, they are capable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment; and even if those good contemplatives do not feel painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, they are capable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment. This was the third simile that occurred to me spontaneously, never heard before. These are the three similes that occurred to me spontaneously, never heard before.

Description of extreme ascetic practices: “I thought: ‘Suppose, with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, constrain, and crush mind with mind.’ So, with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, constrained, and crushed mind with mind. While I did so, sweat ran from my armpits. Just as a strong man might seize a weaker man by the head or shoulders and beat him down, constrain him, and crush him, so too, with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, constrained, and crushed mind with mind, and sweat ran from my armpits. But although tireless energy was aroused in me and unremitting mindfulness was established, my body was uncalm because I was exhausted by the painful striving. But such painful feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

“I thought: ‘Suppose I practise the breathless meditation.’ So I stopped the in-breaths and out-breaths through my mouth and nose. While I did so, there was a loud sound of winds coming out from my earholes. Just as there is a loud sound when a smith’s bellows are blown,...violent winds cut through my head. Just as if a strong man were to crush my head with the tip of a sharp sword,.. there were violent pains in my head. Just as if a strong man were tightening a tough leather strap around my head as a headband,... violent winds carved up my belly. Just as if a skilled butcher or his apprentice were to carve up an ox’s belly with a sharp butcher’s knife,...there was a violent burning in my body. Just as if two strong men were to seize a weaker man by both arms and roast him over a pit of hot coals, so too, while I stopped the in-breaths and out-breaths through my mouth, nose, and ears, there was a violent burning in my body. But although tireless energy was aroused in me and unremitting mindfulness was established, my body was uncalm because I was exhausted by the painful striving. But such painful feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

“Now when deities saw me, some said: ‘The recluse Gotama is dead.’ Other deities said: ‘The recluse Gotama is not dead, he is dying.’ And other deities said: ‘The recluse Gotama is not dead nor dying; he is an arahant, for such is the way arahants abide.’

“I thought: ‘Suppose I practise entirely cutting off food.’ Then deities came to me and said: ‘Good sir, do not practise entirely cutting off food. If you do so, we shall infuse heavenly food into the pores of your skin and you will live on that.’ I considered: ‘If I claim to be completely fasting while these deities infuse heavenly food into the pores of my skin and I live on that, then I shall be lying.’ So I dismissed those deities, saying: ‘There is no need.’

“I thought: ‘Suppose I take very little food, a handful each time, whether of bean soup or lentil soup or vetch soup or pea soup.’ So I took very little food, a handful each time, whether of bean soup or lentil soup or vetch soup or pea soup. While I did so, my body reached a state of extreme emaciation. Because of eating so little my limbs became like the jointed segments of vine stems or bamboo stems. Because of eating so little my backside became like a camel’s hoof. Because of eating so little the projections on my spine stood forth like corded beads. Because of eating so little my ribs jutted out as gaunt as the crazy rafters of an old roofless

barn. Because of eating so little the gleam of my eyes sank far down in their sockets, looking like the gleam of water that has sunk far down in a deep well. Because of eating so little my scalp shrivelled and withered as a green bitter gourd shrivels and withers in the wind and sun. Because of eating so little my belly skin adhered to my backbone; thus if I touched my belly skin I encountered my backbone and if I touched my backbone I encountered my belly skin. Because of eating so little, if I defecated or urinated, I fell over on my face there. Because of eating so little, if I tried to ease my body by rubbing my limbs with my hands, the hair, rotted at its roots, fell from my body as I rubbed.

“Now when people saw me, some said: ‘The contemplative Gotama is black.’ Other people said: ‘The contemplative Gotama is not black, he is brown.’ Other people said: ‘The contemplative Gotama is neither black nor brown, he is golden-skinned.’ So much had the clear, bright colour of my skin deteriorated through eating so little.

“I thought: ‘Whatever contemplatives in the past have experienced painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, this is the utmost, there is none beyond this. And whatever contemplatives in the future will experience painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, this is the utmost, there is none beyond this. And whatever contemplatives at present experience painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, this is the utmost, there is none beyond this. But by this racking practice of austerities I have not attained any superhuman states, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. Could there be another path to enlightenment?’

Recollection of First Jhana: “I considered: ‘I recall that when my father the Sakyan was occupied, while I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with joy and pleasure born of seclusion. Could that be the path to enlightenment?’ Then, following that memory, came the realisation: ‘That is indeed the path to enlightenment.’

“I thought: ‘Why am I afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states?’ I thought: ‘I am not afraid of that pleasure since it has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states.’

“I considered: ‘It is not easy to attain that pleasure with a body so emaciated. Suppose I ate some solid food, some boiled rice and porridge.’ And I ate some solid food, some boiled rice and porridge. Now at that time five bhikkhus were waiting upon me, thinking: ‘If our contemplative Gotama achieves some higher state, he will inform us.’ But when I ate the boiled rice and porridge, the five bhikkhus were disgusted and left me, thinking: ‘The contemplative Gotama now lives luxuriously; he has given up his striving and reverted to luxury.’

“Now when I had eaten solid food and regained my strength, then quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by thinking and pondering, with joy and pleasure born of seclusion. But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

“With the stilling of thinking and pondering, I entered upon and abided in the second jhāna... With the fading away as well of joy... I entered upon and abided in the third jhāna... With the abandoning of pleasure and pain... I entered upon and abided in the fourth jhāna... But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

“When my composed mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the recollection of past lives. I recollected my manifold past lives, that is, one birth, two births...(as in [Mn4](#))... Thus with their aspects and particulars I recollected my manifold past lives.

“This was the first true knowledge attained by me in the first watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who abides diligent, ardent, and resolute. But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

“When my composed mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings...(as in Mn4)... Thus with the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, I saw beings passing away and reappearing, inferior and superior, fair and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate, and I understood how beings pass on according to their actions.

“This was the second true knowledge attained by me in the middle watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who abides diligent, ardent, and resolute. But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

“When my composed mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the destruction of the taints. I directly knew as it actually is: ‘This is suffering’;...‘This is the origin of suffering’;...‘This is the cessation of suffering’;...‘This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering’;...‘These are the taints’;...‘This is the origin of the taints’;...‘This is the cessation of the taints’;...‘This is the way leading to the cessation of the taints.’

“When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance. When it was liberated there came the knowledge: ‘It is liberated.’ I directly knew: ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.’

“This was the third true knowledge attained by me in the last watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who abides diligent, ardent, and resolute. But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

Teaching Dhamma: “Aggivessana, I recall teaching the Dhamma to an assembly of many hundreds, and even then each person thinks of me: ‘The contemplative Gotama is teaching the Dhamma especially for me.’ But it should not be so regarded; the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma to others only to give them knowledge. When the talk is finished, Aggivessana, then I steady my mind internally, quieten it, bring it to singleness, and compose it on that same sign of composure as before, in which I constantly abide.”

Questioned about abiding in delusion: “This is a matter about which Master Gotama can be trusted, as an accomplished and fully enlightened one should be. But does Master Gotama recall sleeping during the day?”

“I recall, Aggivessana, in the last month of the hot season, on returning from my alms round, after my meal I lay out my outer robe folded in four, and lying down on my right side, I fall asleep mindful and aware.”

“Some contemplatives call that abiding in delusion, Master Gotama.”

“It is not in such a way that one is deluded or undeluded, Aggivessana. As to how one is deluded or undeluded, listen and attend closely to what I shall say.” —“Yes, sir,” Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha’s son replied. The Blessed One said this:

“Him I call deluded, Aggivessana, who has not abandoned the taints that defile, which perpetuate being, give trouble, ripen in suffering, and lead to future birth, ageing, and death; for it is with the non-abandoning of the taints that one is deluded. Him I call undeluded who has abandoned the taints that defile, which perpetuate being, give trouble, ripen in suffering, and lead to future birth, ageing, and death; for it is with the abandoning of the taints that one is undeluded. The Tathāgata, Aggivessana, has abandoned the taints that defile, which perpetuate being, give trouble, ripen in suffering, and lead to future birth, ageing, and death; he has cut them off at the root, made them like a palm stump, done away with them so that they are no longer subject to future arising. Just as a palm tree whose crown is cut off is incapable of further growth, so too, the Tathāgata has abandoned the taints that defile...done away with them so that they are no longer subject to future arising.”

When this was said, Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha’s son said: “It is wonderful, Master Gotama, it is marvellous how when Master Gotama is spoken to offensively again and again, assailed by discourteous courses of speech, the colour of his skin brightens and the colour of his face clears, as is to be expected of one who is accomplished and fully enlightened. I recall, Master Gotama, engaging Pūraṇa Kassapa in debate, engaging Makkhali Gosāla...Ajita Kesakambalin...Pakudha Kaccāyana...Saṅghaya Belaṭṭhiputta... the Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta in debate, they prevaricated, led the talk aside, and showed anger, hate, and bitterness. But when Master Gotama is spoken to offensively again and again, assailed by discourteous courses of speech, the colour of his skin brightens and the colour of his face clears, as is to be expected of one who is accomplished and fully enlightened. And now, Master Gotama, I must depart. I am busy and have much to do.” “Now is the time, Aggivessana, to do as you think fit.”

Then Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha’s son, having delighted and rejoiced in the Blessed One’s words, got up from his seat and departed.”

Ajahn Nyanamoli: If you’re not devaluing sensuality, if you’re still valuing it, holding on to it as a valuable thing, if you’re not seeing the danger in it, that means you’re still within the domain of sensuality, even if you’re not engaging in it, even if you’re just torturing yourself, not eating and just drinking water and so on, you’re still doing that with sensuality.

Q: So even if you are doing ascetic practices of renouncing food or living alone and so on, that doesn’t mean that you are practicing renunciation of sensuality. If you’re still delighting in the prospect of future sensual experiences then you have not renounced those things at all. And all you are doing is just a “temporary fast” so that you can enjoy indulging once again. Doing a little bit of renunciation so that you can indulge later on and not feel so guilty about it.

Nm: Your abstinence is temporary, which means that the overall framework of sensuality remains, and you’re not relinquishing that. You might be playing with it and restraining yourself for whatever reason, but overall, the value of sensuality remains unchanged. So that’s what I meant when I said, for example when you do keep virtue and practice sense restraint and endurance, you have to do that with the attitude of, “I will do this infinitely, forever. It doesn’t matter how long this lasts, I will have to endure it forever”. Not like,

“I’ll do this for a week”. And then what? “...then I’ll....most likely go back to the same sensual actions of chasing sensual pleasure”. Well, that’s why you’re not free. Not because you haven’t endured enough, in fact you might have already endured more than enough for wisdom to arise. But the wisdom will not arise, because overall, you’re not relinquishing the value of sensuality. Not because you haven’t endured the pressure of sensual desires sufficiently.

Q: “...Again, Aggivessana, a second simile occurred to me spontaneously, never heard before. Suppose there were a wet sappy piece of wood lying on dry land far from water, and a man came with an upper fire-stick, thinking: ‘I shall light a fire, I shall produce heat.’ What do you think, Aggivessana? Could the man light a fire and produce heat by taking the upper fire-stick and rubbing it against the wet sappy piece of wood lying on dry land far from water?”

“No, Master Gotama. Why not? Because it is a wet sappy piece of wood, even though it is lying on dry land far from water. Eventually the man would reap only weariness and disappointment.”

“So too, Aggivessana, as to those contemplatives who live bodily withdrawn from sensual pleasures, but whose sensual desire, affection, infatuation, thirst, and fever for sensual pleasures has not been fully abandoned internally, even if those good contemplatives feel painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, they are incapable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment; and even if those good contemplatives do not feel painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, they are incapable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment. This was the second simile that occurred to me spontaneously, never heard before...”

Nm: You’re not in the water anymore, but the mind is still wet with the value of sensuality. So it doesn’t matter what you do, or how much effort you’re putting in, or how motionless and for how many hours you sit in your meditation, if you have not, on the level of your views, devalued sensuality forever, you are still within it. So there will be no wisdom arising on account of whatever endurance you put up with, because you do so while still valuing sensual pleasures.

Q: “Again, Aggivessana, a third simile occurred to me spontaneously, never heard before. Suppose there were a dry sapless piece of wood lying on dry land far from water, and a man came with an upper fire-stick, thinking: ‘I shall light a fire, I shall produce heat.’ What do you think, Aggivessana? Could the man light a fire and produce heat by rubbing it against the dry sapless piece of wood lying on dry land far from water?”

“Yes, Master Gotama. Why so? Because it is a dry sapless piece of wood, and it is lying on dry land far from water.”

“So too, Aggivessana, as to those contemplatives who live bodily withdrawn from sensual pleasures, and whose sensual desire, affection, infatuation, thirst, and fever for sensual pleasures has been fully abandoned internally, even if those good contemplatives feel painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, they are capable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment; and even if those good contemplatives do not feel painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, they are capable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment.”

Nm: They would probably be able to light the fire with very little effort, because the effort is determined by how wet the wood is. If it’s damp, you have to work even harder, but if it’s really dry, or if you actually invest your effort in drying the sticks, then it’s going to take very little physical effort to light the fire with it. So

that's why I often say, it doesn't matter whether you're a monk or a lay person, if you want to practice the Dhamma, practically speaking, most of the work comes down to drying your mind from sensuality, it doesn't come down to finding the perfect technique or reading the exact sutta that will make you enlightened. The reason why you're not enlightened even after you have read all the suttas, is not because you haven't read them enough or you haven't thought about them enough, it's because your sticks are not dry enough.

It's not accidental that this aspect is always being overlooked, which is why sensuality is so hard to get rid of, because it's easy to overlook it.

Sense restraint is already the practice of Dhamma. Virtue is already the practice of Dhamma, because you're "drying the sticks". Sometimes when someone reads in a sutta of a person who seemingly just heard one sentence from the Buddha and became enlightened, they assume, "Oh, he was so lucky or it was the Buddha's special powers that made him enlightened". No, the Buddha said himself, "I cannot make anyone enlightened. I just point the way, and then they either choose to follow it or not".

"..When he had spoken, Moggallāna the Accountant said to the Buddha, "When his disciples are instructed and advised like this by Master Gotama, do all of them achieve the ultimate goal, Nibbana, or do some of them fail?"

"Some succeed, while others fail."

"What is the cause, Master Gotama, what is the reason why, though Nibbana is present, the path leading to Nibbana is present, and Master Gotama is present to encourage them, still some succeed while others fail?"

"Well then, brahmin, I'll ask you about this in return, and you can answer as you like. What do you think, brahmin? Are you skilled in the road to Rājagaha?"

"Yes, I am."

"What do you think, brahmin? Suppose a person was to come along who wanted to go to Rājagaha. He'd approach you and say: 'Sir, I wish to go to Rājagaha. Please point out the road to Rājagaha.' Then you'd say to them: 'Here, mister, this road goes to Rājagaha. Go along it for a while, and you'll see a certain village. Go along a while further, and you'll see a certain town. Go along a while further and you'll see Rājagaha with its delightful parks, woods, meadows, and lotus ponds.' Instructed like this by you, they might still take the wrong road, heading west. But a second person might come with the same question and receive the same instructions. Instructed by you, they might safely arrive at Rājagaha. What is the cause, brahmin, what is the reason why, though Rājagaha is present, the path leading to Rājagaha is present, and you are there to encourage them, one person takes the wrong path and heads west, while another arrives safely at Rājagaha?"

"What can I do about that, Master Gotama? I am the one who shows the way."

"In the same way, though Nibbana is present, the path leading to Nibbana is present, and I am present to encourage them, still some of my disciples, instructed and advised like this, achieve the

ultimate goal, Nibbana, while some of them fail. What can I do about that, brahmin? The Realized One is the one who shows the way.” - [Mn107](#)

All the Buddha can do is point the way. So then how did that person in the sutta get enlightened after just one sentence? Well, if you read a little closer, it's because his mind was very dry on account of being withdrawn from sensuality, and obviously, devaluing sensuality thoroughly, because otherwise one sentence from the Buddha would not have been enough for enlightenment. So now, when you read thousands of the sentences from the Buddha and you're not enlightened, it's not because you read them wrongly, or because they are different sentences. It's because your sticks are wet. You can't light a fire because you're not withdrawn from sensuality.

Practically speaking, most of the work, especially for a lay person who wants to practice Dhamma without becoming a monastic, is about withdrawing from sensuality in the lay world. And that is doable. It doesn't mean it will be easy, or pleasant, but doable. The worst possible thing to think or teach others is, “Oh, you don't have to withdraw from sensuality, and you can practice for the fire, that the Buddha says is impossible to achieve for as long as you don't dry the sticks....but nevermind just keep practising without drying the sticks, soaking them in water and the sticks will magically become dry, and the fire of wisdom will arise and we will all be happy”. It doesn't work like that, as the Buddha described, all the effort that you put into trying to light a fire with wet sticks will go to waste, because you have not dried the sticks, through living physically withdrawn from sensual pleasures, and internally abandoning the value you hold towards sensual pleasures.

Withdrawal from sensuality, sustaining that mind withdrawn from sensuality, it's not just doable, it's what the practice is. Becoming immovable in that way, means that you might be one of those people that only needs one sentence for right view and enlightenment, because you did the actual work of drying your sticks from sensuality.

Q: You've done 80% of the work already.

Nm: Yes. Most people would be coming to practice the Dhamma with genuine reasons, with serious determination, but at the same time, still not completely devaluing sensuality, still thinking that they don't need to devalue sensuality, thinking, “Oh, but I don't have to because I'm not a monk”, and that's why all the effort and all the determination they have will not result in liberating wisdom.

All you need to do is read a sutta like the one we are discussing here, whereby it is clearly stated that devaluing sensuality or valuing renunciation is the necessary prerequisite, then you realise if you complete that prerequisite of living withdrawn from sensuality, you will need very little effort to light the fire.

Q: “...So too, Aggivessana, as to those contemplatives who live bodily withdrawn from sensual pleasures, and whose sensual desire, affection, infatuation, thirst, and fever for sensual pleasures has been fully abandoned internally, even if those good contemplatives feel painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, they are capable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment; and even if those good contemplatives do not feel painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, they are capable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment...”

Nm: Exactly, it doesn't matter whether they feel pain or not, because being physically withdrawn from and abandoning the mistaken value in sensuality, is where the work is, and then even a little instruction from the

sutta, let alone all the suttas that we have now in many different translations and original Pali, and so on. If your sticks are dry, you need maybe 10% of that, and you will start seeing things clearly. It's impossible not to, because you are actually doing the work on the level that matters.

Mentally abandoning sensuality is not simply about not thinking about it, it means devaluing it.

Even if you physically step outside of the puddle of sensuality, the swamp of sensuality, but still mentally value that water, you're not withdrawn from it. You might be living on top of a mountain secluded from sensual distractions, but mentally, you still value pleasure of the senses, so you don't see the peril infinitely and forever. That's why mentally you're not withdrawn from it. But if you start contemplating the infinite peril, you will be withdrawing yourself both physically and mentally. And then, things from the suttas will just start falling into place. Much more than before. And then you just do one rub of those sticks, and there is already smoke and fire starting because you have dried the sticks properly.

What I'm trying to point out, because it's obviously a subtle thing which people can easily misunderstand, it's not just, "I will never think these sensual thoughts, that might present themselves", it's whether you value, delight, entertain or indulge mentally in them. Do you see the danger? Because by seeing the danger you are automatically making yourself withdrawn from those values, from those types of thoughts. Are you withdrawn? "No". That means you're not seeing the danger. You can't decide, "I will mentally withdraw myself from it", because that mind is already in it. However, you can make your mind withdraw from it by seeing the danger in that which it values and you will never see the danger in that which you value, if you think you don't have to, if you think you're exempted from it, if you think sensuality is not a problem, if you think sensuality is not "your" problem, if you think because you're not a monk you don't need to address this. Well, if you want to practice the Dhamma, it doesn't matter whether you are a monk or not, the sticks still need to be dry.
