Gnawing Old Bones

October 10, 2007

We’ve grown up in a society that extols sensual pleasure. It would have us believe that that’s what life is all about. In some parts of it, some currents in our culture would say that that’s all there is to life. It’s the best thing that life has to offer. And huge industries have developed to keep selling us on this idea. It makes you want to stop and think, “Why do they have to sell us? Is there really that much there in sensual pleasure?” This is one of the insights that Prince Siddhartha had. He’d had all kinds of sensual pleasures, but when he reflected on death, aging, illness, and death, they started seeming empty. His friends told him, “Just put those things out of your mind. Instead of putting the sensual pleasures out of your mind, put aging, illness, and death out of your mind. Pretend like they don’t happen, and then you can go back and enjoy yourself as before.” As he said, there’s nothing noble, there’s nothing admirable about that attitude. But the advertising industry keeps telling us, “Now wait a minute, that’s all there is to life. This is what you want.” And they’ve learned all the tricks of the trade to make this quest for sensual pleasure seem sophisticated, admirable, something you want to aspire to. I remember reading about a student in an alumni magazine from Oberlin, talking about how he went into psychology because he felt there was a real need for people with knowledge of psychology in the advertising industry. That’s precisely what we don’t need. It’s more psychologists learning the tricks of the mind so they can trick the mind into wanting to buy. Because the tricks of the advertising industry are really the tricks that the mind already plays on itself. If the mind weren’t primed to lie to itself about sensual pleasure, we wouldn’t pick up on the lies that are being fed to us. You can’t blame social conditioning for the conditions in your mind, for the defilements in your mind. The seeds for those defilements are already there. A large part of the mind is just ready to jump, so it’s happy. It’s happy to hear that sensual pleasure is great. It’s ready to go along with the lie. Like the old story of the emperor’s new clothes, everyone wanted to appear sophisticated, to appear knowledgeable. So they pretended not to see what was just blatantly there and pretended to see things that were not there. A large part of the sales job lies in saying that people who don’t enjoy sensual pleasures have something wrong with them. And it is true that people who get upset about other people’s sensual pleasures tend to get angry, out of jealousy. They feel they have to deny themselves, and they get jealous when other people are not denying themselves. So they want to make sure that everybody gets denied. That’s not the Buddhist attitude. The Buddhist attitude is that you look after yourself. As for other people’s sensual pleasures, sensual desires, sensual passions, you hope that they’ll see the light. One way for them to see the light is for you to see the light first and show that not everybody who’s gone beyond sensual pleasure is twisted. Some people really are happier for having abandoned their attachment to sensual pleasures. The Buddha gives a long list of analogies to help you reflect on sensual pleasure, what it’s really like. Not just to badmouth it, but to remind you that there are higher pleasures. There’s one spot where Sister Dhammadena says the reason we go for sensual pleasure is because we see no alternative to pain. Excuse me, I think that’s the Buddha himself who says that. A large part of our meditation is to train ourselves in that alternative, to give us a wider range of skills, so we can find pleasure and find happiness in things that are not dependent on the baits of the world. But at the same time, you have to reflect on the drawbacks of the baits of the world, especially as you’re learning to master this higher form of pleasure, because it’s so easy to slip back. So I’ll have both kinds. Enjoy both the sensual pleasures and the pleasures of concentration. The problem is, as long as you’re attached to the sensual pleasures, you can’t really master the pleasures of concentration. There does come a point where it’s either/or. So it’s good to reflect on the drawbacks of sensual pleasures. One, to encourage you to put more energy into mastering concentration, and two, to help you stick with the concentration. One of the most famous of the Buddha’s analogies is comparing sensual pleasure to some bones of a dog. The dog just gnaws on the bones. Of course, there’s no meat on the bones, there’s nothing on the bones, no flavor of any kind. The only flavor on the bones is the flavor of the dog’s own saliva. The pleasure it gets out of it is the pleasure in the gnawing. The bones itself give no pleasure. What this stands for is the way the mind tends to elaborate around pleasure. The actual pleasure of eating is very little. There’s a pleasure that comes from the taste, there’s a pleasure that comes from a sense of being full and having some energy in the body. We tend to elaborate and make it more than it really is. The same goes for sexual desire. That’s not really nourishing at all. At least food gives you nourishment. But in terms of sex, it’s mostly our associations, the stories we elaborate around it. Whatever the pleasure you’re attached to, just keep reminding yourself it’s like a dog chewing on some old bones. There’s no real nourishment there. Most of that pleasure comes out of what you add to it. Is it worth the effort? Especially when you start thinking about the other drawbacks, some of the other analogies the Buddha gives. You deal with the fact that, on the one hand, you set yourself on fire when you’re given a sensual passion, and then, too, you set yourself up to be in conflict with other people. On the other hand, sensual pleasures are like borrowed goods. The owners of the goods can take them back at any time, if your pleasure depends on someone else liking you and being favorably disposed to you. They can change their mind at any time and take everything back. Another analogy is a hawk that’s got a little piece of meat. All the other hawks and crows and everything come to attack it to get that piece of meat. If it doesn’t let it go, it’s going to die. In other words, you hang on to some sensual pleasures that are going to be people’s pleasures, people who are jealous of your pleasures. They want to take it from you. So it’s good to reflect on the drawbacks as you’re enjoying something, that it’s not pure enjoyment. For one, the enjoyment in the object is not inherent in the object. Most of it has to do with the saliva you add to it, the chewing that you add to it. Then there’s the fire. One of the analogies of the Buddha is a comparison to being buried in a pit of glowing charcoals. Or another is carrying a torch on a windy day. If you’re not careful, the torch can set you on fire. Your mind gets consumed, obsessed with the pleasures, and you end up doing stupid things that you later regret. The purpose of all this is to remind you that there must be a better way. And there is a better way. There’s a greater alternative. The reason we’re not chewing on bones with a dog is because we have other ways of finding happiness. The dog’s range of skills in finding happiness is pretty limited. We have a greater range. Well, we can expand that range even further by learning how to take delight in the meditation. Finding a meditation object that captures your imagination and then exploring its possibilities. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha taught the breath as the most basic topic of meditation, because there are lots of aspects to the breath to explore. As with any skill, it’s good to think about both the advantages that come from mastering the skill and the drawbacks that come from not mastering it, because if you don’t really work at the meditation, you tend to fall back to your old sensual pleasures. So it’s good to remind yourself of their drawbacks, their dangers. They can set you on fire. They involve you in conflict. And what does it come down to? It’s just your own self. It’s alive in your own chewing. That’s about it. Don’t you want something better?

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