The Fires of Sensuality

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They say that after his awakening, the Buddha surveyed the world with an eye of a Buddha. He saw all the creatures of the world, all the beings of the world on fire with a fever of sensual desire, a fever of anger, a fever of delusion. In the passage we chanted just now, the Buddha talks about how the eye is on fire, the passion, aversion, delusion, the ear, nose, tongue, body, mind. It’s burning with these things. Each of the senses is burning with these things. That’s how things look to the eye of the Buddha. Now, to our eyes, things look very different. There are certain sounds, sights, smells, tastes, tactile sensations that we find really delicious, that we really like. Yet the Buddha is saying that we like fire. So this is one of the difficult parts of the path, to allow for the idea that maybe the Buddha is right, that we see things wrongly. In the image he gives, we see that he lives in the texts of a man who has leprosy. He’s got all these horrible wounds. He has to cauterize them over fire to get rid of the itch. Then later, he gets cured of his leprosy. He doesn’t want to go near the fire anymore, because now his perceptions are right. The fire is hot and burning. So the message is that we’re the ones that are suffering from distorted perceptions, and it doesn’t help that the body needs food in order to survive. Certain things taste good, and other things don’t taste good. It’s very easy to get attached to the flavors of those things, and from there we get attached to other flavors—the flavors of sights, the flavors of sounds. All the way into the mind. So the first thing we have to reflect on is the danger of sensuality. Here, sensuality doesn’t mean just lust. It means our passion for our resolves, our passion for our sensual resolves. In other words, the plans that we like to make about sensual pleasures. We actually spend more time and seem to get more enjoyment out of those than we do out of the actual pleasures, the actual sensations. Thinking about food is often much more pleasant than actually eating it. Thinking about any sensual pleasure is more pleasant than actually experiencing it. And our real attachment is to the thinking. It’s the mind that’s more on fire than anything else. But you have to look at what we do in order to gain those pleasures, all the selfish and grubby and other things that we do in order to get what we want. And then once we’ve got it, how long does it last? You still like to note two things. One is that if you asked, “Where are the sensual pleasures of last week, of yesterday? Where are they right now?” They’re gone. Think of all the effort you put in to get them. And then they go, go, go. Nothing really lasts. Nothing stays with you except the memory. Sometimes the memory is pleasant. Often it’s unpleasant. Thinking about the fact that those pleasures are gone, sometimes thinking about the things you had to do in order to get them, and then the consequences. The other thing you like to point out is that most of the murders in the world are between people who’ve had sex. If it were a good thing, why would people do that? If it were wonderful, why would people do that? Then when it was done, everybody would be very happy. They wouldn’t really care whether the person you were having sex with went off and had it with somebody else. But that’s not the way it goes. There’s a sense of betrayal. If it really were good, there wouldn’t be any betrayal at all. That shows that part of the mind already knows that our slavery to sensual desires really is an unappetizing thing, a dishonorable thing. And yet we try to block out that part of the mind. This is precisely the part of the mind that we need if we’re going to gain any insight, if we’re going to gain any good, strong concentration, gain any freedom. This is why so much of the canon is devoted to looking at the drawbacks of sensual pleasures, carrying a torch against the wind. If you don’t let go of the torch, you’re going to get burned. It’s like a drop of honey on the blade of a knife. It’s like a raptor having a little piece of meat, and other raptors come and tear at it. If the first bird doesn’t let go, it’s going to get torn up along with the meat. There are long, long lists of the images of the drawbacks of sensuality. Someone once asked, “Why does the Buddha focus so much on the negative side of these things?” It’s because we’re so addicted to what we see as the positive side, and we need to be reminded that there’s a lot of negativity going on here. It’s the part of the mind that’s going to say, “Yes.” It can know that it’s not alone in the world. Most of the society we live in is obsessed with sensuality. We say that anyone who wants to go find a kind of pleasure that’s not immersed in sensuality is crazy or warped or repressed or whatever. That there’s something wrong with you. That part of the mind just gets starved, starved, starved, and it feels all alone. So what the Buddha here is doing is giving some food to that part of the mind, the part of the mind that wants happiness that doesn’t have to be tied down to these things. These contemplations will help incline the mind to want to find a sense of well-being, a sense of ease, of another sort, a sort that’s, as the texts say, secluded from sensuality. So it often helps to get yourself into good concentration by reflecting on the drawbacks of sensual passion, how the object is not all that the mind likes to dress it up to be, and the actual pursuit of that object can often be demeaning. And all the thinking that goes into pursuing that object is a huge waste of time. It’s a passage where the Buddha said that even though he doesn’t praise sleeping a lot, he said you’d be better off sleeping than indulging in sensual thoughts. So it’s good to think about the drawbacks of these things. It helps the mind be more inclined to get into concentration. And then the concentration helps give you an alternative form of pleasure. Because if you’re going to drop one form of pleasure, you’ve got to find another one to take its place. This is why the pleasure of fully inhabiting the form of your body is a higher level and an important part of the practice. As the Buddha once said, you can know all you want about the drop of pleasure. You can know the drawbacks of sensuality, but if you haven’t tasted the pleasure that comes from getting the mind, as he says, secluded from sensuality and giving rise to the sense of ease and rapture that comes from seclusion, you’re not going to be able to pry yourself loose from sensual desires. You need a higher pleasure, a more refined pleasure, a pleasure that saturates your whole sense of the body, to compare with the pleasure that comes from sensuality. So this is why it’s important that you develop a sense of ease and well-being, inhabiting your body, relaxing the different parts of the body, easing the breath energy throughout the different parts of the body, getting a breath energy that feels good and then just allowing it to spread, and then enjoying it. That’s an important tool for prying you loose from your sensual desires. When the Buddha says you’re secluded from sensuality, it doesn’t mean that you’re losing all sense of your senses. That’s not what the word sensuality means. It simply means that the mind is not involved in its plans for sensual pleasures, and it looks for pleasure right here. You relate to the sensation of the body in a way that allows that sensation to feel good. Some people have trouble focusing on the breath and getting the breath to move through the body. So if the concept of breath energy in the body doesn’t help, what way of conceiving the body sitting here does? You might think of the cells, each little cell getting a little space, each cell getting full of nice energy coming from within. It doesn’t have to come from any place else. Just within the cell feels good. Then each little cell joins in, joins in, joins in, and the whole body feels good. So you’re breathing in such a way that none of the cells feel squeezed, none of the cells feel that their energy is being depleted in any way. When you breathe in, they fill up, and when you breathe out, they still stay full. Try holding that perception in mind. See if it helps. It’s like that old image from vipassana. Your insight helps develop your concentration. Your concentration helps develop your insight. It’s like your two hands washing each other. You have just one hand washing itself. It doesn’t get the job done. Your right hand has to help wash your left hand. Your left hand helps to wash your right hand. You’re two of them working together. They both get clean. So the contemplation of the drawbacks of sensuality helps get you into concentration, and the concentration makes it easier to stay away from the sensuality. If you find yourself being obsessed with sensual thoughts, make a survey of the body. Which parts of the body are you feeling starved? That’s usually what happens. There’s a sense of the body that’s starved of energy and it needs a good hit of energy. So instead of trying to provide it by sensual thinking, you can provide it by the way you relate to the breath, by the way you relate to the feeling of the cells in the body. You might want to start in the hands. From the hands, work up the arms. Then start with the feet. From the feet, work up the legs. That helps to take away some of the hunger that wants to go for a good sensual hit. As you focus on the drawbacks of whatever object it is you’re desiring, it makes it easier to look at the desire itself. Do you really want to stay involved with this desire? Look at the physical side of just sitting here desiring. Look at the way the mind burns. This is not the flame of jhana. This is the flame of a fire that’s just very erratic, flickering all over the place. It’s exhausting. You keep asking yourself, why is it that the mind wants to paint these things that it lusts for, the things that it desires? Why does it want to paint them in such a positive light? What does it get out of this? Sometimes the physical symptoms of feeling turned on, if it’s sexual desire, and then there are other physical symptoms that go along with thinking about food, say, or thinking about any pleasure, thinking about music. Why do you need the sensual object in order to feel those good feelings? Can’t you feel good in your skin simply by breathing, by focusing the mind on a different level? Why does it like to play these games with itself? This is why it’s important to be able to step back from our normal views about sensual pleasures and be willing to admit, well, they have their drawbacks. The part of the mind that feels nourished when you finally say yes, the part of the mind that’s been starved because you’ve been focusing so much on your sensual desires, give that part of the mind a chance to have some nourishment. Give it some space. Give it the opportunity to grow. Because that’s the part of the mind that will lead you to freedom.

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