Stop Feeding Sensual Desire

August 11, 2014

The world is swept away, and yet it keeps coming back. It’s like a sandbar in a river. A flood comes and washes the sandbar away. Then you come back a couple months later and there’s a new sandbar. There’s something that keeps generating in the world. And as for the world outside, that’s not the issue. It’s the world that you’re generating, your experience of the world. And your consciousness and your craving keep coming back. They feed each other. We crave the things we’re aware of, and the craving itself becomes an anchor and a clinging for consciousness. And as long as there’s that hunger, it just keeps going and going and going, whereas this body picks up another one. It’s a process that keeps feeding itself. And you get tied up in the affairs of the world and you forget to look at the process. Where are these things coming from? The habits in the mind. And as long as they keep feeding on one another, sustaining one another, nourishing one another, the process is not going to stop. This is why we need to turn our attention inward to the source of all these things, to see what keeps it going, going, going. The Buddha once said, “There’s no beginning point where you can trace back in time to say that before this there was no ignorance, this is when ignorance started.” The ignorance that causes us to suffer. But he says it is sustained here in the present moment. So you want to look and see what’s sustaining it. And it’s those hindrances that talk about the things that get in the way of your concentration. So as you settle down here, try to stay with the breath. Try to be comfortable with the breath. Find a rhythm and breathing quality that feels good. You’ll find that other things come in to get in the way. Sometimes you can just brush them away like flies. They’ll go away. Other flies come back. That’s your first line of defense. If they get in the way of your seeing the breath or being with the breath, try to brush them away and try to get more familiar with the breath. Be more sensitive to the breath as it’s coming in and going out. Make the breath a more interesting place to stay. But if they keep coming back, back, back, you’ve got to do something else. One of the first lines of defense is to look at the drawbacks of these things. Take sensual desire as an example. What is it about the desire that attracts you? You can probably say that lots of things attract you. What are the drawbacks? When you start looking at the drawbacks, the Buddha has you look at two things. One, the drawbacks of the objects, and two, the drawbacks of the desire itself. When you start looking at them, you realize you haven’t looked that carefully at what you’re doing. You just ride along with it. However pretty an object may be, or nice to any of your other senses, there’s always going to be a bad side. And we’re really good at blocking it out. So you look at it until you begin to see that the object itself doesn’t have that much that’s really worth looking into. That’s when you can turn around and look at the real problem, which is this current of the mind that keeps flowing out. There’s an energy that goes into these things that we really like. You have to ask yourself, “Is it really something you really want to like? Because for many times it’s just the sense,”Okay, I’ve got to get this, and then I’ll be relieved.” Well, the desire itself is what you have to be relieved from. We think, “Well, as long as I get what I want, then the desire will stop.” But it doesn’t stop the desire. It just aggravates it. The Buddha compares it to someone who’s got a lot of wounds and scabs on them. You pick the scabs off and you scratch and scratch because it itches. And the more you itch it, the worse the situation gets. And when you discover, okay, it’s not the object that you’re after, it’s the thrill of the chase, the fascination with just thinking and thinking and thinking about these things. And you look at it in and of itself and you begin to realize there’s not that much there. There’s nothing of any real substance, nothing you can grab hold of and say, “Okay, I gain something out of this.” Because that’s what desire is. It’s the desire to gain something. But it’s just a constant hunger that never gets full. And you think about how long you’ve driven yourself with these desires, and where do they get you? Isn’t it time to fight? Fight back. Okay, the fighting back is not going to be easy, but one of the reasons we meditate is to give you the energy you need, the strength you need, so you can use all the weapons that the Buddha gives you. There’s the weapon of sense restraint. Every time you look at something that excites desire, you have to look at the other side. And you also have to ask yourself, “Who’s doing the looking here? Is it me, or is it my desire, or is it my anger?” Ill will is another hindrance. When your desire gets thwarted, the person who’s gotten in your way really does seem to be someone who’s worthy of ill will. You’d like to see that person suffer. But what’s accomplished by that? And what kind of mind state is this that goes for ill will? The ill will and the sensual desire go together. They’re very strongly related. As the Buddha said, there’s love that gives rise to love, and love that gives rise to hatred. Hatred that gives rise to love, and hatred that gives rise to hatred. These things just get tied up together. So there are times when you have to contemplate to see the drawbacks of the things that you desire. The old statement is, “Watch out for the things you desire, because you may get them.” So you see the drawbacks of that. Then you look at the drawbacks of the processes in the mind that keep going, going, going, and then coming up with nothing or worse than nothing. John Lee has a nice analogy. He says, “When you give in to your desires, it’s like hanging around with thieves and crooks, conmen. They get what they want out of you, and then they leave you, especially when the police come.” So this is one of the ways of dealing with these hindrances. They keep ignorance going. You’ve got to look into them and see them as processes. There’s an old saying about when the finger points at the moon, you want to look at the moon and not worry about the finger. Well, that’s wrong in this case. All those voices in the mind that tell you, “Look there, look there,” you’ve got to look back and see, “Who are these voices? Who is this finger pointing at the moon? What is this finger? What does it want out of me?” This way you get to see these processes as they’re happening, as they’re churning out more and more worlds to replace the ones that get swept away. This is an important weapon in your arsenal, the ability to reflect on what’s actually going on in the mind. The best reflection comes when the mind has been really quiet. You’ve been with the breath. You’ve been nourished by the breath, so you have strength. But there are times when you’ve got to engage in it before you can get that strength, and that requires determination. In the quality of the Buddha’s Sangha, you’ve seen enough of the horrors of following these things. This at least gives you the initial impetus, but that impetus doesn’t stay very long. Unless you have these other skills, too, nourishing. So instead of craving, nourishing, more craving, and the hindrances nourishing more ignorance, you want to have the nourishment that comes from the sense of well-being as you settle down with the breath. As the energies in the mind get gathered, that nourishes something else. That nourishes the qualities of the path. So look at who you’re feeding. It’s like you have all kinds of animals in your house, and you’ve been feeding the snakes and the scorpions and all the animals that want to kill you. You have to ask yourself, when have you had enough? Why not feed the animals that can actually help you with your work? They do exist. Jon Mohaboe has a nice talk where he says, “When we start out, it seems like the path is something imposed from the outside, and our defilements are us, and we’re being attacked by the path.” You have to switch your allegiance. Learn to identify with the voices in your mind that do want to practice the path. Let them be. You let them be yours. And pry away the misunderstanding that the defilements are you when their voices speak. It’s not you speaking, it’s just a voice in the mind. Learn how to see that as something separate. Then once they’re something separate, learn how to see that they’re paper tigers. They may have very realistic-looking faces, but if you don’t let yourself get scared by the face, you can look at it and the body is just made out of folded paper. Then you realize that you’ve been feeding on folded paper. It’s not that nourishing. Try to find other sources of nourishment for the mind. You can nourish the other animals in there, the ones that are good, the ones that are helpful. They do exist.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2014/140811_Stop_Feeding_Sensual_Desire.mp3>