The Allure of Sensuality

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Years back I was reading an article about a man who had started investing in the stock market back in the 1950s. And he asked for some advice from somebody new. What would be a good stock to invest in and not have to worry about selling and buying, just sticking with the stock? And the friend said, “Choose a company that produces a product that everybody knows is bad for them, but they buy it anyhow.” And so the writer invested in tobacco stocks. And sure enough, tobacco stocks kept going up and up and up, no matter what was said about how they caused cancer or the deceptions of the tobacco industry. The stocks just kept climbing. It shows the perverseness of the human mind. All too often the things we know are bad for us are the things we’re most attached to, because we think we’re getting something out of them that compensates for the bad effects those things can have. This is why the Buddhist analysis of the things that we’re trying to get past in the practice includes not only seeing their drawbacks but also seeing their allure. What is it that pulls us to them? We’re working here on concentration, and one of the prerequisites for concentration is that you put aside sensuality, that you are secluded from sensual thoughts. This doesn’t mean that you’re secluded from sensual pleasures. The pleasures themselves are not the problem. It’s the fact that the mind keeps thinking about these things and planning, “I would like this and I would like that.” Whatever the pleasure may be. It’s like thinking of fixing our food. You’ve got a fish or you’ve got a vegetable. How would you fix it? You could think about it for hours. It’s the same with our pleasures concerning other people, other things. We can imagine all kinds of different recipes. And the mind takes a real pleasure in that. As the Buddha said, we’re attached to this kind of pleasure because we don’t see any other alternative to pain, which is one of the reasons why we try to get the mind into concentration. To give it that other alternative that has a lot less drawbacks. Because the problem with sensuality is that even though we may think we’re powerful and clever because we can get the sensual pleasures we want, that’s a lot of the allure right there. We’ve discovered that in advertisements, if you were to put a person in the advertisement that the person you’re aiming at can identify with and yet at the same time admire, in other words, someone who’s better looking, wealthier, whatever, more than we are, we’ll tend to try to identify with that. We think, “If I buy that product, then I’ll be like that person.” So all too often the pleasure itself is not what we’re after. We’re after an image of ourselves as the purveyor and consumer of those pleasures. But then you look at what it’s like for the mind to be enslaved to a pleasure like that. And the people who are trying to get your money, they don’t respect you. All too often, the people you look for to provide you with the pleasures, they don’t respect you. And as if self-sacrifice is what we were saying earlier this afternoon, when you’re dependent on a particular kind of sensual pleasure, it puts you in a position of real weakness. Part of you may say, “Well, I can do without it.” But then there’s the other part that really hankers after it and will do anything at all to get that. And you suddenly find yourself doing things you otherwise wouldn’t have imagined doing. So that’s why it’s good to look at the drawbacks and look at the allure, to see how false and hollow the allure is and what a lie it is to yourself. That’s when you finally decide that, yes, you’ve been lying to yourself and you’ve been believing these lies. That’s when you can begin to get beyond this, the sense of somewhere that comes in, “I’ve been such a fool for so long.” You really have to work on that. Do what you can to develop that. Because that’s what’s going to get you out. In some of Ajahn Lee’s early writings, he talks about the need to develop a sense of sangha, to get the mind into concentration. This is one of the areas where it’s really important to get the mind secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful mental qualities. You’ve got to see the drawbacks of those things. You’ve got to see that you’ve been complicit in a lie, complicit in a cover-up. And you realize what a fool you’ve been, or how foolishly you’ve acted. Let’s put it that way. But there is that sense that you were identifying with an image of yourself that was pretty cool because it could get those pleasures, or it wanted those pleasures. People can be very attached to their views about themselves based on the pleasures that they like, their taste in sensuality. You can be very disdainful of people whose taste in sensuality is the least bit different. But it all comes down to the same thing. You’re a prisoner. You’re a slave. Running after the least little thing. And when part of the mind says, “Enough, that’s your way out,” then you try to bring the mind to the pleasure of just inhabiting your body. At first, it doesn’t have a lot of the lights and images around it. It has a lot of self-image that makes those other pleasures pleasurable. But again, those pleasures need that sense of self-image. One of the Buddha’s main ways of dealing with sensuality is to say, “Well, look at the things you’re actually anchoring for and then take them apart and look at them very carefully. Look at the parts that you ordinarily would not want to look at, the parts that you have to be in such denial about. And the stronger your attachments, the more you’ve got to look at those negative signs. And then you realize the reason you didn’t see those negative signs is because that image you had, the allure, blinded you. But the pleasure of concentration doesn’t need all that advertisement, doesn’t need all those allures. It’s simple, it’s basic, it’s right here. It’s when you appreciate it as being something really safe that you begin to develop a taste for it. And as you get to know it better, you realize it’s not only safe, but also has a more intense and more solid sense of well-being. Because what is the well-being we get out of sensual pleasures? There’s a little bit of point there where the mind can just rest in an image or in a sensation, but it can’t stay very long. Which means it has to go searching again, searching again. We’re here just being with the breath. If you can maintain this sense of well-being, you find that the effect that this kind of pleasure has on the mind is very different. It’s soothing, it’s calming, it’s solidifying. It’s satisfying, as opposed to the kinds of pleasures that we get from what Ajaan Foon used to call”fresh, hot defilements.” There’s a little bit of moment where the mind can rest with a sense of itself or with a pleasure, but then it gets aggravated. And once that again has to find its way back, there’s a part of the mind that will be willing to do almost anything, and there are parts of the mind that will do anything to get that pleasure back, which is why you can’t trust it. And the pleasure concentration makes the mind a lot more trustworthy, because you know you’ve got something good right here that doesn’t require situations outside to be just so, and doesn’t impose your ideas of what you want on other people. Think of that image the Buddha had of everything in the world being laid claim to. If you wanted to get any happiness, you were going to have to take things away from somebody else. Of course, other people would come along, and they’d see what you’ve got, and they’d want to take that away from you. But nobody can take your concentration away from you. They can’t come moving in and take your breath and elbow you out. The only thing that can do that is your greed, aversion, and delusion. Ask yourself, “Why do I keep siding with those?” Think of that image in the Dhamma Reflections about the world being a slave to craving. It goes together with an image in the Sutta that it’s drawn from of a king who’s got everything he really needs. He’s 80 years old. He’s about ready to die. And he says that if someone came and said there was another kingdom that he could conquer, all the wealth that he might want, he’d go ahead and conquer it, even if it was on the other side of the sea. I mean, think of how ridiculous that is. That’s what sensuality is like. It’ll go for anything. Years back, we were having our evening satsang. We had a sweet drink at Vadasokaram after the evening chant, but it was late afternoon. And this couple came walking by, a little tiny, tiny, tiny woman who was a huge, big Westerner. And one of the monks said, “Craving knows no bounds.” That’s what you’re taking as your companion when you start going for sensuality, something that knows no bounds at all. And it’s totally arbitrary as to what you might decide the pleasure’s going to be today or the pleasure tomorrow. And if you develop a real hankering for it, then it does become the case that you will do anything at all, even when you know that it’s bad for you, to try to get that pleasure. And that’s scary, because it means the mind is totally heedless at that point. So the Buddhist question always is, “Do you really love yourself? Do you really care for yourself? If so, why don’t you look after yourself, protect yourself from these false friends?” Because, after all, sensuality was such a good thing. Why is it to say that divorce court is the most violent court in the system? Or if a couple of people have been having sex and one of them betrays the other one, why does the other one feel so horribly betrayed? It’s because their image of themselves, their image of the relationship, is suddenly destroyed. And that’s what they’re actually holding on to more than anything else. So look into your self-image around the pleasures you go for. Try to see where you’re lying to yourself, and where you’re having to dress the pleasure things up in order to make them appealing. Then look at this pleasure that the Buddha offers. It doesn’t require dressing up. It doesn’t involve any bad karma at all. No bad consequences now or into the future. That’s when you see that you’ve been acting very foolishly and not going for the Buddha’s pleasure. That’s when you’re beginning to grow up. And really take your happiness seriously, so that no investor can make any money off you at all.

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