Quite Secluded from Sensuality

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Before you get the mind in concentration, you’ve got to release certain thoughts of sensuality. Sometimes that’s not hard. You know where your comfortable spot is in the body. As you breathe. And so you go right there. Immediately you’re inside the form of the body. And you can find pleasure there. You need that pleasure in order to get away from sensuality. To maintain your distance. But there are other times when you come here and the mind just keeps going back. Thoughts of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. Narratives about how you get this sensual pleasure, how you get that sensual pleasure. We’re really good at fabricating this kind of mental activity. Talking about direct thought and evaluation. It’s easy to direct our thoughts there and evaluate which sensual pleasure we like most. As with food. Think of all the different recipes there are. Just for something simple like ratatouille. Some people can get very worked up around that. I think I’ve mentioned to you the time I was in France and someone made a ratatouille with olives. I mentioned to some other French people and they just shivered at the very idea. What that shows is that some people have some very clear ideas of what they want in terms of sensual pleasures. And other people are more creative. But whatever it is, the mind can be very creative in that direction. So you have to be creative in the other direction. This is why the Buddha gives you so many things to think about in terms of the drawbacks of sensuality. He talks about all the different occupations that people have and how much they suffer in those occupations. Just being a farmer, a very simple occupation, you suffer a lot. And then there’s no guarantee that your crops are going to grow, or that they’re going to get a good price, or that there will be enough rain. Or that there may be too much rain. And even when you do get what you want in terms of a good crop, or whatever the good reward is for your work, there are always people ready to take it away. Because of sensuality it’s why we have fights. Children fight with their parents. Parents fight with their children. Husbands and wives fight with each other, brothers and sisters. And then it goes from the family out into the countries. Nations fight with one another. Over what? Over sensuality. It’s why people go to war. It’s why people commit crimes, and then they’re caught for those crimes, and then all the sufferings. The canon goes into some very graphic descriptions of the tortures they had in those days. All this because of that attachment to sensuality. The Buddha has lots and lots of images. Sensuality is like a dog chewing on a chain of bones. Because remember, sensuality is not something so much your fascination with objects. It’s your attachment to thinking about sensual objects. We love to think about these things. We spend hours thinking about a meal. And when it comes, it’s not all that much. But you’re still attached to the thinking. There’ll be times when I was in Thailand and I had to go to Bangkok and in the afternoon you could smell the barbecue chicken and all the other things that people made to sell to students as they were coming out of school. And you’d think to yourself how much you hadn’t had that, how much you miss it. And it would so happen the next day you’d actually get that in your bowl. And it’d be a disappointment, in that the mind doesn’t learn. You can fantasize that about it all over again. And the dog chewing on a chain of bones doesn’t get anything out of it. As Ajaan Lee says, what it gets out of it is the taste of its saliva. There’s the image of carrying a torch against the wind. Of course the flame is going to come back and burn you. The image of a bead of honey on a blade of a knife. The hawk carrying off a piece of meat. And other birds coming to attack it to get that piece of meat. Once you gain sensual pleasures, lots of people would like to get what you got. And many of them will stop at nothing to take it away from you. It’s like borrowed goods. You’d like to show off your borrowed goods but they don’t really belong to you. They can be taken back at any time. So the Buddha gives you some ways of reasoning with yourself about why sensuality is not a good place to be. And he gives lots and lots of images. Because the mind, when it’s dealing in sensuality, is dealing in images. So you need images to counteract it. And of course there’s the contemplation of the body. When you fantasize about somebody’s body, you focus on certain details and you block out other ones. He says, well look at the ones you’re blocking out. You may be attracted to the skin. But what if you took the skin off and just had it in a pile? You’d run away. I have some monks in Thailand who would go to autopsies. Over there they allow you in, if you’re a monk. And one of those told me on the way back, on the way out, he stopped off in the office of one of the doctors and there was a girly calendar on the wall. Here’s somebody looking at dead bodies all day. You’d have to keep that one connection with sensual pleasure, with sensual fantasies going. It shows how the mind can really compartmentalize things like this. And so what we’re trying to do with the analysis of the body is break down the compartments, break down the walls. So you can ask yourself, what are you really lusting after? What are you really desiring? And sometimes you find it’s not so much the other person’s body, but it’s something about the narrative. Look into that, how much the narratives tend to be lies. The purpose of all this is to get you to realize that you’re looking for happiness, if you’re looking in sensuality for happiness, in the wrong place. John Lee in the Dharma book said he wrote before he wrote Keeping the Breath in Mind, would preface his comments on meditation by talking about different ways of inducing a sense of sanghvega. In other words, you get the mind still, not so much out of force of will, but through reflection. This is one of the distinctive teachings of the forest tradition. And John Lee mentions in his very first book what he learned from Ajahn Mun was it’s not simply a case of developing virtue and then developing concentration and then developing discernment. You start out with discernment. After all, the no-blade-fold path starts out with discernment. We get the right view about things and the mind is more inclined to want to settle down. So in this case, if you find it easy to settle down with the breath, go right ahead. But if not, think in ways that will develop sanghvega. You’ve been creative for who knows how many eons in thinking of different sensual pleasures, different sensual fantasies. Be creative in thinking of ways of counteracting them. Use your ability to visualize. Visualize for the purpose of the Dharma, for the purpose of freeing yourself, rather than for tying yourself down. So remember, meditation is not simply getting the mind to a state where it’s not thinking, or it’s open and receptive to whatever comes up. You have a purpose in getting it to settle down. You’re trying to find a happiness that’s not dependent on sensuality. Something that’s secluded from sensuality. So you can work on the causes of suffering. Suffering itself includes sensual clinging. And the cause is sensual craving. And the clinging and that craving are first in the list when the Buddha describes the first and the second Noble Truths. And even before he would teach the Noble Truths to people. He’d start out with his step-by-step discourse, talking about how good it is to be generous, how good it is to be virtuous. And then talking about the rewards that would come. And some of them are sensual rewards. People go to heaven where the pleasures are much more refined than they are here. But then even those heavenly sensual pleasures have their big drawbacks. You get lazy, you get complacent, you become weak. Imagine it would be like every time you thought of something it would appear immediately. You wouldn’t be developing any character at all. What character you did develop with your generosity and virtue would wither away. So if you’re not practicing the Dharma there, then when you fall, you fall hard. That’s with heaven. Heavenly sensual pleasures, which don’t involve a lot of struggle, devious ways human beings can devise to satisfy their desires for sensuality. You can imagine what happens after a life of looking for sensual pleasures of that sort, what that does to you. So really see what the Buddha called the drawbacks, the degradation of sensual sensuality. That’s when you’re ready for the Four Noble Truths. That’s when you’re ready for the Noble Eightfold Path, the practice of right concentration. The Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths in response to our desire for an end of suffering. But he didn’t pander to that desire. In other words, he didn’t tell us that it was going to be easy. And it starts with this issue of sensuality. If you really want to put it into suffering, there’s some hard truths you have to accept. And one is that you’re actually causing yourself to suffer the more you fantasize about sensual pleasures. As he himself admitted, his heart didn’t leap up at the idea of abandoning sensualities. But when he realized that that was the only way to gain release from suffering, that’s when he was willing to take on the task of renunciation and use his imagination, which had been generating sensual thoughts for who knows how long. To generate thoughts that would help with renunciation. So the end of suffering may not be easy, but it is possible. That’s the message of the Four Noble Truths. And it’s a message we shall take to heart.

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