

The Fires of Sensuality

May 17, 2009

They say that, after his awakening, the Buddha surveyed the world with the eye of a Buddha. He saw all the beings in the world on fire with the fever of sensual desire, the fever of anger, the fever of delusion. And in the passage we chanted just now, the Buddha talks about how the eye is on fire with passion, aversion, and delusion. The ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind are burning with these things. Each of the senses is burning with these things. That's how things looked to the Buddha.

Now, to our eyes, things look very different. We see certain sights, sound, smell, tastes, tactile sensations as food that's really delicious, that we really like. And yet the Buddha is saying that we like fire.

One of the difficult parts of the path is to allow for the idea that maybe the Buddha is right, that we see things wrongly. The image he gives in the texts is of a man with leprosy who's got all these horrible wounds. He has to cauterized 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.

The message is that, as long as we're unawakened, we're suffering from distorted perceptions. And it doesn't help that the body needs food in order to survive, and that certain things taste good while other things don't taste good. It's very easy to get attached to the flavors of those things, and from there we can attached to other flavors, the flavors of sights, the flavors of the sounds, all the way to 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 are our passion for our sensual resolves: the plans we like to make about sensual pleasures. We actually spend more time and seem to get more enjoyment out of those plans than we do get out of the actual pleasures, out of 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. Our real attachment is to the thinking. The mind is 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 grumpy and other things we do in order to get what we want. And once we've got it, how long does it last? Ajaan Suwat used to note two things. One is that, if you ask, the sensual pleasures of last week, of yesterday: Where they are

now? They're gone. You 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 memories. Sometimes the memories are pleasant, but often they're unpleasant—thinking about the fact that those pleasures are gone, sometimes thinking of the unskillful things you had to do in order to get them, and then the consequences.

Another thing he liked to point out was that most of the murders in the world are between people who've had sex with each other. If sex were a good thing, why would people do that? If it were wonderful, then when it was done, everybody would very happy. You wouldn't really care whether the person you were having sex with went off and had sex 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 our mind already knows that our slavery to sensual desires really is an unappetizing thing, a dishonorable thing. Yet we try block out that part of the mind.

This is precisely the part of the mind we need to look into if we're going to gain any insight, if we're going to gain any good strong concentration, any freedom. This is why so much of the Canon is devoted to looking at the drawbacks of sensual pleasures, saying that sensuality is like 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—long, long lists of the images of the drawbacks of sensuality.

People often ask, why is Buddha focused so much on the negative side of these things? It's because we're so addicted to what we see as their positive side. We need to be reminded that there's a lot of negativity going on here, so that the part of the mind that's going to say Yes, there are these drawbacks, can know it's not alone in the world. After all, most of the human society we live in is obsessed with sensuality. They say that anyone who wants to 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. As a result, that part of the mind just gets starved, starved, starved, so that it feels all alone.

What the Buddha is doing here is giving some food to that part of the mind, the part of the mind that wants a 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, as the texts say, is secluded from sensuality. It often helps to get the mind into good concentration by reflecting on the drawbacks of sensual passion, how the objects are not at all

like what the mind dresses them up to be, how the actual pursuit of sensual objects can often be demeaning, and how all the thinking that goes into pursuing those objects is a huge waste of energy and time.

There's a passage where the Buddha said that even though he doesn't praise sleeping a lot, 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 provide you with an alternative form of pleasure. After all, if you're going to drop one form of pleasure, you have to find another one to take its place. This is why the pleasure of fully inhabiting the form of your body, which is a higher level of pleasure, is an important part of the practice.

As the Buddha once said, you can know all you want about the drawbacks of sensuality, but if you haven't tasted at least the pleasure that comes from getting the mind secluded from sensuality, giving rise to a 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 can saturate your whole sense of the body to compare with the pleasure that comes from sensuality.

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 the breath energy to feel good and 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 awareness 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. Instead, it looks for pleasure right here with the breath. How can 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 breath energy in the body doesn't help, what way of conceiving the body sitting here *does* help? 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 anyplace else, just within the cell, and it feels good. Then each little cell joins in, joins in, joins in with the others, till the whole body feels good, so that you're breathing in such way that none of the cells feel squeezed, none of the cells feels that their energy is being depleted in any way. When you breathe in, they fill up. 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 Upasika Kee for how your insight helps develop your concentration, and your concentration helps develop your insight. It's like your two hands washing each other. If 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. The two of them working together get cleaned.

In the same way, the contemplation of the drawbacks of sensuality helps get you into concentration, and the concentration makes it easier to stay away from sensuality. If you find yourself being obsessed with sensual thoughts, make a survey of the body. Which parts of the body are feeling starved? That's usually what happens: There's a sense of the body starved of energy. It needs a good hit of energy. So instead of providing that hit with sensual thinking, you can provide it by the way you relate to the breath, provide it by the way you relate to the feeling of the cells in the body. You might want to start with your hands, and from the hands work up the arms. Then you can start with your feet, and from your feet, work up the legs, up the back. That helps to take away some of the hunger that wants to go for a quick 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: You're 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 very erratic, flickering all over the place. It's exhausting. Keep asking yourself: Why is it that the mind wants to paint these pictures? The things that it desires: Why does it paint them in such a positive light? What does it get out of this?

Sometimes there are 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 a 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 need to play these games with itself?

This is why it's important is to step back from our normal views about sensual pleasures and be willing to admit, well, yes, they have their drawbacks. The part of the mind that feels nourished when you finally say, yes, the part of the mind that has been starved because you're 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 to freedom.