

Sensuality

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Two big enemies of concentration are sensual desire and ill will. It's all too easy—as you're sitting here putting aside your duties of the day, your various responsibilities, and you create an empty space here in the present moment—that these are the thoughts that come flooding in: the sensual pleasures you'd like to fantasize about. When the Buddha talks about sensuality, it's not so much the pretty things out there, or the nice sounds, or the good tastes, or whatever, it's our obsession with thinking about these things, mulling them over and over in the mind. And it's a peculiar fascination, because you don't get any nourishment out of it. You can think about delicious food all day, but it doesn't nourish you.

The same with ill will: The mind settles down and is still for a minute, and then you suddenly think about the people who have harmed you, the injustices you've been subject to. And even though it's not a pleasant thing to think about, the mind feeds, feeds, feeds on these things, perhaps out of a sense of self-justification. After all, that person really did do those horrible things, and you'd like to see him or her get what's coming to them. You're totally in the right. But wanting to be in the right this way totally destroys any opportunity for the mind to settle down, to be at ease, to have a sense of solid foundation here in the present moment.

So you've got to learn how to think about the drawbacks of these things. Ill will is the easier of the two, because we all know what happens with ill will. People get into arguments, they get into fights: All the strife in the world, the suffering is obvious. And it's easy to look at ourselves when we're really angry at somebody, or have a lot of ill will and see that the mind is on fire. It's not a pleasant place to be.

The drawbacks of sensuality, though, are harder to see. This is where the mind gets really resistant to the Buddha's teachings on putting aside sensuality, learning how to practice renunciation. He tells you to look at the drawbacks of sensuality, but we find fault with him for doing so. Someone once complained to me: Why is the Buddha focused so much on the negative side of sensuality? And the reason is because we tend to focus so much on what we see as the positive side, all the pleasure we get out of thinking about these things. But that, too, gets in the way. As these thoughts come into the mind again, and again, and again, they create ruts. And from thinking, it tends to go to action: words you say, things you do. So it's often useful to stop and think about all the stupid things you've done under the influence of sensual desire, to realize that there must be a better way of finding happiness, and there must be a better kind of happiness.

Of course, one of the best ways of undercutting that fascination with sensuality is to develop an alternative kind of pleasure, like the pleasure of concentration. It's almost like we're faced with a Catch-22: If you're fascinated with sensuality, it's hard to get into concentration, and if you can't get into concentration, then it's hard to really pull yourself away from sensuality. But you can chip at this bit by bit. This is one of those areas where you want to use your wisdom and discernment to develop concentration. It's the theme of one of Ajaan Maha Boowa's books. In fact, his book of meditation instructions is entitled, *Discernment Fosters Concentration*.

You have to think about these things for a bit to realize the drawbacks of sensuality, realize the advantages of finding a happiness inside, even when you haven't fully tasted how really good the pleasure of concentration can be. You want to open your mind to that possibility and use that as a motivation, realizing that there must be something better: a totally harmless pleasure in which you don't get intoxicated; you can see things clearly.

One of the immediate drawbacks of getting tied up in sensual thinking is that your mind gets dulled, and you don't see things for what they are. You see things from only one side. It's a pleasure that blinds you. Whereas the pleasure that comes from concentration helps foster clear seeing, clear vision, all-around seeing, all-around vision.

And, again, think of all the trouble that people get into over sensuality. You think of anger as being a big cause of the harm that people do to one another, but where does the anger come from? Usually from thwarted sensual desires. As the Buddha points out, in order to acquire and maintain your sensual desires, you've got to work really hard, and sometimes your work fails. Or it succeeds, and then people run off with the results of your work. It's because of sensual desires that people get into quarrels within the family, between families, between nations.

And then there's the whole element of fear. One of the reasons we're afraid of dying is from fear of losing our sensual pleasures. We think of our sensual thinking as a gift to ourselves, and you have to learn how to realize that it's not.

A lot of this has to do with, of course, the advertising industry. There are those chocolates that come with little bits of chocolate wisdom written inside the wrappers. And chocolate wisdom tends to be, "Take another one, indulge yourself, be nice to yourself, give yourself more cholesterol problems."

But even without the advertising industry, you have that way of thinking when you're feeling really miserable and you tell yourself, "Give yourself an ice cream cone, give yourself some food, give yourself something sensual to make yourself feel better." This is one of the ways our parents made us feel better as kids,

so we tend to indulge ourselves in that way. But you have to ask yourself, especially with the advertising, exactly why are they giving us this bit of chocolate wisdom? So that we'll buy more of their chocolates. They don't really care about our health. They don't care about our well-being. All they care about is getting our money in their hands.

You think of all the politicians who trade on fear. They get away with that because of our attachments to our sensual pleasures. They raise the specter of war, they raise the specter of unemployment and poverty, and push through all kinds of horrible legislation based on that. As long as we're attached to sensual pleasures, we're going to be susceptible to their fear-mongering. Think about it. If you weren't attached to sensual pleasures, what would you have to fear? And nobody could prey on your fears. You'd be more independent. Safer.

This element of independence is really important, because a lot of our sensual pleasures depend on other people, and they have the right to withdraw those pleasures if and whenever they want. Even if they don't want to, they die and they leave us. As the Buddha said, it's like going around with borrowed goods. They could be taken back by the owners at any time.

In fact, one of his instructions for talking to someone who's about to die is that you ask them, "Are you worried about your family?" And then you remind them, well, whether you're worried about them or not, it's not going to help them. Let go of that worry. "Are you concerned about leaving sensual pleasures?" And the answer usually is Yes. So the technique is to get the person to think about more refined sensual pleasures. The pleasures of the devas are a lot better than human pleasures. They look at human sensual pleasures the same way we would look at dogs' sensual pleasures. So think about heavenly sensual pleasures. And then when you think about heavenly sensual pleasures, they can go up many different levels. Each level gets more and more refined. And then you finally get to the point where you realize that even the sensual pleasures of heaven have their end. And when you fall, it's going to be a hard fall. So you try to wean your mind from sensual pleasures.

That's the advice. Of course, if you wait until you're dying to think about it, it's not going to have much impact, because the mind doesn't know where to go. But if you can think that way now, realizing that you've got to find a better, more solid source for pleasure, you can focus on the skills of meditation and be better prepared when the time comes.

One of the issues, of course, is that people think that, in denying sensual pleasure, denying that it's a good thing, we're going to have to wear hair shirts and make ourselves suffer. In fact, the Buddha himself made that mistake when he was

looking for awakening. He thought that if you wanted to get away from your attachments to sensual pleasures, you'd have to inflict pain on yourself. He finally realized, though, that that didn't work. And then he realized that there's another way to free yourself from sensuality, not through pain, but through a better kind of pleasure, starting with the pleasures of concentration.

So it's a trade. You're trading chocolates for gold: the pleasure that comes from settling down with the breath, and working the breath energy through the body, the working around any sense of blockage you might have here or there so there can be a sense of real fullness in the body. You breathe in, and all the different parts of the breath energy in the body are working together. They're energizing one another. And you realize that by allowing the mind to stay right here it is possible to develop a sense of well-being that you can't get by thinking about pleasures of sight, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. This goes deeper and it's totally harmless. You're just sitting here, aware and breathing. And even though this isn't the ultimate happiness, the ultimate well-being, it's the way there. It's how you get there.

Now, you will have to put up with some pain. There's the pain of sitting in meditation, and there's the pain of having to say No to things that you've been saying Yes to for who knows how long. That's why we have to keep on using our discernment to foster our concentration, to keep on reminding ourselves that we're heading in a better direction, and that we have to make a trade.

Our problem, especially here in the West, is that we all want our cake and enlightenment, too. But you have to realize you can't hold on to the cake and gain the enlightenment, you've got to learn how to let go of the cake, let go of the chocolate, because some pleasures get in the way of more worthwhile ones.

It's not that pleasure is bad—and that's one way the mind has of defending its attachment to sensuality, is to say, "Well, what's wrong with pleasure?" Actually, there's nothing wrong with pleasure, but there are better pleasures, more lasting, less harmful, more satisfying pleasures. Remember that it was when the Buddha realized that there is a pleasure that is blameless, the pleasure of concentration, that's when he got on the path. And this was after avoiding pleasure for years.

So we can learn from the lesson that he won the hard way, that some pleasures are better than others. And although the pleasure of concentration takes work, you're going to be much better off for having worked at it.

This is why there's a very direct connection between right resolve and right concentration. Right resolve is the resolve for renunciation of sensuality, and concentration gets into right concentration when you can put aside sensuality, put aside unskillful mental qualities, and stay with the breath.

So sometimes it helps when you're sitting down to focus on the breath to reflect first on the fact that you're headed toward a better pleasure, a wiser pleasure. That makes it easier to put aside the obstacle of sensuality, at least for the time being, so that you can really give your full attention to the breath, to the sense of the energy of the body as you feel it from within, and give it a chance to grow.