Secluded from Sensuality

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The description for a right concentration begins with the phrase that you’re secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities. Sensuality is defined as your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures, planning for sensual pleasures. If you have any thoughts like that, just put them aside. Unskillful qualities are defined as anything beginning with wrong view, up through wrong mindfulness. So if you’re mindful of things that are not relevant to staying focused on the body in and of itself, or putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world, try to put those memories aside. Be mindful only of things that are relevant to what you’re trying to do right now, which is to get the mind concentrated at its still. There are times when it’s easy to put those things aside, other times when it’s hard. This is why when the Buddha was teaching his son about breath meditation, he didn’t start out with breath meditation. He started out with other contemplations, one of which was trying to make your mind like earth. Good and bad things get poured on the earth, but the earth doesn’t get excited, doesn’t get upset. Make your mind like water. Water can be used to wash away disgusting things, but the water itself doesn’t get disgusted. In other words, you want to learn how to be with things as they happen, and not recoil, not run away from them. The purpose here is not just to accept them and just be sitting there accepting. Make the mind as non-reactive as possible so you can see what’s actually going on. Because you remember when the Buddha does teach breath meditation, it’s pretty proactive. You’re going to be breathing in certain ways, trying to induce certain mind states, certain feelings, certain states of awareness by the way you breathe. But to prepare the mind for that activity, you have to make it as impassive as possible. That’s when anything undesirable comes up in your meditation, you don’t get excited about it, you don’t get upset by it. You have to see it clearly if you’re going to deal with it. Another contemplation the Buddha recommends is the Brahmavaharas, goodwill for all. Another one is contemplation of the body. This is the main center of our thoughts about sensuality. It’s because we’re attracted to our body that we get attracted to other people. And so the Buddha has you dissect your attraction to the body. That’s why we have that chin on the 32 parts of the body. Not to say that the body is bad, but by looking at it as an object of sensual desire. It has its uses. Without the body you wouldn’t be able to sit here meditating. But it also has its abuses. You get focused on sensual pleasures related to the body. And they can pull the mind away from contemplation. As I approach meditation topics like this, it’s always important to keep the Third Noble Truth in mind. There is a possibility that you can totally end suffering. Without that possibility you could say, “Well, I’ll just go for whatever pleasure I like.” Some people like sensuality, other people like a quiet state of mind. And it sounds like it’s just a matter of personal preference. But when the total end of suffering is an option, then do you want to spend your time rearranging your thoughts, rearranging your plans around something like this? So you’re going to be attacking not so much the body, but the state of mind that wants to go for that kind of pleasure, that enjoys thinking about different sensual pleasures and then planning them. To focus attention on the mind state, we first have to take apart the object. Is it really worth it? This is why they talk about taking off the skin, putting it in a pile, and seeing what you have left. It’s just that much. It’s a very thin layer of skin around the body. It makes it something you can actually look at. Without that layer you’d run away. And then you take it apart piece by piece. You can’t have a body without a liver. You can’t have one without intestines. But do you really like the liver? Do you really like the intestines? No. Any way of contemplating the body, taking it apart, thinking about its dissolution as it gets older, when it dies, what it’s going to be like, to make you see that the object is not worth all that interest. And yet you find the mind still wants to go for it. And Chandra Mahaprabhu talks about how he got really good at taking the body apart in his mind. So all he had to do was look at somebody and immediately you’d see the flesh, you’d see the blood falling away, the bones disintegrating. And he found that there was still the potential for lust in his mind. So instead of focusing on the body, he started focusing on the mind. Why is it the mind can see all these things, admit all these facts, all these truths about the body, yet still consciously ignore them? This is a tendency of the mind in general. When you want to go for something you know is unskillful, you block out any thoughts that would have to do with criticizing what you’re going for. We can get very narrow in our focus. This is what becoming is all about. You have a desire, and then you have the world around that desire. And in order to pursue that desire, sometimes you have to make it a very narrow world, where your role in that world is very narrow as well. So why do you go for that? What’s the appeal? Why do you want to lust? It’s not the case that you’re sitting there perfectly still and perfectly innocent, and something comes along and stirs up the lust. Most of the time you’re out looking for it, as with anger and all the other unskillful desires that we have. Why is that? What’s the appeal? Where is it located? The Buddha talks about how it can be located in any of the aggregates around us. In other words, your perceptions around lust, your perceptions around your relationship to the other person, your role in getting involved. Sometimes it’s your thinking, the stories you tell yourself, or the feelings that come up. Where is the appeal located? And when you think about all the damage that can be done if you give in to these mind states, yet the appeal is such a little tiny thing. All the affliction that comes, and the fact that you’re cutting off the possibility of nirvana, that particular mind state, that becoming that you develop around lust and sensuality. That’s to black out the possibility that there could be an end to suffering. Otherwise you see how ridiculous this is and what a waste of time. Maybe one of the best ways of looking at this is just wasting your time. You don’t know how much time you have. We have this human birth, and if we don’t use it well, we fall. So here’s your chance to go up. Why throw it away? One of the main reasons is that you don’t believe that it’s possible. Or you don’t want it to be possible. You have to look into these things. It’s a mental issue. We focus first on the body to see that there’s nothing much there. So we can focus our attention on what’s going on in the mind. There’s that experiment I’ve mentioned before. They put a pigeon in a box, a male pigeon with a female pigeon, and measured how much time it would take him to start his mating dance. Then they took the female pigeon out and they put a male pigeon in her place, clocked him again. It took a little bit longer, but eventually he started making the mating dance toward the male. Then they took the male pigeon out and put a decoy in. It took a little bit longer, but eventually he started the mating dance, took the decoy out, and then they put in objects to make him less and less like pigeons. One of them was a red rubber ball. He could still work up his mating dance. Finally they took the ball out to see what he would do with an empty box. He focused on the corner. He started doing his mating dance toward the corner. It tells you a lot about the mind. It’s not just about the pigeon mind. The human mind is like that too. You can manage to get yourself worked up over anything. To what purpose? What’s accomplished? What are the consequences? Those are some of the things that you tend to block out of your mind. When you start indulging in fantasies like this, the consequences disappear in that world. Then is that the way the world works? No, it has consequences. The consequences that come from the affliction that comes with lust are pretty strong. Then as you contemplate that here you are cutting off the possibility of the Third Noble Truth, the suffering can be ended. There is a path and you could be spending your time on that path rather than wandering off into the woods getting caught in the underbrush. So learn to see that sensuality has its drawbacks. Remember the Buddhist graduated discourse. It starts with generosity, with virtue, the rewards that come from developing these qualities in your mind. Get to the sensual levels of heaven. But then you fall. You get carried away with this instantaneous sensual pleasures and the integrity of the mind, the character of the mind, begins to get eroded. You’re used to having whatever sensual pleasure you want, there it is. You think about it, there it is. You can imagine what kind of bad habits you develop in a place like that. Then you get dropped down. You have to start all over again. Think about how many lifetimes, how many aeons you’ve been going through this. So try to get out of that tunnel vision that comes with sensuality. Look at the larger context in terms of rebirth, in terms of the Noble Truths, particularly the Third Noble Truth. There’s that promise. One of the great ironies of Buddhism’s coming to the West is the accusation that Buddhism is pessimistic because it focuses on suffering. That’s just the First Noble Truth. The important one is the Third. It is possible to put an end to suffering. That’s about as optimistic as you can get. But it challenges the become-ings, the worldviews that we have that would block out that possibility. So here’s the Buddha saying, here’s the path and it can go to a really amazing place. We actually step outside of time, step outside of space, where it’s totally free. Wouldn’t you rather go there?

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