

Sensuality Is a Fetter

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The path factor of right resolve is very directly related to the path factor of right concentration. The beginning of the formula for right concentration says that being excluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, you enter the first jhana. “Unskillful qualities” here are the wrong versions of the factors of the path, everything from wrong view down through wrong concentration. You have to let those things go.

And part of one of the wrong factors of the path, wrong resolve, is getting involved in thoughts of sensuality. So you wonder why the Buddha has to repeat the sensuality part. It’s because it is so deeply entrenched in everybody’s mind; it’s why we’re here in the human realm.

We’re addicted to thinking about sensual matters, sensual pleasures. A lot of people think that that’s how they express their freedom: through their ability to think about all the sensual things they want, to fantasize about sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations—the whole panoply. And the variations you can play on that theme are nearly infinite.

As the Buddha said, you look at the world of animals and how many different kinds of animals there are in the world—everything from the tiniest insects up to the whales and the dinosaurs. In the Canon, they mention whales and whale-eaters and whale-eater-eaters. The Buddha went on to say that all those varieties of animals come from the mind. You could be any of those animals; you probably *have* been many of those animals. Yet the Buddha said even that great variety is smaller than the variety of the mind itself.

For a lot of us, sensuality is how we exercise our freedom to think, our freedom to fantasize. But as the Buddha pointed out, it’s a fetter. All those thoughts lead to actions; all the actions lead to consequences. And the range of the mind actually narrows down as it gets more and more focused on sensual issues. This is where the way of the Dhamma parts ways with the way of the world. As the Buddha said, our freedom lies not in that area, but in learning how to put it aside—how to renounce all that fantasizing and find a happiness that really is infinite.

This is the direction we’re going as we train the mind. We’re looking for an infinite pleasure, an unlimited pleasure. The word “pleasure” here, *sukha* in Pali, covers everything from ease and well-being through bliss and happiness. We take seriously the possibility that there is such a thing as infinite happiness. It’s one of

the reasons why we bow down to the Buddha: because he found that, and he respects our desire for an infinite happiness, an infinite well-being, too.

All too often, his teachings are presented as, “Well, just learn how to accept things as they are, and find a bittersweet pleasure in the passing pleasures of the world.” But that’s not the Buddha at all. He wanted a deathless happiness; he didn’t want anything less. So you have to ask yourself: Do you take that seriously as a possibility? And if you do, then the next question is: Why aren’t you aiming at it? What are you doing that’s getting in the way of that possibility?

Clean up your act. This is why, between right resolve and right concentration, there are all those other factors of the path—right action, right speech, right livelihood—for acting in ways that don’t cause harm and also acting in ways that don’t inflame the mind’s tendency to want to go out and fantasize about sensual pleasures.

Over the years, I’ve noticed that when you talk about right resolve, people can see very clearly that the resolve to abandon ill will and the resolve to abandon harmfulness are good things to resolve. But when you say there’s also the resolve to abandon sensuality, everyone says, “Well, yes, but...” They want to draw the line there. They don’t see that lust is as bad as anger. It creates all kinds of fetters. You create fetters for yourself. You tie other people down as well. As long as the mind is fixated on that kind of pleasure, it’s not going to see the possibility of other and greater pleasures.

There’s that story of the prince who was out walking around for exercise early in the morning and he came across a novice. He said, “I’ve got a couple of questions for you.” Now, the novice knew this prince was a troublemaker, and so the novice said, “Okay, I’ll answer your questions, on the condition that you don’t argue with my answers. Just get the information, but I don’t want to get in an argument.”

So the prince asked his question. “I understand that these monks are practicing the type of concentration where they abandon sensuality. Is that true?” The novice said, “Yes, that is true.” The prince said, “I don’t believe it.” He went on his way.

So the novice went to report the conversation to the Buddha, and the Buddha essentially said, “You fool! Why did you think the prince would understand? That prince lives his life totally swamped in sensual pleasures.” Remember, that was back in the days when princes and kings had harems and could spend their night immersed in their harems. Once the mind is focused in that area, it’s not going to even imagine that there’s a possibility of another kind of pleasure, another kind of well-being. Everything aside from sensual pleasure, they see as deprivation. But

that's essentially the attitude of a weak mind that can't find its own internal sense of well-being, so it has to depend on things outside being just right. You go from one fix to the next to the next to the next, like an addict.

So as we come to the practice, we have to expand our imaginations that there is an infinite happiness, and it's not found there. It's found in training the mind. It's in the stillness of the mind. As the Buddha said, there is no happiness—again the word *sukha*—there is no happiness, bliss, well-being, or pleasure apart from peace. Now you might say there are lots of pleasures that are not peaceful at all. But the actual pleasure is in those few moments when the mind can sit with its object and not get pushed off the object: That's when the mind actually has a sense of well-being. There are those little moments in sensual pleasures and in sensual fantasizing, but they don't last very long. But it's not as if they're unrelated to all the pain and suffering, before and after, that goes into attaining those moments.

You've got to look at the whole picture. It's not that sensual pleasures are bad or evil or whatever. It's just that they really tie down the mind. If you're looking for freedom, you can't find it there. You've got to look at your behavior, the way you live your life: To what extent are you working against the possibility of infinite freedom, and to what extent are you moving in the right direction?

And how you're going to handle this issue is something you have to decide for yourself. But you have to keep in mind that the direction for true happiness lies in renunciation. And it's not deprivation. There are certain pleasures that make greater pleasures impossible, or at least they really get in the way. They keep eating away at your concentration, and they keep eating away at the possibility of the mind really stepping back and seeing things for what they are.

So it *is* a matter of either/or. Now, the position of both/and is really popular, but that doesn't make it Dhamma. You have to ask yourself how seriously you take your happiness. This doesn't mean being grim. It means: How sincerely do you want to be happy? Part of the mind will say, "Yes, but..." But you've heard that "yes, but" you don't know how many times. How about, "Okay, let's give it a try"? See to what extent you can free the mind from its fascination with those kinds of things.

This is why we have that chant on the unattractiveness of the body, to undercut the mind's almost infinite ability to find pleasure in contemplating the body: thinking of the body as wonderful—or what I heard the other day. Someone said, "Well, your expression of compassion is through your body. Therefore, you shouldn't say bad things about the body." Well again, that's showing an attachment to the body right there and an unwillingness to really look at what's going on deeper in the mind. It's not something just for monks, or just

for men, or just for anybody. It's for everybody. Our attachment to the body is what brought us here, and if we don't overcome it, it's going to keep us coming back, coming back, coming back, and it gets in the way of the possibility of a really infinite happiness.

And it's an issue we have to face square on. Some people say, "Well, how about avoiding the issue and going to the deeper issue of your attachment to self?"—as if you could avoid it on the way to getting past your attachment to the self. Because, after all, there's not just one self. You've got many selves. And the many selves around sensual pleasure won't go away if you, say, attack your ego or your selfishness in other areas. You've got to clean out the whole stable, always keeping the four noble truths in mind. That possibility of the cessation of suffering is not just a negative thing. It seems to be expressed in negative ways like "the ending of suffering," or non-this or non-that. But what the "non-" means is that there are no more limitations on your happiness. That's what this is all aimed at.

How much more do you want to suffer? How much more suffering do you want to see? It's not just the fact that you're hanging around and you're going to suffer for a while. Some people say, "Well, I can put up with that a little bit more." But in the process, you're going to be involved in the suffering of a lot of other people as well.

Many of us learn our lessons about suffering not only from our own suffering, but also seeing the suffering of others. How many more people do you want to see suffer—how many other people do you want to *help* suffer—before you're willing to take the Buddha up on his offer? That's a question you have to answer for yourself.