

## *A Snare of Death Laid Out*

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Craving has a location. In fact, it defines locations. It becomes the seed around which the process of becoming gathers, like little bits of dust in the atmosphere that become seeds for clouds, seeds for rain. And it's good to know where the location is, because all too often we think we want something but once we get it we realize that it wasn't what we really wanted. We have to go back and look at where that original desire was located.

This is how we come into life. As we were about to die from our previous lifetimes, a vision of the human realm came in. There was something in the human realm that you found attractive and you didn't look at the fine print. You just went for that image, whatever it was.

This is scary: this ability of the mind to slip off that way, to slip into whole worlds without really knowing where it's going, simply because it's attracted by some little bit of pleasure, some image, some idea.

Usually, it's sensual pleasures. This is why there's so much in the Canon about the drawbacks of sensuality. After all, one of the ways we suffer is through sensual clinging. And one of the causes for suffering is sensual craving.

"Sensuality" here doesn't mean the pleasures in and of themselves. It's the mind's fascination with planning them, all the embroidery we create *around* them, all the perceptions and feelings and thought constructs—verbal and mental fabrications. Often that's where our craving is focused. Often, when you desire a person, it's not the person you desire. You desire your perceptions and thoughts of the person.

So you want to get the mind really still so that you can see, when craving of any kind comes up: Exactly what are you focused on? What is the allure? Because that's going to be where the location is found.

Once you've seen the allure, then you look around: What else is tied up with that allure? Those are the things we don't look at. Something looks appealing, but we don't think about what the other implications are. We think, "Well, this appealing thing is sure to have a wonderful world around it." But then look at it: beauty, youth, power, wealth, what kind of world is run by those things.

Twiggy, a famous model back in the 60's, was involved in Hollywood for a while and then she left it. Several years later I read an interview in which she was talking about how Hollywood was all about beauty, youth, power, wealth, and, as

she said, “all those other horrible things.” It’s a good perspective, because a world where those things reign is a pretty miserable world.

People who don’t have beauty, who don’t have power and wealth, are thrown away—have no worth at all. If our happiness depends on those things, we have to very quickly learn to find a happiness that depends on something else. Otherwise, we’re headed for a big fall. All too often when you lose those things you miss them, and if you have a chance to get them again you jump for them. This is what happens at rebirth. Here’s another chance: You want to go for another round? You have to think about the implications.

As the Buddha said, we tend to go for what he calls householder pleasure and householder pain. In other words sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, that we like: If we get them, that’s householder pleasure; if we don’t, that’s householder pain.

So you’ve got to replace those with renunciate pleasure and renunciate pain. Renunciate pain is the realization that “There is a much higher form of happiness and I haven’t reached it yet.” It’s a painful thought, but it’s a thought that motivates you to practice. Renunciate pleasure is when you’re able to let go of sensuality and find pleasure at the very least by getting the mind into concentration.

The realization that there is such a pleasure is a really important discovery, and we should try to make the most of it. It’s not the goal, but it certainly helps pull us out of a lot of misery, so that we’re not starving for pleasure. Otherwise, we’re just going back and forth between householder pleasure, householder pain, householder pleasure, householder pain.

Part of the way out is seeing the value and the real sense of satisfaction that can come from finding pleasure simply in getting the mind to settle in. But also, you have to see the drawbacks of the sensuality. And not just the drawbacks: The Buddha uses the word *degradation*. If you think about people’s relationships, there’s a lot of degradation that goes on in sensual relationships. Both people become enslaved to each other.

In the Theragatha and Therigatha, some of the more dramatic encounters are when people come and try to seduce monks and nuns. In the Therigatha there’s the famous story about the nun going through the forest and a man comes up and tries to get her to disrobe. And it’s interesting, there’s nothing mentioned about how good looking he was. All we see are his words, and he’s a real master of spinning words. He hopes to spin a net in which to catch her, based on his appreciation of her beauty and all the beautiful things he’s going to provide her with. Fortunately, she’s not attracted to her own body. She says, “What do you

see in this body that's of any worth?" And the fact that she's not attracted to herself—and doesn't mind not being attracted to herself—that's what frees her.

In other words, she's found something much better. Because for a lot of people, that's where the attraction to sex is located, in the perception that someone else is attracted to them. After all, as the Buddha said, our desire for sensuality (our desire for other people) starts out with our sense of our own attractiveness. Then we look for other people whom we find attractive and who are also attracted to us. That's where the magnet pulls. So you've got to cut those force fields.

First by looking at the unattractiveness of your body—and not just your body when it's obviously not appealing, but also when it's at its most appealing. Even then if you turned it inside out, what would you have? Nothing much that you'd want to go for. You realize, this is the way it is with all bodies.

And yet this is what you get when you have that vision of the sensual pleasures you could enjoy if you were reborn as a beautiful, attractive person. You'd get all the things that go along with having a body, all the various parts of the body—and every part of the body has illnesses associated with it, and it's going to grow old, it's going to grow unattractive. And do you want to keep going back for that?

In the Theragatha there's a verse where a monk is approached by a woman, and here we get a description of how beautiful she is. She says, "You're wasting your youth. Let's enjoy each other and then when we're both old we can go forth, after there's nothing left of attractiveness in the body." And he tells us that he looked at her and saw a snare of death laid out.

So that's what you've got to see. The people you're attracted to are *snares of death*. The pleasures you're attracted to that would pull you to be reborn in a sensory world: Those are snares of death, because when you're reborn there's going to be death—and there's no escaping it.

It's like that animated film *Ice Age*, I think it was *Ice Age II*. I was on a plane one time and the kid sitting in the row in front of me was watching the series, and there was one incident where a group of them, male and female animals, are in a boat and it's in a fog, and as they're going through the fog, all of a sudden all these mermaids appear, and a merman appears for the woman, the old lady turtle. The animals are all very attracted to them and start looking dreamy-eyed, but then all of a sudden they begin to see that there's static in the image, and as you look into the static you see the fangs of vicious fish.

So it's good to have that image in mind when you see something attractive, especially as the mind is approaching death. After all, at death there's an inclination to want to go for whatever pleasure there may be, because you're

surrounded by pain at that point. The physical pains in the body, the mental pains of having to leave this life, being uncertain, and then suddenly latching onto something that looks good: You've got to watch out for what you go for out of desperation. Just because things look good doesn't mean they *are* good. Look for the static, look for the fangs—and don't wait until you're on your deathbed before you start thinking in these terms.

This is why contemplation of the body is such a basic part of the meditation. It's why we have the chant of the body parts that we repeat so often. This is what you have in your body. This is what other people have in their bodies. This is all the fine print that comes along with the idea of sensual pleasure. And if you can think in these terms, then you can admit that maybe renunciate pleasure actually is a better thing.

So we first provide the mind with an alternative pleasure, and this is one of the reasons why we practice concentration. One of the reasons why we try to learn how to sit through pain and maintain our concentration is because we're going to need it when the body and mind is in pain, so that we're not pained along with them, so that we're not driven by desperation to jump for whatever appears.

But at the same time, in addition to the concentration, you need to have the wisdom that looks for the long term, looks for the whole picture. Instead of just looking just at a particular pleasure—a pleasant sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensation that can be very alluring—look for the world around it. What's tied up with that pleasure? Look for the static inside the image, look for the fangs. They're there if you're willing to look for them. These things are all around us.

People are dying. Why? Because they got born. People getting old, all the things that we see in the human realm: They happen because people wanted to be reborn as people. We call it the fine print, but it's really writ large when you get into the reality.

So be very careful about where you locate your cravings. Look for the allure, and then look for the drawback and the degradation, all the other bad things about whatever the pleasure might be. And that, the Buddha says, is when you're ready to think that maybe the idea of renunciation really is good.

When he gave his graduated discourse, he started out with generosity, virtue, and the rewards of generosity and virtue, which would be to experience sensual pleasures here in the human realm and then up in the higher realms. Then, before he taught the four noble truths, he had to take you through that step of seeing the drawbacks and degradation of sensuality, to the point where you can say, "Maybe renunciation really is good."

The pleasure of a concentrated mind is not just a second best—it's actually much better. That's when you're ready for the four noble truths. So make sure you have this step well mastered, because it's an important step on the way out.