

## *Sensuality*

*October 2, 2009*

In the beginning phrase in the description of right concentration—*vivicca kamehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi*—secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful mental states: What does it mean to be secluded from sensuality? I've read a couple of different explanations. One is that you're secluded from sensual pleasures. But that's impossible. Just sitting here in the cool evening: That's a sensual pleasure. In a quiet place: That's a sensual pleasure. If we had to be totally secluded from sensual pleasures, we'd have to be in prisons with loud music blaring and people fighting all around us. We'd have to be really hot or really cold, just really miserable. It's be hard to meditate in a situation like that. We have to have some level of pleasure, at least as we're learning how to meditate.

Look in the Pali Canon. There's a genuine appreciation for the beauties of wilderness. In fact, the earliest wilderness poetry in the world, at least that we still have, is found in the Pali Canon. Ven. Mahakassapa, the sternest of all the Buddha's disciples, has verses describing the beauties of the wilderness: the dark blue of the rock in the mountains, the ladybugs flying around, the sound of the waterfalls—an ideal place to meditate, to bring the mind to stillness. So being deprived of sensual pleasures can't be what the Buddha means when he says to be secluded from sensuality.

Another interpretation I've read is that you have to be totally blanked out from all sensory impressions. In other words, the mind has to be totally unaware of any sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, or even of the body itself. But that doesn't fit in with the Buddha's definition of sensuality. Sensuality for him is our fascination with our thoughts about sensual pleasures. We love to fantasize about sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations that we would really like in different combinations. Getting the mind to be secluded from *that*: That's how we bring it to right concentration.

Why do we have to be secluded from that? Because there are lots of dangers in what that kind of thinking will cause us to look for in life. As the Buddha points out, it's because of sensuality that we have to work to begin with, to get the sensual pleasures we want. Sometimes we get the wealth we want, sometimes we don't. In either case, there's suffering. When we don't get wealth, all that work is in vain. When we do get it, we have to be concerned about how it's going to be burned by fire, or washed away by water. Kings or thieves might take off with it;

hateful heirs might get it. It's also because of sensuality that people fight—husbands with wives, wives with husbands, brothers, sisters, parents, children, first in the family, and then it spreads into society. This is why we have wars.

The Canon is filled with all sorts of analogies for the drawbacks of sensuality, sensual fanaticizing. It's like a drop of honey on the blade of a knife. Like a raptor that's gotten a piece of meat: It flies up and the other raptor birds try to get it, and if it doesn't let go of that meat, it might get killed. In other words, once you gain a sensual pleasure, there are other people who want it, and they'll do anything to take it.

Someone once asked, why are there so many descriptions of the drawbacks of sensuality in the Canon? It's because people are really resistant to seeing those drawbacks. There was a case of a man who had lost his son. He went to the cemetery every day and cried over his dead son. One day, on the way back from the cemetery, he stopped by to see the Buddha. The Buddha asked him, "Where are you coming from?" The man said, "I've just been crying over my lost son in the cemetery." The Buddha said, "Yes, there's a lot of grief that comes from those we love." The man said, "What do you mean, grief from those we love? We get nothing but pleasure from those we love." Here he was, crying over the person he had lost and he didn't even see the connection.

The story makes its way to the palace. King Pasenadi hears it. He calls in his queen, Mallika, who's been a disciple of the Buddha. He says, "Here your Buddha has said this. What do you have to say about that?" She says, "Well, if he says it, it must be true." He says, "Get out of here." So she sends a brahman to ask the Buddha what he means, and the Buddha points out that people have gone mad over the loss of a husband, a wife, a parent, a child. He tells of one case where a woman has been separated from her husband by her parents because they want to give her to somebody else. She gets in touch with her husband and tells him what's happened. He kills her and then kills himself, so that they'll be together after death. Things like this happen all because of sensuality.

The brahman then goes back to Queen Mallika and she goes in to see the king. Instead of simply repeating what the Buddha said, she asks the king: "Do you love this land over which you are reigning?" He says, "Of course I do." "Well, suppose something were to happen to it, suppose it were destroyed." He says, "If it were destroyed, my life would be destroyed." "How about your sons, your daughters, your other queens, how about me?" she says. He says, "If anything happened to you, it'd be as if my life were destroyed." She says, "That's what the Buddha meant."

There's an extra poignancy in this story, because we find elsewhere in the Pali Canon that she did die before he did. He got the news when he was visiting the Buddha. He broke down and cried.

So a lot of grief and a lot of violence have come from sensuality.

This is why we have to find another kind of happiness. For as the Buddha said, even when you see the drawbacks of sensuality, if you don't have another kind of happiness to draw on, you'll never be able let go of your fascination with sensual pleasures. You'll keep trying to find that one special sensual pleasure that doesn't have the drawbacks of the ones you've encountered. Like that story, I think it was of Nasrudin, who was eating a bushel of hot peppers and crying while he was eating hot peppers. People ask him, "Why do you keep eating those hot peppers if they make you cry? He says, "Because I'm looking for the sweet one." That's the attitude of the mind. It's always looking for the sweet pepper, imagining the sweet pepper, and yet never finding it.

So, in order to get over our fascination with this kind of pleasure, we need another kind, which is what we're trying to develop here as we meditate: a pleasure on the level of form. There is the inner sense of the body we're inhabiting here right now, with its properties of earth, water, breath, fire. In other words, the solidity of the body, the liquidity, the warmth, the energy: When these things are in balance, that balance gives rise to a different kind of pleasure, the pleasure that harms no one.

You remember the Buddha, after having been disillusioned with the sensual pleasures of the palace, went off into the wilderness. Like many people who've been totally obsessed with sensuality, when he decided that sensuality was bad, he went to the other extreme and tortured himself for six years. Then he realized that that didn't lead anywhere. So he reflected: Could there be another way? He thought of a time when as a child. He was sitting under a tree while his father was plowing, and his mind spontaneously entered the first jhana: rapture and pleasure born of seclusion accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. That's the standard description.

So he said to himself, "Here's a pleasure that's not sensual." It's very visceral but it's not sensual. "Why am I afraid of it? It doesn't have any harm, it's not intoxicating." In other words, it doesn't have the same intoxicating effect on the mind as sensuality, because sensual pleasures cloud the mind. When you're focusing on something you really like about a sensual object or a person, you tend to focus on certain details, and you have to block out lots of other details.

So there is a built-in blindness in the act of indulging in that kind of pleasure. Whereas the pleasure of jhana doesn't have any drawbacks, it doesn't harm

anybody. It doesn't entail the same blindness. In fact, the mind gets a lot clearer, and it's through the clarity of the mind experiencing this kind of pleasure that you can begin to see what's actually going on in the mind. So he decided not to be afraid of that, and actually to pursue it.

It's ironic, how often we read about the dangers of getting attached to concentration. There's a book on concentration that came out recently which—I think it was around page 5 of the book—talks about the dangers of concentration, as if we have to be warned off from the very beginning. But that's not how the Buddha taught it. There's only once or twice in the Canon where he mentions that there are some drawbacks to concentration. The only drawback is that it's not full awakening. There are times when you can get attached to it. You can build up a sense of pride around it.

But these drawbacks are really minor compared to the drawbacks of sensuality. Nobody ever killed anyone over the first jhana. Nobody ever stole or engaged in illicit sex because of the second jhana. Nobody even lied or indulged in intoxicants because of the third or fourth jhanas. It's because of sensuality that we break the precepts, that we're killing and stealing and cheating one another. And we've been doing this for so long. As the Buddha once said, the blood that you've shed from having your head cut off from being a robber is more than all the waters in the sea. We've heard about the tears that we've shed being more than the waters of the sea, but it digs a little deeper to think of how we've lost more blood from getting our heads cut off because we've been robbers or because we've been adulterers. In each case, the blood is more than the water in all the oceans. It's all because of sensuality.

So it's useful to reflect on these dangers, because we tend to turn a blind eye to them. We've turned our blind eyes to them for who knows how long. It's good to remember that there's another kind of pleasure, because we go for sensuality thinking that there's no other escape from pain. But the Buddha says, there is another escape. It's right here. We focus on the breath, we focus on the internal sense of the body, we're aware of the different elements in the body, we learn how to bring them into balance. This can give rise to a very strong sense of pleasure, a very nourishing sense of pleasure that causes no harm.

And this knowledge of the elements of the body will also provide us with a good foundation for discernment—first the discernment that comes from simply learning to get in touch with these elements and to realize how many of the different sensations in the body are related to these properties. And how we do have a certain amount of control over them. Through our perceptions of those

properties, we can emphasize one over another, bringing properties that have been out of balance back into balance.

The properties also provide a useful basis for understanding suffering, this tendency we have, when there's a physical pain in the body, to glom everything together. It's our ability to separate these things out, see the pain as one thing, and the physical properties as something else, that helps us to comprehend suffering.

So this is a very useful exercise. It helps bring us to what the Buddha called pleasure that's not involved in baits. Sensuality is bait, and you know what happens around bait. Bait is on a hook. But there is the pleasure of right concentration, a pleasure without bait. The pleasure of total liberation is, as he says, a pleasure that's even more baitless than the pleasure without bait. It's only there that the mind is truly free. Otherwise, we are, as that passage we chanted just now said, slaves to craving. If you want true freedom, you have to understand this.

So work on secluding yourself from sensuality as much as you can.