

Secluded from Sensuality

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As the Buddha commented one time, our reaction to suffering is twofold. One is bewilderment: Why is there this pain? Why is there this suffering? The second is a search: Is there someone who knows a way out of this suffering?

For the most part, the advice we get on finding a way out of suffering is to look for sensual pleasure. But those pleasures last only so long, and we find ourselves suffering again. There's a back and forth: You hold on to the pleasure, and you suddenly find yourself holding on to pain. As in Ajaan Chah's image: There's a snake with teeth on one end and no teeth on the other. You think it's safe to touch the end that has no teeth, but if you do, you find out that they're connected.

Some people find that the pursuit of sensual pleasures is ignoble. In other words, it lowers the status of the mind. And by sensuality, here, we mean not only the actual pleasures themselves, but more our fascination with fantasizing about them. That's what we tend to go to first when there's pain—but we find that that pulls the mind down.

There are some people who say, "Well, maybe pain purifies the mind." The Buddha himself, as part of his quest, had a vision where he saw different kinds of wood. There was sappy wood that was soaking in water, and that wasn't going to be useful to start a fire. There was sappy wood that was taken out of the water, but the fact that it was still sappy and moist meant that you couldn't start a fire with that, either. Then there was dry wood far from the water: That could be used to start a fire.

So he interpreted that image to mean that he had to get away from pleasure entirely. And it's a common occurrence: Think about all the indulgence he had as a young man. When people tire of that indulgence, or they find that they lack self-respect for that indulgence, they often swing to the opposite extreme.

It was only after going through both extremes that he found the middle way. Now, the middle way was not a halfway feeling or a middling feeling. It involved another way of getting away from pain and suffering apart from sensual pleasure—and that was the pleasure of the mind in concentration. That was one of the first factors of the path that he discovered: a sense of ease and rapture that comes when the mind is secluded from sensuality. It's a pleasure of form. We're inhabiting the body from the inside.

We're finding pleasure in balancing the elements in the body, starting with the breath because that's the element most responsive to our intentions. When the

Buddha contemplated this pleasure before he started on the path, he asked himself, “Why am I afraid of this pleasure that doesn’t have any drawbacks? Is it unskillful? Is it blameworthy?” He could see that there’s nothing blameworthy about it. You’re not harming anybody by sitting here breathing, getting sensitive to your breath.

And you’re also not clouding the mind. This is why part of the description is *secluded* from sensuality, secluded from unskillful mental states—you’re not thinking about sensual pleasures at all. There are no fantasies about tomorrow’s meal. If there are, it’s not part of the concentration. You’re trying to lift the quality of the mind, because after all, how are you going to understand sensuality unless you can step outside of it? And how can you step outside of it unless you have an alternative form of pleasure?

As the Buddha said, if you don’t have this form of pleasure—the pleasure of form—or something higher, then no matter how much you may see the drawbacks of sensuality, you’re still going to go back. Because the mind needs pleasure. It’s part of its food. So supply it with a pleasure that’s apart from sensuality, one in which you can look at your sensual clinging and sensual craving from the outside, and not automatically side with these things.

When the Buddha describes his analysis of suffering and the cause of suffering as noble truths, some people complain. They say, “What’s noble about suffering? What’s noble about craving?” They in themselves are not noble. What’s noble is the way the Buddha analyzes them. And what’s noble about that is that his analysis forces you to stand back from these things.

Of the different forms of clinging and craving, sensual clinging and sensual craving have no role on the path at all.

The other forms of clinging and craving, however, *do* have a role. As you’re getting the mind into concentration, it’s based on a desire for becoming: You’re trying to give rise to a state in the mind and trying to annihilate any other mental states that come up. So craving for becoming and craving for non-becoming do play a role—as you’re trying to master the skills of concentration.

The same with clinging: There’s no role for sensual clinging on the path, but there is a role for habits and practices. You’ve got the habits of the precepts, and you’ve got the practices of concentration. Views, right view, and even a sense of self—of someone who’s capable of doing this and will benefit from doing it: Those forms of clinging do play a role on the path.

But you notice that when the Buddha talks about when you gain right view, or *hear* right view for the first time, you start thinking about what the implications are, and you realize that any thinking that’s going to pull you into sensuality is

something that you've got to say No to. That's the first right resolve. So in order to strengthen yourself, to strengthen your ability to step back from sensuality and to see it for what it is, you've got to have this alternative pleasure.

This applies not only in right concentration but also right mindfulness, because the two are actually parts of the same process. Right mindfulness is how you get the mind into right concentration.

Think of the Buddha's images: When you're practicing right mindfulness, you're like that quail in the field that's been newly plowed. The stones are all turned up, and it can hide behind the stones if a hawk comes after it. If it wanders outside of the field, it's easy prey. Outside of the field is what? The five strings of sensuality.

Which means that when you're engaged in mindfulness practice, it's not a matter of just watching whatever comes up: good, bad, indifferent, sensual, non-sensual. You're actively placing a fence around the mind. It's going to stay here with the body in and of itself and not wander off into sensual pleasures. As you get to do that more and more thoroughly, more and more consistently, the mind gets secluded from sensuality and goes into right concentration—where sensuality plays no role.

There you're able to find this alternative pleasure, the pleasure of inhabiting the body fully, with a sense of the breath energy filling the body, a sense of ease filling the body. Then from there you work up to the higher and higher levels of concentration. But it's right here where the Buddha gained awakening. He didn't gain awakening by indulging in sensual thoughts. He realized there was another alternative to pain—and he made it a central part of the path.

You look at the factors for the path. Think back to when we chant them: The first two have to do with discernment, the next three have to do with virtue, and the last three have to do with concentration. Those last three are far longer than the others, and are explained in a lot more detail. They really are the heart of the path. They're what makes the middle way the middle way, because they provide a pleasure that keeps you from going back to sensual pleasures and that helps you not get immersed in pain.

Even in a passage where the Buddha says some people have to practice more painfully than others, his definition of "painful" is a meditation theme: putting a lot of energy into contemplating the body. But you also develop the five faculties, including right concentration, so you're not totally immersed in pain.

Now, there are sensual pleasures that are actually okay along the way. The Buddha notes that he doesn't say No to all sensual pleasures. He says, however, that you have to notice which kinds of pleasures that you indulge in have a bad

effect on the mind and which ones have no bad effect on the mind. If they have a bad effect on the mind, you've got to avoid them. That mean not only avoiding the pleasures but also avoiding fantasizing about them.s

So, again, you have to maintain this sense of well-being that comes from inhabiting the body—staying with the breath, working with the breath energies—if you're going to have any chance of pulling yourself out of sensuality and finding a noble truth inside the mind.

This is what the Buddha's talking about when he talks about the middle way—a pleasure that's not on the continuum between self-torture and total indulgence. It's off the continuum. It's a different kind of pleasure entirely—what he calls pleasure *not of the flesh*.

It's something we have to work to give rise to—it doesn't arise on its own—but as we give rise to it, we develop a lot of good qualities in the mind. This is another way in which this pleasure differs from sensual pleasure. Sensual pleasures you can enjoy without having to develop any special qualities, but to gain the pleasure of right concentration you need mindfulness, you need alertness, discernment, tranquility, and insight, all of which are good qualities to exercise. That's one of the reasons why it's such a useful pleasure, why it's a special pleasure that should be actively pursued.

You hear so much about the dangers of getting stuck in the pleasure of jhana. The Buddha talks a little bit about that: His image is of a person who's got some sap on his hand. He grabs hold of a branch, his hand may stick to the branch because of the sap, but there are solvents to get rid of that sap. And it's a much better attachment than being attached to sensuality, because that kind of attachment can lead you to do all kinds of things that go against the path.

Whereas the only problem with being attached to the pleasure of concentration is that you may hang out here too long—unwilling to do further work—but that can be cured. In the meantime, it's a lot less harmful.

So, this is a pleasure to be actively pursued because it's good for the mind in so many ways.