

Sense Pleasures & Sensuality

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Vivicc'eva kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi, secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities: That's the beginning of the Buddha's description of the first jhāna. To get the mind into right concentration, you have to seclude your mind from sensuality. This doesn't mean that you have to uproot it, simply that you put sensual thoughts aside.

Sensuality and sensual pleasures are not the same thing. Sensuality is your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures. We like to fantasize about sights, sounds, smells, taste, tactile sensations, all the narratives that go around lust, the narratives that go around our desire for food—how you want to fix the food, how you want to eat the food, or the great meals you've had in the past.

Sensual craving is actually craving to fantasize about sensual matters. The mind has free range. The world itself offers only a limited number of sensual pleasures compared to the huge variety that the mind can think of. The pleasures themselves and the sensuality are both a challenge in the practice.

They challenge in different ways—and you deal with them in different ways as well. Starting with sensual pleasures, the Buddha said we don't try to weigh ourselves down with pain; we're not here just to do without. But, he said, if you notice there's a pleasure where, when you indulge in it, unskillful qualities increase and skillful qualities decrease, you've got to step back from that pleasure, you've got to deny yourself that pleasure because it's going to be bad for your mind.

After all, there are some sensual pleasures that are actually good for the practice. A nice quiet place, natural surroundings, a harmonious community: These all count as sensual pleasures, and they're actually very positive supports for the practice.

There are others pleasures, though, that will depend on the individual. For some people they're no problem; for others, a big problem.

A good way to test your ability to do without sensual pleasures is to take the eight precepts, because the precepts that get added onto the five are basically

matters of sensory restraint. The rule against eating in the evening, eating after noon, places some restraint on your tongue. The rule against watching shows places restraint on your eyes. The rule against wearing cosmetics and perfumes: restraint on your nose. Listening to music: restraint on your ears. Lying on beds that are not luxurious or high: restraint on your body. The rule against sexual intercourse of any kind: restraint on all your senses. See how you handle these kinds of restraint. Some people have real difficulties; others find it relatively easy.

This is a typical practice for the uposatha days, the days when, in Thailand and other Theravadin countries, people take the day off, go to the monastery, and spend the day there meditating. These precepts, by limiting the pleasures of the senses, are really good for focusing you on where you really need to be focused, which is finding pleasure in concentration.

So with sensual pleasures it's a matter of *selective* restraint. With sensuality, though, it's a matter of trying to escape from it entirely. First you have to see the *drawbacks* of that kind of thinking. When the Buddha was giving his graduated discourse—the step-by-step discourse to get people ready for the four noble truths—that would be the turning point. He would start with a talk on generosity, a talk on virtue, a talk on heaven. Heaven, of course, would be a description of the pleasures you could experience up there based on the fact that you'd been generous and virtuous down here.

But then the talk would turn: He said, actually there's a downside to sensuality. He called it not only the drawbacks, but also the degradation of sensuality—the fact that the mind becomes a slave to its sensuality gets nothing of any value out of it.

The Buddha gives lots of images to get you to think about the drawbacks of sensuality. First there are the examples: It's because of sensuality that we have to work hard to find the money for sensual pleasures. We gain the money, and who knows if we can actually keep it? It's because of sensuality that people get into fights: husbands with wives, parents with children, brothers with sisters, and from there it heads out to wars between nations.

People commit crimes based on sensuality, and many of them get caught, and have to be punished. The Canon has a very long and graphic description of

punishments. It's because the mind is overcome with sensuality that it ends up doing things that pull it down, leading to a bad rebirth.

Then there are the images of the drawbacks of sensuality. As the Buddha said, even if it rained gold coins, we wouldn't have enough for our sensual pleasures. Our minds are insatiable. Even if there were two mountain ranges the size of the Himalayas, totally gold, it wouldn't be enough for one person's sensual desires. So there's never going to be any satisfaction.

Then there's image of the dog chewing on a chain of bones from which all the meat has been removed: chewing, chewing, chewing, getting no nourishment at all, just a little bit of taste—the taste of its own saliva. That's what sensual fantasies are: your own saliva, basically.

If you get attached to a particular sensual pleasure, you're going to have to put yourself in a position where it can be taken away from you. The image is of a hawk that has a piece of meat: It takes off, and other hawks, crows, kites take after it to pull the meat away. If it doesn't let go, it's going to get mangled.

Sensuality is like carrying a torch against the wind: You burn yourself with the sensual fantasies. A drop of honey on the blade of a knife: There's a little bit of sweetness, but a lot of danger.

So the Buddha has you reflect that if you're devoted to sensual pleasures, and you're fascinated with thinking about them, you're putting yourself in a really weak position. You're going around with borrowed goods, and the owners can take them back at any time. You're in a tree with a lot of fruit, but somebody else wants that fruit as well, and they're willing to cut the tree down, even as you're in it. There are disadvantages all around, both inside and out, in a life devoted to sensuality.

It's when you can think in those terms that you're willing to find pleasure of a non-sensual kind.

The Buddha's not saying that when you practice renunciation you should simply do without. He provides you with an alternative pleasure: the pleasure of right concentration, the pleasure of *jhāna*. The absorption you get in when you're fully inhabiting the body, the sense of ease that comes with the breath, the sense of fullness that comes with the breath as you allow it to spread throughout the whole

body: When you have this alternative pleasure, you learn how to cultivate it, enjoy it, and then you use it for getting the mind into even deeper concentration.

You hear people say, “Watch out for the dangers of jhāna. The pleasures are so attractive that you just get sucked in.” But the Buddha very rarely talks about the dangers of jhāna. There’s one passage where he compares it to having your hand on a branch that has some sap. As long as you’re not willing to go beyond the practice of concentration, it’s like there being sap on your hand from the branch. You’re stuck. But being stuck on concentration is a minor problem compared to being stuck on sensuality.

You actually need the pleasure of jhāna to get away from sensuality. Otherwise, all you see are two alternatives: sensuality and pain. To escape the pain you go for the sensuality. As the Buddha says, without the pleasure of right concentration, then even though you can see the drawbacks of sensuality, you’re still going to go back to sensual pleasures.

So you’ve got to cultivate this sense of well-being inside: the pleasure of form, even though it feels very embodied. I know a lot of people say, “What’s the difference? This feels very sensual.” It’s different: The sensuality of the body relates to your tactile sensations, the things you touch. This is something totally inward that has none of the drawbacks of sensuality. It’s not intoxicating and it doesn’t require that you do anything unskillful.

That’s one of the other areas where you have to exercise restraint with sensual pleasures. There are some sensual pleasures that require you to break the precepts in order to get them. You have to say “No” to those. The same with sensual pleasures that require that you get into conflict, to develop all kinds of unskillful mental attitudes.

Sensual pleasures are intoxicating, and they certainly don’t help you observe your mind with any clarity, whereas the pleasure of jhāna is not intoxicating in that way. It doesn’t require anything unskillful, and it helps you see your mind very clearly.

As the Buddha said, when the mind settles in like this, you can begin to see that the concentration itself is composed of aggregates, and you can start using the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, not-self, first to pry yourself away from any

thoughts of sensuality, any thoughts of any of the hindrances, any of the unskillful qualities ranging from wrong view up through wrong mindfulness. Then you turn that analysis on the concentration itself.

This leads to another stage. Ajaan Fuang talked about this. He was describing one night when he was suffering from really bad headaches for weeks after weeks after weeks, having tried all kinds of medicine. Finally, he realized the pain was not something to try to run away from or to cure. The pain was something to be comprehended.

So he sat up and watched the pain. From the way he described the experience, it sounded like stream-entry for him. He said one of the realizations that came afterwards is that once you've been away from the senses, you come back to the senses and you realize just the fact of engaging in the experience of the senses is painful in and of itself. Even the pleasures are painful. You open your eyes—*bap*—and there's stress.

Which made me think of that sutta where the Buddha's talking about the leper. The leper cauterizes his wounds because it feels good. His relatives and friends take him to see a doctor, and the doctor is able to cure him of his leprosy. Once he's cured, then he looks back at the other lepers: Does he envy them their burning sticks with which they cauterize their wounds? Not at all. If someone were to take him into a pit of burning embers, would he willingly go? No. Why? Because the fire is hot, scorching, painful to the touch. So the Buddha asks Māgaṇḍiya, the person he's talking to: Is the fire painful only now that the leper has been cured or was it already painful to begin with? It was painful to begin with. It's simply that the leper had distorted perceptions.

As the Buddha said, it's the same way once you've seen the deathless: You see that your previous perceptions of sensuality were distorted. You realize that even the pleasures of the senses are painful because you've found something so much better.

So, when you're dealing with sensual pleasures, it's a matter of learning how to exercise proper restraint: restraining yourself from any pleasures that would give rise to more unskillful qualities, that would require that you break the precepts. When you're dealing with sensuality, it's a matter of seeing the drawbacks,

developing an alternative absorption for the mind, getting the mind absorbed in the sense of the body as you feel it from within, and finally changing your perception of sensuality all together—so that you no longer miss it.

That's when the mind really is free. Up to that point, we can be slaves to sensuality to a greater or lesser degree, but it's important that you realize that once you've gone beyond it, you don't miss it. It's not a case of deprivation. We hear the word "renunciation," and it sounds like you're being pulled away from your pleasures and offered scraps of old bread and a little bit of water—prison food.

But it's the other way around. You begin to realize that the pleasures of sensuality are prison food. The pleasure of jhāna is nourishing, healthy food. The image in the Canon is of different types of food all the way up to ghee, honey, and butter. And then there's the point where the mind goes beyond the need even for that kind of food. When it no longer needs to feed—that's when it's free.