

The Necessity of Celibacy

by Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero

Practice of celibacy is always beneficial. Even for a lay person, who is not necessarily Buddhist or familiar with the Dhamma. The obvious reason for its benefits is the inevitable increase of the mental strength that comes with the restraint. This restraint is *intentional* and aims at a very powerful desire that otherwise shapes and controls one's whole life. Sensuality/sexuality is something that heavily contributes towards defining one's actions and choices. It is something that has at least some influence in virtually all of them.

Thus, adopting a practice of restraint of the sensual desire, a person will be going against that grain of the natural sexual pull of one's own body. Through willingly imposing this restraint, the mind will be pressured to grow - in terms of strength and in terms of enduring of itself. (As the case with any strength development is. Gradually increasing resistance, increases the capacity to hold the very same.)

Sometimes people think that not having sexual intercourse is all that being celibate means. That doesn't constitute the celibacy we are talking about here. The difference is to not be celibate *only* because the current circumstances are presenting no options, but to actually be celibate as a result of *determination* and *practice of restraint*. (And then one might decide to live in the circumstance that present no options, and that's fine.) It's important to not misunderstand this. We are not saying that one somehow needs to be *tempting* oneself with sensuality. "Flirting" with it, so to speak, to keep reinforcing the practice of saying "no" to it. That's ridiculous. And completely misguided and countering the right efforts. Flirting with sensuality can only be done out of *sensuality*. (As the Buddha said, it's not possible to have sensual perception without the mind being bound by sensuality.) So, tempting oneself with sensuality, it's already a form of engaging *with* sensuality. As such, it goes against the practice of the celibate determinations.

“Firstly, a man who claims to be perfectly celibate does not mutually engage in sex with a woman. However, they consent to being anointed, massaged, bathed, and rubbed by a woman. They enjoy it and like it and find it satisfying. This is a corruption, flaw, blemish, or taint in celibacy. This is called one who lives the celibate life impurely, tied to the fetter of sex. They're not freed from rebirth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness, and distress. They're not freed from suffering, I say.

Furthermore, a man who claims to be perfectly celibate does not mutually engage in sex with a woman. Nor do they consent to massage and bathing. However, they laugh and play and have fun with women.

they gaze into a woman's eyes;

they listen through a wall or rampart to the sound of women laughing or chatting or singing or crying.

they recall when they used to laugh, chat, and have fun with women;

they see a householder or their child amusing themselves, supplied and provided with the five kinds of sensual pleasures;

They don't see a householder or their child amusing themselves, supplied and provided with the five kinds of sensual pleasures. However, they live the celibate life wishing to be reborn in one of the orders of gods. They think: 'By this precept or observance or mortification or spiritual life, may I become one of the gods!' They enjoy it and like it and find it satisfying. This is a corruption, flaw, blemish, or taint in celibacy. This is called one who lives the celibate life impurely, tied to the fetter of sex. They're not free from rebirth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness, and distress. They're not free from suffering, I say.

As long as I saw that these seven sexual fetters—or even one of them—had not been given up in me, I didn't announce my supreme perfect awakening in this world with its gods, Maras and Brahmas, this population with its ascetics and brahmins, its gods and humans.

But when I saw that these seven sexual fetters—every one of them—had been given up in me, I announced my supreme perfect awakening in this world with its gods, Maras and Brahmas, this population with its ascetics and brahmins, its gods and humans. Knowledge and vision arose in me: 'My freedom is unshakable; this is my last rebirth; now there are no more future lives.'" - Anguttara Nikaya, 7.50

So, it's this determination, the decision to not engage with sensuality ever again that makes all the difference. Just like when a person is trying to give up smoking for example. It will be much harder to do so if you bring yourself up to decide to *never* smoke again, as opposed to deciding it to quit it half-heartedly for a month or so. The former would exert much more pressure on an individual and even someone who was not a heavy, but a casual, smoker would feel the whole weight of it. And this is even more true of celibacy. And it is necessary to determine it in such a decisive manner.

Only then the mind will be pushed towards development (provided it doesn't break) of strength on that corresponding level. Anything short of it, - the mind will just tread water until the pressure of sexuality builds up, and then inevitably give in. Determining it decisively, however, means that person's entire life will have to be affected by the profound shift in significance of ordinary things in day to day life. This is pretty much the main reason why most of the people would be afraid of doing it.

As hard as it might seem, it is still very much possible to succeed with a persistent effort over a period of time. If one modifies one's environment to support the restraint and to not add more to the already existing pressure, the mind can eventually become dry of the inherent "wetness" of the desires. Then everything in person's life that was depending on the acts of sensuality and non-restraint, will also "dry out". A person would be free from it. This refers to the inherent worries of protecting what one has acquired, pains of craving towards what one doesn't have yet, obstacles of one's worldly ambitions, and similar. All these things will have no significance any more. They will not be able to cause one to suffer on account of them.

It is also important to mention that the *sooner* one starts this practice the better. It is not uncommon for people to think that they have time to get older and pursue sexual and sensual desires. And that then afterwards, they can practice restraint and free themselves from desires. Unfortunately, it's quite the opposite: the longer one waits the harder it will be to *discern* sensuality and do something about it. With old age, sexuality goes "underground" so to speak. The time comes when the body loses its vigour and the sexuality won't manifest any more in a form of obvious physical behaviour and thirst. This can mislead a person to believe that they are free from it. What actually happened was that sexuality has now descended from something that was discernible (bodily actions and thoughts of such) to something that's virtually invisible. A subtle *background* that becomes a ubiquitous motivation for all sorts of habits, acts and even psychological needs. They wouldn't carry the sensual flavour to them anymore. A flavour that used to be very clear on the surface of them at all. If the mind hasn't made the effort, while the aim of the effort was obvious, it won't be able to do it now. Of course, it is still possible in theory at least. But, when the strength and determination fade with the body, having been left undeveloped for so long, it is very unlikely that that will change. (The Suttas, though, do list few exceptions of very old people reaching arahantship. But those were rare, which is why they were so clearly remembered.)

Thus, the sooner the better. That's also why many people in time of the Buddha were inspired to see young monks and nuns in *prime* of their life. Meaning: they were at the time of their lives when sensuality was still available and easy to get. They have not just given it up, but ended up *enjoying* the practise of restraint and understanding the Dhamma.

"Then that devata said to the Venerable Samiddhi: "You have gone forth while young, bhikkhu, a lad with black hair, endowed with the blessing of youth and strength, in the prime of life, without having dallied with sensual pleasures. Enjoy human sensual pleasures, bhikkhu; do not abandon what is directly visible in order to pursue what takes time."

"I have not abandoned what is directly visible, friend, in order to pursue what takes time. I have abandoned what takes time in order to pursue what is directly visible. For the Blessed One, friend, has stated that sensual pleasures

are time-consuming, full of suffering, full of despair, and the danger in them is still greater, while this Dhamma is directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, applicable, to be personally experienced by the wise.” --- SN 1.20

We must stress here that practice of sense restraint would be beneficial even to those who have no interest in practising the Dhamma - fully or partially. Because if the mind manages to become stronger than the sensual pull, and learns how to go beyond sensual cravings, it will to a great degree go beyond the burdens that come with the sensuality. Burdens that are otherwise unavoidable and bring much worry and suffering. Going beyond sensuality will also lessen the grip of one's own Ego and all the conceit underlying it would be reduced. The anxieties, lack of satisfaction, guilt over things done in the past - all of that would disappear or be significantly removed. Of course, we can only imagine what greater freedom can be gained, if on top of the steadfast restraint, one also practices the Dhamma instructions towards uprooting even the subtle conceit and cravings.

The entire life of a person most often revolves around following desires. Trying to get what one wants is the most fundamental habit of a human mind. This is quite normal, but the problem is in that *what* people want is almost always rooted in sensuality. One's desires are most often aimed at the pursuit of the pleasures gained through physical senses. Pleasant sights, sounds, tastes, smells and touches. Subtle or coarse. If a man begins to learn how to go against this *sensual "grain"* that exerts pressure on him, that will already mean a beginning of strength. Of course, mere resistance to such sensual cravings will not be able to uproot the sensuality in itself. For that, *understanding* of the nature of that sensuality will be necessary. But this is only possible on the *basis* of the sense restraint. For example, if a person has been adhering to the practice of restraint and abstaining from *intentionally* giving in to sense desires, that person will be able to see the gratuitous nature of the sensual desire in a form of one's own thoughts. It is something that has arisen completely uninvited, yet pressures one to act upon it as if it is truly owned by him. Sticking to this kind of reflection can reveal that even things that one does want and desire, are rooted and arisen as something that is fundamentally outside of one's control. One's responsibility lies not in preventing those thoughts from arising, but in choosing to *delight* and *entertain* them. Or not, as the Buddha would tell. In brief: being able to see the uncontrollable (gratuitous) nature of one's own desires, one can overcome the pressure that they exert on him.

The main reason why most people wouldn't even consider the practice of celibacy is because it's simply too difficult. Because of that it is also unlikely that a man would choose to do it, outside of some sort of philosophical belief or a religious practice. There just wouldn't be enough motivation.

To reiterate: freedom from sensuality starts by giving it up first. Saying "no" to it. That is not optional. This initial effort can then enable a person to allow the nature of desire to *manifest* and *arise*. As opposed to someone who tries to prevent this, or rather cover it up. This cover up is due to instantaneous giving in to the pressure of desire (if not physically, at least mentally). Or it is due to trying to prevent it and deny it. (The former and the latter correspond to sensual indulgence and self-mortification respectively.)

Giving in to the pressure, distracts one from seeing what is it that pressures him in the first place. Denying it, does the same. If one *learns* how to endure it through restraint, then it can become clear that there is no pressure of sensuality *without* one's body. A person at a face

value regards one's own body as basis for pleasure. It's seen to be something "free" and "effortless". Something that belongs to "me". That in itself is a sufficient reason for giving in to it. Hence, it's not incidental that the Buddha often compared sensuality to a "bait".

If one contemplates the necessity of the living healthy body for *any* sensual engagements (fleeting or otherwise), it can be discerned that even the pleasures that one can gain from it *belong* to the actual *sense organs*. As in: pleasures are inseparable and inconceivable without them. Thus, if one wants to overcome the entire domain of sensuality, one can do so by overcoming the *ownership* of the sense organs (or the *body* as a whole). And extinguishing of the ownership, i.e. the necessary condition of sensuality, is done by understanding that it was impossible to own the body in the first place. If that were not so, then one's desires would *already* be all satisfied (i.e. there would be no desires to begin with). Alternatively, one can contemplate that if one were the true master and owner of one's own body, that body would not be a *subject* to illness, aging and death. It would not be *liable* to accidents, elements, circumstances, etc. This kind of understanding can only be properly developed on the basis of restraint and celibacy. And once it is developed, then the restraint will become a normal mode of behaviour. It will not be a way of "resistance" to the sensual pull any more, because there will be no more senses that can pull one. Senses and their respective desires are a problem only when they are "mine".