

Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero

THE ONLY WAY TO JHĀNA

Meditation according to the early Suttas

Path Press Publications

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ABBREVIATIONS

DN—Dīgha Nikāya
MN—Majjhima Nikāya
SN—Saṃyutta Nikāya
AN—Aṅguttara Nikāya
Ud.—Udāna
Thag.—Theragāthā
Dhp.—Dhammapada
Vin.—Vinaya Piṭaka

Preface

The following texts are rewritten and expanded essays based on the transcripts from a selection of my video and audio talks and discussions.

I would like to say thank you to all people involved in proofreading, advising, funding, printing and publishing. Much merit to you all. Anumodana!

—Nyanamoli
Hillside Hermitage, Slovenia

1

Jhāna is a lifestyle

... When the Tathāgata gets a person fit to be tamed, he first trains him like this:

‘(1) Come, monk. Be virtuous. Live restrained in accordance with the Pāṭimokkha, accomplished in your behavior and sphere of activity. Train yourself, having undertaken the training rules, seeing danger in the slightest faults.’

When the monk is virtuous ... seeing danger in the slightest faults, the Tathāgata then trains him further:

‘(2) Come, monk. Be one who is guarded in the doors of your sense faculties. On seeing a form with the eye, don’t grasp at any signs and features (significance) by which—if you were to live without restraint over the faculty of the eye—unskilful qualities such as greed or distress might assail you. Practice restraint. Protect the faculty of the eye. Attain restraint concerning the faculty of the eye. On hearing a sound with the ear ... On smelling an aroma with the nose ... On tasting a flavour with the tongue ... On touching a tactile sensation with the body ... On cognising an idea with the intellect, don’t grasp at any signs and features by which—if you were to live without restraint over the faculty of the intellect—unskilful qualities such as greed or distress might assail you. Practice restraint. Protect the faculty of the intellect. Attain restraint concerning the faculty of the intellect.’

When the monk is one who is guarded in the doors of his sense faculties ... the Tathāgata then trains him further:

‘(3) Come, monk. Be one who moderates his eating. Concurrently reflecting, take your food not playfully, nor for intoxication, nor for putting on weight, nor for beautification, but simply for the survival and continuance of this body, for ending its afflictions, for the support of the holy life, thinking, “I will destroy old feelings and not create new feelings. Therefore I will maintain myself, be blameless and live at ease.’

When the monk is one who moderates his eating ... the Tathāgata then trains him further:

‘(4) Come, monk. Be one who is devoted to wakefulness. During the day, sitting and walking back and forth, cleanse your mind of obstructive things. During the first watch of the night, sitting and walking back and forth, cleanse your mind of obstructive things. During the second watch of the night, reclining on your right side, take up the lion’s posture, one foot placed on top of the other, recollected, alert, with your mind set on getting up. During the last watch of the night, sitting and walking back and forth, cleanse your mind of obstructive things.’

When the monk is one who is devoted to wakefulness ... the Tathāgata then trains him further:

‘(5) Come, monk. Be one who is possessed of recollection and awareness. When going forward and returning, make yourself aware. When looking toward and looking away ... When bending and extending your limbs ... When carrying your outer cloak, upper robe, and bowl ... When eating, drinking, chewing, and tasting ... When urinating and defecating ... When walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and remaining silent, make yourself aware.’

When the monk is one who is possessed of recollection and awareness ... The Tathāgata then trains him further:

‘(6) Come, monk. Seek out a secluded dwelling: a wilderness, the shade of a tree, a mountain, a glen, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a forest grove, the open air, a heap of straw.’

He seeks out a secluded residence: a wilderness, the shade of a tree, a mountain, a glen, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a forest grove, the open air, a heap of straw. After his meal, returning from his alms round, he sits down, crosses his legs, holds his body upright, and brings recollection to the fore.

(7) Abandoning lust with regard to the world, he lives with an awareness devoid of lust. He cleanses his mind of lust. Abandoning ill will and anger, he lives with an awareness devoid of ill will, compassionate to the welfare of all living beings. He cleanses his mind of ill will and anger. Abandoning indolence and tiredness, he lives with an awareness devoid of indolence and tiredness, recollected, alert, percipient of light. He cleanses his mind of indolence and tiredness. Abandoning restlessness and anxiety, he lives undisturbed, his mind inwardly stilled. He cleanses his mind of restlessness and anxiety. Abandoning doubt, he lives having crossed over doubt, with

no perplexity with regard to skilful qualities. He cleanses his mind of doubt.

(8) Having abandoned these five hindrances—imperfections of mind that weaken discernment—then, withdrawn from sensual desire, withdrawn from unskilful qualities, he enters and remains in the first comprehension: joy and pleasure born of withdrawal, with thinking and pondering ... the second comprehension, the third comprehension, the fourth comprehension: purity of equanimity and recollection, neither pleasure nor pain.

This is my instruction to those monks in training who have not attained the goal, but remain intent on the unsurpassed safety from bondage. But for those monks who are arahants—whose defilements are ended, who have reached fulfillment – done the task, laid down the burden, attained the true goal, laid to waste the impediment of being, and who are released through right understanding—these qualities lead both to a pleasant abiding in the here and now, and to recollection and awareness. – MN 107

Ajahn Nyanamoli: As you can see, *jhāna* practice is the culmination of a certain very specific lifestyle of self-taming. When it says: ‘Live restrained in accordance with the *Pāṭimokkha*,’ we can boil that down to the eight or ten precepts and exclude the other rules which pertained to social circumstances at the time. In other words, this lifestyle need not apply only to monastics. Even if you do not wear robes, if you want to practice, then the rules of the *Pāṭimokkha* apply to you—not technically, but in the spirit of the eight precepts which are the necessity for beginning that self-taming practice of restraint. The five precepts keep you from behaving like an animal, and will enable you to make merit which will contribute to a better birth. But if you see yourself as one who practices the Dhamma, then you should know that the eight precepts are not negotiable.

The statement: ‘Come, monk ...’ could be substituted with: ‘So, you want to practice—then come here, follow this discipline. And once you have taken it on, you need to start seeing the danger in the slightest fault.’ (That pertains to sensuality, ill will and aversion. Not ‘faults’ that pertain to technicalities and phrasings of the rules and precepts).

Initially that can be taken neurotically, but that’s okay—you will get used to it and get past the neurotic aspect; but you must continue to see the value of the discipline and the danger of breaking it, because you

know that breaking it will undo your striving. If you are not afraid of breaking the precepts, it's because you do not know them as the basis for understanding the Dhamma. Not knowing that means you will become careless; because there is no fear of the consequences of wrongdoing motivating you.

The common misconception, even with people who keep the precepts and value them, is that they keep the precepts out of faith, cultural pressure, authority, tradition or instruction from whatever meditation group they are a part of, but do not see *how* the precepts are helping them to tame themselves. So while external circumstances are motivating them to be restrained, deep down such people still hold a view that all these random things they do will somehow magically contribute to an experience of a *jhāna* or enlightenment, which will then mean that they have no more work to do. In other words, they don't see a direct link between what they can do through their own choices of sense restraint, and development of the right context which will inevitably result in purification of their minds and enlightenment. They just do *some* work which they *hope* will produce the experience of *jhāna* and later awakening.

The second part of the gradual training is guarding of the senses. That's what peripheral awareness is, the non-grasping of the signs and features of that which is seen, heard, smelt, tasted, touched or thought of.

This is not about shutting off your senses. The signs and features of a sense object that you experience are always peripheral, you don't *see* signs and features. For example, when you look at a sign which says 'Stop', you see the letters, the colour and shape. But the significance of 'You must not pass beyond this point, you must stop there!'—that is not *in* the sign. Yet you experience that when your eyes see the sign, and those are the 'features' of that sign, the significance and meaning of it. The reason I'm saying this is because often the practice of sense restraint is conflated with the view that one must beat the senses down, by not looking, not hearing and so on. Even if you do that, you still won't see the significance of *that*—the signs and features of what you're doing—and that's where you need to start recognising the sense restraint that is occurring. In other words, when you are taming the senses, you need to know before you do any action whether that act will be rooted in greed, aversion or distraction.

Now let's say things surprise you, a sensual option arises and pressures you: then you have a choice to dwell mentally on either the signs

and features that contribute to the increasing of passion, or those conducive to dispassion. Both options are there, you must choose to attend one or the other. Either way, pressure has arisen and you cannot undo that, because you have seen something. You are only relatively in control of the senses, so you can try to avoid certain sights, but still things can happen because your sense organs are still there in the world. And when that does happen, you need to allow things to endure without breaking the discipline. That's the order of development, and that's why discipline comes first.

If you are restraining your senses correctly, it is effortless. You don't need to pull out your eyes, cut your ears off etc., so that you never experience objects that might cause the pressure of lust or disagreeability to arise in you. All you need to do is to make sure that when your eyes do see, or when your ears do hear, you don't delight, accept, welcome and entertain the signs and features that are making lust increase—the sign of beauty, the sign of agreeability, the sign of non-danger, of 'friendly and non-threatening'—all those significances are the signs of sensuality. And when your senses perceive something disagreeable, you don't try to get rid of, deny, resist and harbour aversion towards it either.

If people were to truly see the danger of sensual desire for sensual pleasures, none of that would ever again be seen as safe, friendly, suitable, pleasurable for me; it would be seen to be like a pit of burning embers, a poisonous drink, a bait, a trap, etc. Those significances are there, it's not like you must remove the significances of pleasures. No, you must instead stop entertaining them, and look for the other significances that are equally present, but that you have been ignoring out of your habit of welcoming lust.

Q: I can attend to the beautiful signs of an object which will increase lust, or I can look at the non-beautiful signs (*asubhanimitta*) which would calm things down.

Nm: But that should not be done out of aversion and for the sake of getting rid of the beautiful aspects or for the sake of getting rid of the pressure they exert on you, as neither of those things are yours. Your eye is pressured, and your eye wants the beautiful things. All you need to do is maintain the context of the non-beautiful, the threatening and dangerous, and keep it there; and it will prevail because it is the fundamental context that will make such unwholesome thoughts subside and go away:

As I was living diligent, ardent, and resolute, a thought of sensual desire arose in me. I understood thus: ‘This thought of sensual desire has arisen in me. This leads to my own affliction, to others’ affliction, and to the affliction of both; it obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties, and leads away from Nibbāna.’ When I considered: ‘This leads to my own affliction,’ it subsided in me; when I considered: ‘This leads to others’ affliction,’ it subsided in me; when I considered: ‘This leads to the affliction of both,’ it subsided in me; when I considered: ‘This obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties, and leads away from Nibbāna,’ it subsided in me. – MN 19

That’s why the Buddha would say that in beauty, if you develop your mind, you will be able to see the ugly through it. Not *change* the beautiful and the ugly—it’s still the same beautiful significances—but through them you can see the ugly, you see the danger.

... And how, Ānanda, is one a noble one developing the faculties? Here, Ānanda, in a bhikkhu having seen a form with the eye, there arises what is pleasant, there arises what is unpleasant, there arises what is pleasant and unpleasant. If he should wish: ‘May I remain perceiving the unrepulsive in what is repulsive’, he remains there perceiving the unrepulsive. If he should wish: ‘May I remain perceiving the repulsive in what is unrepulsive’, he remains there perceiving the repulsive. If he should wish: ‘May I remain perceiving the unrepulsive in what is repulsive and what is unrepulsive’, he remains there perceiving the unrepulsive. If he should wish: ‘May I remain perceiving the repulsive in what is repulsive and what is unrepulsive’, he remains there perceiving the repulsive. If he should wish: ‘May I, surmounting both what is repulsive and what is unrepulsive, remain equanimous, recollected and aware’, he remains there equanimous, recollected and aware ... – MN 152

Q: Do not grasp the sign of beauty ...

Nm: Don’t take it up, don’t welcome it or entertain it. It’s still there, but you don’t take it up—and you won’t take it up, if you start attending to the significances that you do not want to take up. Namely the signs of danger.

Q: So in a way, you should grasp the sign of danger?

Nm: Yes, because you don't start in a neutral position. You don't start your practice whereby you have this equal choice of beautiful and ugly—you begin by being fully gripped and pressured by the beautiful. Your sense restraint begins by not doing that, so don't grasp those features, and then the other features will become more apparent. So by all means grasp the feature of ugliness, stick to it, and it will result in developing dispassion all the way to final liberation.

Those beneficial features are not visible initially because of the habitual and automatic grasping of lust when you are touched by pleasure, the automatic grasping at getting rid of the discomfort when you are touched by pain, and the automatic grasping of distraction when you are touched by neither-painful-nor-pleasant feelings. You guard your senses by maintaining the context that will make you abstain from habitually grasping onto the beautiful aspects of what is given, and that pertains to all of the senses.

So, you only need to abandon things which are underlain by lust, aversion or delusion. The signs and features which are revealed through non-grasping cannot be 'grasped' in the same way, which means you cannot delight in or lust for *jhāna*. And that's exactly how you enter *jhāna*: by fully withdrawing from signs and features that are grasped with lust, or that serve to increase lust, ill will or ignorance. By all means grasp the sign of the ugly, since you cannot grasp it with lust, but only with discernment.

Q: When the monk is one who is guarded in the doors of his sense faculties ... the Tathāgata then trains him further:

'(3) Come, monk. Be one who moderates his eating. With concurrent attention take your food not playfully, nor for intoxication, nor for putting on weight, nor for beautification, but simply for the survival and continuance of this body, for ending its afflictions, for the support of the holy life, thinking: "I will destroy old feelings and not create new feelings. Therefore I will maintain myself, be blameless, and live at ease."'

Nm: You need to sustain the right motivation for eating, it's not optional. Don't think that by eating half a meal or avoiding food altogether, that you are practising correctly. That's asceticism, and it's misguided more often than not. You should moderate your eating by not losing sight of the context for eating *while* you are eating. How is that done? By not eating for the wrong reasons, and eating for the right reasons.

Those motivations are something that you can choose to keep in your mind, or ignore. If you can keep them in mind, you don't have to worry about over-eating or under-eating.

Often moderation in eating gets conflated with the idea: 'I must eat only 20% of my meal,' but that just means that you are still ignorant of the motivation behind your eating. Just because you reduce your enjoyment by eating 20% of your usual meal, that does not mean that your sensuality is not there. If there is any form of passion in regard to food, that means you are not eating for the right reasons, and so you need to be contemplating and discerning those reasons more clearly—not just trying to eat less and less, which is what a lot of people try to do. So don't eat something if you don't need to, but don't refuse to eat it just because you don't know where your motivation is rooted. The practice is about discerning your motivation and re-rooting it in wholesome reasons.

You naturally begin by eating out of sensuality—for beautification, for pleasing tastes, for entertainment; you don't start eating with a purified mind. But if you eat just to remove hunger, you will get to see what a burden and a chore eating is. This means that you don't have to try micromanage your meals or special diets—controlling those external circumstances won't uproot your greed, because the greed is not in the food. All you need to do is sustain the correct context, and your previous wrong reasons for eating will diminish.

Q: When the monk is one who moderates his eating ... the Tathāgata then trains him further:

'(4) Come, monk. Be one who is devoted to wakefulness. During the day, sitting and walking back and forth, cleanse your mind of obstructive things. During the first watch of the night, sitting and walking back and forth, cleanse your mind of obstructive things. During the second watch of the night, reclining on your right side, take up the lion's posture, one foot placed on top of the other, recollected, alert, with your mind set on getting up. During the last watch of the night, sitting and walking back and forth, cleanse your mind of obstructive things.'

Nm: How many teachings teach how to purify your mind from obstructive states? Most of the instructions merely tell you how to focus on an object, but how is that purifying your mind? People may perform these techniques *hoping* that no obstructive states will arise, but in doing so they are not purifying their minds, because those minds need to *first* be seen.

It's important to realise that you cannot just start 'cleansing your mind' directly, because when you start out you are not even seeing your mind, let alone states which obstruct the mind. Most people don't keep precepts or practice celibacy—most live with a mind immersed in sensuality and don't guard their senses, and so they don't even see the signs and features of the mind. You need to *first* be well restrained with the discipline, celibate, seeing the danger in the slightest fault, not entertaining the signs and features that would increase the hindrances, then train in having that clarity of motivation behind your eating—because for most people even that is completely invisible.

Being watchful of your actions throughout the day means that your mind is staying with that which is the priority: namely, 'the guarding of the gateway' of your mind, so that there are no obstructions for it. That's the sole task—which can be outlined through discipline, guarding the senses and moderating your eating. You will end up just having to guard the entrance of the gateway, so you don't have to be running around. The gateway is that one entrance into the city which is walled around. The gateway is that one entrance into the city which is walled all round, and that 'wall' is your discipline and sense restraint. That's why virtue and celibacy are not optional if you want to practice rightly.

Q: When the monk is one who is devoted to wakefulness ... the Tathāgata then trains him further:

'(5) Come, monk. Be one who is possessed of recollection and awareness. When going forward and returning, make yourself aware. When looking toward and looking away ... When bending and extending your limbs ... When carrying your outer cloak, upper robe, and bowl ... When eating, drinking, chewing, and tasting ... When urinating and defecating ... When walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and remaining silent, make yourself aware.'

Nm: To develop that previous wakefulness even further, one needs to bring that context of wakefulness that has been developed, 'the guard post,' and intensify it. You don't need to be doing that in some formal hour of focusing meditation, but rather it's done constantly—whether you are going to the toilet, extending your arm, lying down, cleaning, etc. So, even while you are doing all these tasks, the guard post is clear and you are not abandoning that one job that you must do, which is to protect the context from obstructive states.

Also, just notice at what stage in the training the Buddha presents this.

I say this because many people try to start here, thinking that by focusing on their hands or feet, they are practising mindfulness and awareness. There is *no focusing* in ‘mindfulness and awareness,’ it’s about the *presence of memory* and recollecting and developing the right context to an unshakeable extent. It’s about being able to see the signs and features of your mind, its inclinations—so as to protect it from obstructive states before they even arise.

These signs and features need to be discerned in the background; they are not something that you can stare at or attend to directly, because signs and features are in the background of that which you are attending to. You cannot see the mind as an object of your senses, but you can discern it peripherally and know it. That’s the principle of *cittanimitta*.

Q: When the monk is one who is possessed of recollection and awareness ... the Tathāgata then trains him further:

‘(6) Come, monk. Seek out a secluded dwelling: a wilderness, the shade of a tree, a mountain, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a forest grove, the open air, a heap of straw ...’

(7) Abandoning lust with regard to the world, he lives with an awareness devoid of greed. He cleanses his mind of lust. Abandoning ill will and anger, he lives with an awareness devoid of ill will, compassionate to the welfare of all living beings. He cleanses his mind of ill will and anger. Abandoning indolence and tiredness, he lives with an awareness devoid of indolence and tiredness, recollected, alert, percipient of light. He cleanses his mind of indolence and tiredness. Abandoning restlessness and anxiety, he lives undisturbed, his mind inwardly stilled. He cleanses his mind of restlessness and anxiety. Abandoning uncertainty, he lives having crossed over uncertainty, with no perplexity with regard to skilful qualities. He cleanses his mind of uncertainty.

(8) Having abandoned these five hindrances—imperfections of awareness that weaken discernment—then, withdrawn from sensual desire, withdrawn from unskilful qualities, he enters and remains in the first comprehension: joy and pleasure born of withdrawal, accompanied by thought and evaluation ...

Nm: If you want to abandon the hindrances, which is how you enter *jhāna*, then you need to be living with your recollection thoroughly established. That means you need to be watchful at all times—which in turn means you need to moderate your eating, guard the senses, be celibate

and keep the precepts. Not watchful of ‘sensations’ or micro movements and thoughts your body or mind come with, but watchful of the right context of your situation, of withdrawal, the danger of losing sight of gatepost, the peril of sensual pleasures, etc. You can then realize that *jhāna* is an establishment of mind that results from your own efforts of purifying your lifestyle. It’s not a magical experience that will purify your life for you. *Jhāna* is one of the last positive symptoms of you healing the wounds of lust, hatred and ignorance. When you live withdrawn in such a way, having removed sorrow and concern regarding the world, having abandoned the hindrances, you are secluded from unwholesome states. The pleasure of that withdrawal from liability to suffering arises. You feel safe. And that’s the entering and abiding in *jhāna*. It’s not the other way round.

The important thing is that *jhāna* is one of the last steps in the gradual training; but many contemporary teachings try to begin the training with it, bypassing all the prerequisites.

If you withdraw yourself from the unwholesome, you don’t have to worry about *jhāna*—that *is jhāna*. You don’t have to worry about a technique, which incidentally you will not find in the Suttas. The closest thing to a method for *jhāna* is what we have just been describing, the Gradual Training.

Just as the ocean has a gradual shelf, a gradual slope, a gradual inclination, with a sudden drop-off only after a long stretch, in the same way this discipline of Dhamma has a gradual training, a gradual performance, a gradual progression, with attainment of higher knowledge only after a long stretch. – Ud. 5.5

2

Lay life does not justify sensuality

The practice starts with learning what the Buddha *actually* taught. For a person who is interested in following the Buddha's instruction, it is important to start reading the discourses that contain that instruction. Equally important is to continue reading them; especially in the sense of re-reading and studying repeatedly those that you have already gone through.

This is because the discourses can be understood on different layers of meaning: the first time you read a Sutta, you might feel inspired and it makes some sense; but if you make a practice of reading a discourse more than once, you will quickly realise that there is something further to be understood beyond the original meaning that you might have gleaned. Although the previous understanding might have been correct, it can be taken further. You can never know too much in terms of the Buddha's instruction. This is important to recognize, because the more you know, the more likely you are to be applying yourself to the practice correctly. This means that you are in turn more likely to discern those things that are referred to in the discourses within your own experience.

So it is important to practice learning. However, in order for what is learned to be applicable, virtue and sense restraint need to be fully established and that is the main point that is often overlooked. Often people differentiate between 'practice for lay people' and 'practice for monks'. It is true that there is a difference in terms of the external statement and the particular lifestyle, but in terms of practice the important distinction is between living involved with sensuality, and living without it.

Then Ven. Ānanda, together with Tapussa the householder, went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One: 'Tapussa the householder, here, has said to me, "Venerable Ānanda, sir, we are householders who indulge in sensuality, delight in sensuality, enjoy sensuality, rejoice in sensuality. For us—indulging in sensuality,

delighting in sensuality, enjoying sensuality, rejoicing in sensuality—renunciation seems like a sheer drop-off. Yet I’ve heard that in this teaching and discipline the minds of young monks leap up at renunciation, grow confident, steadfast, and firm, seeing it as peace. So right here is where this teaching and discipline is contrary to the great mass of people: i.e. renunciation.”

‘So it is, Ānanda. So it is.

Even I myself, before my awakening, when I was still unawakened but intent upon awakening, thought: “Renunciation is good. Seclusion is good.” But my mind didn’t leap up at renunciation, didn’t grow confident, steadfast, or firm, seeing it as peace. The thought occurred to me: “What is the cause, what is the reason, why my mind doesn’t leap up at renunciation, doesn’t grow confident, steadfast, or firm, seeing it as peace?” Then the thought occurred to me: “I haven’t seen the danger of sensual pleasures; I haven’t pursued it. I haven’t understood the reward of renunciation; I haven’t developed it. That’s why my mind doesn’t leap up at renunciation, doesn’t grow confident, steadfast, or firm, seeing it as peace.”

Then the thought occurred to me: “If, having seen the danger of sensual pleasures, I were to pursue that; and if, having understood the reward of renunciation, I were to develop it, there’s the possibility that my mind would leap up at renunciation, grow confident, steadfast, and firm, seeing it as peace.” So at a later time, having seen the danger of sensual pleasures, I pursued that theme; having understood the reward of renunciation, I familiarized myself with it. My mind leaped up at renunciation, grew confident, steadfast, and firm, seeing it as peace.

Then, withdrawn from sensual desires, withdrawn from unwholesome states, I entered and remained in the first comprehension: pleasure and happiness born from withdrawal, with thinking and pondering.’ – AN 9.41

Usually, it is true, a layperson is a person who lives with sensuality; and monks are those practising restraint. However ‘being a layperson’ and ‘living with sensuality’ are two entirely separate things; one does not need to imply the other. It is important to make this distinction. If someone, who wishes to seriously practice the Dhamma, chooses to live as a layperson for whatever reason, this does not automatically imply that they don’t need to practice sense restraint.

Quite often I hear people saying something like ‘I cannot be a monk, because I have to look after my mother (or similar)’. But the implicit conclusion to this is ‘... and therefore because I have a good worldly reason not to be a monk, I can also engage in sensuality by default since I’m not a monk’. That is completely wrong thinking. It is one decision to pursue the lifestyle of a layperson as opposed to that of a monk. The decision to neglect sense restraint on top of it—or to practice it only partially—has nothing to do with the choice of being a layman. You are always responsible for acting out of sensuality, and this is what you are choosing to ignore by equating lay life with sensual life. The same problem of avoiding responsibility can often cause somebody to become a monk, but then to expect the circumstances and environment of the monastery to do the sense restraint for them. That is, they make no effort to uproot sensuality internally on the level of the mind, and although they are not engaging in sensual activity with their body at the time, they remain very much within the sensual domain.

There are discourses in which laypeople understood the Dhamma. However, it is very important to see that they certainly did not understand the Dhamma on account of their sensual life. Whenever people who were not monastics understood the Dhamma, it was through being withdrawn from sensuality as a necessary condition:

Then the Lord talked a progressive talk to the householder Anāthapiṇḍika, that is to say talk on giving, talk on moral habit, talk on heaven, he explained the danger, the vanity, the depravity of pleasures of the senses, the advantage in renouncing them. When the Lord knew that the mind of the householder Anāthapiṇḍika was ready, malleable, devoid of the hindrances, uplifted, pleased, then he explained to him that teaching on Dhamma which the awakened ones have themselves discovered: suffering, the origin, the cessation and the way leading to cessation of suffering. And as a clean cloth without black specks will easily take dye, even so as he was sitting on that very seat, Dhamma-vision, dustless, stainless, arose to the householder Anāthapiṇḍika, that ‘whatever is liable to manifest, all that is liable to cease’. Then the householder Anāthapiṇḍika, having viewed the Dhamma, reached the Dhamma, found the Dhamma, plunged into Dhamma, having crossed over doubt, having put away uncertainty, having become independent of others in the Teacher’s instruction. – Vin. Kd 16

Sometimes, due to complacency, a person with the Right view might become content with what they have understood and not make any further effort, but the Buddha would always admonish people in such cases and urge them not to be complacent. So if complacency is ill-advised, even for somebody with a considerable attainment—what is to be said about attempting to develop that attainment with the attitude of complacency as your starting point? The idea that ‘I am fine in whatever environment I am in, and sensuality is not a problem for me,’ is entirely wrong-thinking according to the principles of Dhamma. Sensuality is always a problem.

Another point to consider is that even the decision to remain as a layperson is already not something to be taken lightly. If you want to understand the Dhamma, you need to live withdrawn from sensuality, which is certainly easier to do if you are not a layperson living an ordinary lay lifestyle. This means that if you choose to live as a layperson, you are adding another extra task for yourself on top of trying to understand the Dhamma: namely sense restraint amidst the environment which does anything but encourage sense restraint. This is very hard to sustain, which is exactly why people tend to turn a blind eye to the fact that they are responsible for the choice of their environment, and just go with it. Back in the Buddha’s day, if someone remained as a layperson rather than going forth on account of their confidence in the Buddha’s teaching, this was nearly always rooted in some necessity; such as looking after children or dependents who would not be able to survive alone. It was not just that others would be upset if they were not there; it was that they would literally die without them. If somebody did not go forth only because they were protecting other people’s lives, they did not take their duty towards family as an excuse to also live a sensual life. They would continue to practice sense restraint as laypeople.

... Aggivessana, it’s as if there were a great mountain and two companions would go to that mountain. On arrival, one of the companions would stay at the foot of the mountain, and one would climb to the top. The companion staying at the foot of the mountain would ask the companion standing on top, ‘What do you see, my friend, standing on top of the mountain?’

He would say, ‘I see delightful parks, delightful forests, delightful stretches of land, and delightful lakes.’

The other would say, ‘It’s impossible, my friend. It cannot happen

that standing on top of the mountain you would see delightful parks, delightful forests, delightful stretches of land, & delightful lakes.'

Then the companion standing on top, descending to the foot of the mountain and grabbing his companion by the arm, would make him climb to the top. After letting him catch his breath for a moment, he would ask him, 'What do you see, my friend, standing on top of the mountain?'

He would say, 'I see delightful parks, delightful forests, delightful stretches of land, and delightful lakes.'

The other would say, 'But just now didn't you say, "It's impossible, my friend. It cannot happen that standing on top of the mountain you would see delightful parks, delightful forests, delightful stretches of land, and delightful lakes"? Yet now I understand you to say, "I see delightful parks, delightful forests, delightful stretches of land, and delightful lakes."' "

The other would say, 'But that's because I was standing blocked by this great mountain and didn't see.'

In the same way, Aggivessana, Prince Jayasena is blocked, obstructed, impeded, and enveloped by the even greater mass of ignorance. For him, living amid sensuality, enjoying sensuality, consumed by thoughts of sensuality, burning with the fever of sensuality, intent on the search for sensuality, to know or see or realize that which is to be known through renunciation, seen through renunciation, attained through renunciation, realized through renunciation: That is impossible. ... – MN 125

The point to recognise is that your criteria for what is right and possible are not necessarily correct, from the point of view that you have at the 'bottom of the mountain'. Refusing to climb, for whatever reason, does not give you the excuse to indulge in whatever is at the bottom of the mountain. Again, it doesn't matter whether you wear robes or not: what matters is whether you want the fruits of liberation or not. And if you do, then you have to ask yourself if you are physically withdrawn from sensuality? Are you accepting sensuality on the mental level? Are you practising sense restraint for the goal of overcoming it?

Most important of all is to take responsibility for your choices, including the choice to remain as a layperson. Otherwise, you will not feel responsible for engaging in sensuality, because you already have not

taken responsibility for choosing not to climb the mountain; not to go into the higher environment of sense restraint. If you do take responsibility for that choice and fully consider it, you can see that it is indeed still possible to practice, but, far from using the choice of environment as an excuse for carelessness, you know that you are making a compromise and therefore you have to be twice as careful at the bottom of the mountain. If you think, ‘I am not at the top and therefore I can fully indulge and engage with whatever comes my way down here at the bottom,’ that is a whole other layer of sensuality and self-deception, on top of a decision that is already a compromise.

So the practice starts by learning what the practice actually is, and this has to involve realising that there is no possibility for understanding anything that has been learned unless a proper basis of virtue and sense restraint is established. In concrete terms, this means keeping more than the five precepts—at a minimum it means being celibate and eating for the right reasons. Even back in the Buddha’s day, the five precepts were not sufficient for *developing* the Right view. Rather, they were and remain a non-negotiable basis for a mundane and successful human life of somebody who is not pursuing the path of the Dhamma practice.

Yes, five precepts do offer some improvement to an unrestrained mind, but if you want to understand the Dhamma or discern the sign of your mind (the necessary condition for *sotāpatti* i.e. the Right view) then the mind needs to be fully withdrawn from sensuality, just as the quote regarding Anāthapiṇḍika’s stream-entry above shows. Practically speaking, one needs to be celibate, and not entertain sensual options throughout the day.

So, if you can sustain that degree of carefulness and restraint in the environment at the bottom of the mountain—that’s fine, but you should recognise that this is not at all an easy thing to do. Even back in the Buddha’s day it was hard even without all the various convenient options for distraction that we have today. To sustain such restraint in such a sensual pressuring environment, you will need to possess some serious willpower. If you were to possess such willpower, then actually there would be nothing binding you to the bottom of that mountain. You would have already overcome it and moved to a better place.

Once, Ānanda, there was a market town in this spot named Vebhaliṅga. It was prosperous and full of people. And Kassapa, a

blessed one, a perfected one, a fully awakened Buddha, lived supported by Vebhaliṅga. It was here, in fact, that he had his monastery, where he sat and advised the mendicant Saṅgha.

The Buddha Kassapa had as a chief supporter in Vebhaliṅga a potter named Ghaṭikāra. Ghaṭikāra had a dear friend named Jotipāla, a brahmin student.

Then Ghaṭikāra addressed Jotipāla, ‘Come, dear Jotipāla, let’s go to see the Blessed One Kassapa, the perfected one, the fully awakened Buddha. For I regard it as holy to see that Blessed One.’ When he said this, Jotipāla said to him, ‘Enough, what’s the use of seeing that bald, fake ascetic?’

For a second time ... and a third time, Ghaṭikāra addressed Jotipāla, ‘Come, dear Jotipāla, let’s go to see the Blessed One Kassapa, the perfected one, the fully awakened Buddha. For I regard it as holy to see that Blessed One.’ For a third time, Jotipāla said to him, ‘Enough, what’s the use of seeing that bald, fake ascetic?’ – ‘Well then, Jotipāla, let’s take some bathing paste of powdered shell and go to the river to bathe.’ – ‘Yes’ replied Jotipāla.

So that’s what they did. Then Ghaṭikāra addressed Jotipāla, ‘Jotipāla, the Buddha Kassapa’s monastery is not far away. Let’s go to see the Blessed One Kassapa, the perfected one, the fully awakened Buddha. For I regard it as holy to see that Blessed One.’ When he said this, Jotipāla said to him, ‘Enough, what’s the use of seeing that bald, fake ascetic?’

For a second time ... and a third time, Ghaṭikāra addressed Jotipāla, ‘Dear Jotipāla, the Buddha Kassapa’s monastery is not far away. Let’s go to see the Blessed One Kassapa, the perfected one, the fully awakened Buddha. For I regard it as holy to see that Blessed One.’ For a third time, Jotipāla said to him, ‘Enough, what’s the use of seeing that bald, fake ascetic?’

Then Ghaṭikāra grabbed Jotipāla by the belt and repeated his request. ... So Jotipāla undid his belt and said to Ghaṭikāra, ‘Enough, what’s the use of seeing that bald, fake ascetic?’

Then Ghaṭikāra grabbed Jotipāla by the hair of his freshly-washed head repeated his request. ...

Then Jotipāla thought, ‘It’s incredible, it’s amazing, how this potter Ghaṭikāra, though born in a lower caste, should presume to grab me by the hair of my freshly-washed head! This must be no ordinary matter.’

He said to Ghaṭṭikāra, ‘You’d even milk it to this extent, Ghaṭṭikāra?’ – ‘I even milk it to this extent, Jotipāla. For that is how holy I regard it to see that Blessed One.’ – ‘Well then, Ghaṭṭikāra, release me, we shall go.’

Then Ghaṭṭikāra the potter and Jotipāla the brahmin student went to the Buddha Kassapa. Ghaṭṭikāra bowed and sat down to one side, but Jotipāla exchanged greetings with the Buddha and sat down to one side. Ghaṭṭikāra said to the Buddha Kassapa, ‘Sir, this is my dear friend Jotipāla, a brahmin student. Please teach him the Dhamma.’

Then the Buddha Kassapa educated, encouraged, fired up, and inspired Ghaṭṭikāra and Jotipāla with a Dhamma talk. Then they got up from their seat, bowed, and respectfully circled the Buddha Kassapa, keeping him on their right, before leaving.

Then Jotipāla said to Ghaṭṭikāra, ‘Ghaṭṭikāra, you have heard this teaching, so why don’t you go forth from the lay life to homelessness?’ – ‘Don’t you know, Jotipāla, that I look after my blind old parents?’ – ‘Well then, Ghaṭṭikāra, I shall go forth from the lay life to homelessness.’

Then Ghaṭṭikāra and Jotipāla went to the Buddha Kassapa, bowed, and sat down to one side. Ghaṭṭikāra said to the Buddha Kassapa, ‘Sir, this is my dear friend Jotipāla, a brahmin student. Please give him the going forth.’ And Jotipāla the brahmin student received the going forth, the ordination in the Buddha’s presence.

Not long after Jotipāla’s ordination, a fortnight later, the Buddha Kassapa—having stayed in Vebhalinga as long as he wished—set out for Benares. Travelling stage by stage, he arrived at Benares, where he stayed near Benares, in the deer park at Isipatana.

The King of Kāsi heard that he had arrived. He had the finest carriages harnessed. He then mounted a fine carriage and, along with other fine carriages, set out in full royal pomp from Benares to see the Buddha Kassapa. He went by carriage as far as the terrain allowed, then descended and approached the Buddha Kassapa on foot. He bowed and sat down to one side. The Buddha educated, encouraged, fired up, and inspired him with a Dhamma talk.

Then the King said to the Buddha, ‘Sir, would the Buddha together with the bhikkhu Saṅgha please accept tomorrow’s meal from me?’ The Buddha Kassapa consented in silence. Then, knowing that the Buddha had consented, the King got up from his seat, bowed, and respectfully circled the Buddha, keeping him on his right, before leaving.

And when the night had passed, the King had a variety of delicious foods prepared in his own home—soft saffron rice with the dark grains picked out, served with many soups and sauces. Then he had the Buddha informed of the time, saying, ‘Sir, it’s time. The meal is ready.’

Then Kassapa Buddha robed up in the morning and, taking his bowl and robe, went to the home of the King, where he sat on the seat spread out, together with the Saṅgha of bhikkhus. Then the King served and satisfied the bhikkhu Saṅgha headed by the Buddha with his own hands with a variety of delicious foods. When the Buddha Kassapa had eaten and washed his hand and bowl, the King took a low seat and sat to one side. There he said to the Buddha Kassapa, ‘Sir, may the Buddha please accept my invitation to reside in Benares for the rainy season. The Saṅgha will be looked after in the same style.’ – ‘Enough, great king. I have already accepted an invitation for the rains residence.’

For a second time ... and a third time the King said to the Buddha Kassapa, ‘Sir, may the Buddha please accept my invitation to reside in Benares for the rainy season. The Saṅgha will be looked after in the same style.’ – ‘Enough, Great King. I have already accepted an invitation for the rains residence.’

Then the King, thinking, ‘The Buddha does not accept my invitation to reside for the rains in Benares,’ became sad and upset.

Then the King said to the Buddha Kassapa, ‘Sir, do you have another supporter better than me?’ – ‘Great king, there is a market town named Vebhaliṅga, where there’s a potter named Ghaṭikāra. He is my chief supporter. Now, great king, you thought, “The Buddha does not accept my invitation to reside for the rains in Benares,” and you became sad and upset. But Ghaṭikāra doesn’t get upset, nor will he. Ghaṭikāra has gone for refuge to the Buddha, the teaching, and the Saṅgha. He doesn’t kill living creatures, steal, commit sexual misconduct, lie, or take alcoholic drinks that cause negligence. He has experiential confidence in the Buddha, the teaching, and the Saṅgha, and has virtues praised by the noble ones. He is free of doubt regarding suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the practice that leads to its cessation. He eats in one part of the day; he’s celibate, virtuous, and of good character. He has set aside gems and gold and rejected gold and money. He’s put down the shovel and doesn’t dig the earth with his own hands. He takes what has crumbled off by a riverbank

or been dug up by mice, and brings it back in a carrier. When he has made a pot, he says, “Anyone may leave bagged sesame, mung beans, or chickpeas here and take what they wish.” He looks after his blind old parents. And since he has ended the five lower fetters, Ghaṭikāra will be born in a heavenly realm and will become extinguished there, not liable to return from that world.

This one time, great king, I was staying near the market town of Vebhaliṅga. Then I robed up in the morning and, taking my bowl and robe, went to the home of Ghaṭikāra’s parents, where I said to them, “Excuse me, where has Ghaṭikāra gone?” – “Your supporter has gone out, sir. But take rice from the pot and sauce from the pan and eat.”

So that’s what I did. And after eating I got up from my seat and left. – Then Ghaṭikāra went up to his parents and said, “Who took rice from the pot and sauce from the pan, ate it, and left?” – “It was the Buddha Kassapa, my dear.”

Then Ghaṭikāra thought, “I’m so fortunate, so very fortunate, in that the Buddha Kassapa trusts me so much!” Then joy and happiness did not leave him for a fortnight, or his parents for a week.

Another time, great king, I was staying near that same market town of Vebhaliṅga. Then I robed up in the morning and, taking my bowl and robe, went to the home of Ghaṭikāra’s parents, where I said to them, “Excuse me, where has Ghaṭikāra gone?” – “Your supporter has gone out, sir. But take porridge from the pot and sauce from the pan and eat.”

So that’s what I did. And after eating I got up from my seat and left. Then Ghaṭikāra went up to his parents and said, “Who took porridge from the pot and sauce from the pan, ate it, and left?” – “It was the Buddha Kassapa, my dear.”

Then Ghaṭikāra thought, “I’m so fortunate, so very fortunate, to be trusted so much by the Buddha Kassapa!” Then joy and happiness did not leave him for a fortnight, or his parents for a week.

Another time, great king, I was staying near that same market town of Vebhaliṅga. Now at that time my hut leaked. So I addressed the bhikkhus, “Bhikkhus, go to Ghaṭikāra’s home and find some grass.” – When I said this, those bhikkhus said to me, “Sir, there’s no grass there, but his workshop has a grass roof.” – “Then go to the workshop and strip the grass.”

So that’s what they did. Then Ghaṭikāra’s parents said to those

bhikkhus, “Who’s stripping the grass from the workshop?” – “It’s the bhikkhus, sister. The Buddha’s hut is leaking.” – “Take it, sirs! Take it!”

Then Ghaṭikāra went up to his parents and said, “Who stripped the grass from the workshop?” – “It was the bhikkhus, dear. It seems the Buddha’s hut is leaking.”

Then Ghaṭikāra thought, “I’m so fortunate, so very fortunate, to be trusted so much by the Buddha Kassapa!” Then joy and happiness did not leave him for a fortnight, or his parents for a week. Then the workshop remained with the sky for a roof for the whole three months, but no rain fell on it. And that, great king, is what Ghaṭikāra the potter is like.’

‘Ghaṭikāra the potter is fortunate, very fortunate, to be so trusted by the Buddha Kassapa.’

Then the King sent around five hundred cartloads of rice, soft saffron rice, and suitable sauce to Ghaṭikāra. Then one of the king’s men approached Ghaṭikāra and said, ‘Sir, these five hundred cartloads of rice, soft saffron rice, and suitable sauce have been sent to you by the King of Kāsī. Please accept them.’ – ‘The king has many duties, and much to do. I have enough. Let this be for the king himself.’

Ānanda, you might think: ‘Surely the brahmin student Jotipāla must have been someone else at that time?’ But you should not see it like this. I was the student Jotipāla at that time.”

That is what the Buddha said. Satisfied, Venerable Ānanda was happy with what the Buddha said. – MN 81

3

No one wants sensuality

Q: Bhante, you once said that the only reason one gives in to sensual desire is because one doesn't want it. What do you mean by that?

Ajahn Nyanamoli: What I meant was that for literally *every* human mind—regardless of the culture, education, or religion—any desire that arises in regard to anything available through the senses is at its root oppressing.

Desire is a need, a thirst, a hunger; it pressures you to act. But you don't *have* to act. That's the whole point—as a human being, you always have a choice. But when a desire arises, the automatic response is to give in to that pressure of desire. And why would you give in to the pressure of any desire? Because it's unpleasant. If the pressure of the desire were neutral or pleasant, you wouldn't make any effort and spend time trying to gain what your desire wants, because you would already be at ease. But that desire is already unpleasant, and for you to try and deal with that displeasure, you just give in to whatever the desire promises. That's what I mean: when you are engaging in sensual desires, you do so in order to be free from the unpleasant pressure of that very desire.

People say: 'No, I enjoy my senses.' That's a mistake, because if they were to stop and think: 'When there is an *unsatisfied* desire in me, is that pleasant? Is that what I want?', they would realise that it isn't. Or again: 'Can I fulfil sense desire by giving in to it?' No, you can never fulfil desire, because the point of desire is to send you in the wrong direction. Thus, when people say: 'I enjoy my senses,' what they are really saying is: 'I enjoy temporarily freeing myself from the pain of my senses.'

Q: The desires are based on non-satisfaction.

Nm: Exactly, it requires non-satisfaction for it to be. That's why if you stop and think about it, you realise the only reason you are engaged with sensuality is because the pressure of sensual desire is unpleasant, and you don't know any other escape from that pressure other than the temporary release through sensual indulgence.

And that's the whole point: whenever you encounter any form of displeasure, your only way of dealing with it is through acts of sensuality, which is why and how people turn to food, music, sexual activity, or even meditation, hoping for some pleasurable experience to lift them when they're feeling down or depressed. They commit more strongly to sensual activity, because that's the only thing that seemingly relieves them of that pressure. Yet, actually, that is just making it worse, because the more dependent you are on running away from that pressure of sensual desire, the more pressure that desire will exert over you.

Being pressured by a painful feeling, he harbours aversion towards it. When he harbours aversion towards painful feeling, the underlying tendency to aversion towards painful feeling lies behind this. Being pressured by painful feeling, he seeks delight in sensual pleasure. For what reason? Because the ordinary person does not know of any escape from painful feeling other than sensual pleasure. – SN 36.6

Q: So what should you do?

Nm: If you start seeing your sensual desires as something that's controlling you, something that you are enslaved by, then you have to start seeing that nature before you give in to the desire. Then it becomes obvious, clear as day, that it's very unpleasant. Even when you can satisfy your desires, but maybe just not quickly enough—even that is unpleasant. Either way, that desire is rooted in a disagreeable feeling, i.e. a pressure that's very unpleasant. So if you want to free yourself from it, you have to first start restraining your senses, and refraining from making it worse by giving in to that pressure of desire.

You're basically training yourself to be stronger than something else that usually overpowers you. But to start doing that, you need to start withstanding that thing. If you just habitually give in to sense desire, and at the same time expect to somehow magically be free from the pressure of that desire, that's just wishful thinking. Restraint needs to come first if you want to be free from sense desire, because through restraint, the painful nature of that desire in itself becomes apparent.

Initially, when people start restraining, they notice more pain and they assume that it's because of their restraint. But it isn't. The restraint cannot cause you pain; it can only uncover the underlying pain of the desire that is *already* there.

Imagine that you're tied to five strong animals and they are running towards the objects of their desire: you naturally run with them to avoid that extra painful pull that you will experience if you try standing your ground. The animals are stronger than you, they pull you. It's unpleasant. But if you run with them at more or less the same pace, that doesn't deal with that initial pain of them pulling you in the first place. In fact, running with them enables them to pull you even harder. So initially, you have to accept that sharp pain of restraint, a 'steep drop-off' as the Suttas say, which eventually will allow you to see that it's not the restraint that's the problem—the restraint just shows you what happens when these animals are pulling in their respective domains while you are refusing to follow. If the animals were not pulling at all, there wouldn't be any pain revealed by the restraint. Imagine the animals are tamed and calm, moving around slowly and you can just remain seated and not have to run with them. You are restrained, the senses are tamed and there is no pull. And thus, there is no pain.

It's something anyone could benefit from: just learning how to say no to themselves, gradually, in regards to this and that, in regard to indulgences. Because each time you carelessly give in like that, the animals get more to feed on, which means they get more powerful, which means each time they pull you, you'll be less and less able to resist them.

Quite often, and I'm pretty sure many people can relate to this: your desires take you to places you don't want to be, that you know you will regret even before you go there, yet you can't help it and you're just dragged there. How will it be then, when old age or sickness sets in? When your senses start to fail, yet your mind is completely dependent on that pleasure that you get from that fleeting satisfaction of your desires. When the only resemblance of relief from any disagreeable feelings, is now taken away. When the senses can't enjoy sense objects any more, when the eyes can barely see, when it's hard to hear, when it's difficult to chew, when the body doesn't move correctly, when it's not young and doesn't have that much energy, yet your mind is dependent on that perpetual chasing after sense pleasures and now that's just all taken away. How will it be when an unpleasant feeling arises—and it will—and you have even less ground for being able to deal with it?

Q: It will feel like unwanted solitary confinement.

Nm: Indeed. That's why people are terrified of isolation. They can no longer escape what they have been running away from.

4

Desire to end desire

And what, monks, is the right effort? (1) There is the case where a monk generates desire, endeavours, activates persistence, upholds and exerts his intent for the sake of the non-arising of unskilful qualities that have not yet arisen. (2) He generates desire, endeavours, activates persistence, upholds and exerts his intent for the sake of the abandonment of unskilful qualities that have arisen. (3) He generates desire, endeavours, activates persistence, upholds and exerts his intent for the sake of the arising of skilful qualities that have not yet arisen. (4) He generates desire, endeavours, activates persistence, upholds and exerts his intent for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, abundance, fulfilment, and development of skilful qualities that have arisen: This is called right effort. – SN 45.8

Q: What is the difference between desire (*chanda*) and craving (*taṇhā*)?

Ajahn Nyanamoli: The difference is that *chanda* is a form of zeal, or interest; and it can be either wholesome or unwholesome. If you have a desire towards sensual pleasures, that is *kamachanda*—sensual desire, which is an unwholesome desire. So then if you want to be free from sensuality because you started to understand the dissatisfaction of it, then you have to have a desire to be free from it. It's still a form of desire, but it can make you want to practice the Dhamma. It's a desire that can eventually result in freedom from sensual desire. Whether *chanda* is bad or good, that depends on where you direct it.

As you begin to practice, it's not a question of not having desires. It's really about having the desires that are directed at the development of the wholesome, and the diminishing of the unwholesome. When you are free from any desire towards sensual pleasures, you will also lose the desire towards cultivating the wholesome because that is now what you *are*. At that point, you don't need to have a desire to develop the wholesome once that wholesome is developed. That's how desire, directed rightly, can result in freedom from desire altogether—freedom from *chanda* altogether.

Then a brahmin approached the Venerable Ānanda ... and said: ‘For what purpose, Master Ānanda, is the holy life lived under the ascetic Gotama?’

‘It is for the sake of abandoning desire, brahmin, that the holy life is lived under the Blessed One.’

‘But, Master Ānanda, is there a path for the abandoning of this desire?’

‘There is a path, brahmin, for the abandoning of this desire.’

‘But, Master Ānanda, what is the path for the abandoning of this desire?’

‘Here, brahmin, a bhikkhu develops the basis for potency that possesses composure due to desire and intentions of striving. He develops the basis for potency that possesses composure due to energy ... composure due to mind ... composure due to investigation and intentions of striving. This, brahmin, is the path for the abandoning of this desire.’

‘Such being the case, Master Ānanda, the situation is never ending. It is impossible that one can abandon desire by means of desire itself.’

‘Well then, brahmin, I will question you about this matter. Answer as you see fit.

What do you think, did you earlier have the desire, “I will go to the park,” and after you went to the park, did the corresponding desire subside?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Did you earlier arouse energy, thinking, “I will go to the park,” and after you went to the park, did the corresponding energy subside?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Did you earlier make up your mind, “I will go to the park,” and after you went to the park, did the corresponding resolution subside?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Did you earlier make an investigation, “Shall I go to the park?” and after you went to the park, did the corresponding investigation subside?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘It is exactly the same with a bhikkhu who is an arahant, one whose taints are destroyed, who has lived the holy life, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, reached his own goal, utterly destroyed the fetters of existence, and is completely liberated through

final knowledge. He earlier had the desire for the attainment of arahantship, and when he attained arahantship, the corresponding desire subsided. He earlier had aroused energy for the attainment of arahantship, and when he attained arahantship, the corresponding energy subsided. He earlier had made up his mind to attain arahantship, and when he attained arahantship, the corresponding resolution subsided. He earlier made an investigation for the attainment of arahantship, and when he attained arahantship, the corresponding investigation subsided.

What do you think, brahmin, such being the case, is the situation never-ending or is there an end?

‘Surely, Master Ānanda, such being the case, the situation has an end, and is not never ending. Magnificent, Master Ānanda! ... From today let Master Ānanda remember me as a lay follower taken refuge for life.’ – SN 51.15

Abandoning unskillful desire is not a matter of choice, it’s a matter of directing desire towards a certain kind of behaviour, that kind being the Gradual Training, which will then remove any basis for perpetuation of unskillful desire later on.

In other words, when you, for example, become aware of your illness, you need to have a desire to be cured. That desire will make you look for a doctor, find the right medicine, and then sustain the application of the medicine on the basis of that desire for health. Then once you’re cured, and healed, and there is absolutely not even the slightest trace of your illness left, you will have no more desire to be cured—because you’re cured. However, if while you are still ill, you think: ‘Okay, so being free from illness means having no desire to be cured, therefore, I will have no desire to be cured,’ that way of thinking will prevent you from curing yourself.

In the beginning, a person cannot distinguish between bad or good desire; that’s why you need to start with sense restraint, as we always say. But you don’t want to be trying to not have desires, you want to be trying to see where your desires are directed. If it’s a desire for physical pleasures of the lustful kind, *that’s* the desire you should not cultivate, that’s the desire you should abandon, not welcome, not entertain, establish a context of danger in regard to it and endure it until it passes, without acting out of it.

An *anāgāmi*, who is free from sensual desire, is not free from *chanda*. He's free from desire towards the pleasures of sense objects. In other words, freedom from sensuality doesn't mean absence of *chanda* of any kind, it means loss of interest and zeal for the sensual type of pleasure. Why? Because the gratification has been fully understood, the danger has been fully understood and the escape has been fully understood.

Any contemplatives who do not discern, as it is, the gratification of sensuality as gratification, the danger of sensuality as danger, the escape from sensuality as escape: that they themselves would understand sensuality; or would rouse another with the truth so that, in line with what he has practised, he would understand sensuality: that is impossible. But any contemplatives who discern, as it is, the gratification of sensuality as gratification, the danger of sensuality as danger, the escape from sensuality as escape: that they would themselves understand sensuality or would rouse another with the truth so that, in line with what he has practised, he would understand sensuality: that is possible. – MN 13

It's not that an *anāgāmi* or an *arahant* has no concept any more of what physical pleasure would feel like, it's that they have no interest in it anymore on the level of the mind, intent or thought. They're absolutely free from any zeal that a person who is not free from sensuality would otherwise have.

An untrained person who has a sensual thought is immediately pressured to act out of that thought and pursue sensual pleasures, because there exists an inclination towards it, there is a welcoming of that prospect of pleasure, the possibility of gratification. That inclination can only be abandoned through seeing the danger of that *delighting* towards sense objects. For example, you will not have an interest in ingesting a beautiful drink if you understood the deadliness of the poison it contained. The texture and taste of it hasn't changed, the pleasure hasn't changed, but now your understanding of it as a poison: that has changed. Thus, you have absolutely no interest towards that kind of pleasure whatsoever.

Q: A person might say, 'Well, I understand that sensuality is bad. Yet, I'm still attracted.'

Nm: For as long as you haven't fully understood the gratification, the danger and the escape, you will still value sensuality, which means that you should not claim that you have understood sensuality. Because if you do make such a statement, that means you're contradicting yourself. If you fully understood those three aspects, there would be no *chanda* towards sensuality left, there would only be *chanda* towards renunciation, towards seclusion, towards further abandonment.

A person might think: 'Yes, I understand the peril of sensuality.' Okay, fine. Ask yourself the next question. 'So am I free from any form of delight, welcoming, zeal, interest, curiosity even towards pleasures that come on account of objects of the senses that are provocative of lust?' – 'No, I don't think I'm free of that. Or I'm not sure if I'm free.' That means you're not free, which means that you should not think you understand it. Nobody denies that you will have some insight or some degree of insight into sensuality once you start restraining, but don't think that's freedom until you know: 'I am free. I don't want this, this is truly something I have no interest in any more. My mind can never return to it.'

You might spend most of your day not interested in sensual pursuits, but are you still liable to having interest in sensual pursuits? If so, you're not outside of the domain of sensual desire. It's important to always look at that level of *susceptibility*: 'Am I liable to become careless and interested in sensual pursuits again? Well, maybe?' There you go—you're not free from doubt in regard to it, which means you're not free from it.

... Then Ānanda said to the nun:

'Sister, this body is produced by food. Relying on food, you should give up food. This body is produced by craving. Relying on craving, you should give up craving. This body is produced by conceit. Relying on conceit, you should give up conceit. This body is produced by sex. The Buddha spoke of breaking off everything to do with sex.

"This body is produced by food. Relying on food, you should give up food." This is what I said, but why did I say it? Take a bhikkhu who concurrently reflects on the food that they eat (while they eat): "Not for fun, indulgence, adornment, or decoration, but only to sustain this body, to avoid harm, and to support the holy life. In this way, I shall put an end to old feelings and not give rise to new feelings, and I will live blamelessly and at ease." After some time, relying on food, they give up food. That's why I said what I said.

“This body is produced by craving. Relying on craving, you should give up craving.” This is what I said, but why did I say it? Take a bhikkhu who hears this: “They say that the bhikkhu named so-and-so has realized the undefiled freedom of mind and freedom by wisdom in this very life. And they live having realized it with their own insight due to the ending of defilements.” They think: “Oh, when will I too realize the undefiled freedom of mind and freedom by wisdom in this very life. ...” After some time, relying on craving, they give up craving. That’s why I said what I said.

“This body is produced by conceit. Relying on conceit, you should give up conceit.” This is what I said, but why did I say it? Take a bhikkhu who hears this: “They say that the bhikkhu named so-and-so has realized the undefiled freedom of mind and freedom by wisdom in this very life. And they live having realized it with their own insight due to the ending of defilements.” They think: “Well, that venerable person can realize the undefiled freedom of mind and freedom by wisdom in this very life. ... Why can’t I?” After some time, relying on conceit, they give up conceit. That’s why I said what I said.

“This body is produced by sex. The Buddha spoke of breaking off everything to do with sex.” – AN 4.159

As for *taṇhā*, it’s subtler than *chanda*. *Taṇhā* is on a different level. *Chanda* is an active quality that you either carelessly engage with on account of your past behaviour that hasn’t been restrained, or something you can cultivate, as the Buddha would say: ‘he generates desire ... for the sake of the non-arising of unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen ... etc.’ You can reflect on why it’s good to be cured, why it’s good to make the effort towards abandoning the unwholesome and cultivating the wholesome, why it’s good to practice the Gradual Training, why it’s good to be virtuous and have sense restraint, and because of those reflections you will be generating a desire to develop those practices.

Taṇhā is more on an immediate level of your attitude towards your present enduring feeling, whatever it is. That attitude is always rooted in *resistance*. Even if there is craving for pleasure, that is rooted in you resisting the current feeling, which is not in itself unpleasant, but it’s not sufficient—the pleasure is not sufficient, which is why you crave for more pleasure—which means, it’s painful.

Any resistance is painful, and with the mind of resistance, if you ex-

perience pleasure, you will be resisting it by default, because by default, you want more of it. With the mind not free from *taṇhā*, when you experience pain, you're resisting it by default, because you don't want any of it. You want it to completely go away. With the mind not free from *taṇhā*, when you experience a neutral feeling, you will automatically resist it, you will incline towards oblivion, towards ignoring it, towards turning away from it, because you don't understand it. *Taṇhā*, practically speaking, is always that resistance on the level of what you're currently feeling.

Q: Even if you're feeling pleasure, you're still resisting it. It's not good enough for you.

Nm: Absolutely. That's why if you're not free from craving, every pleasure will be underlain by craving for more. With the presence of resistance, there is the presence of dissatisfaction. Presence of *taṇhā* means *dukkha* is there, presence of *dukkha* means *taṇhā* is there.

If *taṇhā* is still present, that means that there is still resistance to whatever feeling is there for you at the time, and that's why you suffer: not because of what is felt, but because of that resistance. And why would you be resisting? Why is it that you're not content with an agreeable feeling that is present? Why is it, that by default, the mind wants more of it? It's because of the wrong view in regard to what pleasure is, what sensuality is, and what gratification is.

Sensuality is a form of *upādāna*, an assumption. It's basically the view and the values that you uphold throughout your day-to-day existence. Sensual desire is felt unpleasantly and that's why you want to gratify your senses, because non-gratified senses hurt. However, your resistance is the suffering there, and so if you stop resisting the non-gratified senses, they'll stop hurting and there will be no suffering there despite the senses being ungratified. But when you don't see that the suffering is on the level of your resistance, you think suffering exists because of the non-gratification of the senses, and so you go out and seek gratification, and that's why you keep perpetuating your suffering.

So first, you need to stop seeking out the gratification of the senses, so that your *resistance* to the non-gratified senses becomes apparent as the cause of your suffering. Only then can you realise, 'Oh, I stop resisting, it stops hurting'. Which means that gratifying the senses becomes redundant. The habit of resistance (craving) perpetuates the sensuality view that non-gratified senses cause suffering and gratified senses means

freedom from suffering.

Taṇhā feeds *kāmuṇāpādāna*—the assumption of sense desire, and the *kāmuṇāpādāna* feeds *taṇhā*. It's a vicious circle, it has no beginning. It's not that you were pure, then you develop *taṇhā*, and then you develop *upādāna*. No, you start already infected, perverted, mistaken, confused, assumed. Corruption is beginningless. And that's why if you understand it, if you uproot the gratuitous assumption or the craving, both will be uprooted and cannot revert back. That uprooting is irreversible.

Bhikkhus, this is said: 'A first point of ignorance, bhikkhus, is not seen such that before this there was no ignorance and afterward it came into being.' Still, ignorance is seen to have a specific condition.

I say, bhikkhus, that ignorance has a nutriment; it is not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for ignorance? It should be said: the five hindrances.

The five hindrances, too, I say, have a nutriment; they are not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for the five hindrances? It should be said: the three kinds of misconduct.

The three kinds of misconduct, too, I say, have a nutriment; they are not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for the three kinds of misconduct? It should be said: non-restraint of the sense faculties.

Non-restraint of the sense faculties, too, I say, has a nutriment; it is not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for non-restraint of the sense faculties? It should be said: lack of recollection and awareness.

Lack of recollection and awareness, too, I say, has a nutriment; it is not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for lack of recollection and awareness? It should be said: no concurrent attention.

No concurrent attention too, I say, has a nutriment; it is not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for no concurrent attention? It should be said: lack of trust.

Lack of trust, too, I say, has a nutriment; it is not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for lack of trust? It should be said: not hearing the good Dhamma.

Not hearing the good Dhamma, too, I say, has a nutriment; it is not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for not hearing the good Dhamma? It should be said: not associating with good people.

– AN 10.61

5

The simile of the wet sticks

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Vesālī in the Great Wood in the Hall with the Peaked Roof.

Now on that occasion, when it was morning, the Blessed One had finished dressing and had taken his bowl and outer robe, desiring to go into Vesālī for alms.

Then, as Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha's son was walking and wandering for exercise, he came to the Hall with the Peaked Roof in the Great Wood. The venerable Ānanda saw him coming in the distance and said to the Blessed One: 'Venerable sir, here comes Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha's son, a debater and a clever speaker regarded by many as a saint. He wants to discredit the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. It would be good if the Blessed One would sit down for a while out of compassion.' The Blessed One sat down on the seat made ready. Then Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha's son went up to the Blessed One and exchanged greetings with him. When this courteous talk was finished, he sat down at one side and said to the Blessed One:

'Master Gotama, there are some contemplatives who live pursuing development of body, but not development of mind. They are touched by bodily painful feeling. In the past, when one was touched by bodily painful feeling, one's thighs would become rigid, one's heart would burst, hot blood would gush from one's mouth, and one would go mad, go out of one's mind. So then the mind was subservient to the body, the body wielded mastery over it. Why is that? Because the mind was not developed.

But there are some contemplatives who live pursuing development of mind, but not development of body. They are touched by mental painful feeling. In the past, when one was touched by mental painful feeling, one's thighs would become rigid, one's heart would burst, hot blood would gush from one's mouth, and one would go mad, go out of one's mind. So then the body was subservient to the mind, the mind wielded mastery over it. Why is that? Because the body was not developed.

Master Gotama, it has occurred to me: “Surely Master Gotama’s disciples abide pursuing development of mind, but not development of body.””

‘But, Aggivessana, what have you learned about development of body?’

‘Well, there are other monastics who go naked, rejecting conventions, licking their hands, not coming when asked, not stopping when asked; they do not accept food brought or food specially made or an invitation to a meal; they receive nothing from a pot, from a bowl, across a threshold, across a stick, across a pestle, from two eating together, from a pregnant woman, from a woman breastfeeding, from a woman in the midst of men, from where food is advertised to be distributed, from where a dog is waiting, from where flies are buzzing; they accept no fish or meat, they drink no liquor, wine, or fermented brew. They keep to one house, to one morsel; they keep to two houses, to two morsels ... they keep to seven houses, to seven morsels. They live on one saucerful a day, on two saucerfuls a day ... on seven saucerfuls a day. They take food once a day, once every two days ... once every seven days; thus even up to once every fortnight, they dwell pursuing the practice of taking food at stated intervals.’

‘But do they subsist on so little, Aggivessana?’

‘No, Master Gotama, sometimes they consume excellent food, taste excellent delicacies, drink excellent drinks. Thereby they regain their strength, fortify themselves, and become fat.’

‘What they earlier abandoned, Aggivessana, they later gather together again. That is how there is increase and decrease of this body. But what have you learned about development of mind?’

When Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha’s son was asked by the Blessed One about development of mind, he was unable to answer.

Then the Blessed One told him: ‘What you have just spoken of as development of body, Aggivessana, is not development of body according to the Dhamma in the Noble One’s Discipline. Since you do not know what development of body is, how could you know what development of mind is? Nevertheless, Aggivessana, as to how one is undeveloped in body and undeveloped in mind, and developed in body and developed in mind, listen and attend closely to what I shall say.’ – ‘Yes, sir,’ Saccaka replied. The Blessed One said this:

UNDEVELOPED IN BODY AND UNDEVELOPED IN MIND

'How, Aggivessana, is one undeveloped in body and undeveloped in mind? Here, Aggivessana, pleasant feeling arises in an ordinary person. Touched by that pleasant feeling, he lusts after pleasure and continues to lust after pleasure. That pleasant feeling of his ends. With the ending of the pleasant feeling, painful feeling arises. Touched by that painful feeling, he sorrows, grieves, and laments, he weeps and becomes distraught. When that pleasant feeling has arisen in him, it invades his mind and remains because body is not developed. And when that painful feeling has arisen in him, it invades his mind and remains because mind is not developed. Anyone in whom, in this double manner, arisen pleasant feeling invades his mind and remains because body is not developed, and arisen painful feeling invades his mind and remains because mind is not developed, is thus undeveloped in body and undeveloped in mind.

DEVELOPED IN BODY AND DEVELOPED IN MIND

And how, Aggivessana, is one developed in body and developed in mind? Here, Aggivessana, pleasant feeling arises in a noble disciple. Touched by that pleasant feeling, he does not lust after pleasure or continue to lust after pleasure. That pleasant feeling of his ends. With the ending of the pleasant feeling, painful feeling arises. Touched by that painful feeling, he does not sorrow, grieve, and lament, he does not weep and become distraught. When that pleasant feeling has arisen in him, it does not invade his mind and remain because body is developed. And when that painful feeling has arisen in him, it does not invade his mind and remain because mind is developed. Anyone in whom, in this double manner, arisen pleasant feeling does not invade his mind and remain because body is developed, and arisen painful feeling does not invade his mind and remain because mind is developed, is thus developed in body and developed in mind.'

'I have confidence in Master Gotama thus: "Master Gotama is developed in body and developed in mind."'

'Surely, Aggivessana, your words are rude and discourteous, but still I will answer you. Since I shaved off my hair and beard, put on the robe, and went forth from the home life into homelessness, it has not been possible for arisen pleasant feeling to invade my mind and remain or for arisen painful feeling to invade my mind and remain.'

‘Has there never arisen in Master Gotama a feeling so pleasant that it could invade his mind and remain? Has there never arisen in Master Gotama a feeling so painful that it could invade his mind and remain?’

‘Why not, Aggivessana? Here, Aggivessana, before my awakening, while I was still only an unawakened Bodhisatta, I thought: “Household life is crowded and dusty; life gone forth is wide open. It is not easy, while living in a home, to lead the holy life perfect and pure as a polished shell. Suppose I shave off my hair and beard, put on the robe, and go forth from the home life into homelessness.”

...

SIMILE OF THE WET STICKS

1. ‘Now these three similes occurred to me spontaneously. Suppose there were a wet sappy piece of wood lying in water, and a man came with an upper fire-stick, thinking: “I shall light a fire, I shall produce heat.” What do you think, Aggivessana? Could the man light a fire and produce heat by taking the upper fire-stick and rubbing it against the wet sappy piece of wood lying in the water?’

‘No, Master Gotama. Why not? Because it is a wet sappy piece of wood, and it is lying in water. Eventually the man would reap only weariness and disappointment.’

‘So too, Aggivessana, as to those contemplatives who still do not live bodily withdrawn from sensual pleasures, and whose sensual desire, affection, infatuation, thirst, and fever for sensual pleasures has not been fully abandoned internally, even if those good contemplatives feel painful, piercing feelings due to striving, they are incapable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment; and even if those good contemplatives do not feel painful, piercing feelings due to striving, they are incapable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment. This was the first simile that occurred to me spontaneously.

2. Again, Aggivessana, a second simile occurred to me spontaneously. Suppose there were a wet sappy piece of wood lying on dry land far from water, and a man came with an upper fire-stick, thinking: “I shall light a fire, I shall produce heat.” What do you think, Aggivessana? Could the man light a fire and produce heat by taking the upper fire-stick and rubbing it against the wet sappy piece of wood lying on dry land far from water?’

‘No, Master Gotama. Why not? Because it is a wet sappy piece of

wood, even though it is lying on dry land far from water. Eventually the man would reap only weariness and disappointment.’

‘So too, Aggivessana, as to those contemplatives who live bodily withdrawn from sensual pleasures, but whose sensual desire, affection, infatuation, thirst, and fever for sensual pleasures has not been fully abandoned internally, even if those good contemplatives feel painful, piercing feelings due to striving, they are incapable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment; and even if those good contemplatives do not feel painful, piercing feelings due to striving, they are incapable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment. This was the second simile that occurred to me spontaneously.

3. Again, Aggivessana, a third simile occurred to me spontaneously. Suppose there were a dry sapless piece of wood lying on dry land far from water, and a man came with an upper fire-stick, thinking: “I shall light a fire, I shall produce heat.” What do you think, Aggivessana? Could the man light a fire and produce heat by rubbing it against the dry sapless piece of wood lying on dry land far from water?’

‘Yes, Master Gotama. Why so? Because it is a dry sapless piece of wood, and it is lying on dry land far from water.’

‘So too, Aggivessana, as to those contemplatives who live bodily withdrawn from sensual pleasures, and whose sensual desire, affection, infatuation, thirst, and fever for sensual pleasures has been fully abandoned and suppressed internally, even if those good contemplatives feel painful, piercing feelings due to striving, they are capable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment; and even if those good contemplatives do not feel painful, piercing feelings due to striving, they are capable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment. This was the third simile that occurred to me spontaneously. These are the three similes that occurred to me spontaneously, never heard before.

DESCRIPTION OF EXTREME ASCETIC PRACTICES

I thought: “Suppose, with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, constrain, and crush mind with mind.” So, with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, constrained, and crushed mind with mind. While I did so, sweat ran from my armpits. Just as a

strong man might seize a weaker man by the head or shoulders and beat him down, constrain him, and crush him, so too, with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, constrained, and crushed mind with mind, and sweat ran from my armpits. But although tireless energy was aroused in me and persistent mindfulness was established, my body was not calm because I was exhausted by the painful striving. But such painful feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

I thought: "Suppose I practise the breathless meditation." So I stopped the in-breaths and out-breaths through my mouth and nose. While I did so, there was a loud sound of winds coming out from my earholes. Just as there is a loud sound when a smith's bellows are blown, violent winds cut through my head. ... Just as if a strong man were to crush my head with the tip of a sharp sword, ... there were violent pains in my head. Just as if a strong man were tightening a tough leather strap around my head as a headband, ... violent winds carved up my belly. Just as if a skilled butcher or his apprentice were to carve up an ox's belly with a sharp butcher's knife, ... there was a violent burning in my body. Just as if two strong men were to seize a weaker man by both arms and roast him over a pit of hot coals, so too, while I stopped the in-breaths and out-breaths through my mouth, nose, and ears, there was a violent burning in my body. But although tireless energy was aroused in me and persistent mindfulness was established, my body was not calm because I was exhausted by the painful striving. But such painful feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

Now when deities saw me, some said: "The recluse Gotama is dead." Other deities said: "The recluse Gotama is not dead, he is dying." And other deities said: "The recluse Gotama is not dead nor dying; he is an arahant, for such is the way arahants live."

I thought: "Suppose I practise entirely cutting off food." Then deities came to me and said: "Good sir, do not practise entirely cutting off food. If you do so, we shall infuse heavenly food into the pores of your skin and you will live on that." I considered: "If I claim to be completely fasting while these deities infuse heavenly food into the pores of my skin and I live on that, then I shall be lying." So I dismissed those deities, saying: "There is no need."

I thought: "Suppose I take very little food, a handful each time, whether of bean soup or lentil soup or vetch soup or pea soup." So

I took very little food, a handful each time. While I did so, my body reached a state of extreme emaciation. Because of eating so little my limbs became like the jointed segments of bamboo stems. Because of eating so little my backside became like a camel's hoof. Because of eating so little the projections on my spine stood forth like corded beads. Because of eating so little my ribs jutted out as gaunt as the crazy rafters of an old roofless barn. Because of eating so little the gleam of my eyes sank far down in their sockets, looking like the gleam of water that has sunk far down in a deep well. Because of eating so little my scalp shrivelled and withered as a green bitter gourd shrivels and withers in the wind and sun. Because of eating so little my belly skin adhered to my backbone; thus if I touched my belly skin I encountered my backbone and if I touched my backbone I encountered my belly skin. Because of eating so little, if I defecated or urinated, I fell over on my face there. Because of eating so little, if I tried to ease my body by rubbing my limbs with my hands, the hair, rotted at its roots, fell from my body as I rubbed.

Now when people saw me, some said: "The contemplative Gotama is black." Other people said: "The contemplative Gotama is not black, he is brown." Other people said: "The contemplative Gotama is neither black nor brown, he is golden-skinned." So much had the clear, bright colour of my skin deteriorated through eating so little.

I thought: "Whatever contemplatives in the past have experienced painful, piercing feelings due to striving, this is the utmost, there is none beyond this. And whatever contemplatives in the future will experience painful, piercing feelings due to striving, this is the utmost, there is none beyond this. And whatever contemplatives at present experience painful, piercing feelings due to striving, this is the utmost, there is none beyond this. But by this painful practice of austerities I have not attained any superhuman states, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. Could there be another path to enlightenment?"

RECOLLECTION OF FIRST JHĀNA

I considered: "I recall that when my father was occupied, while I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, withdrawn from sensual pleasures, withdrawn from unwholesome states, I entered upon the first comprehension, which is accompanied by thinking

and pondering, with joy and pleasure born of withdrawal. Could that be the path to awakening?" Then, following that memory, came the realisation: "That is indeed the path to awakening."

I thought: "Why am I afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states?" I thought: "I am not afraid of that pleasure since it has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states."

I considered: "It is not easy to attain that pleasure with a body so emaciated. Suppose I ate some solid food, some boiled rice and porridge." And I ate some solid food, some boiled rice and porridge. Now at that time five monks were waiting upon me, thinking: "If the contemplative Gotama achieves some higher state, he will inform us." But when I ate the boiled rice and porridge, the five monks were disgusted and left me, thinking: "The contemplative Gotama now lives luxuriously; he has given up his striving and reverted to luxury."

Now when I had eaten solid food and regained my strength, then withdrawn from sensual pleasures, withdrawn from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first comprehension, which is accompanied by thinking and pondering, with joy and pleasure born of withdrawal. But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

With the stilling of thinking and pondering, I entered upon the second comprehension ... With the fading away as well of joy ... I entered upon the third comprehension ... With the abandoning of pleasure and pain ... I entered upon the fourth comprehension ... But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

When my composed mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge and recollection of past lives. I recollected my manifold past lives, that is, one birth, two births ... (as in MN 4) ... Thus with their aspects and particulars I recollected my manifold past lives.

This was the first true knowledge attained by me in the first watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who lives diligent, ardent, and resolute. But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

When my composed mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings ... (as in MN 4) ... Thus with the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, I saw beings passing away and reappearing, inferior and superior, fair and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate, and I understood how beings pass on according to their actions.

This was the second true knowledge attained by me in the middle watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who lives diligent, ardent, and resolute. But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

When my composed mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the destruction of the taints. I directly knew: "This is suffering"; ... "This is the origin of suffering"; ... "This is the cessation of suffering"; ... "This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering"; ... "These are the taints"; ... "This is the origin of the taints"; ... "This is the cessation of the taints"; ... "This is the way leading to the cessation of the taints."

When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance. When it was liberated there came the knowledge: "It is liberated." I directly knew: "Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being."

This was the third true knowledge attained by me in the last watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who livess diligent, ardent, and resolute. But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

TEACHING DHAMMA

Aggivessana, I recall teaching the Dhamma to an assembly of many hundreds, and even then each person thinks of me: "The contemplative Gotama is teaching the Dhamma especially for me." But it should not be so regarded; the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma

to others only to give them knowledge. When the talk is finished, Aggivessana, then I steady my mind internally, calm it, elevate and compose it on that same sign of composure as before, in which I constantly live.’

QUESTIONED ABOUT LIVING IN DELUSION

‘This is a matter about which Master Gotama can be trusted, as an accomplished and fully awakened one should be. But does Master Gotama recall sleeping during the day?’

‘I recall, Aggivessana, in the last month of the hot season, on returning from my alms round, after my meal I lay out my outer robe folded in four, and lying down on my right side, I fall asleep recollected and aware.’

‘Some contemplatives call that living in delusion, Master Gotama.’

‘It is not in such a way that one is deluded or undeluded, Aggivessana. As to how one is deluded or undeluded, listen and attend closely to what I shall say.’—‘Yes, sir,’ Saccaka replied. The Blessed One said this:

‘Him I call deluded, Aggivessana, who has not abandoned the taints that defile, which perpetuate being, give trouble, ripen in suffering, and lead to future birth, ageing, and death; for it is with the non-abandoning of the taints that one is deluded. Him I call undeluded who has abandoned the taints that defile, which perpetuate being, give trouble, ripen in suffering, and lead to future birth, ageing, and death; for it is with the abandoning of the taints that one is undeluded. The Tathāgata, Aggivessana, has abandoned the taints that defile, which perpetuate being, give trouble, ripen in suffering, and lead to future birth, ageing, and death; he has cut them off at the root, made them like a palm stump, done away with them so that they are no longer subject to future arising.’

When this was said, Saccaka said: ‘It is wonderful, Master Gotama, it is marvellous how when Master Gotama is spoken to offensively again and again, assailed by discourteous courses of speech, the colour of his skin brightens and the colour of his face clears, as is to be expected of one who is accomplished and fully awakened. I recall, Master Gotama, engaging Pūraṇa Kassapa in debate, engaging Makkhali Gosāla ... Ajita Kesakambalin ... Pakudha Kaccāyana ... Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta ... the Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta in debate, they prevaricated, led the talk aside,

and showed anger, hate, and bitterness. But when Master Gotama is spoken to offensively again and again, assailed by discourteous courses of speech, the colour of his skin brightens and the colour of his face clears, as is to be expected of one who is accomplished and fully awakened. And now, Master Gotama, I must depart. I am busy and have much to do.'

'Now is the time, Aggivessana, to do as you think fit.'

Then Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha's son, having delighted and rejoiced in the Blessed One's words, got up from his seat and departed. – MN 36

Ajahn Nyanamoli: If you're not devaluing sensuality and are still holding on to it as a valuable thing, not seeing the danger in it, then you are still within its domain even if you're not engaging in it. Even if you're torturing yourself—not eating, just drinking water and so on—you're still doing *that* with sensuality.

Q: So, even if you are doing ascetic practices of renouncing food, or living alone and so on, that doesn't mean that you are practising renunciation of sensuality. If you're still delighting in the prospect of future sensual experiences, then you have not renounced those things at all. All you are doing is just a 'temporary fast' so that you can enjoy indulging once again; doing a little bit of renunciation so that you can indulge later on and not feel so guilty about it.

Nm: Your abstinence is temporary, which means that the overall framework of sensuality remains, and you're not relinquishing that. You might be playing with it and restraining yourself for whatever reason, but overall, the value of sensuality remains unchanged. That's what I meant when I said that when you do keep the virtue, practice sense restraint and patient endurance, you have to do it with the attitude of: 'I will do this infinitely, forever. It doesn't matter how long this lasts, I will have to endure it forever, and I won't act out of it.' So it's not: 'I'll do this for a week.' And then what? '... then I'll ... most likely go back to the same sensual actions of chasing sensual pleasure.'

That temporary attitude towards renunciation is why you're not free. Not because you haven't endured enough; in fact you might have already endured more than enough for wisdom to arise. But wisdom will not arise because, overall, you're not relinquishing the *value* of sensuality.

Q: ‘... Again, Aggivessana, a second simile occurred to me spontaneously. Suppose there were a wet sappy piece of wood lying on dry land far from water, and a man came with an upper fire-stick, thinking: “I shall light a fire, I shall produce heat.” What do you think, Aggivessana? Could the man light a fire and produce heat by taking the upper fire-stick and rubbing it against the wet sappy piece of wood lying on dry land far from water?’

‘No, Master Gotama. Why not? Because it is a wet sappy piece of wood, even though it is lying on dry land far from water. Eventually the man would reap only weariness and disappointment.’

‘So too, Aggivessana, as to those contemplatives who live bodily withdrawn from sensual pleasures, but whose sensual desire, affection, infatuation, thirst, and fever for sensual pleasures has not been fully abandoned internally, even if those good contemplatives feel painful, piercing feelings due to striving, they are incapable of knowledge and vision and supreme awakening; and even if those good contemplatives do not feel painful, piercing feelings due to striving, they are incapable of knowledge and vision and supreme awakening. This was the second simile that occurred to me spontaneously ...’

Nm: You’re not in the water any more, but the mind is still wet with the value of sensuality. So it doesn’t matter what you do, or how much effort you’re putting in, or how motionless and for how many hours you sit in your meditation, if you have not, on the level of your views, devalued sensuality *forever*. Through not understanding the danger of it—you are still within it. So there will be no wisdom arising on account of whatever endurance you undergo, because you do so while still acting from the point of view that sensual pleasures are valuable.

Q: ‘Again, Aggivessana, a third simile occurred to me spontaneously. Suppose there were a dry sapless piece of wood lying on dry land far from water, and a man came with an upper fire-stick, thinking: “I shall light a fire, I shall produce heat.” What do you think, Aggivessana? Could the man light a fire and produce heat by rubbing it against the dry sapless piece of wood lying on dry land far from water?’

‘Yes, Master Gotama. Why so? Because it is a dry sapless piece of wood, and it is lying on dry land far from water.’

‘So too, Aggivessana, as to those contemplatives who live bodily withdrawn from sensual pleasures, and whose sensual desire, affection, in-

fatuation, thirst, and fever for sensual pleasures has been fully abandoned internally, even if those good contemplatives feel painful, piercing feelings due to striving, they are capable of knowledge and vision and supreme awakening; and even if those good contemplatives do not feel painful, piercing feelings due to striving, they are capable of knowledge and vision and supreme awakening.'

Nm: They would probably be able to light the fire with very little effort, because the effort is determined by how wet the wood is. If it's damp, you have to work even harder, but if it's really dry, or if you actually invest your effort in drying the sticks, then it's going to take very little physical effort to light the fire. So that's why I often say that it doesn't matter whether you're a monk or a lay person: if you want to practice the Dhamma, practically speaking, most of the work comes down to drying your mind from sensuality, it doesn't come down to finding the perfect technique or reading the exact sutta that will make you enlightened. The reason why you're not enlightened even after you have read all the Suttas, is not because you haven't read them enough or you haven't thought about them enough—it's because your sticks are not dry enough and your views are not relinquished.

It's not accidental that this aspect is always being overlooked, which is also the reason why sensuality is so hard to overcome.

Virtue and sense restraint is already the practice of Dhamma, because you're 'drying the sticks'. Sometimes when someone reads in a sutta of a person who seemingly just heard one sentence from the Buddha and became enlightened, they assume 'Oh, he was so lucky', or 'It was the Buddha's special powers that made him enlightened'. No, the Buddha said himself: 'I cannot make anyone enlightened. I just point the way, and they either choose to follow my instruction or not.'

... When he had spoken, Moggallāna the Accountant said to the Buddha: 'When your disciples are instructed and advised like this, do all of them achieve the ultimate goal, Nibbana, or do some of them fail?'

'Some succeed, while others fail.'

'What is the cause, Master Gotama, what is the reason why, though Nibbana is present, the path leading to Nibbana is present, and Master Gotama is present to encourage them, still some succeed while others fail?'

‘Well then, brahmin, I’ll ask you about this in return, and you can answer as you like. What do you think? Are you skilled in the road to Rājagaha?’

‘Yes, I am.’

‘What do you think, brahmin? Suppose a person were to come along who wanted to go to Rājagaha. He’d approach you and say: “Sir, I wish to go to Rājagaha. Please point out the road to Rājagaha.” Then you’d say to him: “This road goes to Rājagaha. Go along it for a while, and you’ll see a certain village. Go along a while further, and you’ll see a certain town. Go along a while further and you’ll see Rājagaha with its delightful parks, woods, meadows, and lotus ponds.” Instructed like this by you, he might still take the wrong road, heading west. But a second person might come with the same question and receive the same instructions. Instructed by you, he might safely arrive at Rājagaha. What is the cause, what is the reason why, though Rājagaha is present, the path leading to Rājagaha is present, and you are there to encourage him, one person takes the wrong path and heads west, while another arrives safely at Rājagaha?’

‘What can I do about that, Master Gotama? I am the one who shows the way.’

‘In the same way, though Nibbana is present, the path leading to Nibbāna is present, and I am present to encourage them, still some of my disciples, instructed and advised like this, achieve the ultimate goal, Nibbāna, while some of them fail. What can I do about that, brahmin? The Tathāgata is the one who shows the way.’ – MN 107

All the Buddha can do is point the way. So, then how did that person in the sutta become enlightened after just one sentence? Well, if you read a little closer, you see that it’s because his mind was very dry on account of being withdrawn from sensuality, and obviously devaluing sensuality thoroughly, because otherwise one sentence from the Buddha would not have been enough for enlightenment. So now, when you read thousands of the sentences from the Buddha and you’re not enlightened, it’s not because you read them wrongly, or because they are different sentences. It’s because your sticks are wet. You can’t light a fire because you’re not withdrawn from sensuality.

Practically speaking, most of the work, especially for a lay person who wants to practice Dhamma without becoming a monastic, is about with-

drawing from sensuality in the lay world. And that is doable. It doesn't mean it will be easy, or pleasant, but it is doable. The worst possible thing to think or teach others is, 'Oh, you don't have to withdraw from sensuality, and you can practice for the fire, that the Buddha says is impossible to achieve for as long as you don't dry the sticks ... but never mind just keep practising without drying the sticks, soaking them in water and the sticks will magically become dry, and the fire of wisdom will arise and we will all be happy.' It doesn't work like that. As the Buddha described, all the effort that you put into trying to light a fire with wet sticks will go to waste, because you have not dried the sticks through living physically withdrawn from sensual pleasures, and internally abandoning the value you hold for sensual pleasures.

Withdrawal from sensuality, sustaining that mind withdrawn from sensuality—it's not just doable, it's what the practice is. Becoming immovable in that way means that you might be one of those people who only need one sentence for right view and enlightenment, because you did the actual work of drying your sticks from sensuality.

Q: You've done 80% of the work already.

Nm: Yes. Most people would be coming to practice the Dhamma with genuine reasons, with serious determination, but at the same time still not completely devaluing sensuality, thinking, 'Oh, but I don't have to because I'm not a monk.' And that's why all the effort and all the determination they have will not result in liberating wisdom.

Q: '... So too, Aggivessana, as to those contemplatives who live bodily withdrawn from sensual pleasures, and whose sensual desire, affection, infatuation, thirst, and fever for sensual pleasures has been fully abandoned internally, even if those good contemplatives feel painful, piercing feelings due to striving, they are capable of knowledge and vision and supreme awakening; and even if those good contemplatives do not feel painful, piercing feelings due to striving, they are capable of knowledge and vision and supreme awakening ...'

Nm: Exactly, it doesn't matter whether they feel pain or not, because being physically withdrawn from and abandoning the mistaken value in sensuality—that is where the work is, and then even a little instruction from the sutta would be enough, let alone all the Suttas that we have now in many different translations and so on. If your sticks are dry, you

need maybe 10% of that instruction, and you will start seeing things clearly. It's impossible not to, because you are actually doing the work on the level that matters.

Mentally abandoning sensuality is not simply about not thinking about it, it means *devaluing* it.

If you physically step outside of the swamp of sensuality, but still mentally value swimming in it, you're not withdrawn from it. If you don't see the danger in it, you are still valuing it. You might be living on top of a mountain secluded from sensual distractions, but mentally you still value pleasure of the senses, as you don't see their peril infinitely and forever.

If you start contemplating the infinite peril, you will be withdrawing yourself both physically and mentally. And then things from the Suttas will just start falling into place. Much more than before. And then you just rub those sticks together once, and there is already smoke and fire starting because you have dried them properly.

You can't simply decide 'I will mentally withdraw myself from sensuality,' because your mind is already in it. However, you can make your mind withdraw from it by seeing the danger in that which it values. And you will never see the danger in that which you value if you think you don't have to—if you think you're exempted from it, if you think sensuality is not a problem, if you think sensuality is not 'your' problem, if you think because you're not a monk you don't need to address this.

Well, if you want to practice the Dhamma, it doesn't matter whether you are a monk or not, the sticks still need to be dry.

6

Discerning the body

Why is it that, despite knowing how little satisfaction the sense pleasures provide, or how much danger they entail, a person's mind can still be dependent on those pleasures? It's because, fundamentally, a person does not really know where the problem lies.

You might know that the pleasures you get from sense objects are not satisfactory, but if you are not free from sensuality, then you don't yet understand the *extent* of the sense objects or the extent of the pleasure that you are chasing. In other words, when you think about the unsatisfactory nature of sense objects, your contemplation is not entirely adequate; because if it were, then you would understand the danger and lose desire for it.

The problem of still being addicted to the pleasures of the senses, although you know they are doing you more harm than good, is that you are not seeing where the nature of that pleasure begins—you are only seeing what you are used to seeing; that which is on the level of the sense objects. There is something more to that picture that is being left out, because of which your addiction is not uprooted: namely, the *relationship* between you and your body.

Whenever there is a sensual pull towards sense objects for pleasure, your body and senses are there peripherally enduring, as a basis from which you are pressured. The relationship, on that peripheral level, between you and that body that is pressuring you towards sense objects: that's what needs to be understood. The reason why that is so hard to understand is because the body as a unity of sense organs does not, and cannot, appear on the level of sense objects. Your dependence on the pleasures of the sense objects is determined by and dependent upon the pressure that your body exerts on your mind. It is a wild animal that you are tied to, inseparable from your mind; and it wants to go left and right and eat this and that, it will pressure you until it gets what it wants.

This means that overcoming sensuality is not a question of removing the agreeable and enticing things from the world in order to be free;

rather, it's about taming that which pressures you, *because of which* you are not free. That is why you are still attracted to sense objects despite knowing how little satisfaction sense objects provide: your knowledge that 'this is unsatisfactory' is limited and pertains only to the domain of sense objects. You are failing to see the bigger picture which involves this whole underlying pressure of your own body and the pleasure that you depend on—the wild animal underneath. You don't see that as a problem, because you think that the sense objects that obsess you are the problem. No—that is rather the end result of the problem which is already there and fully controlling you.

That is why sense restraint—not engaging in those sense objects that are inciting of lust—is the prerequisite for discerning the root of the problem. And the root of the problem is that the body, that is to say the senses, is attracted to the pleasure that the senses are used to, which are the unwholesome pleasures that you have been carelessly feeding them. If you don't engage with the pleasures that the senses are used to, their dependence on them will cease. If the animal is perpetually engaged in wild behaviour, it will become used to that and that's going to be its norm. If, however, the animal is not allowed to engage with sense objects which are provocative of lust and aversion, it will have to calm down whether it wants to or not, because those things of an agitating nature are now things that the animal has been unable to engage with.

Māgandiya, the eye delights in forms, takes delight in forms, rejoices in forms; that has been tamed by the Tathāgata, guarded, protected, and restrained, and he teaches the Dhamma for its restraint.

The ear delights in sounds ... The nose delights in odours ... The tongue delights in flavours ... The body delights in touches ... The mind delights in ideas, takes delight in ideas, rejoices in ideas; that has been tamed by the Tathāgata, guarded, protected, and restrained, and he teaches the Dhamma for its restraint. – MN 75

If you want to uproot the dependence on the pleasure of the sense objects, you have to uproot the dependence on the pleasure of this body: its agreeability and your assumption of ownership, which results from not seeing it peripherally as a thing which endures there on its own, with its own thirsts. This disowning of the body can only be done on the level of that correct *peripheral* recognition of what the body is. It cannot be

done on the level of observing the body *with* your senses; because then you are not actually observing the body, you are observing the sense objects which *require* the body.

Even if you are extremely aware of and attentive to every bodily sensation that occurs, all of that is on the level of sense objects; and for this reason, none of that which is underneath it—that necessary requirement for perceiving any sense object—will be affected by that practice and by those efforts.

An eye cannot see itself. In the same sense, for as long as you believe that you can access your sense organs on the level of sense objects, you will be engaged in an extremely futile attempt to access that which is inaccessible. The notion of accessing it in that manner is a contradiction in terms. You need to discern the body *not* on the level of the senses, but on the level of the framework of the world of the sense objects, and that is what will fully purify the relationship between you and the ‘indirect’ body that appears peripherally while you are experiencing sense objects.

For as long as there are sense objects, the body, as the unity of the sense organs, is peripheral to that. It’s always the background to the domain of the sense objects, and that’s where you need to recognize it. So it’s not about examining the individual organs and looking at them with other sense organs; it’s about understanding the six-sense base, the body as that thing which is there, that needs to be tamed on that level of the peripheral.

So the less you engage with sense objects that are pulling you, the more the pressure that the body exerts over you will diminish, and the clearer you will see it on that level which is revealed through sense-restraint.

To summarise, if you want to stop chasing sense pleasures, you need to start practising mindfulness of the body *correctly*. *Not*, that is, as an *observational technique* of watching sensations, but being aware of it as a peripherally enduring bag of skin. An indirect image of the body that contains the sense organs that are attracted to the various types of sense pleasures in their respective domains.

Thus, instead of watching the sensations of the body, recognize the *idea (dhamma)* of it, as a real thing existing concurrently to your direct attention. And you can only learn to see that idea correctly, if you have been sufficiently practising sense restraint, guarding the sense doors, moderating your eating, watchful and dwelling in solitude. Company

and the world require your mind to be on the level of sense objects, and if you have not been sufficiently withdrawn from that, then there is not enough space for you to step back and learn to see this body as a thing that endures there in the world, as a basis for all the sense-object experiences.

Now when you have been sufficiently withdrawn in this way, you can then disown the pressure and pull of those individual organs and start to see them as five individual animals, like the simile that the Buddha gave in SN 35.247. You can genuinely see them as wild animals that need training, whereas those who are not withdrawn from sense objects would see ‘the animals’ only in abstraction, which means that they are very much identified with them. They don’t see their sense organ as an independent entity which basically has its own life, desires and needs, which they need to tame and control. So each time there is a pull from a sense object, then *they* are the ones that are pulled by sense objects. They don’t see anything in between.

Hence the encouragement to practice sense-restraint and correct mindfulness, in order to discern those peripheral signs and features of that body, which exist on the level of ‘around that which you are attending to’: that’s where the body is.

That’s also what the Buddha meant in the famous *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta*, when speaking about knowing the body ‘to the extent necessary for final knowledge.’ The measure of that extent is how familiar you are with the phenomenon of the body on the level of the peripheral, how steady your mind is in discerning the presence of the body for what it is on its own, without trying to attend to it directly and without trying to make it into a sense object. If you can discern it to that extent sufficiently, then you will no longer be underlain by lust, craving and thirst of the individual senses.

Not discerning the senses, and being on the level of sense objects—that is how you are underlain by all the *āsava*. They underlie you because you go over them, and then they direct and push you. So you want to develop your mind to the extent necessary whereby you are not underlain by them, but where you underlie them, so to speak.

Venerable sir, how should one know, how should one see, for the taints to be abandoned? ... for the taints to be uprooted? ... for the underlying tendencies to be abandoned? ... for the underlying tendencies to be uprooted?

Bhikkhu, when one knows and sees the eye as not-self, the underlying tendencies are uprooted. When one knows and sees forms as not-self ... When one knows and sees like this, the underlying tendencies are uprooted. – SN 35.56

In a similar sense, one sutta describes how a monk is not overwhelmed by things, by pressures, but instead overwhelms them:

And how, friends, is one uncorrupted? Here, having seen a form with the eye, a bhikkhu is not intent upon a pleasing form and not repelled by a displeasing form. He lives having set up recollection of the body, with a measureless mind, and he understands that liberation of mind, liberation by wisdom, wherein those unwholesome states end without remainder. Having heard a sound with the ear ... Having cognized a mental phenomenon with the mind, he is not intent upon a pleasing mental phenomenon and not repelled by a displeasing mental phenomenon. He lives having set up recollection of the body, with a measureless mind, and he understands that liberation of mind, liberation by wisdom, wherein those unwholesome states end without remainder.

This is called a bhikkhu who is uncorrupted amidst forms cognizable by the eye, uncorrupted amidst sounds cognizable by the ear, uncorrupted amidst odours cognizable by the nose, uncorrupted amidst tastes cognizable by the tongue, uncorrupted amidst tactile objects cognizable by the body, uncorrupted amidst mental phenomena cognizable by the mind. When a bhikkhu lives like this, if Mara approaches him through any of the sense bases, Mara fails to gain access to him, Mara fails to get a hold on him.

When a bhikkhu dwells thus, he overwhelms forms; forms do not overwhelm him. He overwhelms sounds; sounds do not overwhelm him. He overwhelms odours; odours do not overwhelm him. He overwhelms tastes; tastes do not overwhelm him. He overwhelms tactile objects; tactile objects do not overwhelm him. He overwhelms mental phenomena; mental phenomena do not overwhelm him. This is called a bhikkhu who overwhelms forms, who overwhelms sounds, who overwhelms odours, who overwhelms tastes, who overwhelms tactile objects, who overwhelms mental phenomena—one who overwhelms and who is not overwhelmed. He has overwhelmed those

unwholesome states that defile, that lead to future being, that bring trouble, that result in suffering, and that lead to future birth, ageing, and death. It is in this way that one is uncorrupted. – SN 35.243

That is what is meant by ‘establishing the right order’: seeing what comes first and stays there as first: body on the level of the peripheral. Not losing that context, regardless of what else might happen with your attention. So whatever you are attending to, whatever pressure there is—desire for pleasure and so on—the order that is now determined by your *knowledge* does not change; you still see that peripheral body as the basis for all of this that is happening, and all you need to do is protect that order so that there is no room to become underlain by greed, aversion, and delusion, which is the perverted order.

Practice that sufficiently, and lust, aversion, and distraction will completely fade because they have not been maintained through the perversion of the order. That’s why it is said that ‘sensuality is a perversion of perception,’ i.e. putting the sense objects first and everything else measured through that as second; and not seeing the body peripherally, the necessary basis for sense organs, as that which is first (structurally speaking). If you ‘un-pervert that perception’, there is then no room for lust to breed and expand:

‘I’ve got a burning desire for pleasure,
my mind is on fire!
Please, out of compassion, Gotama,
tell me how to quench the flames?’

‘Your mind is on fire
because of a perversion of perception.
Turn away from the feature of things that’s attractive,
provoking lust.

See all underlying activations as other and foreign,
as suffering and not-self.
Extinguish the great fire of lust,
don’t burn up again and again.

With a mind elevated and calm,

reflect on the unattractive aspects of the body.
With recollection of the body,
be full of disenchantment.

Cultivate the signlessness,
give up the underlying tendency to conceit
and when you comprehend conceit,
you will live at peace.’ – SN 8.4

Sensuality versus agreeability

‘One should not pursue sensual pleasure, which is low, vulgar, coarse, ignoble, and unbeneficial; and one should not pursue self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, and unbeneficial.’ So it was said. And with reference to what was this said?

The pursuit of happiness in pleasure linked to sensual desires – which is low, vulgar, coarse and unbeneficial – is, in its nature, beset by suffering, vexation, despair and fever. It is the wrong way. The non-pursuit of such happiness in pleasure linked to sensual desires – low, vulgar, coarse and unbeneficial – is, in its nature, free of suffering, vexation, despair and fever. It is the right way.

...

‘One should know how to define pleasure, and knowing that, one should pursue pleasure in oneself.’ So it was said. And with reference to what was this said?

Bhikkhus, there are these five types of sensual pleasure: forms discernable by the eye, sounds discernable by the ear ... odours discernable by the nose ... flavours discernable by the tongue ... tangibles discernable by the body – that are wished for, desired, agreeable, and likeable, connected with sensual desire and provocative of lust. These are the five types of sensual pleasure. Now the pleasure and joy that arise dependent on these five types of sensual pleasure is called sensual pleasure: a filthy pleasure, a coarse pleasure, an ignoble pleasure. I say of this kind of pleasure that it should not be pursued, that it should not be developed, that it should not be cultivated, and that it should be feared.

Here, bhikkhus, withdrawn from sensual pleasures, withdrawn from unwholesome states, a bhikkhu enters upon the first comprehension ... the second comprehension ... the third comprehension ... the fourth comprehension. This is called the pleasure of renunciation, the pleasure of seclusion, the pleasure of peace, the pleasure of enlightenment. I say of this kind of pleasure that it should be pursued,

that it should be developed, that it should be cultivated, and that it should not be feared ...” – MN 139

Q: Upon coming into contact with the Buddha’s instruction and hearing that sensual pleasures are bad, one can often then go on to assume that *all* pleasure is bad.

Ajahn Nyanamoli: This is because there is no discernment of the different types of pleasure. It’s like in the ‘Simile of the Bait’ sutta (MN 25): those who engage in sensual pleasures carelessly are like the first herd which eats the bait laid out by the hunter. The second herd realises the danger of the bait, but then refuses all of the food. They then end up starving, and finally go back to also eat the bait. This is similar to a person who starts to realise that sense restraint is good and sensuality is bad, but then their mind naturally goes into the mode of thinking: ‘Any sense pleasure, any agreeability, any comfort is bad. Therefore, I must say no to it all.’

While sensuality is overly affirming things—taking everything, the bait and not just the food—this is overly denying things, and it too is unsustainable.

This was what the Buddha himself realised after engaging in extreme asceticism and self-mortification for a long time: that there is pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual types of pleasure, so there is no need to fear that pleasure—which, in fact, is exactly how sensuality is to be abandoned.

I thought: ‘I recall once, when my father was working, and I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, then, withdrawn from sensuality, withdrawn from unwholesome states I entered upon the first comprehension: joy and pleasure born from seclusion, accompanied by thinking and pondering. Could that be the path to awakening?’ Then following that memory came the realization: ‘That is the path to awakening.’

I thought: ‘So why am I afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensuality, nothing to do with unwholesome states?’ I thought: ‘I am no longer afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensuality, nothing to do with unwholesome states, but that pleasure is not easy to achieve with a body so extremely emaciated. Suppose I were to take some solid food: some rice and porridge.’ So I took some solid food: some rice and porridge. – MN 36

Nm: So if you do not hold onto the view that ‘any pleasure through the senses is sensuality, therefore I can’t help it and am justified in either engaging with sensuality, or in shunning the whole thing and denying everything, there is nothing in between,’—you can then see that there is a lot in between. There is a middle way. And that’s the whole point. In the beginning, you might have to end up overdoing restraint and saying ‘no’ to things that you don’t necessarily have to. But based on that, the work is to discern what type of pleasure is the pleasure of sensuality, and what type of pleasure—still experienced through the senses—is not sensual.

For as long as you live, you will have the senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch—it’s unavoidable. It is only a particular type of unwholesome pleasure which can be called ‘sensual.’ It is that type that must be abandoned and cut off at the root, but you will never see that root if you are dismissing everything, or saying ‘yes’ to everything. In the Suttas, when describing the five objects of sensual pleasures, the Buddha did not say that they were *any* sight, sound, smell, taste or touch that you might find agreeable. He said they were the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches that are ‘wished for, desired, agreeable, and likeable, connected with sensual desire and provocative of lust.’ (See MN 139, quoted at the beginning). You already know what those things are—you know what provokes your lust, aversion or delusion.

Not all agreeable sense-objects are necessarily ‘sensual pleasures.’ If you are, for example, admiring a beautiful sunset and thinking: ‘Oh, but this is sensuality!’—it’s not, it is simply an agreeable sight. Will your mind be feverish with lust on account of the sunset? Would you be unable to sleep because you are so dependent on seeing sunsets? No, it’s inconceivable. There is a difference there.

So you have to resist the temptation to dismiss the whole experience because it feels like everything is bad, and learn how to eat around and avoid the bait. You can only do this by knowing where your motivation is rooted, i.e. the reason for your action. This is what will help you to recognise the intention that is aimed, even indirectly, at that type of pleasure that is provocative of lust; start seeing more of those things that are related to that type of pleasure, and become skilled at avoiding them more effectively. It is then that the pleasures that have nothing to do with sensuality—such as the pleasure of solitude, or the pleasure of remote dwellings that are far from physically pleasant or provocative of lust—become very agreeable, and you know you do not need to fear them.

Q: So for example, I can eat food which makes me even more hungry, or food that just satisfies me but doesn't make me feverish for more.

Nm: Yes. You have to eat. Initially everything and every food is sensual. But eating is unavoidable. So what do you do? Do you just eat anything without any regard, or do you make the effort to discern the reasons for eating: Is it healthy? Am I eating to distract myself from something? If you check your intentions carefully, you will start seeing that there is food that you not only find agreeable but would fantasize about and would spend hours trying to get, becoming upset if you don't get it. So don't go for that food. But what about other food? You can realise that you don't need to, on the other hand, eat food that makes you feel disgusted or vomit—that's equally ridiculous. You just need the food that serves its purpose—fills you up, is healthy, might be agreeable, but not something that will obsess your mind and provoke lust in you and so on. That's it—it's quite an easy criteria.

Come monk. Be one who moderates his eating. Concurrently reflecting, take your food not playfully, nor for intoxication, nor for putting on weight, nor for beautification, but simply for the survival and continuance of this body, for ending its afflictions, for the support of the holy life, thinking: 'I will destroy old feelings and not create new feelings. Therefore I will maintain myself, be blameless and live at ease'. – MN 125

Before doing something, you can reflect on the purpose of doing it. For instance: 'I want to go out.' Why? What is it for? Is it for company, enjoying distractions and all those kinds of things that will provoke either lust, aversion, indolence and distraction? So now you know that it will end in seeking unwholesome pleasures, and you do not do it. But if you think, say, 'I want to go out for a nice walk in an agreeable park, where I'll be alone and clear with my thoughts': that's not sensuality, that is agreeability. The more you start discerning that difference, the clearer it becomes, and the easier it then becomes to completely divert your actions and mind from going in the direction of sensuality, and find things to do of an agreeable nature, but which are non-lustful, non-provocative, free of fever and thirst.

There is the case where I see a monk, composed and sitting in a village dwelling. The thought occurs to me, 'Soon a monastery attendant

will disturb this venerable one in some way, and rouse him from his composure.’ And so I am not pleased with that monk’s village dwelling.

But then there is the case where I see a monk sitting, nodding, in the wilderness. The thought occurs to me, ‘Soon this venerable one will dispel his indolence and tiredness and attend to the wilderness-perception, unified.’ And so I am pleased with that monk’s wilderness dwelling.

Then there is the case where I see a wilderness monk sitting uncomposed in the wilderness. The thought occurs to me, ‘Soon this venerable one will compose his uncomposed mind, or protect his composed mind.’ And so I am pleased with that monk’s wilderness dwelling.

Then there is the case where I see a wilderness monk sitting composed in the wilderness. The thought occurs to me, ‘Soon this venerable one will release his unreleased mind, or protect his released mind.’ And so I am pleased with that monk’s wilderness dwelling.

Then there is the case where I see a village dwelling monk who receives robes, alms food, shelter, and medicines for curing the sick. Receiving, as he likes, those gains, offerings, and fame, he neglects seclusion, he neglects isolated forest and wilderness dwellings. He makes his living by visiting villages, towns, and cities. And so I am not pleased with that monk’s village-dwelling.

Then there is the case where I see a wilderness monk who receives robes, alms food, shelter, and medicines for curing the sick. Fending off those gains, offerings, and fame, he doesn’t neglect seclusion, doesn’t neglect isolated forest and wilderness dwellings. And so I am pleased with that monk’s wilderness dwelling. – AN 6.42

Nm: So as the sutta says, even if a monk goes to the forest, and his mind is full of sensual thoughts, and he’s just sleeping, and not doing anything, at least he is still in an environment that is not provocative of lust, and so his mind will eventually settle down. The other type of monk is diligent and his mind is not drowsy or full of lust—yet he is living in the village, and so his mind *will* become provoked with lust sooner or later, because he lives in an environment that is filled with the five types of sensual pleasures.

You can use the pleasure of seclusion and renunciation to overcome dependence on provocative sensual pleasures, then later on it will be

possible to develop your composure (*samādhī*) further and completely surmount any dependence on any kind of agreeability of the senses. But even then, as long as you have the senses, until the body breaks apart, agreeable and disagreeable sense experiences will still be coming your way.

What, bhikkhus, is the Nibbāna-element with residue left? Here a bhikkhu is an arahant, one whose taints are destroyed, the holy life fulfilled, who has done what had to be done, laid down the burden, attained the goal, destroyed the assumption of being, completely released through right knowledge. However, his five sense faculties remain unimpaired, by which he still experiences what is agreeable and disagreeable and feels pleasure and pain. It is the extinction of greed, aversion, and delusion in him that is called the Nibbāna-element with residue left. – Iti 44

Nm: It's quite an important point, because many people would fall into that trap of saying 'no' to everything, winding themselves up. It's unsustainable (and unwholesome) because you are trying to deny the presence of your senses. You are still seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting and touching things that are agreeable and disagreeable, and you don't see anything in between. While still having desire for the agreeable and hating the disagreeable, you just try to get rid of the entire thing. That is why it always results in that self-loathing.

It is because of that very kind of loss of perspective that some monks in the Buddha's day, as they were contemplating the body, ended up killing themselves.

Then the monks, thinking: 'The Blessed One, with many lines of reasoning, has given a talk on the unattractiveness of the body, has spoken in praise of the development of the perception of unattractiveness,' remained committed to the development of the perception of unattractiveness in many modes and manners. They, being ashamed, repelled, and disgusted with this body, sought for an assassin. In one day, ten monks took the knife. In one day, twenty monks took the knife. In one day, thirty monks took the knife. –

SN 54.9

Nm: Now, a person might think: ‘Okay, it seems I must allow some agreeability,’ and therefore think themselves justified in engaging with any kind of pleasure. No—you are justified in experiencing what is agreeable, but you are *not* justified in failing to see the line between agreeability and sensuality. Agreeability can exist without sensuality, but sensuality requires agreeability, it is a particular kind of agreeability. Only if you remove dependence on that particular type that is provocative of lust, can you then simply have the agreeability of seclusion from the senses, without being dependent on it. Then you would also not be afraid or distraught when sickness, death or disagreeable things come your way.

A simile to illustrate the distinction being made here is if you imagine you are enclosed in a room with five windows, through which you perceive things. You just see things as they come in front of the windows, sometimes pleasing things, sometimes displeasing things, and that’s it, you’re sitting in the chair, and you’re just perceiving sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches. But in regards to the pleasure that is provocative of lust, trapping and hooking you in, underlain by craving for more and so on—if you do not know how to distinguish it from the rest and are careless in regard to it, that is when you wouldn’t just be sitting there, but would lean through the window, try to grab it, fix it there, make it not go anywhere else, hold it within your field of view and try to possess it, forget about all the other windows and just think about the one through which you’ve been provoked. You would then be leaning out into a particular sphere that is not yours.

The point is about seeing how much your mind moves on account of things that are agreeable and disagreeable, the extent to which you are provoked, the extent to which you cannot resist that pressure and start crawling out of the window and trying to get what’s there. That’s the danger of it. The beautiful things just remain in the world:

Lustful intention is a man’s sensuality:
 Not the beautiful things of the world.
 Beautiful things remain as they are in the world
 While the wise remove the desire for them. – AN 6.63

It’s that fever, that lust: that is why you are subjected to the danger, because you expose yourself on account of it. Now, imagine you recognise that. So you are still seated there. Now, when a thing comes into your

field of view through a window, and it's pressuring you to get up and go back to the old ways, you realise, 'Ah, *that's* the danger of it—so I won't do that.' You restrain yourself and do not look through the window until that particular thing goes away, because it cannot stay there all the time. Now, something agreeable might arise there that you can admire from your chair and your mind doesn't feel the need to get up. You can just stay in the chair: 'Oh, look, it's a beautiful sunset. But I'm not crawling out of the window or losing my perspective.' When that sight changes you will not feel dejected.

So it is when something comes to provoke you, to bait you and hook you—that's when you say: 'No—I refuse to look until it disappears, because it could result in this mind getting up, running, tripping over and falling out of the window and meeting death or deadly suffering.' But that does not mean: 'Since I get hooked on these particular things I see, I must block up, and board up, and destroy all these windows and never see anything ever again!' Thinking in this way means that you are still moved by those things, because you still have to get off the chair in order to block those windows, or to chase things away that are in front of the windows. But what you have to realise is that *that's* the problem—not what was in front of the window. The problem is that, whether you are getting up because you want it, or you're getting up because you don't want it—you are getting up on account of it.

When the mind is completely cooled down through not acting out of pressure and not having taken the bait, then there is no basis for things to provoke you to get up from that chair. You can still encounter things that used to provoke lust or aversion, and now you realise that moving on account of it is inconceivable, because the mind has been tamed to that complete extent. And it is when you encounter things that used to provoke you that they remind you 'this mind is truly free.'

'But Master Ānanda, when a bhikkhu is an arahant – with taints destroyed, one who has reached fulfilment, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, attained his own welfare, destroyed the attachment to being, and is liberated through right understanding: is this knowledge and vision "my taints are destroyed" continually present to him, while walking, standing, sitting, lying, sleeping and awake?'

Well then, Sandaka, I shall give you a simile. For it is by means of a simile that a wise man may understand the meaning of what

is said. Suppose there was a person whose hands and feet had been amputated. Would they be aware that their hands and feet had been amputated constantly and continually, while walking, standing, sleeping, and waking? Or would they be aware of it only when they were to take note of it?

‘No, master Ānanda, they wouldn’t be aware of it constantly. Only when they were to take note of it would they be aware: “my hands and feet are amputated”.’

In the same way, when a bhikkhu is an arahant – with taints destroyed, one who has reached fulfilment, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, attained his own welfare, destroyed the attachment to being, and is liberated through right understanding – this knowledge and vision ‘my taints are destroyed’ is not continually present to him, while walking, standing, sitting, lying, sleeping and awake. Rather, it is only when he takes note of it that he is aware: ‘my taints are destroyed.’ – MN 76

Q: It’s similar, in a way, with me realising that previously I was infatuated with food and unsatisfied even though I could eat whatever I desired. But now I can just eat plain porridge and it doesn’t make me hungry after I eat it. I don’t crave it but I don’t hate it either. It does the job—isn’t that wonderful!

Nm: It’s wonderful because it’s extremely practical, just like other simple things such as wearing patched robes—because you don’t worry about it, it serves the purpose, it’s lightweight and easy to maintain; you don’t have to do anything difficult to procure it—and nobody wants it or would steal it. So it’s wonderful because it doesn’t burden you with duty and is easy—and that is a pleasure that is not sensuality.

The pleasure of generosity is similar. That is what the Buddha would teach householders before telling them about the right view; he would elevate and gladden their mind with a talk on generosity and higher births (see, for example, AN 8.21). So he was teaching them about good types of pleasure. Helping others feels pleasant, and even if you’re not doing it for the purest of reasons, it is still not a pleasure that will provoke lust and fever, so it is beneficial for the mind.

People’s lives are controlled by thirst and fever, in a mind rooted in lust, aversion and distraction; just on account of those few particular things that provoke lust or aversion; not the entire eye domain and sights.

But those few particular perceptions that are provocative then become the criteria for measuring everything else, for a mind that is dependent on that sensual being (*kāma bhava*). That is *the* pleasure that controls the mind, and everything else will be secondary to that pleasure. So even if they could see the pleasure of seclusion and the pleasure of generosity, they can't—until they see the danger of the other type of pleasure, that particular type of sensual pleasure.

It's a subtle bait: there is more, so to speak, 'non-bait' around, there are more things that are not beautiful in the world than there are things that are beautiful. There are, generally, more ugly things, more things that are non-provocative. But if you haven't understood the gratification, the danger and the escape in regards to the provocative things, that is your *entire* being. *Kāma bhava*, 'sensual being,' is an entire state of your existence, on account of those few baits, the few little hooks that you are constantly attached to and that are dragging you left and right.

Q: You only get up from the chair because you don't see the danger in getting up.

Nm: Yes, you are fully immersed with that particular type of sensual pleasure.

Q: So should I force myself to sit down and not get up?

Nm: That is how you have to start. So sure, in the beginning, it might be that you just take it on faith that you shouldn't get up, though you still want to get up—but at least you are not getting up. That's the first step, that is sense restraint. Since you are not getting up, that means you are not acting out, and not sustaining the habit of 'getting up.' Sooner or later, if you keep on doing that, you're going to start seeing more, increasing your perspective. 'I haven't been getting up, haven't been acting out of craving. The aggregate of virtue is here. I haven't been breaking the precepts though I was very pressured to do so.' Now with this perspective, you are closer to seeing where the problem really is—the trick, the bait, the mental obsession. The bait is there to hook you, but it cannot come through the window and hook you out—you are the one who goes for it.

So what's the danger then? Is the danger that there are hooks around, or is the danger in the fact that you can't stop grabbing them?

Bhikkhus, suppose a fisherman would cast a baited hook into a deep lake, and a fish on the lookout for food would swallow it. That fish who has thus swallowed the fisherman's hook would meet with calamity and disaster, and the fisherman could do with it as he wishes. So too, bhikkhus, there are these six hooks in the world for the calamity of beings, for the slaughter of living beings.

There are, bhikkhus, forms cognizable by the eye that are wished for, desired, agreeable, likeable, sensual and provocative of lust. If a bhikkhu seeks delight in them, welcomes them, and remains holding to them, he is called a bhikkhu who has swallowed Mara's hook. He has met with calamity and disaster, and the Evil One can do with him as he wishes.

There are, bhikkhus, sounds cognizable by the ear ... thoughts cognizable by the mind that are desirable ... tantalizing. If a bhikkhu seeks delight in them ... the Evil One can do with him as he wishes.

There are, bhikkhus, forms cognizable by the eye that are wished for, desired, agreeable, likeable, sensual and provocative of lust. If a bhikkhu does not seek delight in them, does not welcome them, and does not remain holding to them, he is called a bhikkhu who has not swallowed Mara's hook, who has broken the hook, demolished the hook. He has not met with calamity and disaster, and the Evil One cannot do with him as he wishes.

There are, bhikkhus, sounds cognizable by the ear ... thoughts cognizable by the mind that are wished for ... provocative of lust. If a bhikkhu does not seek delight in them ... the Evil One cannot do with him as he wishes. – SN 35.230

Nm: People tend to avoid responsibility and blame the sense objects for their sensuality. It's like saying: 'Oh, but if only there were no hooks, I wouldn't be grabbing them.' Yes, if there were no hooks that would be great—but there are hooks. There is this *saṃsāra*, there is sensuality. So what is the other thing that you could equally do, that would free you from those hooks? Stop reaching for the hooks, and take responsibility first for when you do reach for them. Then, if you continue to stop reaching, you can calm down and see that freedom for yourself.

Q: Can one understand the danger of sensuality while still grabbing the hooks—i.e., while still engaging with it?

Nm: Can you understand the danger of reaching for a hook, while at the same time you are unable to resist and stop reaching for a hook? Well, the fact that you are reaching for a hook means you're not seeing the danger.

It's like when someone thinks that they can engage with sensuality 'mindfully'—impossible, it's a contradiction in terms. Engaging in sensuality means that there is *no* perspective. Or if one thinks: 'I won't engage physically or verbally, but mentally I can think about it.' That would be the equivalent of being strapped to a wild, rabid, mad animal that for the moment is calm—but then you deliberately show it things that are making it even more rabid and mad. So, yes, you can hold it for now, but the point will come where your grip will loosen, and then that animal is going to go wild. The mind is the forerunner of all things, and if you are cultivating lust there, the body will soon follow.

Bhikkhus, that one can engage in sensual pleasures without sensual desires, without perceptions of sensual desire, without thoughts of sensual desire, that is impossible. – MN 22

People don't realize that their mind has a mind of its own. Your sense of ownership doesn't matter—the truth is that the mind is basically on its own while you are subjected to it. That's the recognition of seeing the sign of the mind (*cittanimitta*) as something that is not yours that you are paired with.

You can think: 'But I should be able to engage with provocative objects and not be pressured internally!' But that's not up to you—the mind has a mind of its own. If it sees these certain things, it will go for them and if it doesn't see those particular things—it will calm down.

SIMILE OF THE BAIT

... Bhikkhus, a deer-trapper does not lay down bait for a deer herd intending thus: 'May the deer herd enjoy this bait that I have laid down and be happy forever.' A deer-trapper lays down bait for a deer herd intending thus instead: 'The deer herd will eat food unwarily by going right in amongst the bait that I have laid down; by so doing they will become intoxicated; when they are intoxicated, they will fall into negligence; when they are negligent, I can do with them as I like on account of this bait.'

1. Now the deer of the first herd went to the deer-trappers field, ate the bait, absorbed, intoxicated and negligent, became subjected to the wishes of the deer-trapper. That is how the deer of the first herd failed to get free from the deer trapper's power and control.

2. Now the deer of a second herd reckoned thus: 'The deer of that first herd, by acting as they did without precaution, failed to get free from the deer-trapper's power and control. Suppose we altogether shun that bait; shunning that fearful enjoyment, let us go out into the forest wilds and live there.' And they did so. But in the last month of the hot season when the grass and the water were used up, their bodies were reduced to extreme emaciation; with that they lost their strength and energy. Then they went back to the deer-trappers' field, ate the bait, absorbed, intoxicated and negligent, became subjected to the wishes of the deer-trapper. That is how the deer of the second herd also failed to get free from the deer-trapper's power and control.

3. Now the deer of a third herd reckoned thus: 'The deer of that first herd ... the deer of that second herd, reckoning the failure of the first herd, tried to live in the forest wilds; but they also failed to get free from the deer-trapper's power and control. Suppose we make our dwelling place within range of the deer-trapper's bait. Then we shall eat food not unwarily and without going right into the bait, by doing so we shall not become intoxicated; we shall not fall into negligence; when we are not negligent, the deer-trapper shall not do with us as he likes on account of that bait.' And they did so. But then the deer-trapper and his following considered thus: 'These deer of this third herd are as cunning and crafty as wizards and sorcerers. They eat the bait laid down without our knowing how they come and go. Suppose we have the bait that is laid down completely surrounded all round over a wide area with wicker hurdles; then perhaps we might see where the third deer herd's dwelling place are.' They did so, and they saw where the third herd hide. And that is how the deer of the third herd also failed to get free from the deer-trapper's power and control.

4. Now the deer of a fourth herd reckoned thus: 'The deer of that first herd ... the deer of that third herd, ... also failed to get free from the deer-trapper's power and control. Suppose we make our dwelling place where the deer-trapper and his following cannot go. Then, having done so, we shall eat food not unwarily and without going right in amongst the bait that the deer-trapper has laid down; by doing so

we shall not become intoxicated; we shall not fall into negligence; when we are not negligent, the deer-trapper shall not do with us as he likes on account of that bait.’ And they did so.

But then the deer-trapper and his following considered thus: ‘These deer of this fourth herd are as cunning and crafty as wizards and sorcerers. They eat the bait laid down without our knowing how they come and go. Suppose we have the bait that is laid down completely surrounded all round over a wide area with wicker hurdles; then perhaps we might see the fourth deer herd’s dwelling place, where they go to hide.’ They did so, but they did not see the fourth deer herd’s dwelling place. Then the deer-hunter and his following considered thus: ‘If we scare the fourth deer herd, being scared they will alert others, and so the deer herds will all desert this bait that we have laid down. Suppose we treat the fourth deer herd with indifference.’ They did so. And that was how the deer of the fourth deer herd got free from the deer-trapper’s power and control.

Bhikkhus, I have given this simile in order to convey a meaning. ‘Bait’ is a term for the five types of sensual pleasure. ‘Deer-trapper’ is a term for Mara the Evil One. ‘The deer-trapper’s following’ is a term for Mara’s following. ‘Deer herd’ is a term for recluses and brahmins.

Now recluses and brahmins of the first kind ate food unwarily by going right in amongst the bait and the material things of the world that Mara had laid down; by doing so they became intoxicated; they fell into negligence. When they were negligent, Mara did with them as he liked on account of that bait and those material things of the world. That is how the recluses and brahmins of the first kind failed to get free from Mara’s power and control.

Now recluses and brahmins of the second kind reckoned thus: ‘Those recluses and brahmins of the first kind, by acting as they did without precaution, failed to get free from Mara’s power and control. Suppose we shun that bait food and those material things of the world; shunning that fearful enjoyment, let us go out into the forest and live there.’ And they did so. There they were eaters of greens or millet or rice-bran or the discarded scum of boiled rice or grass or cow dung; they lived on forest roots and fruits. But in the last month of the hot season when the grass and the water were used up, their bodies were reduced to extreme emaciation; with that they lost their strength and energy; they lost their liberation of mind; they returned to that same

bait that Mara had laid down and those material things of the world; they ate food unwarily by going right in amongst it; by so doing they became intoxicated; they fell into negligence; Mara did with them as he liked on account of that bait and those material things of the world. That is how those recluses and brahmins of the second kind failed to get free from Mara's power and control.

Now recluses and brahmins of the third kind reckoned thus: 'Those recluses and brahmins of the first kind, by acting as they did without precaution, failed to get free from Mara's power and control. Those recluses and brahmins of the second kind, by reckoning how the recluses and brahmins of the first kind had failed, they did with the precaution of going to live in the forest wilds, also failed to get free from Mara's power and control. Suppose we make our dwelling place within range of that bait that Mara has laid down and those material things of the world. Having done so, we shall eat food not unwarily and without going right in amongst the bait that Mara has laid down and the material things of the world. By doing so we shall not become intoxicated; we shall not fall into negligence; when we are not negligent, Mara shall not do with us as he likes on account of that bait and those material things of the world.' And they did so.

But then they came to hold views such as 'the world is eternal' and 'the world is not eternal' and 'the world is finite' and 'the world is infinite' and 'the soul and the body are the same' and 'the soul is one thing and the body another' and 'after death a Tathagata exists' and 'after death a Tathagata does not exist' and 'after death a Tathagata both exists and does not exist' and 'after death a Tathagata neither exists nor does not exist.' That is how those recluses and brahmins of the third kind failed to get free from Mara's power and control. Those recluses and brahmins, I say, are just like the deer of the third herd.

Now recluses and brahmins of the fourth kind reckoned thus: 'Those recluses and brahmins of the first kind, ... the recluses and brahmins of the third kind, by reckoning how the recluses and brahmins of the first kind and also the recluses and brahmins of the second kind had failed, they make their dwelling place within range of the bait that Mara had laid down and the material things of the world, also failed to get free from Mara's power and control. Suppose we make our dwelling place where Mara and his following cannot go. Then, having done so, we shall eat food not unwarily and without going right in

amongst the bait that Mara has laid down and the material things of the world. By doing so we shall not become intoxicated; we shall not fall into negligence; then Mara shall not do with us as he likes on account of that bait and those material things of the world.' And they did so. And that is how those recluses and brahmins of the fourth kind got free from Mara's power and control. Those recluses and brahmins, I say, are just like the deer of the fourth herd.

And where is it that Mara and his followers cannot go? Here, withdrawn from sensual pleasures, withdrawn from unwholesome states, a bhikkhu enters upon the first comprehension, which is accompanied by thinking and pondering, with joy and pleasure born of seclusion. This bhikkhu is said to have blindfolded Mara, to have become invisible to the Evil One by depriving Mara's eye of its opportunity. – MN 25

8

The pleasure of boredom

Oh, when will I stay in a mountain cave, alone, with no companion, discerning all states of being as impermanent? This hope of mine, when will it be?

Oh, when will I stay happily in the forest, a sage wearing a torn robe, dressed in ocher, unselfish, with no need for hope, with lust, hate, and delusion destroyed?

Oh, when will I stay alone in the wood, fearless, discerning this body as impermanent, a nest of death and disease, oppressed by death and old age; when will it be? ...

... Mind, for many years you told me: 'Enough of living in a house for you!' Why do you not urge me on, mind, now that I've gone forth as an ascetic? ...

... In my family circle, friends, loved ones, and relatives; and in the world, sports and play, and sensual pleasures; all these I gave up when I entered this life: and even then you're not content with me, mind! ...

... The methodical teacher, supreme among people, great physician, guide for those who wish to train, said: 'The mind fidgets like a monkey, so it's very hard to control if you are not free of lust.' ...

... Mind, when you urge me towards the impermanent and unstable, you're acting like someone who plants trees, then, when they're about to fruit, wishes to cut down the very same trees. Immaterial mind, far-traveller, lone-wanderer: I won't do your bidding any more. Sensual pleasures are suffering, painful, and very dangerous; I'll wander with my mind intent only on Nibbāna ...

... The men and women who live under your will and command, whatever pleasure they experience, they are ignorant and fall under Māra's control; loving life, they're your disciples, mind. – Thag. 19.1

Ajahn Nyanamoli: What is described in this sutta represents everybody's relationship with their mind: the only difference being how much perspective you have towards it, or to what extent you identify with it. The

mind presents you with ideas which you accept and act on, and then you assume ownership of them, but from the beginning you didn't have a say in their creation—in their arising—the mind simply came up with them. What is up to you, is whether you choose to accept what the mind offers; in the same sense that you can choose whether or not to look and go towards what the eyes want to see.

The eyes want to go in a direction which you do not have to accept, but if people have no self awareness and perspective developed through sense restraint, then for them that pull is *theirs*. So ironically, they are being pulled against their will, but at the same time they believe that that's what they want to do. For Tālapuṭa, in that sutta, he already had some wisdom, because he was already able to see the mind as 'this thing'; as he said: 'You urged me to do this, I did this, and now you want to go back.' Now if he didn't have wisdom, he would have just thought: 'I want to go back,' but he questioned the thought: 'Is this what I want? No, this is what my mind wants and that's clear enough, but is this what I want? ... No, I do not want to eat what has been "vomited up" so to speak. I was miserable over there and that's why I left, so I don't want to do it, but the mind still wants it.' So when there is such a conflict, you have a choice; either give in to the mind in order to not endure the conflict, or tame the mind in order to resolve the conflict. There will be no more conflict when you (wisdom) are in charge.

Q: In the beginning the mind offered him something quite appealing ...

Nm: Yes, due to his own contemplation and choices: he met the Buddha and at that time his mind thought that this training was worth doing. Even his own mind was not happy in that environment, which is why it presented him with these romantic ideas about living in the forests. However, when the reality of those romantic ideas set in, the hardships, enduring the insects, etc, then the mind changed: 'Ohhh, I want to go back now.' He was wise enough to question it: 'My mind has changed but shall I follow it? No.' When you start seeing yourself as this creature, this six-sensed animal, those senses will want to pull you in the direction they want to go, but it's you who needs to stop gratuitously identifying with them and giving in to their pressure, and then they will eventually obey. How long that will take depends on how much effort you put in.

The mind directs the other senses and it's the hardest to tame, but it's still the same principle. When you have a thought, you can reflect

further on it. When the mind is interested in sensuality, for example, it will naturally not think about the ugly aspects which are simultaneously present, but you can make it do so, as Tālapuṭa decided to do: 'No, I will tie you down, mind, and I will stay here where you first told me to go—it was a good idea, thank you—but now we are not changing this, we will stay here until you listen to me, not the other way around.' So it's not about *not having* those thoughts or trying to prevent them from arising, thinking: 'I shouldn't be thinking this.' It's not up to you what thoughts arise for you, that's up to your mind; but you should not be acting because of them, acting upon them and accepting them without further consideration. Nor, on the other hand, should you be averse to thoughts, trying to get rid of them out of ill-will. That's on you.

If you know exactly where the line is and where your responsibility lies, then you know that the mind can come up with whatever it wants; all you need to do is to not entertain it and establish the context of the danger, if what it offers is unwholesome and sensual. It is your choice to accept the offer of the mind or not, to go with it or not.

You also have the choice of whether or not to allow the mind to keep dwelling on, and revolving around, a particular subject; because the mind actually needs your input and encouragement to keep revolving around sensuality or ill-will. You can develop the perception of danger or the perception of abandoning in regard to those thoughts, so that while the mind is presenting those thoughts of sensuality, you are not wanting them, and are abandoning them because they are dangerous. It is a very different attitude to that of thinking: 'I will make this mind never think of that again!' That might be the final outcome of your being completely dispassionate towards whatever your mind presents you, but until then the mind will be presenting you with various things, in the same way that any other sense will be presenting you with things it wants to do. Then, you should certainly not welcome thoughts if you know and see that they are rooted in sensuality, ill-will or distraction—but that doesn't mean that you should think: 'I don't want these thoughts, so let me get rid of them right now!' It means that you should think: 'I don't want it, so now let me endure this unruly mind that is trying to harass me with these thoughts, and not act on them.'

The Blessed One said, 'Monks, if you are asked by wanderers of other religions: "Friends, there are these three qualities. Which three?"

Greed, aversion and delusion. These are the three qualities. Now what is the difference, what is the distinction, what is the distinguishing factor among these three qualities?”—When thus asked, you should answer those wanderers in this way: “Friends, lust carries little blame and is slow to fade. Aversion carries great blame and is quick to fade. Delusion carries great blame and is slow to fade” ...’ – AN 3.68

Nm: Delusion is not a missing piece of information; it’s an existential attitude that you have towards your senses. That’s why I often refer to it as ‘distraction’, because it’s an active thing, it’s something that you are *doing* here and now. Just like lust and aversion, delusion is something you welcome, act upon, accept and do not understand. It’s not something you don’t know. It’s the attitude of distraction.

It’s about the movement of distraction, the movement of having something to do to maintain your being. A good indicator to measure it would be your capacity for boredom. If you are easily bored, that means you have accumulated a lot of delusion that will be difficult to see, and it will not fade easily. If you *never* get bored; where there is no pressure whatsoever of non-activity, no pressure to do anything, no pressure to get rid of anything or to distract yourself or look away from nothing happening, or nothing being felt—then you are at least an *anāgāmi* or Arahant.

Practically speaking, boredom is a good way to practise. People don’t see boredom as an indicator, and certainly don’t see delusion as an attitude that they cultivate, despite commitment to precepts, sutta study, and contemplation. Ordinarily a person always tries to deal with boredom, and if that person is a Buddhist, they inevitably use some meditation technique to do so. Also, at the same time, people can fall into mistakenly thinking: ‘I’ll cultivate boredom,’ because in reality they simply don’t want to be bothered by disagreeable experiences that fill them with aversion. That’s not a correct practice of boredom either.

Reading suttas or scholarly works can also be something to do to avoid boredom. Yes, you do need to know the suttas and collect that information in order to know what to look for, but sooner or later you need to start uprooting delusion for what it is; and for that you need to endure and not depend on some activity to keep you occupied, engaged and connected to the senses.

For example, if you decide to allow yourself to get bored: switch off your phone, close the doors and curtains, put away your books, switch

off the television, don't do your meditation technique—then, it doesn't matter whether you sit, walk, stand or lay down—just abide in that non-activity. The mind will certainly be presenting you with something to do, which is fine—you don't need to try to get rid of those thoughts, you just don't act upon them.

If you decide to get up or go to the toilet, those are not the kinds of activities that will distract you. But if your mind suggests: 'Let me just check my email,' well that's an activity of a kind that will distract you, so you don't do that. Now, if you do that for an hour, you will probably feel intense boredom, and may even feel frightened, which is why people fear solitude or confinement where there is nothing to distract their senses. But, in itself, it is only frightening because you have always depended on the momentum of action. That's a gratuitous dependency that you have been cultivating because you didn't know any better, and as long you don't know any better you will be cultivating it.

'On one occasion a certain bhikkhu was dwelling in a certain woodland thicket. Now on that occasion that bhikkhu had been excessively engrossed in recitation, but on a later occasion he passed the time living in non-activity (indifferent, withdrawn, at ease) and keeping silent. Then the devata that inhabited that woodland, no longer hearing that bhikkhu recite the Dhamma, approached him and addressed him in verse: "Bhikkhu, why don't you recite Dhamma-stanzas, living in communion with other bhikkhus? Hearing the Dhamma, one gains confidence; In this very life- the reciter gains praise."

The bhikkhu replied: "In the past I was fond of reciting Dhamma-stanzas, so long as I had not achieved dispassion. But from the time I achieved dispassion, I dwell in what the good men call: "The laying down by final knowledge of whatever is seen, heard, or sensed".' – SN 9.10

Nm: Are you delighting in projects and work? If yes, that means you are delighting in distraction. Just try abiding in true non-activity for an hour or two, no meditation techniques or trying to be mindful: just sit there, don't fall asleep, get up or walk back and forth if you are sleepy, and just allow your mind to come up with ideas and things to do, and then don't commit to them. Let those thoughts endure and just sit about. Do that

for a few hours and you will see that there is going to be a space created between you and your senses, because of that identification that people naturally jump into: 'When eye wants to see = I want to see.' That identification, that proximity with the senses needs maintenance. If you keep the precepts, dwell in solitude and don't act upon impulse and create that space, then you will get to see this sense-creature for what it is: the mind *there* with its thoughts wanting to do this and that—the monkey mind—you get to see it because you stop being driven by it.

Now suppose that this is your practice for most of the day—abiding in non-activity, wakeful and discerning the mind—then when you commit to do something with body, speech or mind, you do so only on the level of that recognition that it will not cause further distraction. You do those activities with *jhāna*—the mind of non-activity, non-distraction. That's why in *jhāna* you can walk, eat, go to the toilet, etc.—it's not like you're frozen motionless. Non-activity means no activity that is rooted in distraction, or lust or aversion. It will also then become clear what you are not distracting yourself from, which is—yourself, the six-sensed-creature, the pressure.

That's why people fear boredom, and why it always turns into existential anxiety; because you start seeing how divorced you are from your own senses; from the things that you identify with, things that define who, or what you are. It's as if someone releases a balloon which floats away, higher and higher—that's your mind, there is no end to how high it can go. And there is no problem in how high it goes either. The problem arises from your expectation, need and dependence of being tethered to the senses, and that in turn is so because you haven't been restraining yourself enough. You haven't been seeing the danger in the slightest fault, and you have been depending on action through your senses.

Everybody depends on having something to do, but some depend on it more than others. When a person constantly needs to be active, as soon as they are not active they immediately get bored, restless, and then anxiety sets in—and then no matter how insignificant something is, it becomes *the* most important thing that must be done. That anxiety and desperation is only there because they refuse to give up the gratuitous assumption that the senses belong to them and are worth holding onto. If you give that up, then non-activity is the most sublime thing—but as I said, the pleasure of the first comprehension (*jhāna*), and the pleasure of the neutral feeling, needs to be understood and developed. It's not automatic.

That's also the reason why if, for example, you have been confined in a room with nothing to do for a long time and are then released, no matter how unpleasant a chore you then have to do, you will enjoy it; because at least you will feel that there is something for you to do (if you are still dependent on action). Now you can realise that having the pleasure of something to do is determined by how far your mind has withdrawn. People who never experience boredom, because they always have something to distract themselves with, are people who have to go further into sensuality. There is nothing sensual about cleaning a toilet—you just enjoy the action in itself because the boredom was a bit too much to handle—but say, you never experienced boredom or separation or withdrawal from the senses, have no perspective in regard to them, and all you do is engage with the senses: your desire for sense pleasures will become overwhelming, it will outweigh your ability to get the pleasure you want and then need for your sanity. The more you engage in sensuality the less pleasure you feel, because the need to engage increases. On the other hand, if you have been withdrawn from sensuality for a long time, then even just a little bit of mundane engagement with the senses will be agreeable, without constituting sensuality.

The pleasure of cleaning a toilet is not based on craving; it's actually determined by the fact that you haven't been engaging in sensuality and so you don't need to fear that pleasure. But you do need to be careful, because you might then start trying to find random things to do which, although they are not sensual, can become distracting. If they do, your mind will start thinking sensual thoughts.

Now suppose you don't fear the boredom or neutral feeling any more; it's not felt as unpleasant because you have understood it—you basically live withdrawn from sensuality, and your mind is now even more established in the separation from the senses and their pulls. That's why, from that perspective, even enduring discomfort will feel like divine pleasure. From the point of view of *jhāna*, physical endurance, eating rough food, living at the root of a tree, wearing rough robes, using harsh medicines will all feel like they are the finest requisites. It's the same principle, determined by the extent to which your mind is withdrawn, that determines how pleasantly the engagement will be experienced. It is the same principle in which certain people who engage in as much sensuality as they want, end up feeling depressed and numb to it. It is because they have been engaging with that level for so long and their minds have not

been withdrawn. So it's the same principle of withdrawal: in boredom, if you work through it, don't act out of it and even endure anxiety if it arises, then even chores will be felt as agreeable. Now, if you develop that further into a *jhāna*, then even if you don't do any chores, just enduring the elements will be agreeable—it will be felt pleasant from the point of view of this *creature* being so withdrawn, and that's why the Buddha encouraged the venerable Anuruddha to develop *jhāna*:

... Now, when you think these eight thoughts of a great person and become a person who can attain at will, without trouble or difficulty, these four comprehensions—heightened mental states providing a pleasant abiding in the here and now—then your robe of cast-off rags will seem to you to be just like the clothes chest of a householder, full of clothes of many colours. As you live contented, it will serve for your delight, for a comfortable abiding, for non-agitation, and for reaching Nibbāna.

When you think these eight thoughts of a great person and become a person who can attain at will, without trouble or difficulty, these four comprehensions – heightened mental states providing a pleasant abiding in the here and now – then your meal of almsfood will seem to you to be just like the rice and wheat of a householder, cleaned of black grains, and served with a variety of sauces and seasonings. ...

... Your dwelling at the foot of a tree will seem to you to be just like the gabled mansion of a householder or householder's son, plastered inside and out, draft-free, bolted, and with its shutters closed. ... your bed on a spread of grass will seem to you like the couch of a householder, spread with long-haired coverlets, white woollen coverlets, embroidered coverlets, antelope-hide and deer-skin rugs, covered with a canopy, and with red cushions for the head and feet. ...

... Your medicine of fermented cow's urine will seem to you to be just like the various tonics of a householder: ghee, fresh butter, oil, honey, and molasses sugar. As you live contented, it will serve for your delight, for a comfortable abiding, for non-agitation, and for reaching Nibbāna ... – AN 8.30

If you enjoy living in the jungle wearing rough robes and enduring insects, if you find that agreeable, you don't need to fear that pleasure as though it were sensuality, because it is not. The agreeability is determined by the

loftiness of your state of mind. If you are not distracting yourself, you will inevitably find things enjoyable, and if you develop *jhāna*, even the extreme pain of disease can be endured because your mind can attain *jhāna* at will. In other words, if your mind can re-establish itself as fully withdrawn and independent of any sense at any time, and that ‘creature’ of the six senses seen there enduring on its own, not owned by you or connected to you anymore, then how can you be bothered by anything that happens to it?

Then Venerable Mahākassapa went up to the Buddha, bowed, and sat down to one side.

The Buddha said to him: ‘You’re old now, Kassapa. Those worn-out hempen rag robes must be a burden for you. So Kassapa, you should wear clothes given by householders, accept invitations for the meal, and stay in my presence.’

‘For a long time, sir, I’ve lived in the wilderness, eaten only alms-food, worn rag robes, and owned just three robes; and I’ve praised these things. I’ve been one of few wishes, content, secluded, withdrawn, and energetic; and I’ve praised these things.’

‘But seeing what benefit, Kassapa, have you long practised these things?’

‘Sir, seeing two benefits I have long practised these things.

I see a happy life for myself in the present. And I have compassion for future generations, thinking: “Hopefully those who come after might follow my example.” For they may think: “It seems that the awakened disciples of the Buddha for a long time lived in the wilderness, ate only almsfood, wore rag robes, and owned just three robes; and they praised these things. They were of few wishes, content, secluded, withdrawn, and energetic; and they praised these things.” They’ll practice accordingly, which will be for their lasting welfare and happiness.

Seeing these two benefits I have long practised these things.’

‘Good, good, Kassapa! You’re acting for the welfare and happiness of the people, for the benefit, welfare, and happiness of gods and humans.

So Kassapa, wear worn-out hempen rag robes, walk for alms, and stay in the wilderness.’ – SN 16.5

The degree of hardship and endurance is determined by how much your mind is withdrawn from these things, and that's why it's not incidental that boredom and doing nothing (which includes your favourite meditation 'technique') is that thing that nobody wants to deal with, even people who try to practice the Dhamma. They do so to avoid sinking into that boredom.

Q: If you are living in such a non-distracted way, your life naturally becomes simple and minimalistic.

Nm: The amount of proliferation and elaboration of the senses and engagement with them will have to fade. That's why working, talking and sleeping are not sensual in themselves, but can be the reason for slowing down the *sotāpanna's* progress. For one with the Right view, if he were to practice sense restraint and learn to abide in non-activity even more, avoid managing the *dukkha* through techniques and psychologising, he can become an Arahant in this life. However, in an effort to do all of this, some still get distracted with work, talk and sleep, which becomes an obstruction to progress. That's why the Buddha admonished some of his Noble disciples:

Now on that occasion the venerable Ānanda, along with many bhikkhus, were busy making robes at Ghāṭā the Sakyan's dwelling. Then, when it was evening, the Blessed One rose from retreat and went to Ghāṭā the Sakyan's dwelling. There he sat down on a seat made ready and asked the venerable Ānanda: 'Ānanda, there are many resting places prepared in Kāḷākhemaka the Sakyan's dwelling. Do many bhikkhus live there?'

'Venerable sir, many resting places have been prepared in Kāḷākhemaka the Sakyan's dwelling. Many bhikkhus are living there. This is our time for making robes, venerable sir.'

'Ānanda, a bhikkhu does not shine by delighting in company, by taking delight in company, by devoting himself to delight in company; by delighting in society, by taking delight in society, by rejoicing in society. Indeed, Ānanda, it is not possible that a bhikkhu who delights in company, takes delight in company, and devotes himself to delight in company, who delights in society, takes delight in society, and rejoices in society, will ever obtain at will, without trouble or difficulty, the joy of renunciation, the joy of seclusion, the joy of peace,

the joy of awakening. But it can be expected that when a bhikkhu lives alone, withdrawn from society, he will obtain at will, without trouble or difficulty, the joy of renunciation, the joy of seclusion, the joy of peace, the joy of Nibbāna ...' – MN 122

The amount of work that the monks were engaged in was obviously not necessary and the Buddha rebuked them, even though that work was not sensual. If you lose the context and do not sufficiently clarify the motivation behind your engagement in work, talk and sleep, this will then become a basis for maintaining delusion. Obviously a Noble disciple maintains that delusion in a much subtler way than an ordinary person would, but it's still a form of distraction. All he would need to do is to not engage, or not allow himself to be engaged in work, talk and sleep for the purpose of distraction, then he will progress towards Nibbāna. There is no other effort he needs to make because he has already understood the Dhamma.

The Blessed One then said to a bhikkhu: 'Is it true, bhikkhu, that after returning from the alms round you enter your dwelling after the meal and pass the time living in non-activity and keeping silent, and you do not render service to the bhikkhus at the time of making robes?'

'I am doing my own duty, venerable sir.'

Then the Blessed One, having known with his own mind the reflection in that bhikkhu's mind, addressed the bhikkhus thus: 'Bhikkhus, do not find fault with this bhikkhu. This bhikkhu is one who gains at will, without trouble or difficulty, the four comprehensions that constitute the higher mind and provide a pleasant dwelling in this very life. And he is one who, by realising it for himself with direct knowledge, in this very life enters upon that unsurpassed goal of the holy life for the sake of which people go forth from the household life into homelessness ...' – SN 21.4

That pleasant abiding here and now paired with your Right view is basically *jhāna* which leads you to Nibbāna. But as I said many times, *jhāna* is not a product of your activity or meditation, *jhāna* is a product of withdrawal from the senses and disengagement from the unwholesome. It's the pleasure and security that comes from that type of non-activity when *citta* turns away from thinking-and-pondering. But again, non-

activity is determined by whether or not you are motivated by distraction, aversion or lust. In other words, if you are ‘doing’ the non-activity because you don’t want to deal with *dukkha* internally, you are deluding yourself just as much as the one who runs to sensuality in order to avoid emotional discomfort.

Just sit in your room and you will see in a short time that the mind will present you with something to do. If you relish that offer, *that* is the activity, *that* is the distraction. However, not acting on the impulse to act is already creating some space between you and the senses, and that’s why none of this will be possible if you are not first accomplished in the first few steps of the gradual training: (1) keeping the precepts, (2) guarding the senses, (3) moderating your eating, (4) being devoted to wakefulness.

Non-activity is not using any type of action for the means of distracting yourself from yourself, or for losing the perspective of this creature that needs to be contained, tamed and watched.

Q: And there’s nothing more important than maintaining the right perspective (*yonisomanasikāra*) for the diminishing of delusion.

Nm: Sure, if you start giving in to these distracting activities, the right perspective will diminish or will be more obscured, and if you don’t give in to those acts of self-distraction, the right perspective is maintained. You don’t need to try to keep the perspective, all you need to do is protect it from distraction. Once you are no longer actively engaged with the world, work and whatever else you have to do, there will be enough space for you to see whether the actions you are about to perform are being used for distraction. Are they used for the pleasure of indolence and for the sake of forgetting about this creature that you need to keep an eye on? (You don’t need to be choking that creature and tying it up, but you do need to not lose sight of it.)

So now that you have finished your work and return home to rest, does that include binge watching movies, having a drink, listening to music, etc? Why do you need to do these things in order to relax? All you need to do for relaxation is to not do any work. Not perform any duty. You can easily relax by doing nothing, or doing something non-distracting that does not result in you wanting to do more and losing sight of yourself. You do want to relax, but not to the point where you lose sight of the creature that you need to keep an eye on. Often people conflate the

two, thinking: 'I have done my work, now I can relax,' which means I can lose sight of myself and become distracted. No—you can relax, but at no point does that mean that you should lose sight of the six-sensed creature. That's the difference between activity and non-activity. If you don't lose sight of the creature, you will not be acting on the level of the creature even if you are doing chores; you will be doing them through the mind of non-activity—that is, only to the minimal point of need and fulfilling a purpose. It's the same with eating—you do it to the extent that you need it, and eating more than you need is no longer seen as pleasant, because what is pleasurable is protecting the mind of non-distraction, which makes everything else pleasurable from a higher stance. You realise that this is the true pleasure; pleasure which is not underlain by craving for more. That type of pleasure is not unwholesome, it's safe and you are mindful within it, so it's a win-win.

Calming the pain, not avoiding it

What is ‘meditation’?—In the broadest terms, if a person did not know what meditation is, and had no notion of any techniques, the answer to that question would be that ‘it’s a way of calming one’s mind.’

It is learning how to calm your mind down skilfully, *without* involving sensuality or distraction: that is the wisdom, the work and the value of it. Most people simply follow their sense desires to acquire sense pleasures in order to calm the mind down regarding something that bothers them. In other words, following sense desires is just a cover up, pasting a cover on a wound that you don’t want to deal with. Underneath, it is still the same infected wound.

This illustrates the difference between doing meditation for the right reasons, and doing meditation for the wrong reasons. Are you doing meditation just to get away from things, to not deal with them? Or are you doing it to calm your mind *with regard* to the things that are still there, that are otherwise agitating you? Am I trying to avoid the pain, or am I trying to calm my mind with regard to the pain and not trying to get rid of it—that is the fundamental difference there.

That’s why it is important what view a person has with regard to meditation. Most contemporary notions about meditation (even when people have genuine reasons, initially, for wanting to practice it) imply some sort of special pleasant experience that will result from commitment to a technique, a pleasure that will replace the pain, and that will easily allow you to conclude that you had a very ‘successful meditation’. It comes down to concentrating on an object until the issue of existence and the world disappears temporarily.

But that is not ‘calming’, to begin with; it is a form of sensuality—trying to replace whatever bothers you (displeasure) with pleasurable experience. This never resolves an underlying issue, but instead always covers it up.

Sometimes people realise that sensuality cannot really provide a lasting satisfaction. They then turn to meditation, but they don’t change their

attitude. The whole idea of *jhāna* creating an overwhelming pleasure—a kind of ecstasy—is the exact same view of sensuality; you just replace the sensual object that you usually chase with a different one—of your ‘meditation’.

Would you consider it calming yourself down while you are cultivating expectations, asking ‘when will this pleasure of insight arrive, when will the calmness happen to me? When will this suffering go away?’ Is anticipation a calming quality? Of course not, but how many people can truly say they can meditate without the slightest attitude of anticipation? This is implicit in contemporary forms of meditation, Buddhist or otherwise: waiting for *pleasant experiences to happen* that will sort the pain out.

The Blessed One, brahmin, did not praise every type of meditation, nor did he condemn every type of meditation. What kind of meditation did the Blessed One not praise? Here, brahmin, someone abides with his mind obsessed with sensual lust, a prey to sensual lust, and he does not understand the escape from arisen lust. While he harbours lust within, he meditates, premeditates, over-meditates, and mis-meditates. He abides with his mind obsessed with ill will, a prey to ill will ... with his mind obsessed with indolence and tiredness, a prey to slindolence and tiredness ... with his mind obsessed with restlessness and anxiety, a prey to restlessness and anxiety ... with his mind obsessed with doubt, a prey to doubt, and he does not understand the escape from arisen doubt.

While he harbours doubt within, he meditates, premeditates, over-meditates, and mis-meditates. The Blessed One did not praise that kind of meditation. – MN 108

When he harbours aversion toward painful feeling, the underlying tendency to aversion toward painful feeling lies behind this. Being contacted by a painful feeling, he seeks delight in sensual pleasure. For what reason? Because the ordinary person does not know of any escape from painful feeling other than sensual pleasure. – SN 36.6

When touched by pain, the only thing an ordinary person knows is to seek pleasure. It doesn’t matter whether he seeks pleasure through food, company, or meditation. *He seeks pleasure, because he doesn’t want to deal with the pain.* That is why it is a sensual view that underlies that meditation—any meditation of that kind.

Meditation is not about replacing the experience that has arisen. It is about thoroughly knowing it and being *unmoved by it* while it's there. But the point will come when, in order to fully understand it, you need to learn how to stay calm, *within it*—and that is the role of the right *samādhi*—patiently enduring an experience without acting out of craving to get rid of the unpleasant and replace it with a sensual pleasure.

Such a *samādhi* practice will result in the pleasure that the Buddha praises, the pleasure that is different from the pleasure of sensuality, that of not being bothered, the pleasure of being withdrawn from danger, the pleasure of internal safety of a mind that has turned away from the entire world. It is a pleasure that you cannot crave more of, because it didn't come in that external sense of just replacing one experience with another. The pleasure of *jhāna* is the pleasure of that withdrawal. It is a result of that seclusion from and non-activity of going after sense pleasures or of needing to get rid of discomfort.

Here, bhikkhus, withdrawn from sense desire, withdrawn from unwholesome states, a bhikkhu enters upon the first comprehension ... the second ... the third ... the fourth comprehension. This is called the pleasure of renunciation, the pleasure of seclusion, the pleasure of peace, the pleasure of awakening. I say of this kind of pleasure that it should be pursued, that it should be developed, that it should be cultivated, and that it should not be feared. – MN 139

In order to calm your unwholesome intentions on the mental level, you need to have calmed your body and speech, having restrained it sufficiently long beforehand. *Then* you can actually start calming that movement of the mind that automatically leans towards pleasure and away from pain. However, this calming is still not done at the expense of what is agitating you. On the contrary, the thing that agitates you mentally remains and it actually serves as a benchmark for your calming. It's easy to be calm when there is nothing bothering you. But that's not the calmness that is supportive of wisdom. Being calm *within* an experience that *internally* bothers you—that, on the other hand, is.

That is why the gradual training is about *building that up*, because that is the most disturbing thing to endure. When you start saying 'no' to desiring sense pleasures, and begin guarding the sense doors, avoiding company, it is very disturbing for the mind that depends on those

movements, engagements and activities. Solitude and withdrawal from the senses—feels like dying. It is the withdrawal from a heavy addiction: your mind is an addict which has depended on the senses for aeons, not only in this life. If you think cigarettes are hard to give up, or heroin, try giving up the entire domain of pleasure which is dependent on the senses and existence in general.

Q: Even on that small scale in terms of little things like addiction to smoking, you can get a glimpse of the relief that comes from not being agitated any more by that particular craving.

Nm: Imagine then the pleasure of the first *jhāna*, when you are not drawn by anything in the world. No addiction; you are completely dry of it, such that even if you have thoughts of sensual objects, they are not *sensual thoughts* in the sense of thoughts that would immediately pressure you. That's a true relief, a true peace, the laying down of a burden. But there is no magical way to achieve this, i.e. 'watch your nostrils' or 'sensations' or 'walk slowly feeling the soles of your feet'—there is only the withdrawal from that to which you are addicted. That is the 'magical way'; and you need to be *sufficiently* withdrawn. For how long depends on how strongly you were addicted.

That's the 'technique'. The technique of basically overcoming *the* addiction of all addictions—i.e. the addiction of the senses—without relying on replacements. People can often replace it, committing to something else, even more activity, meditation, work, perpetual distraction, company—which would keep the mind from actually seeking sense pleasures on a coarse level, but without uprooting anything. It is just like a heroin addict finding something new to keep himself addicted to, which does not uproot the original problem. The moment those activities become unavailable, the resting place of his mind is where his addiction still is, so he will go back to that which he hasn't abandoned.

So that is what 'meditation' is. Once you have sufficiently, whole-somely controlled your mind by unwavering sense restraint, seclusion and the guarding of the sense doors, you now learn to bring calm to the experience. Not by abandoning it, but by finding calm within it—stilling the agitation aspect of it, so that you can carry on in the same direction of practice, because you realise that that's the only way out.

There is no specific instruction that can be given on how to do this, because that would become another activity you will now *do*. The only

way to do it is to endure it (*khanti*), and through that endurance, when you have no room to move left, right, forward or backward, you will find the way to calm yourself—by not moving left, right, forward or backward.

That's also why you cannot accidentally become enlightened—who would become free from addiction by accident, by enduring the pain of withdrawal for six months? Without a determined goal, without a reason for going through that and doing that work? Who would accidentally somehow just choose to do that for so long that they then became free? There has to be some knowledge, some faith and some will behind it, in order to commit to that training and see the benefit in it. Again, cigarettes, alcohol, drugs—all are particular addictions, *within* the broader addiction of sensuality. Now you are giving up the entire domain of pleasure that is based on activity through the senses.

The only way to overcome such addiction to sensuality is by gradual training. Gradual training means developing a wide base of virtue, a wide base of sense restraint, eating for the right reasons, and watchfulness. Then all the struggles that your mind goes through as a result of that supreme withdrawal helps create a calmness within, and prevents you from falling from a firm base.

That is why, from the point of view of developing your mind, it is actually better to start by keeping the five precepts, but taking them for *the rest of your life*, than to take the eight precepts but only keep them occasionally. The five precepts, taken with the intention to keep them for the rest of your life, is what will start to become that 'firm base'. And they must be taken in that sense. A heroin addict will not free himself if he goes to rehab only on the weekends, and then continues as normal throughout the week. So, take on the five precepts—*forever*. Doing so will create a confinement for the mind that is addicted to chasing sense pleasures—and that's the weight you need to start taking on in this gradual training. It's the whole point, and it's what the lay followers in the Suttas did:

We go for refuge to Master Gotama, to the teaching, and to the Sangha of monks. From this day forth, may Master Gotama remember us as lay followers who have taken refuge for life. – MN 150

It means that the five precepts are now the basis of your sense restraint and confinement, which is very easy, not even really confining—but

they must be taken in the ultimate sense. If, on top of that, you want to sometimes keep the eight precepts, good; but then if you don't keep the eight precepts there should be no falling lower than the five precepts, since they are your base. And that must remain so.

Then, if you really do want to free yourself once and for all, or at least make an attempt to do so, you should take the eight precepts—again, in the ultimate sense, *for the rest of your life*.

And through that, because that base is now something you must protect, you're forced to be mindful. You're forced to moderate your actions and not overdo things that would make you spill out and break the precepts. You're forced to guard your senses; because if you don't, it becomes very unpleasant within the confinement of the eight precepts. That's how you start taming your mind, and once it is tamed, there is no going back—which is the very meaning of 'non-return'. One who abandons sensuality is *not coming back to this world*, for that very reason. He has abandoned dependence on anything in or from this world. It is not a poetic name, 'non-returner', but factual. He is never returning to any previous addiction, it's inconceivable—irreversible, like a stone split in half which cannot be drawn back together. If you accomplish 'going against the grain,' going against *saṃsāra*, it's irreversible, you can't go back down, impossible. That's why the free mind is known as 'free mind.'

Having fully uprooted the view of sensuality, fully understood the danger of it, it's just impossible for the mind to even entertain that as a possibility anymore. Sensuality was only relatively pleasant because of your mental condition, your addiction to it, your need to scratch the itch.

The Buddha compares this to a person who suffers from leprosy and asks if a leper, who has become free from his disease, would ever consider burning himself with hot embers as before, which would cause immense, unbearable pain? When the condition that enabled this to provide him with some relative pleasure is removed, it just becomes inconceivable for him to continue to do that:

'Suppose, Māgandiya, there was a leper with sores and blisters on his limbs, being devoured by worms, scratching the scabs off the openings of his wounds with his nails, cauterising his body over a burning charcoal pit. Then his friends and companions and relatives, brought a physician to treat him. The physician would make medicine for him, and by means of that medicine the man would be cured of his leprosy

and would become well and happy, independent, master of himself, able to go where he likes. Then two strong men would seize him by both arms and drag him towards a burning charcoal pit. What do you think, Māgandiya? Would that man twist his body this way and that?’

‘Yes, Master Gotama. Why is that? Because that fire is indeed painful to touch, hot, and scorching.’

‘What do you think, Māgandiya? Is it only now that that fire is painful to touch, hot, and scorching, or previously too was that fire painful to touch, hot, and scorching?’

‘Master Gotama, that fire is now painful to touch, hot, and scorching, and previously too that fire was painful to touch, hot, and scorching. But when that man was a leper with sores and blisters on his limbs, being devoured by worms, scratching the scabs off the openings of his wounds with his nails, his faculties were impaired; thus, though the fire was actually painful to touch, he acquired a mistaken perception of it as pleasant.’

‘So too, Māgandiya, in the past sensual pleasures were painful to touch, hot, and scorching; in the future sensual pleasures will be painful to touch, hot, and scorching; and now at present sensual pleasures are painful to touch, hot, and scorching. But these beings who are not free from lust for sensual pleasures, who are devoured by craving for sensual pleasures, who burn with fever for sensual pleasures, have faculties that are impaired; thus, though sensual pleasures are actually painful to touch, they acquire a mistaken perception of them as pleasant.’ – MN 75

10

Recollection of breathing and subduing of aversion

The Blessed One said: ‘Monks, do you develop recollection of in-and-out breathing?’

When this was said, Ven. Ariṭṭha replied to the Blessed One: ‘I develop recollection of in-and-out breathing, lord.’

‘But how do you develop recollection of in-and-out breathing, Ariṭṭha?’

‘Having abandoned sensual desire for past sensual pleasures, having done away with sensual desire for future sensual pleasures, and having thoroughly subdued perceptions of aversion-resistance (*paṭighasaññā*) with regard to internal and external things, recollected I breathe in and recollected I breathe out.’

‘There is that recollection of in-and-out breathing, Ariṭṭha. I don’t say that there isn’t. But as to how recollection of in-and-out breathing is brought in detail to its culmination, listen and pay close attention. I will speak.’

The Blessed One said: ‘And how, Ariṭṭha, is recollection of in-and-out breathing brought in detail to its culmination? There is the case where a monk, having gone to the wilderness, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building, sits down folding his legs crosswise, holding his body upright, and bringing recollection to the fore. Recollected, he breathes in; recollected he breathes out.

Breathing in long, he discerns: “I am breathing in long”; or breathing out long, he discerns: “I am breathing out long.” Or breathing in short, he discerns: “I am breathing in short”; or breathing out short, he discerns: “I am breathing out short.” He trains himself: “I will breathe in sensitive to the entire body.” He trains himself: “I will breathe out sensitive to the entire body.” He trains himself: “I will breathe in calming the bodily determination.” He trains himself: “I will breathe out calming the bodily determination.”

He trains himself: “I will breathe in sensitive to joy.” He trains himself: “I will breathe out sensitive to joy.” He trains himself: “I will

breathe in sensitive to pleasure.” He trains himself: “I will breathe out sensitive to pleasure.” He trains himself: “I will breathe in sensitive to the mental determination.” He trains himself: “I will breathe out sensitive to the mental determination.” He trains himself: “I will breathe in calming the mental determination.” He trains himself: “I will breathe out calming the mental determination.”

He trains himself: “I will breathe in sensitive to the mind.” He trains himself: “I will breathe out sensitive to the mind.” He trains himself: “I will breathe in satisfying the mind.” He trains himself: “I will breathe out satisfying the mind.” He trains himself: “I will breathe in steadying the mind.” He trains himself: “I will breathe out steadying the mind.” He trains himself: “I will breathe in releasing the mind.” He trains himself: “I will breathe out releasing the mind.”

He trains himself: “I will breathe in discerning impermanence.” He trains himself: “I will breathe out discerning impermanence.” He trains himself: “I will breathe in discerning dispassion.” He trains himself: “I will breathe out discerning dispassion.” He trains himself: “I will breathe in discerning cessation.” He trains himself: “I will breathe out discerning cessation.” He trains himself: “I will breathe in discerning relinquishment.” He trains himself: “I will breathe out discerning relinquishment.”

This, Ariṭṭha, is how recollection of in-and-out breathing is brought in detail to its culmination.’ – SN 54.6

Some might think that what Ven. Ariṭṭha described is not correct recollection of breathing. But the Buddha did not disagree with him and then go on to offer a *different* practice. On the contrary, he acknowledged Ven. Ariṭṭha’s description, which is actually how the Buddha’s own instruction of *ānāpānasati* always starts: ‘recollected he breathes in, recollected he breathes out.’ He then proceeded to add that the practice can be even *more complete*. That is when it will be enough for final liberation and the uprooting of all conceit.

This means that even if you practice recollection of breathing in the simple sense that the *Ānāpānassati sutta* begins—‘recollected he breathes in, recollected he breathes out’—you can overcome any desire towards sensual objects of the present, past and future. In other words, you will have surmounted the entire domain of sensual craving, and most importantly, you will have completely subdued that *paṭigha* (resistance or

self-loathing) towards your own senses, which is enough to destroy the five lower fetters.

Recollection of breathing is often erroneously taken to be a mechanical method of meditation. So, to avoid making that mistake, it would be better to initially put aside the detailed instructions, because doing so will prevent you from falling into a mindless ‘in-and-out-breathing-focusing-visualisation’ technique. It will also force you to develop knowledge of the enduring breath beneath your experience, regardless of associated mental, emotional, or physical states. (That’s also how *ānāpānasati* brings *satipaṭṭhāna* to fulfilment.) ‘*Recollected* he breathes in, *recollected* he breathes out.’ It doesn’t say ‘focused’ or ‘concentrated’ he breathes in or out.

If you overcome all sensuality and subdue all of the *loathing* that you have towards your own senses and towards anything or anyone in the world, present, past or future, then you will be ready to follow the Buddha’s detailed instructions on *ānāpānasati*. You will also know exactly what he means, whereas otherwise you will be following his instructions with sensuality, and as a technique that you think will result in ‘greater sensual pleasure for me!’ Any significant skill with mindfulness of breathing can only be developed with the complete surmounting of sensuality, or by overcoming the five lower fetters.

That breath underneath your experience that is always enduring and which you don’t lose sight of (the knowledge of the breath being there), is an anchor for mindfulness or present-memory. You can focus on that physical side if you want, but you must first know that the breathing is underneath you, that’s really what the ‘anchor’ is. It’s using the enduring breath that’s already there happening to you, underneath your emotional state etc., as an anchor for mindfulness, and then investing effort to not lose sight of that, peripherally. You don’t need to stop doing what you are doing in order to breathe. But you certainly can refuse to allow yourself to be *absorbed* into what you’re doing, so that you forget that breathing is happening in the background. Recollectedness, or mindfulness, is about learning how not to overly commit attention to the foreground, and learning how to stretch your mind to continuously discern ‘both ends’ (background and foreground) simultaneously. That’s why, when you develop *samādhi* or composure, the mind becomes pliable. It can stretch and encompass, it’s no longer a hard, twisted lump.

Q: Having become accomplished in virtue and sense restraint, things calm down and then the reality of the body becomes clearer.

Nm: That reality of the body will first present itself as unpleasant and confining, because you will experience the fundamental *paṭigha* that you have towards it. So, you are going to experience this physical resistance, this sickness, the self-loathing, because you're withdrawing from the entire domain of 'sensual being' (*kāmabhava*). What you have to abandon is that *paṭigha*, that aversion towards your own senses which are no longer engaging with sensual distractions. That's why sensual desire is so powerful, because the aversion towards being confined within the body underneath it is even more so. And the only means of escape that an ordinary person knows is sensual pleasure, which is no escape at all.

Q: In a way, that's the first thing you do as you are born. Your first act is to try to escape that fundamental discomfort. Your senses are agitated and you don't want that pain, so you automatically reach away from that and into the direction of sensual objects.

Nm: That's what is meant by 'underlying tendencies.' A baby is not doing anything, but the mind is superimposed with the senses and they are uncomfortable, however subtle they may be. There is nothing else there except that discomfort for a newborn mind—and what an unenlightened mind does, regardless of the type of discomfort it is experiencing, is want to get rid of it. So naturally, on that fundamental level where the baby is experiencing the discomfort of its newly born body/senses, it goes in the direction of sense objects. Not that it chooses to, but discomfort pushes it in that direction, and then everything else it starts encountering in the world—the mother, breastfeeding, etc.—just becomes a confirmation of that direction where it found a relative safety from discomfort, which is, itself, this insecurity of the body.

Q: By 'knowing the sense organs for what they are,' it means that you experience them as uncomfortable, pressured and agitated.

Nm: Yes. Practically speaking, you will experience them as a pressure. However, there is only pressure when you have ignorance, which the baby does (it has an underlying tendency of *avijjā*). If there were no *avijjā* in that baby's mind, it would not have been born. If you begin to know and see the sense organs clearly, and sustain that clarity, you will begin

to diminish your ignorance with regard to them—your appropriation of them, your assumption of ownership. You will then begin to understand that resisting them is futile, and therefore your aversion will also fade.

The nature of form—*rūpa*—is to deform. The elements of which it is made are changing and reshaping, and your body is doing the same.

Q: You cannot just remove that bodily discomfort because that is the body. You have to somehow make peace with it.

Nm: By removing your aversion towards the senses, that's how you make peace. You subdue all perceptions of self-loathing by thoroughly developing restraint of the senses, keeping a close eye on them so that they don't get polluted by the unwholesome.

Q: But I should not try to overly suppress the senses because that would make them more agitated.

Nm: If you want to calm down these wild animals, these untamed sense organs, you can't just give them what they want, and you certainly won't calm them down by beating and starving them either. You need to give them the right kind of food when needed and not too much.

Q: I was also thinking this: 'This person said something I heard and didn't like. This person did something I saw, and didn't like. But without my eyes, or my ears, or this body, I wouldn't be able to experience that person. So, do I hate this person? Or do I really hate my eye, ear or this body? The world outside of this body is only experienced through this body. So how can it be outside? And how can I conceive outside of this body if it's not on the basis of this same body and senses. This is where the misconceiving happens, isn't it?'

Nm: Yes, exactly. That's why the Buddha described the sense organs as hollow, empty, without substance. In other words, they don't appear.

You can't see your eyes and that's why you are naturally averse to that which you've seen, because there is nothing else there that you can visibly hate. But actually, what you are averse to is that *negative sense base* that's hollow, empty. As the Buddha would say: if one were to look closely at the body, one would find no substance to it. It's a *negative space*. That's where your eye is, that which doesn't appear in that *positive sense* but is the reason for your sights.

Bhikkhus, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great lump of foam. A man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a lump of foam? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of form there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near: a bhikkhu inspects it, reflects upon it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in form? – SN 22.95

So that's why it takes knowledge. First, it takes sense restraint to stop acting towards what you see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and to stop fortifying the wrong notion that that is what you are averse to. Then you can discover that natural aversion, natural *paṭigha* and self-loathing, towards these senses, because they were always untamed animals; not the objects they were seeking. Even then you will not see the eye as an object, as in 'Oh, now I recognise you!' But you get to know it, through withdrawal from the sense objects that you used to chase according to likes or dislikes. What you are left with now is that pure aversion to the fact that there is seeing there, that undermines me and that I'm subjected to. The Buddha himself said: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, whether agreeable or disagreeable, are besetting you, attacking your senses. That's what sights do, so to speak.

So, you can come to realise that your own senses are where the problem is; but you cannot see this without first being withdrawn from sense objects. For as long as you are still engaging and acting out of their pressure – reacting to the person who upset you – you will maintain the notion that the sense objects are the problem. And this is exactly the root misconception: you don't see your body for what it is, i.e. these sense organs that you resist, which, in turn, is why you delight in sense objects of an agreeable kind, and why you're averse to sense objects of a disagreeable kind. Because, fundamentally, you don't want to have to deal with or face the voidness of those sense organs, that lack of substance, because doing so reveals your non-ownership of them.

If you were to see the eye, truly for what it is, as a sense base because of which there are sights, you would realise that it's inaccessible to you. Any sense of control you had—preferences for pleasing sights, avoidance of displeasing sights—all that was completely circumstantial, on

the basis of being fully trapped within it. There is no outside of it. What you see is the result of your eye seeing. So, you naturally develop this notion, the knowledge of the world outside, because of which you feel that you can free yourself from the pressure of these five senses, the five sense organs, the body. But that's the wrong notion. For as long as you maintain the wrong notion, you're never going to take on that pressure correctly. And you will not be able to free yourself from it.

Q: So, my senses are sort of liable to being attacked by objects. How do I protect them?

Nm: They are completely inaccessible to you. You don't even have a say in how the senses see things, or hear things, you only get the result of it. The sense bases don't appear. You can't see them; the eye cannot see itself, the ear cannot hear itself. They are negative, hollow, empty—all those descriptions that are found in the Suttas. Because of that, all you see is you and me and this anger, or this displeasing thing and me and this displeasure; so, it's for me, it's mine; I want it, I don't want it. But 'you' are completely outside of that whole relationship between that eye that's being harassed and beset by these sights, and so on.

For as long as you don't withdraw from sense objects, you will not see that there is something else there that doesn't appear on that level. It's that background of the pressuring body, what I was describing as that 'natural' *paṭigha*. And without discerning that, there is no correct mindfulness or recollection of the body nor of in and out breathing.

11

Escape from the body

Bhikkhus, I will teach you a Dhamma exposition on union and disengagement ... A man, bhikkhus, attends internally to his masculine faculty, his masculine comportment, his masculine appearance, his masculine aspect, his masculine desire, his masculine voice, his masculine ornamentation. He becomes excited by these and takes delight in them. Excited by them, taking delight in them, he attends externally to feminine faculty, feminine comportment, feminine appearance, feminine aspect, feminine desire, feminine voice, feminine ornamentation. He becomes excited by these and takes delight in them. Excited by them, taking delight in them, he desires union externally, and he also desires the pleasure and joy that arise on account of such union. Beings who are delighted with their masculinity enter upon union with women. It is in this way that a man does not transcend his masculinity. This is how union comes about. – AN 7.51

The first thing you would notice here is that it is not about denying masculinity or femininity. It is about not carelessly becoming dependent upon the pleasures of the masculine body or the pleasures of the feminine body, which then results in seeking the external counterpart. So, the whole point is to become developed regarding your own body. It's not about saying: 'there is no gender, this masculinity is just an illusion.' Yes, in a sense, there is no gender, as in no gender that is *yours*, that can be owned by you—but factually, the body is just so. It is *such*—with such hormones, with such predispositions, such height and shape and so on—and that was never a problem.

The problem is that there is a basis of pleasure that can arise on account of the body and your mind is not developed with regard to that. So, when the prospect of pleasure makes itself apparent, you accept the body and accept the ownership. You carelessly identify and take up ownership of whatever you are paired with—in this case, the masculine

aspects. As a result, you seek pleasure even further outside, which is its counterpart. Again, as a result of that, you seek a union, and become dependent on the pleasure of that union, and everything else—all the burdens—that come with it.

All this is because you were not developed with regard to the initial prospect of pleasure that you were paired with. The body, whether masculine or feminine, is the basis of a certain type of physical pleasure. For a man it is the basis of his masculinity, for a woman it is the basis of her femininity. And why is that prospect of pleasure not enough in itself? Why by default does an undeveloped mind seek the external counterpart? Why would you spill outside and seek union with the external?

It's because of a view. Because of the assumption of where the pleasure of a sensual kind is; that the pleasure is in the external sense objects, not on the level of your body. In the same sense people assume that *they* are accessing, seeing, perceiving and owning the external objects; not that it is their senses seeing, perceiving, and owning.

In other words, your senses, your body, masculinity, or femininity; these are all invisible to you, because you have been carelessly cultivating actions towards that pleasure *out there*, which although factual, is actually secondary to the pressure of the body—sense objects are secondary to the existence of the *paṭigha* (resistance–pressure) of your senses. The only reason you don't see that is because you keep assuming. You keep holding the view that *that* [out there] is first, and *this* [body here] is second. So, in the eyes of this assumption, *this* [I] gets attracted to *that* [out there] because of *that* [out there]. Thus, whatever is *here* is seen as second, and as insufficient. That is why you are not developed with regard to the body, because you assume the wrong order, and the wrong order prevents development.

But if you see: 'Well, it doesn't matter how far out I reach and seek, the experience is bound within the framework of these senses. The only way I can know the external world is on account of these senses knowing the external world. This means that, for me, the assumption I had about the external world is actually pretty much inconceivable.' If then, you start thinking about it clearly, you realize that all that was a complete misconception. All your assuming is internal to your senses, and that is all you can ever have.

But you will not be able to reach this basic level of clarity if you are still *acting* on account of an assumption of the external coming first.

And your body, your desire, the pressure being secondary—is simply a response to the impulse. For as long as you keep that picture perverted, there is no development, there is no uprooting of sensuality, and there is no abandoning of masculinity or femininity.

On one occasion the Venerable Vaṅgīsa became dissatisfied, as lust infected his mind. Then he addressed Ānanda in verse:

‘I’ve got a burning desire for pleasure,
my mind is on fire!
Please, out of compassion, Gotama,
tell me how to quench the flames?’

‘Your mind is on fire
because of a perversion of perception.
Turn away from the feature of things that’s attractive,
provoking lust.

See all underlying activations as other and foreign,
as suffering and not-self.
Extinguish the great fire of lust,
don’t burn up again and again.

With a mind elevated and calm,
reflect on the unattractive aspects of the body.
With recollection of the body,
be full of disenchantment.

Cultivate the signlessness,
give up the underlying tendency to conceit
and when you comprehend conceit,
you will live at peace.’ – SN 8.4

Nm: Perversion of the order means, literally, putting that which is second, first.

Q: So, what is first?

Nm: What is first is the framework of your senses. There is no outside

of it, you are fully enclosed within it. You start recognizing that, and you will start experiencing deep anxiety because you realize you are utterly, utterly enclosed—trapped—within yourself. And any notion of the external world or external pleasure: it is not that it is ‘not real’—it’s real, but it’s *also* enclosed within. It’s almost like a sense of being ‘buried alive’ as we discussed many times in our talks.

That’s why underlying tendencies just push you in the direction of sensuality, because if you resist them you are left with deep fear, pain, and terror. Your assumption is of the external world, and suddenly you see that it doesn’t matter to what extent of the universe you travel. It’s within this body, as the Buddha says:

‘Once I was a seer named Rohitassa, a student of Bhoja, a powerful sky-walker. My speed was as fast as that of a strong archer—well-trained, a practised hand, a practised sharp-shooter—shooting a light arrow across the shadow of a palm tree. My stride stretched as far as the east sea from the west. To me, endowed with such speed, such a stride, there came the desire: “I will go travelling to the end of the world.” I—with a one-hundred-year life, a one-hundred-year span—spent one hundred years travelling—apart from the time spent on eating, drinking, chewing and tasting, urinating and defecating, and sleeping to fight off weariness—but without reaching the end of the world I died along the way.

So it is amazing, lord, and awesome, how well that has been said by the Blessed One: “I tell you, friend, that it is not possible by travelling to know or see or reach a far end of the world where one does not take birth, age, die, pass away, or reappear.”

(When this was said, the Blessed One responded:) ‘I tell you, friend, that it is not possible by travelling to know or see or reach a far end of the world where one does not take birth, age, die, pass away, or reappear. But at the same time, I tell you that there is no making an end to suffering without reaching the end of the world. Yet it is just within this fathom-long body, with its perception and intellect, that I declare that there is the world, the origination of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path of practice leading to the cessation of the world.’ – AN 4.45

When you actually take that in a realistic sense, it is quite frightening

for a mind that is not developed, for a mind that is still dependent on the pleasures of the external kind.

Q: You can't reach beyond your senses.

Nm: It's inconceivable, your thoughts can't even fathom the outside of them. The only way to do so is to misconceive them. And then through misconceiving, that misconception 'exists' as such. That's why the Buddha said that form 'finds footing' in existence, through misconceiving:

Bhikkhu, this is not how the question should be asked: 'Sir, where do these four primary elements cease without anything left over, namely, the elements of earth, water, fire, and air?'

This is how the question should be asked: 'Where do water and earth, fire and air find no footing?' – DN 11

So, they exist then, as external—although, in truth, they *can't*. But by not knowing that, that is how they exist *for you*. That's the fundamental perversion of the order. Sensuality is that, *bhava* is that. Seeing that your senses do, in fact, come first (and you can see that only if you have not been acting out of them, if you have been withdrawn from that pressuring addiction of scratching the itch by external means)—when you see that, you start seeing that there is no outside of this, and even your thoughts of 'outside'—it's not that you stop having them, you just see them correctly, as 'within this.'

So, the clearer that becomes, the less perversion you are living on a day-to-day basis, so to speak. Up to the point where the perversion becomes completely eradicated, it doesn't matter what you see, hear, smell, taste, touch, or think. You cannot fall back into the assumption of the wrong order, because the right order has been thoroughly understood, such that the perversion can't take place any more. And that's when you know you're free from *kāma bhava*, from sensual craving and sensual being. The pleasure of the external kind was not the sensuality, the sensuality was there because of the perversion of the order.

That's exactly what that sutta above (AN 7.51) describes—through not being developed with regard to what comes first (for a man it's the masculine framework of the body and the senses; for a woman, it's the feminine framework of the body and the senses) you start spilling outside, assuming outside, becoming even more dependent on the outside.

Q: ‘Not being developed’ means ...?

Nm: Not seeing it clearly enough; not having practised sense restraint enough; not having your mind developed with regard to the pressure; not having endured it patiently for long enough; having been acting out of it. Or, having been keeping the precepts as a means of fulfilling an external duty, not as a means of direct development of your mind, by not acting out of the pressure of the current sense. All of that is ‘not being developed with regard to your own masculinity or femininity.’ It means taking up ownership of that, not being able to see it as impersonal, as *anicca*, as ‘foreign’.

Q: So, he gives in, and delights in his masculine ‘pressure’.

Nm: You could just say: ‘He takes his masculine pressure for granted.’ By default, his mind is already outside, attracted to those things, even if he is avoiding them. Because of taking the pressure for granted as ‘mine,’ as belonging to me, not having a mind developed with regard to that pressure, means the pressure will overwhelm the mind, the mind will not overwhelm the pressure. By default, that will put you outside.

What needs to be sustained is not acting out of that pressure, but discerning it, and guarding the sense doors. That does not mean just ‘I keep the precepts because it’s my duty,’ but rather intentionally choosing to abstain from thinking about things that would be taking up the pressure; intentionally keeping an eye on your actions, decisions, on your choices, and responsibility in such a way that will make you *not* spill out towards the external world.

By sustaining this effort sufficiently, you become aware of what it is that you’ve been doing, what has perpetuated your dependence on the pressure and the pleasure of the external world. Which is taking the pressure for granted, as yours. So, you start allowing it to be, not trying to get rid of it, so that you can endure it correctly, not acting out of it correctly, and guard your sense doors with regard to it correctly. This means that you are taking up responsibility for it, so you are not taking it for granted any more.

Eventually then, you will be able to see it as not yours. It’s not that right from the beginning you need to just suddenly ‘see it as not mine.’ It is by not acting out of it, guarding your sense doors, taking responsibility for it, allowing it to endure, and not trying to get rid of it—all of these are ways of practising towards ‘not mine.’ When that is sufficiently

cultivated, then that whole perverted order arising from taking up the pressure as mine will have faded, or will have diminished sufficiently for you to see that it has diminished.

Q: There is the idea that one practices in such a way: 'I have lust for a woman. So now I must contemplate the disgusting nature of a woman's body.' (Or the opposite.)

Nm: See, the problem with that is that it is taking it in the sense of an external duty that one must do. 'When lust is present, I must do *this*.' Why? 'Because I am averse to the discomfort of it!'

No. When lust is present you must acknowledge it, and recognize the mind of lust as the mind of lust.

As opposed to: 'Mind of lust—I immediately turn away from it and do this. The mind of non-lust—I do that. Either way, I will try not to be aware of myself because it's too unpleasant.' So, when the mind of lust is there, that needs to be endured (*khanti*), without giving in to your aversion to the discomfort of it.

If you are jumping into the practice of *asubha* immediately, you are acting out of aversion. You are not allowing it to be for what it is—the phenomenon of lust, mind affected by lust. You're just trying to get rid of it, which is exactly the motion of sensuality—when lust is present you immediately jump into the sensuality to get rid of that painful itch. So now you learn that this is bad, and now you think: 'when lust is present what do I do?' And you jump into acting out in yet another way to get rid of that painful itch.

Those are the two extremes that people end up going towards, by not understanding the middle way: either scratch the itch or try to deny the itch. People's practice of *asubha* often falls on the level of just trying to deny the itch. That is not *asubha*, it is not uprooting the lust, it's just covering it up. It is not even good as management, because it will come back, and the '*asubha*' will lose effectiveness the more you do it for the wrong reasons.

So, the mind of lust is present; then the first thing you know is: 'Okay, I should not act out of this. But I should do *asubha*—when the mind of lust is *not* present.' Otherwise your practice of *asubha* is rooted in aversion, trying to deny the lust. And why would you try to deny the lust? Because you don't want to endure the discomfort of it. You are averse to it. The first step of patient endurance is what you do not even want to do. So, all

subsequent steps are based on *sīlabbataparāmāsa*—avoiding responsibility for the first step of patiently enduring it, not trying to get rid of it.

Endurance is the ultimate austerity.

Nibbāna is the ultimate, say the Buddhas.

No true renunciate is violent or hostile to another. – Dhp 184

Q: Again, even when lust is not exactly active now, there remains the underlying tendency towards lust; one can still see that one is liable to lust. So now one could contemplate *asubha*.

Nm: Exactly, so there is no ‘mind of lust’ actively present, but if I ask: ‘Am I free from lust? Well ...’

So now you should contemplate and try to redefine the framework of attractive by seeing it as unattractive, create a broader context of unattractive—because that is there. You just haven’t been looking at those aspects. But you can only do that correctly when the mind is properly established i.e. when you are not rooted in trying to get rid of things—that lazy avoidance of endurance.

Q: Properly established means ‘being able to patiently endure.’

Nm: To have not acted out of it, so that you are not gripped by lust. And in that frame of mind, you can contemplate—contemplate the *asubha*, contemplate the danger, all of these things. Then when the ‘activated’ lust comes back, you won’t need to ask: ‘Oh, what do I do now?’ Because if you had sufficiently contemplated the nature of that which is lustful, it will be implicit in that lust.

So that which was lustful comes now with an even richer background of ‘unattractive’, because that is what you have been cultivating. It’s about rewriting the significance of things. Through that significance of lust, there is also seen the further significance of danger—unattractive, not worthy, to be avoided, to be not acted upon. And the clearer that broader context becomes, the more impossible it will be for you to put that superficial aspect of lust first, and ignore all the context as secondary. In other words, your mind is becoming imperturbable with regard to lust because that context is becoming established and it’s not moving. It doesn’t matter how forceful, how quick, or how sharp the lust might be, the context remains primary. That is when the mind is settled in the right order, and it cannot tip over anymore.

Q: Some might want to contemplate the disgusting nature of *another person's* body. Is it not better to look at this body, your body?

Nm: Well, first, if you are doing it based on a mind that is not affected by lust at the time, you can do it either internally or externally; it doesn't matter. If you do it externally, your body will be included in that contemplation; if you do it internally, other's bodies will be included in that—as long as it is not done based on lust or aversion, and trying to avoid the endurance of a mind of lust or any other unwholesome hindrance.

And how does disengagement come about? A man does not attend internally to his masculine faculty ... his masculine ornamentation. He does not become excited by these or take delight in them. Not excited by them, not taking delight in them, he does not attend externally to feminine faculty ... feminine ornamentation. He does not become excited by these or take delight in them. Not excited by them, not taking delight in them, he does not desire union externally, nor does he desire the pleasure and joy that arise on account of such union. Beings who are not delighted with their masculinity become disengaged from women. It is in this way that a man transcends his masculinity.

This is how disengagement comes about. – AN 7.51

Nm: 'Not delighting' is about not taking it for granted. The pressure, the possibilities of pleasure that your masculine form offers you, you need to practice non-interest, non-zeal towards those. Do not take them for granted, but actually start contemplating and regarding them as perilous. That's basically not using your body for the sake of gaining external pleasures ...

So, you cannot just say: 'I will just let go of it.' It's not a matter of direct choice. But what you can do is, first, stop acting out of the form being taken for granted: i.e. stop acting towards external pleasures. Start practising sense restraint, endure your senses and their own *paṭigha*, endure the pressure, and try, as much as possible, to see it as impersonal.

Then if you become more accustomed to this (which is what *samādhi* is—being unmoved, by having sufficiently endured it), that is, more accustomed to the interior of your senses (which is all you ever had—there is no 'exterior' to your own experience, it's a contradiction in terms), then, having stopped resisting it, you can see it as simply 'a thing there.'

So, it doesn't mean: 'I need to become feminine in order to overcome my masculinity' or vice versa. No, that's just you acting out of whatever you have, trying to deny it with its opposite. All you need to do is stop taking it for granted and stop assuming ownership of it.

OPENING AMIDST CONFINEMENT AND THE PRACTICE OF *COMPREHENSION*

'This was said, friend, by the young deva Pañcālacaṇḍa:

"The sage, the withdrawn chief bull,
the Buddha who has comprehension,
the One of Broad Wisdom has found
the opening amidst confinement.'

What, friend, has the Blessed One spoken of as confinement and what as the achievement of an opening amidst confinement?

The Blessed One, friend, has spoken of these five objects of sensual pleasure as confinement. What five? Sights discernable by the eye that are wished for, desired, agreeable, likeable, sensual and provocative of lust. Sounds discernable by the ear ... Smells discernable by the nose ... Tastes discernable by the tongue ... Touches discernable by the body that are wished for, desired, agreeable, likeable, sensual and provocative of lust. These are the five kinds of sensual pleasures that are called "confinement" by the Buddha.

Now, take a bhikkhu who, withdrawn from sensual pleasures ... enters upon the first comprehension. To this extent the Buddha spoke of creating an opening amidst confinement in a qualified sense ...' – AN 9.42

Nm: The opening is not finding another direction apart from the senses, or denial of the senses. The 'opening amidst confinement' is the removal of the ownership of that which confines you. Complete non-appropriation—which begins with the first *jhāna*.

So, it's not like you find the opening in the aggregates by which you can sort of 'slip out' of *saṃsāra*. No, you *are* confined by everything that appears. *Nāma-rūpa paccaya viññāṇa*. *Viññāṇa paccaya nāma-rūpa*—name-and-matter conditions consciousness, while consciousness conditions name-and-matter. That is the ultimate confinement. So, what is then the 'opening' amidst that, the opening within the state of already being fully buried alive? It is the removal of the ownership of that situation in

its entirety. That's why in the first *jhāna* there is no sense of 'I am' as in 'I am entering the first *jhāna*.' It's not that there is no sense of the five senses—there is—but there's no ownership of it. There are *thoughts and thinking*, but the traces of ownership have been completely removed on every level. Thus, nobody is confined; there is no confinement anymore. For something to be confined, you need that which confines and that one who is confined, the assumed sense of Self. Complete removal of that ownership and conceit is the subtlest of the openings, so to speak, amidst everything that confines.

Q: That's why it says that the first *jhāna* is an opening, that escape—but now, as the sutta continues to state, could one see that there is still confinement there?

Nm: Yes, but now it is getting abstract. If a person develops the first *jhāna*, they will understand what is the true *okāsā* (opening) among *sambādhe* (confinement), and then the principle of other *jhāna* will become apparent. But if somebody tries to understand this on an abstract level—'this opening and this confinement, then this further opening and this confinement'—none of that will become applicable.

The opening, the escape from that which confines, is the removal, uprooting, and fading away of ownership and conceit with regard to the senses and their pleasures that you have been depending upon. That's why the first *jhāna* is enough for arahantship. If you establish your mind upon that first escape and spend a sufficient amount of time in it, you will uproot any lust towards anything that was confining you before. But yes, theoretically speaking, one who is established in the first *jhāna* can start thinking about whether there is a more refined opening or escape with regard to this. From the point of view of the second *jhāna*, the first is very coarse; from the point of view of the third *jhāna*, the second is very coarse, and so on.

So, you can use that principle to *remove the ownership*. *Jhāna* in itself does not necessarily bring the full uprooting of the sense of 'I am' and the sense of 'mine' on the level of *views*. For that you need wisdom. Theoretically, a person could have *jhāna* without having fully uprooted their underlying tendencies.

Q: So, here I am with a pressure of the body and I want to satisfy it, get rid of that pressure, and feel pleasure rather than this pressure.

Nm: Why is that? What is that a burden? It is confinement, you are confined by this pressure, so what do you do? You try to get rid of the pressure by spilling out, letting it outside. That's why you won't find the true opening amidst confinement because you keep acting towards the assumed 'opening.' The sense pleasures of the external kind are assumed to be the relief of the pressure here. And that's why people are so psychologically dependent on 'scratching the itch.' That is the only form of release that they know.

But it is not a release—it's the very reason for your confinement. The more you try to find release in that way, the more burdened you become, the more dependent on sensuality you become. That's why it's important to realize that this needs to be lived on the level of enduring the pressure, not acting out of it, and calming your mind within it. Withdrawal from a dependence on the pleasure of the assumed external kind is the prerequisite for the pleasure of *jhāna*, that genuine release.

As long as these five hindrances are not given up inside themselves, a bhikkhu regards them as a debt, a disease, a prison, slavery, and a desert crossing.

But when these five hindrances are given up inside themselves, a bhikkhu regards this as freedom from debt, good health, release from prison, emancipation, and sanctuary.

Seeing that the hindrances have been given up in them, happiness springs up. Being happy, joy arises. With joyful mind, the body calms down. When the body is calm, he feels at ease. Being at ease, the mind becomes composed.

Withdrawn from sense desires, withdrawn from unwholesome states, he enters upon the first comprehension, which is accompanied by thinking and pondering and with the joy and happiness born of withdrawal ... – DN 10

Withdrawing from unwholesome states, from the wrong order that you have been assuming, that is the work, and release of the right kind will occur as a result of it. That's the true 'opening amidst confinement.' But people don't want to deal with the confinement. They don't want to deal with the pressure, or endure it—they want a technique that will give them an experience of pleasure that they will then take to be *jhāna*, and then assume that all this work has been done, on account of this special

meditation pleasure that they have created. That exactly mirrors the same principle of sensuality that they have been acting out of. They are still seeking that pleasant thing to be their escape. No, the escape is found by not maintaining the dependence upon the wrong order. Then the pleasure of *jhāna* will happen:

Withdrawn from sense desires, withdrawn from unwholesome states, he enters upon the first comprehension, which is accompanied by thinking and pondering and with the joy and happiness born of withdrawal. – MN 101

The Buddha does not say: ‘Not having been withdrawn, still being pressured by sensuality, he practises a technique, he experiences *jhāna* and all his problems just fall away, and it’s a magical experience.’

12

Jhāna is virtue

In the Suttas it is very clear that when *jhāna* is mentioned, it is within the context of the gradual training that leads from virtue, seeing danger in the slightest fault, moderation of your eating, up to complete seclusion from unwholesome states. Thus, the practice of *jhāna* is the practice of taming the senses, taming the mind.

Many suttas say that the *jhānas* are the only meditations that the Buddha approves of, and this is exactly why ‘*jhāna* meditation’ is to be understood in the sense of the unification of the gradual training. That is to say, through virtue, the guarding of the sense doors, moderation of your eating and being watchful, you are literally composing the mind, gathering it up. That is what the first comprehension is: when the mind has been sufficiently gathered away from unwholesome states, away from the world—‘internally steadied’ as the Suttas describe it—then there is the ‘pleasure born of seclusion.’ You are secluded and composed—your mind is gathered—with respect to things concerning which you used to be scattered.

This means that you actually come closer to *jhāna* by simply keeping the precepts (that is, the eight precepts; the five precepts alone are not sufficient to enable your withdrawal from sensuality, which is the necessary basis for *jhāna*)—fully and unbroken—than if you spend all your time trying to achieve *jhāna* through the practice of meditation techniques or sensation watching, while regarding the precepts as of secondary importance, or not even keeping them at all.

Sometimes people take on the precepts—celibacy, withdrawal from sensuality—but take them conditionally, ‘just until I reach the *jhāna*.’ This is as if you were to build a ten-storey house, are standing on the top floor, and then suddenly start thinking that the foundation is no longer important, and you start messing around with it. You would destroy all of it and have to rebuild.

‘It is as if there having been heavy rain at the crossroads, the dust were to vanish and mud appear. If one were to say, “Now dust will never again appear at this crossroads,” would this be speaking rightly?’

‘No indeed, friend. For it remains that people, cattle and the like will cross over the crossroad, that the wind and sun will evaporate the moisture, so that the dust may again appear.’

‘So in the same way, friends, there can be a person who, withdrawn from sensual desires, withdrawn from unwholesome states, enters upon the first comprehension: joy and pleasure born of withdrawal, with thinking and pondering ...

With the thought “I obtain the first comprehension,” he associates with monks, nuns, laymen, laywomen, rulers and ministers, with teachers of other paths and their disciples.

Being associated in this way, he becomes close and friendly, spends time in idle chatter, and living in this way, his mind becomes infected with lust. His mind being infected with lust, he gives up the training and returns to the lower life.’ – AN 6.60

In other words, you don’t see that this very development of virtue and sense restraint is *the* development that should be protected for the rest of your life. That it will elevate your mind so that you will be able to abide in *jhāna* ‘at will—without difficulty, without trouble’ as the Suttas say, because behaviour based upon that foundation is not eroded and the whole structure remains. Even if you are not necessarily abiding in *jhāna* at the time, the *structure* of *jhāna* is there.

The structure of the gradual training, based on the precepts, provides the basis for directing your mind in all sorts of ways, not necessarily only with respect to *jhāna*. In fact, simply through keeping those precepts, unbroken, you can always reflect upon your behaviour and experience joy on that basis, and this is already a form of *samādhi*—a unified standard of certain actions that you have abandoned. And that begins to unify your mind in that sense; instilling confidence that you will not engage in such behaviour *because you don’t take the precepts conditionally*.

So, Great King, a bhikkhu thus accomplished in virtue sees nothing to fear from anywhere with respect to his restraint in virtue. Just as a warrior-king who has defeated his enemies sees nothing to fear from any direction with respect to any of his enemies; in just this way, a

monk thus accomplished in virtue sees nothing to fear from anywhere with respect to his restraint in virtue. Being endowed with this complete aggregate of virtue, he experiences in himself a blameless happiness. That, great king, is how a bhikkhu is accomplished in virtue. – DN 2

The problem and difficulty with this is not that the development of virtue is too complex or difficult to understand, as it is actually quite straightforward. The problem is that it is easy to *overlook*, and the most common reason it is overlooked is that one's views about the practice accord it only secondary or conditional importance. Because they aim for a special sort of 'jhāna ecstasy,' people can miss, or fail to see, the significance of the 'blameless happiness' of virtue, which is quite attainable and close, and is actually the beginning of the correct *samādhi*. And so they drift away and do something else, or do something on top of it, at the expense of it. That is one of the reasons that the Right view is the necessary basis for the right *samādhi*:

'Bhikkhus, I shall teach you right *samādhi* with its supports and its requisites. Listen and attend closely to what I shall say.'—'Yes, venerable sir,' the bhikkhus replied. The Blessed One said this:

'What, bhikkhus, is right *samādhi* with its supports and its requisites – right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right recollection? A mind unified with these seven factors is called right *samādhi*.

Therein, bhikkhus, right view comes first. And how does right view come first? One understands wrong view as wrong view and right view as right view: this is one's right view.' – MN 117

So, if you have faith in the Buddha, and are confident that the Dhamma was well expounded, it is important to actually ask yourself which you are putting first—what the Buddha said you should be doing, or what *you think* the Buddha said you should be doing. Even if, for instance, you think that you are fine from the point of view of virtue, ask yourself: 'When I recollect my virtue, am I joyous, am I contented; am I, in a sense, withdrawn from unwholesome states *simply* on account of the aggregate of virtue?' If your virtue is correctly developed, that should be the case.

Furthermore, Mahānāma, a noble disciple recollects his own virtue: complete, unblemished, untorn, untarnished, praised by the wise, not misapprehended, conducive to *samādhi*. While a noble disciple is recollecting his virtue, at that time his mind is not pervaded by lust, nor by aversion, nor by distraction. At that time his mind is unwavering, based on his virtue. And, Mahānāma, a noble disciple with an unwavering mind obtains happiness in the practice, happiness in the teaching, and happiness in the nature of things. Being happy, joy arises; with a joyful mind, the body calms down; when the body is calm, he experiences ease; being at ease, his mind is composed. – AN 11.11

If this is not the case, then regardless of the extent of your practice of what you *think* virtue is, virtue is obviously not fulfilled from the Buddha's point of view, and from the point of view of practising the Dhamma.

Right view also means understanding the role of the *patient endurance* that is needed to bring the practice of virtue and the gradual training to its culmination, rather than drifting away from it. The reason patience is essential is that the joy and contentment which arises on account of virtue is not an instantaneous or immediate result of keeping the precepts. On the contrary, initially sense restraint and virtue will be unpleasant and difficult. And when the pain resulting from that pressure is revealed and increased through renunciation, if you do not have the patience to bear it, you will end up giving in to the craving to get rid of its discomfort. Though you might not necessarily break the precepts, you will still *want to get rid of the pain of restraint* and as such will act out one way or another, undermining your efforts to uproot craving and suffering.

The reason for your suffering, stress and everything else, is that your choices—your actions—are still bound and rooted in greed, aversion, and delusion. That is to say, your choices are still actively maintaining and fuelling *taṇhā*—craving. And these actions are not subconscious, not millisecond-quick, requiring you to have developed this special focus to spot them. They are *always* on the level of your conscious *intention*, and consequently are always covered up; therefore, they need to be *uncovered*, through self-honesty, by admitting to yourself what you already know.

If you admit this, you will have to see the compromise or compromises that you are making, for which you try to compensate with increased commitment to meditation, 'mindfulness,' or whatever practice of what

you think 'sīla' is—but all at the expense of those things being done on account of greed, aversion and distraction, which you are refusing to give up. This occurs to the point that even your views about the practice become basically a kind of coping mechanism, rooted in the pressure of responsibility for restraint, or out of hoping for the 'pleasure of *jhāna*' to come and sort everything out.

The joy of the first comprehension is the joy of relief and safety—safety from nothing other than your own senses that have been dragging you around like a rag-doll your whole life—left, right, here, there, see this, do that—jumping around, tormented. When the mind has *not* been secluded from the senses on the basis of virtue, the only peace it knows is the fleeting peace of momentarily appeasing the senses by seeking pleasure for them. Which is why, if the senses have not been restrained through virtue and gradual training, your view and practice of *jhāna* is an extension of that same seeking of pleasure through the senses. It cannot be *jhāna*, because it is not above sensuality. As long as you do not give up these views and these compromises, you cannot fulfil the gradual training, and you cannot be free from suffering: the presence of craving means the presence of suffering.

Giving them up might seem more unpleasant initially, but actually in the long run it's not, because if you do so, all those burdens of virtue and duty that you had to endure to compensate for them will stop burdening you, because they will not be your duty anymore. Your only duty will be to cease acting out of greed, aversion and delusion; to not give in to conscious impulses to do something because of a desire for pleasure, a desire to avoid displeasure, or a desire to distract yourself.

If you do that, from the moment you wake up until the moment you go to sleep, you will be unable to break the precepts, unable to be discontented, and unable to *not* be composed.

Bhikkhus, one who is virtuous; who is accomplished in virtue, does not have to make an act of will: 'May non-remorse arise in me.' It is in the nature of things that non-remorse arises in one who is virtuous and accomplished in virtue.

One who is without remorse does not have to make an act of will: 'May happiness arise in me.' It is in the nature of things that happiness arises in one who is without remorse.

One who is happy does not have to make an act of will: 'May joy

arise in me.’ It is in the nature of things that joy should arise in one who is happy.

One with a joyful mind does not need to make an act of will: ‘May my body calm down.’ It is in the nature of things that the body will calm down in one with a joyful mind.

One whose body is calmed does not have to make an act of will: ‘May I be at ease.’ It is in the nature of things that one whose body is calmed will be at ease.

One who is at ease does not have to make an act of will: ‘May my mind be composed.’ It is in the nature of things that the mind will be composed in one who is at ease. – AN 10.2

Pāli glossary

- anāgāmī* – non-returner
ānāpānasati – recollection of breathing
arahant – awakened one
āsava – underlying tendencies
asubhanimitta – sign of repulsive
avijjā – ignorance
ayonisomanasikāra – non-concurrent attention
chanda – desire, zeal
cittanimitta – sign of the mind
jhāna – comprehension
kāmabhava – being of sensuality
kāmachanda – sensual desire
khanti – endurance, patient endurance
nāma-rūpa – name-and-form
nibbāna – cooling down, Awakening
paṭigha – resistance, loathing
Pāṭimokkha – Book of Discipline
puthujjana – ordinary person
rūpa – form, matter
samādhi – composure
taṇhā – craving, thirst
Tathāgata – The Awakened One
upādāna – assumption
viññāna – consciousness
yonisomanasikāra – concurrent attention, attending concurrently

About the author

Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero was born in Serbia in 1983. His interest in Buddhist meditation was inspired by the books of another Yugoslavian monk from the 60s, Bhikkhu Ñāṇajīvako, from Island Hermitage in Sri Lanka. After a few years of practising as a layman and following Ven. Ñāṇavīra Thera's teachings, in 2005 Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero joined a Theravada Buddhist monastery in the Thai Forest Tradition, where in 2007 he received his full ordination as a Buddhist monk.

After living in various monasteries in Europe and Thailand for a number of years, Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero moved to Sri Lanka in 2013 where he lived in a small private aranya he established for solitary practice, called Hillside Hermitage. Currently he's residing in Europe.

For more of his teachings please see:

www.hillsidehermitage.org

This book offers a practical guide on how simply virtue and sense restraint, paired with 'concurrent attention', result in what the Buddha described as *jhāna* meditation or an experience elevated from any obstructive states. The early Suttas explicitly repeat that the only way to this purification is through the taming of the mind by withdrawing it from unwholesome actions and intentions. This is known as the Gradual Training: keeping the precepts, sense restraint, guarding the senses, moderation in eating, wakefulness, recollection and awareness, seclusion, overcoming the five hindrances (lust, aversion, sloth, agitation, doubt), and living in *jhāna*.

The author goes into detail on how the Gradual Training differs from what is commonly understood as meditation, and how the contemporary meditation techniques that revolve around 'focusing', 'concentration' and 'observing sensations' completely miss the mark. It offers detailed instructions on how to practice *khanti* – the correct 'endurance' of things on the mental level after establishing oneself in the lifestyle of the precepts and sense restraint – and how to dig up the roots of lust and aversion towards any discomfort and pressure that sensual desires create, without ever needing to give in or distract oneself from it.

Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero, was born in Serbia in 1983. At the age of 22 he joined a Buddhist monastery where he became a fully ordained monk. Since then he has been living and practising in various parts of the world, independent of the mainstream Buddhist schools and traditions.



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