

# The Danger Contemplation

- By Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero

And how, bhikkhus, are sensual pleasures seen by a bhikkhu in such a way that as he looks at them sensual desire, sensual affection, sensual infatuation, and sensual passion do not lie latent within him in regard to sensual pleasures?

Suppose there is a charcoal pit deeper than a man's height, filled with glowing coals without flame or smoke. A man would come along wanting to live, not wanting to die, desiring happiness, and averse to suffering. Then two strong men would grab him by both arms and drag him towards the charcoal pit. The man would wriggle his body this way and that. For what reason? Because he knows: 'I will fall into this charcoal pit and I will thereby meet death or deadly suffering.' So too, bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu has seen sensual pleasures similar to a charcoal pit, sensual desire, sensual affection, sensual infatuation, and sensual passion do not lie latent within him in regard to sensual pleasures.

And how, bhikkhus, has a bhikkhu comprehended a mode of conduct and manner of living such that evil unwholesome states of covetousness and displeasure do not flow in upon him? Suppose a man would enter a thorny forest. There would be thorns in front of him, thorns behind him, thorns to his left, thorns to his right, thorns below him, thorns above him. He would go forward mindfully, and he would go back mindfully, thinking, 'May no thorn prick me!' So too, bhikkhus, whatever in the world has a pleasing and agreeable nature is called a thorn in the Noble One's Discipline. Having understood this thus as 'a thorn', one should understand restraint and non-restraint. - Sn35.244

**Ajahn Nyanamoli:** In the context of the Noble Ones' discipline, where one possesses the Right view and has comprehended the Four Noble Truths, it is crucial to regard every pleasure as a thorn. This means that, just as one must be careful when entering a jungle filled with thorns, one must exercise caution and attentiveness in approaching such experiences. However, the emphasis lies not on learning "how" to be cautious, but on cultivating the mindset of viewing pleasurable experiences as potential dangers. By adopting this perspective, vigilance and care will arise spontaneously, as one recognizes the potential harm that can arise from delighting in pleasure. It is imperative to note that this simile is not merely about physical caution, but about the mental attitude towards pleasure and the hazards it presents.

Merely imitating carefulness methodically is insufficient to fulfill the Noble discipline and attain Arahantship. One must learn to *view* pleasurable experiences as thorns to genuinely grasp restraint and lack of restraint. By

adopting this mindset, certain perceptions develop that aid in overcoming sensual desires and attachments. Understanding the harm that pleasurable experiences pose leads to a natural sense of vigilance and mindfulness. So, the effort one makes should not be directed towards being mindful of every physical movement or similar. Instead, one should strive to discern how to *perceive* sensuality as “burning embers” and thus turn the sense restraint into something effortless and preferable. This will be followed by dispassion and freedom from suffering and attachment. The task entails thorough and accurate reflection of recognizing the danger over and over again in things that would otherwise be the foundation for desire.

In the first simile, the mind of a Noble disciple seeks to be anywhere else in the world except in the burning pit. Similarly, when a pleasurable experience arises in the mind, if one has cultivated the perception of danger, one’s mind will not want to go there. Even when it comes to eating, one should be attentive to how they perceive the food and ensure that they do not lose their understanding of sensuality as something perilous.

Q: Why am I unable to see the inherent danger in sensuality, even though it is a fact? What is preventing me from recognizing the danger that is present?

Nm: Although you can state that sensuality is dangerous, if you still have passion towards it, then you have not truly understood its danger. The measure of your understanding is whether or not you are dispassionate in the face of sensuality. So, simply stating abstract facts about the danger of sensuality is not enough, as it does not reflect your actual experience. Don’t confuse abstract ideas for true understanding. For example, simply acknowledging the “fact” of impermanence of everything does not necessarily mean that you have any *understanding* of it. To truly understand *anicca*, you must develop it to the point of becoming a Sotapanna. Engaging with sensuality multiple times a day, whether it be relishing, welcoming, planning, or worrying about it, is a clear symptom of not having understood the danger of sensuality. Thus, instead of taking it as a fact, contemplate the danger repeatedly for as long as it takes for the context of its danger to become established. And then protect the context by avoiding carelessness and indulging in sensual thoughts.

Q: How can one identify or become aware of the danger?

Nm: Some individuals recognize the danger of excessive indulgence in sensuality. They observe the discontent that arises from indulgence, which is why many turn to religion, spirituality, and meditation. The dissatisfaction is clear, and many people can perceive it. However, how one responds to it determines if they remain trapped within the same domain or if they free themselves from it.

For others, this might not be apparent at first, so they must take refuge in the Buddha’s teachings and trust that sensuality is truly dangerous and unworthy of attachment, even if it contradicts their personal experiences. This requires a commitment to maintaining virtue and practising sense restraint when agreeable sensations arise in the body and mind. Trust in the teachings enables the mind to contemplate and discern the danger of sensuality, which may not be immediately apparent to its full extent.

By practising sense restraint and discerning the arising thoughts without immediately acting upon them, one can gain insight into the implications of sensuality and why it is not beneficial. Through diligent contemplation and clarification, doubts can be endured and overcome, and a deeper understanding of the danger of sensuality can be realised.

It should be understood that simply hearing about the dangers of sensuality is not enough. One must make a sincere effort to investigate and reflect upon their own experiences with sensuality in order to truly comprehend its harmful nature. Only then will the Buddha's similes regarding sensuality in the Suttas become clear and meaningful.

So, a genuine effort and personal investigation are necessary to truly comprehend and avoid the danger of sensuality. The mere provision of information without personal reflection and effort will not lead to understanding and seeing of the danger.

Q: This is the simile of the deer herd that you often refer to:

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 so be long-lived and handsome and endure for a long time.' A deer-trapper lays down bait for a deer herd intending thus: '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.- Mn25

Nm: It cannot be denied that there is a pleasant quality to indulging in the bait. However, it's a trap. If one truly comprehends this danger, the superficial allure of the bait will lose its power to arouse desire.

Q: The bait is not intended for our well-being. The traps are not set for our benefit.

Nm: As previously mentioned, it can be difficult to recognize the potential danger within sensuality when it presents itself in a beautiful and enticing manner. Our automatic response is to view it as friendly, non-threatening, and harmless. However, it's essential to challenge this perception and ask ourselves why we view it as such. What is the basis for our belief that pleasure of the senses is "natural" and harmless? Have we ever truly questioned it, or is it simply an assumption we've made without consideration?

If you fail to see sensuality as a problem, then no matter how much you study the Buddha's teachings, it will not make a difference. Sensuality is a problem because you are under its control. If you ignore this fact, you are like a prey caught in a trap, being dragged around by the hunter while pretending to be going where you want to go. Meanwhile, the hunter is there in your face, amused by your ignorance of the situation.

Sensuality, if it were wholesome, would not pressure you. It would not require the loss of self-awareness, or induce lust in your mind. Sensuality is deceptive and not what it appears to be. This is why the Buddha often compared it to a trap.

Q:

"Now the deer of the first herd ate food unwarily by going right in amongst the bait that the deer-trapper had laid down; by so doing they became intoxicated; when they were intoxicated, they fell into negligence; when they were negligent, the deer-trapper did with them as he liked on account of that bait. That is how the deer of the first herd failed to get free from the deer trapper's power and control."

Nm: They act impulsively and indulge in their desires, without any consideration for the consequences or impact on themselves or others. This is common behaviour.

Q:

"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 food; 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; when they had lost their strength and energy, they returned to that same bait that the deer-trapper had laid down. They ate food unwarily by going right in amongst it. By doing so they became intoxicated; when they were intoxicated they fell into negligence; when they were negligent, the deer-trapper did with them as he liked on account of that bait. And that is how the deer of the second herd also failed to get free from the deer-trapper's power and control."

Nm: This second type of individuals, even without the guidance of the Buddha's teaching, can still experience the dissatisfaction and suffering caused by sensual desires and have enough intelligence to recognize it. One doesn't need to be a Buddhist to understand that these desires are temporary, can only be appeased but never satisfied and they control one's life. Many people realise this and question the purpose of pursuing these desires. Some of them choose to shun the bait, i.e. avoid engaging with anything pleasing to the senses, such as beautiful sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches. However, they fail to understand the root of the problem - the attachment and craving in their minds - and mistake the objects of pleasure as the source of the problem. Thus, they become ascetics who deny any object that *could* be pleasing to the senses. They think that by doing so, they can escape the suffering caused by their own desires.

However, the problem with this approach is that pleasure or displeasure is not determined by the objects themselves, but by one's state of mind. Even if one lives on top of a mountain, the mind can still crave for pleasure and find it in previously unpleasant things. Therefore, one cannot sustain the practice of not engaging

with sense objects forever. Sooner or later, one will encounter something pleasing, and if one hasn't understood the root of desire, one will be trapped by that.

This is similar to the second deer herd, which avoids the bait but eventually returns to it when food becomes scarce in the mountains. When they encounter the bait again, they get trapped because they haven't developed the wisdom to recognize where the *actual* trap is. They only know how to run away from the bait, but not how to avoid discerning it from the trap.

Doubling down on asceticism or creating elaborate ways to avoid temptation, as the Jains did, will not solve the issue; as the root of sensuality is not in the objects themselves, but rather in one's craving. The Buddha himself tried extreme asceticism to the point of refusing to breathe or eat, but it did not free him from sensuality. He realized that pain, and self-torture, were not the ways to enlightenment.

Therefore, one should certainly exercise restraint and virtuous behaviour; but then when thoughts of sensuality arise, it is important to realise that not only should one not give into them, but neither should one simply try to get rid of them. This is akin to avoiding thinking about a trap without understanding how one is trapped. It is through enduring these thoughts and understanding the pressure that drives them that one can truly see its actual nature and overcome sensuality. The Buddha emphasised that sensuality is not rooted in the beautiful objects of the world, but rather in the desire and lust that surrounds them. An Arahant or Tathagata who has removed desire and lust from their thoughts can still perceive beautiful objects without being driven by lust.

Q:

"Now the deer of a third 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. The deer of that second herd, by reckoning how the deer of the first herd had failed and by planning and acting as they did with the precaution of going to live in the forest wilds, 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, 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; when we are not 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 around over a wide area with wicker hurdles; then perhaps we might see the third deer herd's dwelling place, where they go to hide.' They did so, and they saw the third herd's dwelling place, where they went to hide. And that is how the deer of the third herd also failed to get free from the deer-trapper's power and control."

Nm: This third deer herd is just like contemplatives who have renounced indulgence in external sense objects and extreme ascetic practices but have not abandoned their internal thirst for pleasure: they act under the pressure of their views in which they find pleasure. Although they may physically restrain themselves from indulging in sensual pleasures, they still mentally entertain the same value of pleasing objects and thirst for them. They may plan how to avoid displeasing sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches, build their own little palace, and avoid experiencing any hardship or elements. All of these thoughts and actions show that they are still concerned about catering to their senses for pleasure. Therefore, Mara, the trapper, may still catch them because they left all the footprints around the bait.

The Buddha compares this to holding views or opinions that one feels blindly justified about. Views can be anything from how monks should wear their robes to what should be done or how one should behave. It is not a choice to hold views, but it is a choice *what* views to hold and how to hold them. If one feels ill will or irritation when someone disagrees with their views, they are still holding onto views wrongly, even if they are based on Dhamma.

A person holds the views “wrongly” through an emotional state that underlies them. If one holds any view and feels emotionally disturbed when someone challenges it, they are wrong to that extent. Even if the view is accurate in and of itself. This means they have not removed the passion internally and are not free from sensuality.

The problem lies in whether one is emotionally attached to one's opinion or not. So, instead of trying to rid oneself of views, one should learn not to be moved by them. This way, one can objectively assess whether their views are right or wrong without feeling existentially threatened by opposing opinions. It is crucial to abandon wrong views and be fearless in exploring and pushing in the very direction that one has been afraid of. If one is upset by worldly views, how much more emotional distress will they feel when they start undermining their very personal existential views?

Any emotional attachment to a view, whether it is right or wrong, is unjustifiable. If one finds oneself getting upset due to someone else's opinions or remarks, *that* makes them wrong. It does not matter if the other person is foolish; it is irrelevant from a standpoint of the Dhamma practice. Emotional involvement with any opinion or standpoint is a sign of being wrong.

By not being emotionally invested in our views and standpoints, we can avoid falling into the trap and thus become the fourth type of herd. The Buddha had views and opinions on many things, but he did not have passion underlying any of them. This is what we can strive for as well - to have views and opinions but not be moved by them emotionally.

Q:

“Now the deer of a fourth 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. The deer of that

second herd, by reckoning how the deer of the first herd had failed and by planning and acting as they did with the precaution of going to live in the forest wilds, also failed to get free from the deer-trapper's power and control. And the deer of that third herd, by reckoning how the deer of the first herd and also the deer of the second herd had failed, and by planning and acting as they did with the precaution of making their dwelling place within range of the deer-trapper's bait, 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; when we are not 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 around 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, where they went to hide. 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."

Nm: Individuals who are like the fourth type of deer herd do not accept any external justification for their standpoints, which allows them to become both externally and internally calmed. They do not act out of craving and instead develop *jhana*, which is a place where Mara cannot find them.

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